

Design Notes Episode 12 - Libby VanderPloeg

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Liam Spradlin: Design notes is a show from Google Design about creative work and what it teaches us. I'm your host Liam Spradlin. Each episode we talk with people from unique creative fields to discover what inspires and unites us in our practice.

Libby VanderPloeg: I've always been interested and I've always been interested in humor. And I think that when the two work together you can get people to hear you and get people to listen.

Liam: That was illustrator Libby VanderPloeg. In the interview Libby and I explore how her work captures the essence of place. The process of deciding what to share with the world and what happens when your work takes on a life of its own. Let's get started. Libby welcome to Design Notes.

Libby: Thanks for having me Liam.

Liam: So just to get started, something I always ask about is kind of your journey. So where you are now, what you're working on and what the journey was like to get there.

Libby: Well right now I'm working on a project, it's a book about mindfulness, it's for young adults. I've actually found it pretty useful, uh, in my personal life lately because I feel like I could really benefit from thinking about focus right now. Things have been a little bit chaotic in the last couple of years as my illustration work has sorta been picking up. How did I get here? I

think I always wanted to be an illustrator. I never really saw it as like a career I would pursue though when I was a child. I loved books, there was always books around the house 'cause my mom was a librarian and a story teller. She used to actually tell stories at elementary schools and even like renaissance festivals in costume. (laughs) So we would go to those and I always around when she was story telling.

So it was a part of my life but I didn't ever think I would work as an illustrator. I studied art though in college and after college I like many artists pursued graphic design so that I could make a living. And after many years as a graphic designer and eventually an art director I started to notice that all of the projects that I was working on I was trying to illustrate work for. And I realized then that I wasn't really interested in art directing I was just interested in creating opportunities for (laughs) my illustration. And so I think at some point I just decided that I may be better off pursuing what I really loved which was illustration.

Liam: You mentioned story telling as kind of a strong influence on your work. I want to go into that a little deeper. I'm interested to know what your thought process and approach is for telling a story through a static illustration or a short animation.

Libby: My approach to finding those stories is often noticing the world around me and finding the peculiarities in the situations that I encounter everyday like walking around my neighborhood, the people that I see and I live in Green Point Brooklyn. Its got all kinds of people. And so there's just so much to absorb and so much to reflect on, not to mention so many trends that come through. And I think one of my tendencies is to linger on trends and sort of try to understand what makes them popular and then pick it apart and see if there's a way to subvert or celebrate it, it can go either way.

Liam: I also want to tangentially go into some of the work you've done with maps because looking at your map work it seems to convey a story in

each piece. So I'm interested in how you take something kind of utilitarian, like a map and transform it into something else.

Libby: It's pretty challenging. I have a lot of friends that are also map makers sort of and we talk a lot about the pain and agony of making maps. As far as illustration goes. Illustration itself isn't a lot of pain and agony but map making is definitely not easy, there's so many things you have to consider, like how accurate do you need it to be or do you just need it to convey a mood. And some of the maps that I do go one way and some go the other. But I am happiest making maps that sort of do both which is why I like to bring in all of these characters and little moments and vignettes that talk about daily life in that place and what daily life in that place consists of, whether it's like a fishing village or a main street in a small town. Or even like a forest that may have berries in it. Those are all the things that make a normal map more fun to sort of escape into.

Liam: So there's actually a lot of research that goes on behind those.

Libby: Absolutely. I actually make Google maps (laughs) of all the maps that I'm going to make. And, uh, I go through and I pinpoint all of the necessary landmarks, the things that have to be on the map. And then I'll go in and sort of scour the landscape to look for things that maybe nobody has mentioned need to be on there but I think could be fun to include. It's actually really fun (laughs). It's really interesting because you learn about all the places that you're mapping as you're working and I feel like I have very extensive knowledge of places I've never been which is a little bit depressing too.

Liam: I know a lot of artists who prefer to start on paper and will move into digital. There are some artists who work purely in digital and there are some who are purely in paper. So I'm interested to know where you are on that continuum and what the rationale is for that.

Libby: It's an interesting question because I actually work both ways. I start always with pencil and paper and I wish that I could stay on paper because for some reason I'm always chastising myself for being like a computer oriented person. But once I've done my pencil sketches and presented them to my client or if it's self directed work than, you know, thought about it myself I always then move to digital almost always. And, uh, create and refine my work on the computer. Sometimes you can't tell but sometimes I think that's so beautiful the way you can see the paint soaking into the paper, I wish that I could have that impulsiveness sort of in my work. It's not necessarily something that I think that I have but nevertheless I try to bring in touches of analog cues into my digital work.

Liam: How do you think that would change if you were elsewhere on that continuum? So for instance if you were working purely with paper how would that change how you approach the work?

Libby: I can't even imagine working purely on paper. I think that I would just be, I just don't think I would do commercial work because I am such a perfectionist I would never feel like I could get anything done. I feel like I would constantly be editing in these clunky ways, like for instance working on maps, if I were to try to do what I do with maps with paint and paper I think it would take me five times as long to do it. Which isn't a bad thing but I don't understand why I would belabor it when I'm happy with the expediency of digital.

Liam: So zooming back out but kind of on that same topic. The way in which you interact with the work while you're creating it, how would you describe that and what kind of impact do you think it has on the final product?

Libby: That's a very good question as well. It's definitely work. When I'm working I may create something that feels light and free and joyful but the process of creating that feeling is work. It's serious and it's sometimes just the last thing you want to do and it's just like everything else if you want to

get something done to your expectations you have to research and you have to do it step by step. Like with maps for instance it's like first I put land in and then I put roads down and then I'm literally building a place. And then there's another layer for text. And doing all that text by hand, all of that is work. So I hope that it feels light and free and happy but doing it isn't always as light and free.

Liam: I'm interested in your use of color and where that falls in the process and how you've established palettes and you think about working with color.

Libby: I've tried working in just black and white but it somehow doesn't feel like me. I don't know. And that's another reason why I like working digitally is because I love the kind of electric quality of mixing like hot RGB colors with neutral colors 'cause I think it just feels good to look at in some weird way. I don't know the science behind color theory and mood but there's so much to me that makes me happy when I see beautiful colors. As far as selecting color palettes I have some strange aversions to certain colors. I don't know why but I think it kind of goes to my fondness for vintage things, and vintage objects always have a faded quality or maybe one tone is the first to go as if something fades. Like for instance yellow always seems to fall out before other colors do. So I've noticed in my work that I don't use a lot of yellow and I have sometimes pondered as to why that is and wondered if it's maybe because I'm trying to make it feel older, or faded, or trying to tap into some nostalgia.

Liam: I also want to move into your relationship with the work. So I remember in an interview with Spring Street you said that one of your goals is to create something that makes people smile or makes them feel some pang of emotion. So I want to know what your emotional relationship is with your work.

Libby: I think that while oftentimes I feel like a pretty cynical person. I don't want my work to necessarily highlight that quality in myself. I think there are

some people out there who do it really well, and do it without any sort of concern as to how people read them. But I worry that if I put work out there that maybe stoked people's insecurities or makes them wonder like, "Is she laughing at me?" Then I'm not doing a good job. I like to make people feel empowered or just happy. So a lot of the work that I do make taps into those feelings. It's funny when I'm drawing faces I'm generally mirroring those same faces as I'm working on them so I could be working at my computer and suddenly realize that I've been smiling for the last 10 minutes because I'm drawing like a range of faces for an animation and it's kind of funny. (laughs) Because I think that I'm feeling those feelings as I'm creating those feelings. Maybe that's why I don't delve into the sadness too much 'cause maybe I'm afraid I will feel that myself. (laughs).

Liam: So that was actually my next question. Is whether the emotional qualities that you try to put into your work are reflective of the one's that you feel while you're working on it?

Libby: Yeah. I definitely think so.

Liam: So I guess I would also ask how that changes both during the process of creation and also once a piece is done. So at the moment that you consider it finished which may in fact be never if you're anything like me. (laughter) But the moment at which it's finished enough to go into the world, a week from then, a month from then, a year from then. Do you revisit your pieces and still evoke that? Or what does that look like across the whole journey?

Libby: I'm actually reworking something right now that I've been hanging onto for I think it's gonna be almost a year now. And I'm just not sure like what it says or what it projects. And I keep going back to it thinking, I know what I'm trying to say here but I'm not sure if I want to share this feeling, and I'm not sure if this says that feeling. It's hard, you know, sometimes you find something you want to say but you're not sure whether it's worth

saying to everybody. And sometimes I think I just end up creating it for myself because it's a problem that I want to work out or it's something that I want to explore. I've got a lot of work that it's just waiting for, maybe it's waiting to die. (laughter) I don't really know yet. But there are some pieces on the other hand that go out there in the world, I share them. Like I made a gif about a year and a half ago and I released it on International Women's Day and it went really viral. It was a gif of women lifting each other up like helping each other.

But it really took off and kind of, it kind of has a life of its own now. I mean so many people have shared it and said nice things to me about how it inspired them. So it was just this tiny moment thinking of it and not thinking it was like a really big deal but at the same time going I think I made a cool thing. It's kind of a neat problem that I solved visually and then to find that it resonated and people just added their own editorial comments and used it in a way that promoted things that I believe in that I didn't even know about, I learned about organizations and I found that people use it as sort of a rallying cry, made me happy.

Liam: I'm interested in how your work fits into the contexts of the viewers lives. Are there other instances that you can speak to where you've been able to directly observe that or, um, see that in action?

Libby: Oddly, surprisingly I've had a few of my animated gifs go viral. Like this Women's Day gif and they have become these sort of strengthening, motivating, empowering symbols. There was one that I created that was promoting Hillary's campaign that one got shared very widely and people used it to sort of show their support for this candidate without insulting the other candidate. And that was my goal with it, I just was like, "I'm not gonna drag anybody through the dirt. I'm just gonna say this is what I'm gonna do, do what you want."

So it was like a grid of people that were shimmying and it said, "Shimmy if you're with her." But there was another gif that I did around Mother's Day with a woman flexing her muscle and lifting a baby at the same time. Again it got shared by a lot of women's groups. So what surprisingly has happened since I created the international women's day gif is that I've really found this support from the feminist community from my work which I did think of myself as a feminist before that but I didn't really know that it would be a place that I would find so much support for my art.

Liam: We talked about when you're creating the work and kind of imbuing it with the emotional qualities that you're going for and how that reflects back into your own emotional relationship with the work. When you see something of yours go viral and people are reacting to it and sharing it and putting, and putting it in all these different places, does that affect how you feel about the piece at all?

Libby: Yeah. I think it must. I don't know generally the stuff that has gotten that sort of wide circulation I feel really good about and that's why I shared it. So it just makes me feel better about the work that it's working, that it's doing something positive. It's making people feel a collective energy. It basically makes people feel energized and so far has promoted positive feelings of community, it feels good.

Liam: We also mentioned these ideas or like archived pieces that are waiting for something. (laughs) So I'm curious to know how you know that something is ready to go out into the world or what indicators do you look for or feel?

Libby: I don't think I ever really know. I think sometimes I'm just tired of sitting on it and I'm like, I'm never gonna know if this is ready but I'm done with it, I'm just done with thinking about it. I don't want to over edit this anymore. Because I have a tendency to over edit things. And that's another reason I like digital medium, but sometimes I'm just like, "Let's just see what

happens. Let's just see what people think about it." Because sometimes it's interesting to just put your own work out there to test it and see does it work? Does it communicate what I thought it communicated? Or am I gonna have to move to another country?

Liam: (laughs)

Libby: I don't know. We'll find out. It's good to always test yourself.

Liam: Speaking of over editing and just editing your work in general, having the kind of creative nature that it does. There's a lot of talk in the UIUX community about systematized design and building design systems for interfaces and things like that, so I'm curious if there's a parallel there in illustration work about how you approach collecting different components that you build illustrations out of, if that makes sense. I guess this would include things like having an overarching palette, having various characters that you-

Libby: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Liam: Reference a lot or various themes or- or components like that?

Libby: Well I think that you probably could draw a parallel. I did work as a web designer for a short while. So I have some experience thinking sort of anthropologically about user interface and I think it has made me approach my work in a very organized way and a very efficient way. I really value efficiency in my work and limitations and constraints. And while I think that I value the aesthetic side enough that I decided to go into illustration, I do love when design can eliminate all of the frills and just work really well. And I think when it comes to illustration that's what I want to do. I don't want too much superfluous detail but just enough to get the job done.

Liam: So what are some of the constraints that you put on your illustration work?

Libby: I don't like to use more than like 10 colors or so in anything. I like symmetry, I like triangles, and I don't mean like an overt shape but definitely I find balance relies on different triangles of color or shape or size of things throughout a piece. I really like balance and harmony but those aren't really constraints.

Liam: And I'm sure it's something that varies by the project too right?

Libby: Yes. It does. When it comes to maps I like really clean lines. I don't like any ragged edges on anything. I kind of relish in zooming in and like making all of my vectors perfectly smooth, it- it's not healthy. It's not healthy.

Liam: (laughter) That's what I was just thinking. And I think plenty of designers can relate. Going back to that [inaudible 00:19:17] second, I just want to discuss a little more about the balance between utility and expression in those. 'Cause you talk about making very clean lines and making them readable and balanced and everything so what is the balance there? How do those two things kind of interplay?

Libby: Mm-hmm (affirmative). When it comes to maps I can be kind of a stickler for accuracy when it comes to geography which makes some of my clients less excited in the beginning stages of my work but I just have to tell them hang in there. We'll find ways so that everybody is happy. I really like doing island maps because I love having like an edge of a coastline contrast with water, it makes for a really nice design to be able to breakup the space. When you're working on some cities, like I did a project not long ago that was 12 maps, 12 cities. And some of the maps just didn't look as good as others because it just wasn't as beautiful of a city grid. So to all the city planners out there-

Liam: (laughs)

Libby: Please abide by a beautiful grid. Or don't but don't do both at the same time.

Liam: This is a very interesting topic to me because I deal a lot with grids and I love grids so I want to know your take on how do you recognize a beautiful grid in a city or any context?

Libby: There are different approaches to grid I'd say. I lived in Chicago for a long time. Chicago has a really strong grid, of course it has like a highway cutting through all of it but I think Chicago aesthetically to map is a great city. It's just harmonious. But mapping Paris can be really cool too because at least you have this sort of radial pattern that is aesthetically pleasing. Miami is really not a nice map because it has inconsistent weights of roadways that don't work together. Like all the north south streets are bigger and there's fewer of them. So it looks like a bad plaid.

Liam: Interesting.

Libby: Yeah. It's a pattern that nobody would want.

Liam: It'd be very interesting to overlay like an artistic influence on city planning and see what that does in terms of-

Libby: That would be interesting.

Liam: The utility of-

Libby: Hmm.

Liam: Infrastructure.

Libby: Somebody should spearhead that.

Liam: (laughs)

Libby: Maybe you. (laughs)

Liam: Just to wrap up, I'm interested to know how your creative process has changed over time either spanning your whole career or since you focused on illustration. And also where you see it going in the future, how you see illustration as a practice evolving and what that means for you and your work?

Libby: So I've always been interested in design and I've always been interested in humor. And I think that when the two work together you can get people to hear and get people to listen. I've always wanted to make my art, make people think about something, I guess that's a very statement. But I did for a very brief while go to grad school, I did not finish grad school. I went for sculpture and it just turned out it wasn't for me. But the conversations that I was having made me stop and think a lot that maybe it wasn't exactly art that I wanted to do and maybe I wasn't in the right place. I just kept going back in conversations with students and teachers about social issues and how to do work that engaged the community and got everybody involved.

And I think after a little while I just thought, "I guess I really want to make work that's accessible to everybody." And I don't know if- if I go in- in an art direction. I want to be careful how I do that. I want to be careful to make it reach more people so that they feel that they have something that they can aspire to, that they can understand and that motivates them. I want my creative work to continue to reach a broad audience from all types of sociocultural demographics and communities.

Liam: I think that's a really good point and I think, you know, thinking about your work I think that's been accomplished. You know, if you have a gif of

women lifting each other up that's animated, that's very accessible, it doesn't depend on literacy. It really just depends on an internet connection essentially.

Libby: One thing that I hope is that there are ways that technology can get in the hands of more people, that people won't be censored from seeing certain things that people will be able to have choices.

Liam: Tying it back to one of our very first questions. It goes back to how the medium that you work in impacts the work that you do and the fact that you want to aim for feeling and social engagement and things that are able to be shared, doing work digitally is really conducive to that.

Libby: Yeah it definitely is. I really love doing these short animations because I think its made more young people access my work. You know? Not that I'm old but I'm not super young either. I'm right in the middle. And, um, and it's nice to connect with people of different ages.

Liam: Right. Well thanks for coming on.

Libby: Yeah. Thanks for having me. It was great talking to you.

Liam: Keep an eye on design.google/podcasts so you don't miss our next episode with interdisciplinary designers Sang Mun. In the episode we delve into Sang's computer fooling ZXX typeface, how technology interacts with human perception and how design can empower people in their everyday lives. You can subscribe to Design Notes on Google Podcasts, iTunes, Spotify or wherever you listen to podcasts. Until next time.