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Tugboats In Pastels



Summer vacation is here! The high school across the street is deserted except for an occasional skateboarding youth practicing his daring-do. The girls next door seem to giggle a lot more as they momentarily suspend themselves weightlessly above the trampoline in their back yard. I hear the lawn mowers during the week now, at odd times of the day. The days are long and lazy, and the pace reflects the mood. The joggers seem to be floating, not so much plodding, with a decided new bounce in their steps. What a difference a lot of sunshine can work. Overnight the hollyhocks by the end of my driveway have reached themselves six feet toward the sky. The bird population has laid claim to the vacation period, as well. Sparrows and chickadees by the handfuls swoop down onto the birdbath and quarrel over who goes first. Old Cat doesn't even raise a whisker at all the commotion. Ah, yes, vacation is here. Now if I could just resist that second glass of lemonade..... Oh, well.....

Next Issue: Hurrah! for the Red, White and Blue

Every year since 1984 The South Sound Maritime Heritage Association of Olympia has hosted an annual meeting of vintage and/or working tugboats and subsequent races of same. And every year without fail, I have been on hand to view and research the many types and sizes of these hard working vessels. I have been privileged to be able to tour some of them, meet the owners and crew and to witness first hand what makes these boats so special. The history of tugboats in South Sound is rich and varied. From escorting large container carrying ships to pushing barges loaded with logs, the intrepid tugboat is called upon; rain or shine. One is always amazed by the power displayed by such able craft. They range from nearly miniature to quite large modernized workers with comfortable quarters for many hands. They are used by the Navy and the Army. Large fleets of tugs are maintained by the Foss Maritime Company in the Northwest, from Seattle, Washington to Portland, Oregon. Some tugs ply the rivers, some are ocean going for long periods of time. They work the waters of Puget Sound and the lakes of the Emerald City.

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My favorite vantage point for the tugboat races is the dock area at the Port of Olympia. From here I can see the boats as they make their way to the starting line. The view is close enough to read the names and see the detail on the deck, yet far away enough to get a wonderful composition to include sky, water, distant shoreline, and the dome of the Washington State Capitol building in the background. With sketch book and pencil and digital camera with plenty of floppies, I eagerly anticipate the rumble of engines as they leave the staging area. From then onward it is one tug after another without much time in between. The weather is usually clear and warm on Labor day weekend, so spending 4 to 6 hours doing research is a pleasant undertaking.

Then it is home to the studio to catalog all the research photos, match the historical and biographical information to the pictures, and choose which tugboats to begin painting. My media of choice

recently has been soft pastel. For me, pastel is unequaled for clarity and vitality of color to capture the excitement and movement of the races. Each boat has its own distinctive exterior color scheme (In the case of the Foss tugboats, all bear the same color hulls.).

Because pastel is a "drawing" media, the detail can be created with little effort. Reflective water can be translated effectively too. The flowing rhythms of waves created by passing boats is readily accomplished with the tips of sharpened pastel sticks. Or, by using the flat sides of the pastels, I can "wash" in the broad expanse of sky or billowing clouds. (I tend to paint realistically with hints of impressionism breaking in). Pastels allow me to render the tugboat races as I see them against the luminous skies and glowing clouds of the Puget Sound on an autumn day.

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Each year there are not only the same wonderful local and regional tugboats at the races, but new ones seem to appear seemingly from out of the blue. As for my part, I am delighted to experience the "old familiar" boats, and look forward to new and different subjects for my palette and brush. When I do a tug it is one with strong contrast and lots of drama in water and sky to set off the beauty of the boat. I am intrigued by the way the soft rounded hull of the boat is sharply balanced with the straight angles of the mast and lines. It is a challenge to create the illusion of depth and movement on a two dimensional surface, such as Canson Mi-Tientes paper or hand made sanded board.

The pastel paintings are a natural to reproduce as limited edition giclee prints. The colors are bright and clear and the detail is crisp. The original is generally 12" X 16", so I can scan it directly. From there, the print is produced in my studio, signed and #d and packaged and distributed. I am looking forward to the tugboat races in Puget Sound this Labor Day weekend. Why don't you come down and see them too?

Carol Thompson

Featured Artwork

Cedar King



"The little tug boat 'Cedar King' seems dwarfed by the larger working tugs in Olympia, Washington's harbor. But don't be fooled, pound for pound this tiny tug can more than pull her weight!"

Henry Foss



"The large tug boat 'Henry Foss' makes her way out of the harbor to begin a long day of work on Puget Sound. But first she shows her impressive performance to admiring fans along the way."

Morning Wait



"The fog is lifting and sunshine colors the clouds and water. A small personal tugboat will participate in the annual races on Puget Sound at Olympia, Washington. But for now it is a quiet 'morning wait' for the festivities to begin."