

## ***I am a Pebble* the love story between an otter and her rocks, on its way to Hollywood**

Yasmine Bresson & Maxime Le Chapelain are two of the co-directors of the short film *Je suis un Caillou*, along with Mélanie Berteraut-Platon, Léo Coulombier, Nicolas Grondin and Louise Massé. Yasmine and Maxime both love art and design, trying out a graphic design diploma for the former and a sculpting course for the latter, before finally crossing the threshold of ESMA and finding their calling. They met in the classroom where they would spend their next 4 years, learning and honing their CG Animation and Special Effects skills. It's together that they will develop the touching story of Bulle, an orphaned little otter who created a family out of rocks to escape her loneliness. The film will then go to win first place, awarded by the ESMA graduation jury, event gathering more than forty international studios, all transfixed by the moving story and its original design, its innovative quality highlighted by its status as a student film.

### **There is no better family than the one we choose.**

« *At the inception of the project was a single phrase in one of my notebooks: "an otter living with a pebble". I shared the concept with Yasmine, who was immediately on board. We then developed the idea and the story around it in one of our "scenario" evenings* », recalls Maxime.

And thus, bit by bit, the story of Bubble takes shape: an otter, separated from her kin at a young age, who then builds herself a family with rocks. « *The film begins as Bubble's perception of her family starts to change, adds Yasmine, she becomes aware of their true nature and has to face her loneliness.* »

« *We wanted to oppose two natural concepts: a soft and cuddly little otter, full of life, faced with cold, unmoving, heavy rocks. They have little in common: the place they live in, and the spherical shape they can take. We tried to bring opposites together and exploit this dual nature.* »

« *One can sometimes feel distant and aloof towards their closest relatives despite external similarities, as one cannot find any deeper connection. On the other hand, one can feel very close to things that appear very different, like, say an otter and some rocks* », explains Maxime. »

### **Using a story for children to spread a message.**

The childlike aspects of the movie allow the viewer, as is often the case in children's media, to reflect on deeper themes, touching a wide range of people. It was one of the threads that the directing team pulled to weave their tapestry:

« *This "cute" childlike design also gives us some credibility, especially with a rock-loving otter as a starting point. We managed to put some distance between the situation –that of a character feeling alone and different trying to make people change instead of accepting them as they are– thanks to this style, which is removed from reality. It also allows us to show more expression, in the characters' attitudes and emotions, and in the decor as well. The audience can thus better experience the feelings and ideas conveyed in the film* », explains Maxime.

« *All in all, continues Yasmine, this film shows that we can live with our paradoxes, and that our nature is not necessarily self-evident. We all need to open ourselves to understand each other. Bubble eventually accepts her own complexity, and accepts her own surrogate family as it is. Which means, that, at the end, the rocks can take a step in her direction and the universes meet. Our identities are not fixed, they evolve and we need to learn to love and have empathy for ourselves, to then accept others as they are.* »

### **A painting, animated.**

The story was created and refined as if it was destined to be a picture book. To achieve this complex goal, an insightful study of graphical references was conducted by the team, to better determine the direction and the style they wanted. « *We were influenced by artists like Gop Gap* », confides Yasmine.

This paint-like animated rendering rested mainly on Leo's shoulders, who was affected to R&D for this project. He created, using the Python coding language, a specialized script that made this rendering possible, which gave this unique 2D paintbrush aspect, standing out in a 3D-dominated animation. It was an additional challenge, as the students were going above and beyond what they were taught to explore, and develop their own rendering method.

*« We knew that it was feasible, as we had seen similar CG renderings during our research, explains Yasmine, we didn't know if we could do it, but we had to try. Léo was confident in our ability, and thus, for a year, we ran tests, created codes and scripts. Using an image as reference, we tried to reproduce it, to then apply the method to the film. We did a lot of thinking, to figure out the characters' and the cameras' movement, the various elements, lights, shadows, etc. It was a constant ping-pong game, going back and forth between Leo and the rest of the team, between code and images, to get this final result. We couldn't only think in 2D renders, we had to account for the volume of objects as we were evolving in a 3D environment. We had to give off the impression that we painted a sculpture. Several brush textures were used to process the various elements, depending on the precision required and their importance in the scene, but mostly to ensure that everything important was legible and understandable for the viewer. »*

But rendering also serves the story, as highlighted by Maxime: *"this kind of blurry aspect underlined the perception of Bubble, who has a hard time noticing the limits between what she is and what the rocks are. This manner of rendering also softened the coarse appearance of the rocks, allowing for a sort of closeness between the otter and the rocks; the rocks had a softer, cozier look."*

### **A film with an international appeal.**

First acclaimed by the graduation jury, *I am a Pebble* went on to have quite a tour in several festivals. Totalling more than forty selections and rewarded with six prizes, including the 1<sup>st</sup> place in the « Student Competition » at the Athens Animfest, « Best Student Project » at the SIGGRAPH festival or the « Best Animation Short » award at the HollyShorts Film Festival.

And now the film is on the way to Hollywood, a dream that the six co-directors can almost touch.

*« We are delighted to see that our story travels and touches so many people. We put a lot of love and a lot of work into it; reaching Hollywood is both a surprise and a great honor », concludes Yasmine.*