A WISH STAYS WITH YOU

HANNAH DOUCET
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PLATFORM CENTRE
When I was ten, I wished to visit Disney World.

Each year at least 13,000 critically ill children make this same wish. I made my wish after two years of treatment for Lymphoblastic Lymphoma.

These are wishes made with wish-granting agencies. They are “official” wishes, within a philanthropic industry that guarantees fulfillment. In this context, wish-fulfillment is transformed into something tangible, executable, and aligned with corporate structures. The connection between critical illness and wish fulfillment is complex. Here, it’s as if the illness has taken the place of the ritualistic wish object: the wishbone, the wishing well, the wish chip, the shooting star—instead, the child wishes on their illness.

In Canada and the U.S., half of all eligible children wish to visit Disney World. In response to the ongoing popularity of the Disney wish, Give Kids the World Village (GKTWV), a non-profit resort that accommodates critically ill children and their families on their trip to visit Disney World, opened in 1986.

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A Wish Stays With You satirizes, reflects on, and theorizes around aesthetic seduction at Disney and GKTWV. Within the exhibition my use of the mediums of photography, video and sculpture grapples with the aesthetics of branding and marketing alongside built (and crumbling) fantasy spaces and research aesthetics borrowed from my studio wall. These visual languages of presentation (seduction) and research (critical engagement) form the basis of the exhibition.

The exhibition weaves together explorations of memory, capitalist constructions of fantasy, corporate philanthropy, problematizing the histories of wish-granting charities, advertising, performance, death, illness, disability, ableism within fairy tales, and toxic positivity. Through an autotheoretical lens A Wish Stays With You represents a “pulling back of the curtain” on the long-standing relationship between charitable organizations devoted to fulfilling critically-ill children’s wishes and Disney, the corporate media giant that spins tales of realized dreams.

Embedded in the structure of wish-granting agencies and GKTWV is the inherent belief that fantasy can alter the direction of a child’s life. When interviewed about the village, President of GKTWV Pamela Landwirth says they strive to: “create a feeling of such intense happiness that makes you feel like you can conquer the world, we want to send these kids back with that feeling, I can do anything, I can conquer anything because I’ve got this happiness.”¹ Notions of happiness and positivity as forces that can heal illness is an underlying narrative so pervasive in the colliding worlds of healthcare and wellness, wish-granting agencies and Disney. My work links these sectors in their joint pronouncement on the importance and necessity of happiness. Through this exploration I attempt to insert nuance and complexity within otherwise purely positive narratives.

Swiss theorist Max Lüthi writes that fairy-tales “are a form of hope. We fill our heads with improbable happy endings, and are able to live—in daydreams—in a world in which they are not only possible but inevitable.”² Disney fairy tale narratives are so embedded with hope, ever-present with a “happy ending.” Likewise, Lauren Berlant theorizes the concept of cruel optimism as “the condition of maintaining an attachment to a significantly problematic object... the fear is that the loss of the promising object/ scene itself will defeat the capacity to have any hope about anything.”³ When I think of GKTWV and the context of childhood illness, I wonder, how do these fairy-tale narratives support us, and how do they harmfully implicate themselves in our understanding of reality? Berlant’s conceptualization resonates here. This wish-granting format, and specifically the Disney wish, asks the wisher to maintain hope and attachment to capitalism, fairy tales and Disney, in order to maintain hope about anything at all.

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The imagery at GKTWV is playful and joyful, yet dated. The structures are worn, teetering, on the verge of breaking. The immersive fantastical scenes here lack the detail and complexity of Disney. GKTWV is a space where fantasy, illness and wish-fulfillment co-exist. This liminal space fascinates me. It is here that we see Disney’s construction of the able-bodied ideal confronted with

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1. A Look at Give Kids The World Village (Interview with Pam Landwirth), YouTube (Midway to Main Street, 2019).
the dimensionality, animation, and nuance of disabled and ill children. I am struck by the uniqueness of a resort that exists solely for hosting sick kids and how they differ from those intended for the general public. In a community founded to provide space for sick children to thrive beyond the limitations of their illness, does illness recede or come to the forefront? What does it mean to make space for sick children within Disney—a place that has continually perpetuated narratives that condemn different and disabled bodies?

In *The Undying*, Anne Boyer writes, “I would rather write nothing at all than propagandize for the world as is.” Similarly, I desire to look and think deeply about my experience with the Disney wish and push forward into a space where thoughts unravel and tangents emerge, where the image of a benevolent good dissipates and a picture that is altogether more strange, interesting, and complex emerges.

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Hannah Doucet (she/her) is an artist, arts educator and cultural worker from Treaty 1 Territory currently based in Tkaronto/Toronto. She works within photography, video and sculpture to create work that explores relationships between wish fulfillment, illness and fantasy. Her practice engages the body, illness, anxiety, as well as materiality and failure within the medium of photography. Doucet has exhibited across Canada, with exhibitions at Neutral Ground (Regina), Duplex (Vancouver), PLATFORM (Winnipeg), The New Gallery (Calgary) and Gallery 44 (Toronto). Doucet was the inaugural winner of the PLATFORM photography award in 2017 and was long listed for the National Gallery of Canada’s New Generation Photography award in 2019. She is one of four founders of Blinkers, a non-profit project space based in Winnipeg, where she was a co-director until August 2021. She has over 10 years of experience working within community arts as an artist facilitator and educator in schools, community resource centers, hospitals, and art galleries. She is currently the Program Coordinator at VIBE Arts, a community arts organization based in Toronto.
Change, You Wish
by Emily Doucet

Opening movement
A smiling sun waves to the crowd. Behind them, a human chest respires. Stretching almost imperceptibly, the photograph-laden textile covering the body expands and deflates. A small shadow delineates between breast and limb, revealing a small sliver of brilliant blue under each arm. The opening of the swelling soundtrack is topped with the cartoon-ish sound of a magic wand (you know the one); a sound that signals the beginning of a spell, a transformation, or the granting of a wish (perhaps).

I’m describing the opening movement of a video I first saw in my sister Hannah’s basement studio. We’d been talking about the project for months. I’d seen the sun mascot costume move between apartments, and I’d read multiple versions of her MFA thesis that outlined the research behind this project. She asked me to write about this work, so I’ve been watching this video – again and again. With repeated viewings, its effect is changing. The joy which infused the scene upon first viewing does not dissipate entirely, but now I feel the labored movements of the performing bodies. Repeated viewings leave me hypnotized, tense. Watching over and over seems to be the only way into this text yet I’m still searching for the words to describe it, for I don’t know what it would be like to see the video without knowing the full story, not sharing a history with the person wearing the costume. I suppose my problem here is not that different from that which troubles any kind of writing about art or history: how to account for my position? How to transcribe memories and experiences (my own or that of another)?

Back some years, we went on a trip...
I can see that the narrative structure is going to be a problem here.
Let me try again.
The march begins

Hard-sounding piano notes hit us. Rhythmic clapping layers on top. The body in the background disappears leaving the sun in the middle of an animated forest at night. Glittering lights in the center of the background. Now fireworks! Moving back and forth between a magically lit forest and an exploding sky. The sun continues their dance. Star-filled skies take over. A rainbow, a swirl of gold. Something is building.

When I was 13, I answered the phone. My mom was calling from the hospital. I only remember a few words from the call, that she “didn’t know what to do,” that my sister had cancer. It was 2001 (a year nothing else happened) and we had recently gotten a desktop computer. I was sitting at the computer when I answered the phone, so I searched for the name of the cancer and started reading. But even now I know (or think) that I’m misremembering. That call was about her anxiously waiting outside the operating room during the initial biopsy surgery. Surely, I didn’t get this news over the phone, alone?

But whatever the origin story of my knowledge, or the precise moment which I learned that things were about to change, change they did. Illness is a strange event, a series of bizarre interactions. If you’re lucky, people give you things when people are sick. Meals appear, more people around than ever before — a succession of aunts and neighbors (women, mostly). Homemade meals frozen. Schedules off-kilter. Hannah receives a puppet who will (aesthetically, at least) receive the same medical interventions; a group of veterans gives us a PlayStation. Two years later, an organization gives Hannah a wish. I view philanthropy from the outside, one step back but still a secondary beneficiary of organized kindness.
Dream sequence

Two more figures appear on either side of the sun. Both encased in photographs, their features anonymized, smoothed over by the textile covering their faces. The music changes again, dreamlike now. The sun leaves us. The back-up dancers move amongst clouds, glowing gold skies, and moonlight reflecting on water—all cartoon tropes conjuring those scenes in nature we might be prone to thinking are magic in action, rendered much better in animation than any photograph. The sun returns, bringing with it a new set of fireworks to end the sequence. Everything changes again.

When I heard my family would be going to Florida, I knew, I just knew, everything would be different. I don’t think I had had any particular interest in going to Disney World, a place I associated with being a child—something (at least in retrospect) I had very little interest in being. Still, Disney World was in Florida, a climate decidedly different from Winnipeg, where I had started noticing the tans some people came back with after the Winter or Spring break. Based on this anecdotal research, I knew that a tan could absolutely transform one’s social standing.

Orlando! We were submerged in humidity. We were staying in Kissimmee, at a nonprofit resort called Give Kids the World. The trip was designed as a transformative experience, the result of a wish granted by a foundation. Hannah will tell you the machinations of this transaction better than I, but I had other things on my mind—something (at least in retrospect) I had very little interest in being. Still, Disney World was in Florida, a climate decidedly different from Winnipeg, where I had started noticing the tans some people came back with after the Winter or Spring break. Based on this anecdotal research, I knew that a tan could absolutely transform one’s social standing.

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The brass section comes in, the sound gets deeper. A catchy hook lets the dancers show off their choreography, their bodies overlaid on a background of sky and space. We move back into the “dream,” transported by a change in the music, a return. The sky lightens and birds fly off into the distance. The sonic symbol of the magic wand signals that we are near the end. Both dancers kneel to frame the sun with their arms. A blue sky fills with fluffy clouds before darkness. The music ends, while the dancers hold their places. We could cut here, but we see them breathing. One gets up, kicks the air (as if to celebrate a job well done) and disappears. The second dancer vanishes. The sun remains, wobbling ever so slightly to hold the pose. Their, or, I should say, Hannah’s (now that I’ve revealed my knowledge of the performer), arms drop. It is all over.
Emily Doucet is a writer, editor, and historian of photography and visual culture, based in Tiohtià:ke/Montréal. She is currently a SSHRC Postdoctoral Fellow in the Department of Art History and Communication Studies at McGill University. She writes on historical and contemporary visual culture regularly, publishing essays, interviews, and reviews for a variety of publications including Border Crossings, C Magazine, Canadian Art online, Communication +1, Grey Room, Lady Science, and Public Parking, and for arts organizations such as the Blackwood Gallery, Circuit Gallery, Fonderie Darling, Gallery iCO3, and Truck Contemporary. Her work has been funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, the Manitoba Arts Council, the Northrop Frye Centre (Victoria College), the Centre for the Studies of France and the Francophone World (University of Toronto), the Eccles Centre (British Library), the Kulturwissenschaftliches Institut Essen, and the Image Centre (Toronto Metropolitan University), among other organizations.
“FAIRY-TALES ARE A FORM OF HOPE. WE FILL OUR HEADS WITH IMPROBABLE HAPPY ENDINGS, AND ARE ABLE TO LIVE—IN DAYDREAMS—IN A WORLD IN WHICH THEY ARE NOT ONLY POSSIBLE BUT INEVITABLE.”