

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.

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.

1. A Look at Give Kids The World Village (Interview with Pam Landwirth), YouTube (Midway to Main Street, 2019).

2. A.S. Byatt, “Introduction to the Annotated Brothers Grimm” in *The Annotated Brothers Grimm*, ed. Maria Tatar (New York, NY: Norton & Company, 2004). xx.

3. Lauren Gail Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012), 24.

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 together 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.

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

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.”⁴ 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.

⁴ Anne Boyer, *The Undying: Pain, Vulnerability, Mortality, Medicine, Art, Time, Dreams, Data, Exhaustion, Cancer, and Care* (New York, NY: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2019), 116.

*A variation of some of these words were first published in *Border Crossings*’ August 2021 Issue on Photography in a text titled *A Wish Stays With You*.

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right: *Perpetual Curtsy*, digital photograph, 2022.





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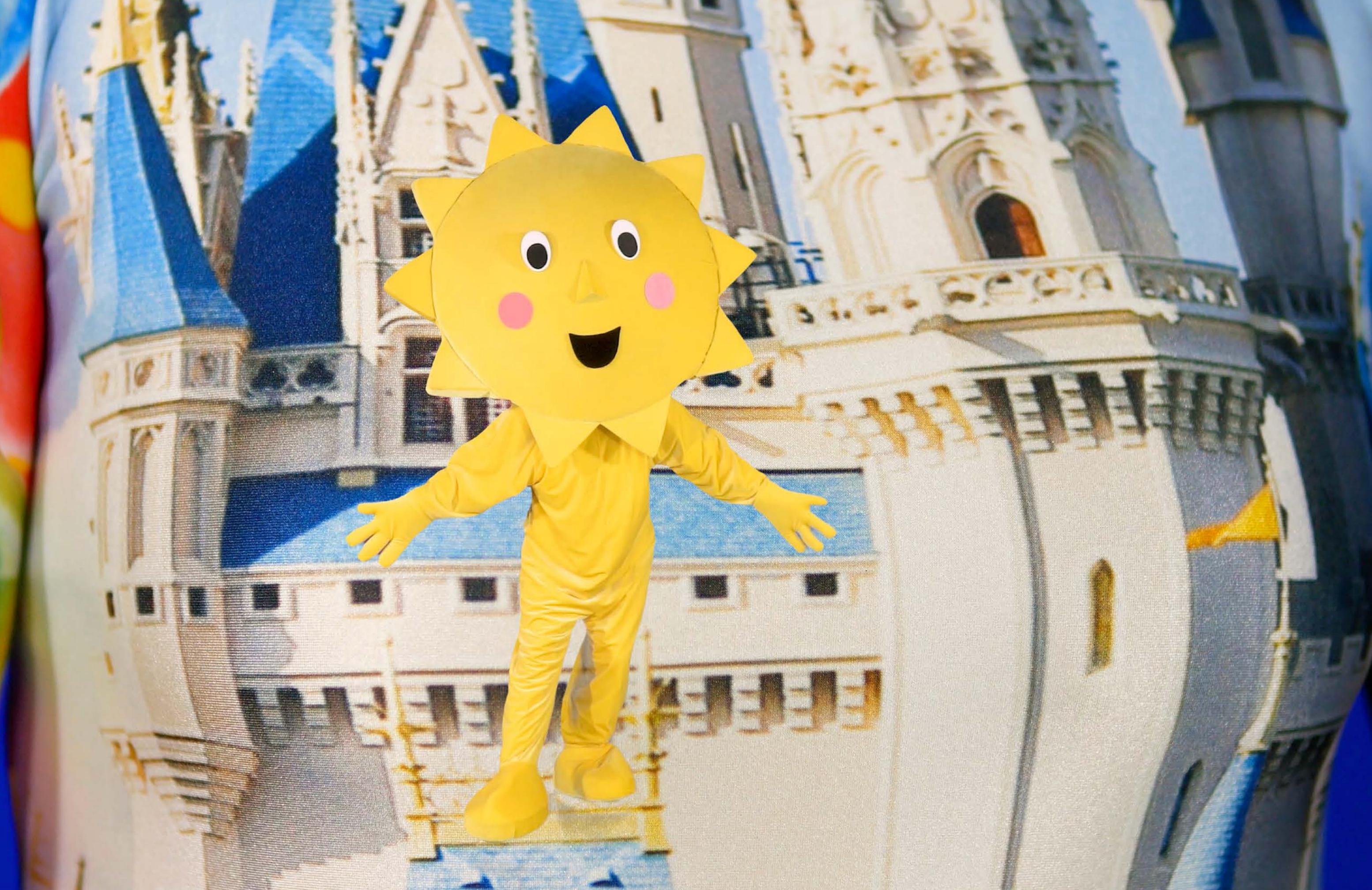
Thank you to my partner Mick for accompanying me on my research trips to Disney World and being my biggest support during the creation of this project.

Thank you to my amazing family who cared for me and supported me through my cancer treatment as a child, accompanied me on my wish trip to Disney World in 2003 and continue to be glowing supporters in my life and art. Mom, Dad, Emily (again), Jacob, Olivia and Maia. I love you all so much. ♥

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.

left: *Princess*, digital photograph, 2021.

reverse: *Watch in Awe* [cropped still], video, 0:03:22, 2021.



Change, You Wish

by Emily Doucet

Opening movement

A smiling sun waves to the crowd. Behind them, a human chest respire. 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).

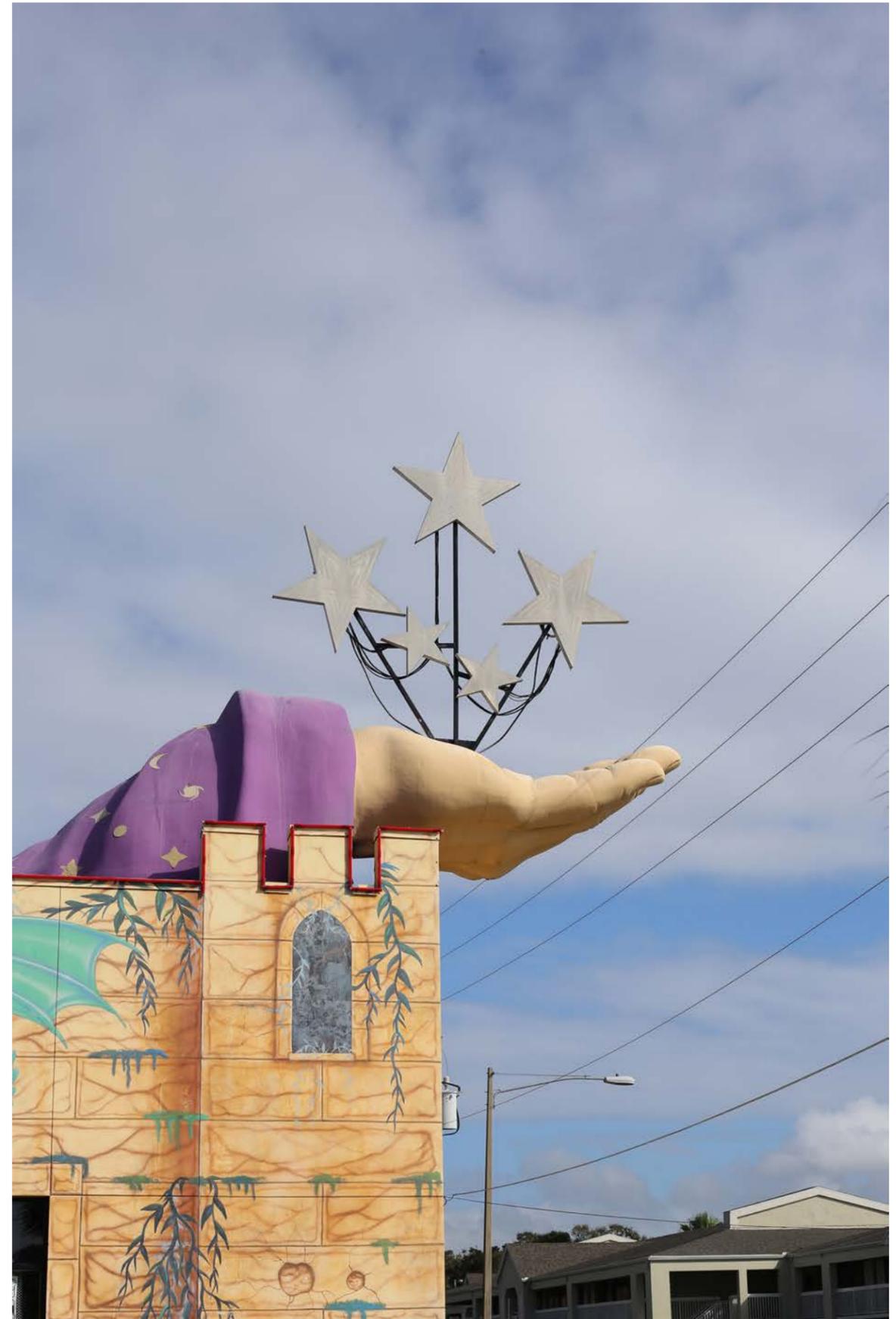
I'm describing the opening movement of a video I first saw in my sister Hannah's basement studio. We'd been talking about the project for months. I'd seen the sun mascot costume move between apartments, and I'd read multiple versions of her MFA thesis that outlined the research behind this project. She 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.

Untitled (A Wish Stays With You), digital photograph, 2021.





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.

left: *Untitled (A Wish Stays With You)*, digital photograph, 2021.

reverse: *Watch in Awe* [cropped still], video, 0:03:22, 2021.



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: you see, before I left, a boy (it would turn out not a very nice one) had told someone to tell me that he liked me — a powerful phrase for any girl to wish on. Add that refrain to the fact that I was now on vacation surrounded by critically ill children (which filled me with fear) and my family (which, admittedly, filled me with embarrassment), and I was conflicted, at best.

A much-quoted guy once said of Disney that “all Mickey Mouse films are founded on the motif of leaving home in order to learn what fear is.” Though written long before the establishment of Disney World the amusement park, this phrase has stuck with me in writing this. It is probably an instinct to evade that fear that prompts my impulse to tell you the wider significance of all of this, to plunge myself into some big historical narrative, about girlhood in North

2. Woolf's interest in her sister's paintings appears to have been motivated by the way that they evaded language, writing in the foreword to a 1930 pamphlet published accompany an exhibition of Bell's work: “the puzzle is that Mrs. Bell's pictures are immensely expressive, but their expressiveness has no truck with words.” Virginia Woolf, “Foreword,” in *Recent Paintings by Vanessa Bell* (London: The London Artist's Association, 1930).

America in the 1990s, about tans, about Florida, about Disney World, about capitalism—we are talking about transformation, after all. Then, however, I was a teenager and my preoccupations were vain, simple. Just like Disney World promises to transform for the price of admission, so to me Florida signaled the possibility of the previously unattainable. Among other things: consumer goods. Abercrombie! Hot Topic!

I see all this in that video. And yet, I haven't really talked about it yet. I've teased my reader with formal description, interrupted by me, me, me. But now I see a certain parallel between my reticence to interpret and my lapses in memory; something kindred in the boom and bust of language between criticism and memoir. Literature and the visual arts have, after all, been called “the sister arts.” This isn't usually intended to describe the parallel media practiced by sisters, though we can find examples — the writer Virginia Woolf and the painter Vanessa Bell for one. It would appear that Virginia was likewise (and just as uncharacteristically) at a loss for words, writing that while Vanessa's painting “excites a strong emotion,” “when we have dramatised it or poeticized it or translated it into all the blues and greens, and fines and exquisites and subtles of our vocabulary, the picture escapes. It goes on saying something of its own.” But, somehow, as Woolf puts it, “our emotion has been returned to us.” Virginia's words for Vanessa's paintings purposely pale. The picture escapes, goes on speaking. I'm not going to be able to capture the video because I can't get outside of it. There is no distant writing.

The magic wand sound hits differently now. There is flatness to its tone, like when you know what feeling the movie score is supposed to be conjuring whenever the script hasn't brought you there. I try to look up where the sound comes from but all I can see are different sound libraries where I can purchase or download a variety of different versions, described variously as “magic wand” or “casting a spell.” After all this, the sound is almost doleful, rather than joyful.

1. Walter Benjamin, “Mickey Mouse,” in *Selected Writings, Vol. 2, Part 2 (1931-1934)*, ed. by Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland and Gary Smith (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), 545.



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.

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