

Susanne Kim about CABINETS OF WONDER

“Whenever I feel stressed, I watch guinea pigs”

How to summarise CABINETS OF WONDER in a few sentences? It's more than 'just a film'. It feels like a poem, or an opera, or a combination of both. German director Susanne Kim: *“I would describe it as a very free documentary, playing with fictional elements, staging, poetry, sounds, music... the things that children include intuitively in everything they do. It is a cinematic journey into the inner worlds of children, into their cabinets of wonder.”*

Wisdom connects with his Cameroun great-grandfather, who was a lion hunter. Ever since Roya crossed the ocean as a refugee on her way to Germany, she dreams of being a mermaid. Joline refuses to grow up, while Elias, diagnosed with autism, dreams of his perfect friend, a voice box that offers him comfort, empathy and shelter. But how to bring these feelings and memories to life in a movie?

It feels like every single image, every detail of the film was well-thoughought.

Susanne Kim: We developed the film together with the children. For every child we searched for the right method to make them come across vulnerable, strong and beautiful - just as they are. We built a voice box for Elias, impersonating his perfect companion. Wisdom's anecdote about his great-grandfather defeating a lion reflects his everyday struggles with racism, or with the feeling of not belonging here. For Joline, who escapes into a childlike world, we came up with blue bugs, crawling and tickling her. Roya, who wants to dwell in memories without being traumatised time and time again, became a mermaid. The children wrote their own songs, built masks and props, and came up with ideas, like Wisdom's raft or Roya's balloon. I then merged them with my visual ideas and luckily had a great team, constructing tree houses, lion tongues, giant bugs and everything I could think of.

What did your storyboard look like?

Kim: There is a white wall in my room; whenever I think about a new film, it

fills up bit by bit with pictures, objects and notes that I find in books, magazines, on the web, at flea markets. When immersing yourself deeply into something, it will come to find you everywhere. The result becomes one big collage. That's how I see my films, as collages.

Apparently the film comes with a VR installation.

Kim: Elias had put me up to this VR experience; I hadn't dealt with virtual reality before, but he had. It immediately made sense to me that through a pair of VR glasses you can enter the planet inside his head with all its air conditioning fans, guinea pigs and voice boxes. We then created a virtual world for all four protagonists, where you can sit on Wisdom's raft, make Joline's blue bugs play a tune or experience Roya's dream. We're not simply reproducing the film's images, but creating another level of understanding. You can play, puzzle, interact. It is like a physical experience; you really have the feeling of riding on a river or sitting in a boat. But VR and film also



Director Susanne Kim & Art director Franziska Junge

work independently from each other.

I'm all the time searching for little pieces of information to complete the puzzle; every association leads to the next one.

Kim: CABINETS OF WONDER is indeed designed as a kind of scavenger hunt, so it is okay if you feel challenged. In my experience, some adults need time to understand what the film





“means”, while children don’t even question our way of storytelling. This is not a conventional documentary; I wanted to offer children a wider diversity in visual languages and artistic approaches.

I suppose every child on earth has a story of its own. Why did you finally select these children?

Kim: I wasn’t looking for specific stories, but for specific children. I spent time in youth clubs, after-school classes and playgrounds, we even had a casting call. In the end, the ones who

somehow caught my eye emerged quite organically.

They offer us an insight into their lives by showing us their most vulnerable side.

Kim: The children in the film are emotionally very smart; they know that being vulnerable is not a weakness. The experiences they already had (and that have hurt them deeply), they transform them into a message: you are okay the way you are, let others be the way they are too. It was important not to expose them as victims. Through connecting different images, I wanted to open doors and windows, and develop a sense of community.

Many of these children’s problems are caused by society’s expectations.

Kim: That was indeed one of the basic ideas behind the project: children’s lives are dominated by categorisations such as “autism” or “immigrant” or even “school results”, and the associated expectations and prejudices of adults. As a child, you can’t influence much of it, you are dependent.

Even if we’re dealing with serious problems, how can you not laugh about children running around in



some sort of giant insect costumes?

Kim: I especially had to laugh when they started discussing politics, about “which side Mrs. Merkel is on”.

What is the story behind the mysterious presence of those guinea pigs?

Kim: Wisdom and Elias both have guinea pigs, and so does my daughter. Those creatures are fantastic. Whenever I feel stressed, I observe them for 10 minutes while they eat away, yawn, poop and jump around like little “popcorns”. After that, you just can’t be in a bad mood any longer. We all agree

that in a child’s world, there should be plenty of such little creatures.

—
Gert Hermans
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