

Essay by Louise Johnson

Walt Disney, an icon of the great American Dream. The son of Irish immigrants, he lived his early life in poverty, survived the Great Depression and the Second World War. His empire, like many others of his generation, was built on hard work and passion. He pushed himself beyond what he thought he could ever achieve and there are some parallels with Ray Kroc, the man behind the rise of the billion dollar empire of McDonalds. Both men wrenched themselves up over the praecipe, the men who ground it out in the name of capitalism and the free West. This was a generation who made the most of every working minute, the industrial pioneers who transformed America.

During the depression Disney produced the first fully animated film, Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs. This was a huge success and was followed with Pinocchio and the then Cinderella and Treasure Island. In 1955 Disney World opened with the help of corporate sponsorships. At the same time the McDonalds empire was rapidly expanding across the USA. Fries bought in one end of the country would look and taste exactly the same as the ones bought in the other, production line ready hamburgers. This was a vision of the new world where easy meals and cheap entertainment became part of the popular culture.

In England in the 1950's a new form of architecture arrived that changed the English landscape forever. New housing was built on the back of the housing shortage that followed the destruction of cities in the Second World War. The social housing, amongst it, the 'Brutalist' form, was starkly modern and its creators sold a vision of a more prosperous, comfortable, peaceful life to the prospective inhabitants. The architects were intent on sweeping away the old social order with its architecturally elitist finery, in favour of something safe for families, yet exciting and avant garde.

Whether you liked the Brutalist architecture, the hamburgers or the Disney cartoons, you could admire the determination, integrity and success of the men behind them. However, Mark's artwork dramatically illustrates the legacy of these global empires in 21st Century Britain. As with many other of his works you are forced to confront head on many of the ills of modern society, rooted in desolation and apathy.

The post war architecture was made with cheap materials, concrete that didn't last in damp weather, structurally unsound and not well maintained. The covered walkways were meant to encourage children to play safely with their neighbours but rapidly became dimly lit no man's lands fuelling crime and violence. The estates had dark spaces that encouraged delinquency. People who lived there became disaffected. Nearby residents didn't want to know the people living in these estates, the very people who had fought in two world wars were being let down by society and the State.

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The NHS was also built on the promise of the paternalist vision of a new Britain. The dream of caring from the cradle to the grave has never quite been realised through chronic underfunding, inadequate resources and neglect (particularly of the elderly). Stories of people being let down by the system are part of the daily news.

In 21st century England some of the post-modern architecture has become stratospherically expensive - desirable property to the middle classes who want the 'coolness' of living in a building that was once inhabited by rapists, drug dealers and thieves. Following the great Thatcherist property sell off what is often left behind for social housing is even worse, damp, structurally unsound havens for gangs, drugs and violence.

The world in Mark's artwork is far removed from the ideal of the new comfortable haven for England's post war families, sitting around the TV watching Disney films. The dream for many, 60 years on, has turned sour. He makes this point so eloquently in the saccharin impassive faces of the Disney princesses floating eerily around the geometric, cluttered, run down estates. Mark's artwork is compelling yet disturbing, the princesses' faces are masks, their castles are the high rises, the props of the modern day version of the Disney dream.

What we have in many corners of England are the flaccid remnants of those new post-war world empires. The run down estates and the faceless Disney princesses in the works blend seamlessly in the works, thus illustrating the point that the Disney characters are there to sell a dream of a life that is intangible and unobtainable. But it is the use of colour and tone that so superbly add to the mood of the pieces. The bland faces and the surroundings are disconcerting yet the classic Disney colours pull you in with their familiarity.

Disney is still selling its version of a better life, but this time the salesmen are interested only in maximising profit. It peddles a view of the world in which a girl just needs to be rescued by a handsome white prince to live a happy life, a world with no disability and riddled with casual racism and stereotypes that encourage deep rooted xenophobia. McDonalds sells the Disney plastic characters of the latest film being plugged, free with happy meals, their ultimate destination being to landfill. As people become increasingly unhealthy on the back of cheap McDonalds meals, the NHS creaks under the strain, and so it goes on...

Just as communism has not worked, the artwork makes the point that this post-war capitalism has failed many of our people. Whilst the rich have certainly got richer, the poorer have stayed poor and become increasingly marginalised and disaffected. We walk past the concrete jungles but we don't see them. Mark's work forces us to confront these uncomfortable truths about much of modern England.

Louise Johnson - June 2015