



Pic: John Shireair

Hard Scrabble, 2019 Linocut 90 x 200 cm.

JOHN ABELL

For his artist's residency at the National Trust's Newton House, Dinefwr, Welsh painter **John Abell** was inspired by the building's tumultuous and radical history for the pictures in his new exhibition. **Daisy Gaunt** visits his Cardiff studio to find out what makes him tick.

Among half-finished canvases, paint-streaked palettes and countless brushes, John Abell sits creating images that seem out of a dream, cross-legged on the floor, swiping cobalt blue along the curved lines of a horse climbing a ladder. "It's a motif I rely on a lot," he tells me, at his studio based in an empty shop in Cardiff's Capitol Shopping Centre. "For me, it represents us – we are always trying to do the impossible; it makes you draw a parallel with the real world."

These existential concerns are present in Abell's new exhibition *Becca And Her Children*, at the National Trust's Newton House in Dinefwr, Llandeilo, which began in January of this year. In the first artist's residency undertaken by the National Trust for their 2019 *People's Landscape* programme, it marks the 180th anniversary of the Rebecca Riots (1839-43), when cross-dressing farmers and agricultural workers protested unfair taxation across mid and west Wales.

The chaotic nature of his studio is a far cry from Abell's strict artistic discipline and routine. "I work every day. A lot of the time, it seemed like it was for nothing, but it's so good now – do not quit!" In making these pieces, Abell was determined to immerse himself in the world of the rioters completely, living in a cottage neighbouring Newton House – where much of the riots took place – for three weeks. "Walking in the deer park, painting all day, then coming home and making etchings – it was a really meditative time," he remembers. "I hope I have done the people [who took part in the riots] justice."

This artistic immersion is something Abell, who studied at Camberwell College Of Art and now lives and works in Cardiff, is burning to share with the whole nation. "I think of my art as having a spiritual connection with my audience," he says. "I want to change their perception of things, even just for a minute."

Through these pieces, Abell invites his audience into his swarming, vivid reimaginings of the riots: a technicolour dreamworld; a whirlwind of raw emotion, empathy and violence prevalent within the protests. The pictures seem to silently ask the viewer what they would do, how they would respond to the poverty and injustice imposed on them by an unfeeling, oblivious government.

The collection of linocuts, etchings and prints will be bringing a "large and diverse" examination of tenant farmers "forced into radicalism" by Turnpike Trusts, who owned most of the main roads and fields and introduced tollgates. By dressing in women's clothes as "Rebecca and her daughters", they were inspired by the Old Testament, where vigilant Rebecca urges her followers to "possess the gates of those who hate thee" (Genesis XXIV, verse 60). "It's such a revolutionary quote," says Abell. "To take back from your oppressor what they have stolen."

The "capriciousness and violence" of the Old Testament translates into Abell's works, with harsh lines and edges depicting the cutthroat nature of both man's greed and the "incredible torment" suffered by the farmers. Depicting "people forced into extreme measures", the rioters burned the toll gates



Pic: Kathryn Campbell

– real representations of the high taxes and economic exploitation enforced upon them – and demanded that fares were lowered or eradicated.

"The riots are an example of radicalism actually working. I don't think that would happen today; I'm feeling pretty nihilistic about politics at the moment," Abell says. "I wish we valued art a bit more," he continues, suggesting that the marginal space occupied by Wales throughout history has limited a certain "form of art-appreciating culture", prolific in England or France, from developing sufficiently. Welsh painters are not so readily celebrated as, say, Turner or Constable are in England. Yet with Abell's "determination that it will all work out in the end", is Welsh art on the cusp of a renaissance?

***Becca And Her Children*, Newton House, Dinefwr, Llandeilo, until Sun 26 Apr. Admission: £8.50. Info: 01558 824512 / www.nationaltrust.org.uk/dinefwr**