

John Abell's Visionary World of Playful Impermanence

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John Abell is an artist of the in between, of the upside down, of shimmering and wild alternative realities. When entering his world, you will meet an eclectic array of recurring characters; curious witches, strangely chill apocalyptic horsemen slinging guitars, electric skeletons and willowy women glowing under the moonlight wearing garments of stars. You will encounter horses, birds and deer, tall ships, ladders, lighthouses and winged figures. They suggest a hundred stories, but stories are not their reasons for being. They are visions, moments, signposts. Very likely they are not from around here, but they may also be just around the corner.

Abell is a deliciously slippery artist, embracing the liminal with playful nods toward the esoteric. His palette is saturated with vibrating, psychedelic jewel tones, dominated by blues, purples, pinks and the occasional bright sap greens and yellows. His paintings shine like opals, producing an elated, ethereal effect. This is Abell's intention, and color is not the only way in which he destabilizes the viewer's sense of reality. The scale of his works could often be described as imposing, but his works are intensely immersive and enfolding. He plays with perspective, placing the viewer in situations of both intrigue and fear; directly in the line of horses falling from ladders, itself a bizarre and jarring scenario, or being discovered by a circle of witches under a full moon, a circumstance equally joyful or menacing. Abell is fascinated by the idea of what an alien might experience if they crash landed onto Earth, and what they might first see. The viewer becomes the fallen alien, newly encountering some weird scene.

Abell's pieces layer objects and figures together in ways that defy any sense of linear storytelling. His composition is inspired by the perspective of medieval woodcuts, creating visual juxtapositions of time and space. In *Exodus* we see what appears to be a stand of trees and fiery ships reflected in the water, but underneath the surface, four horsemen amble along. They are clearly not reflections, but their plain of existence is entirely uncertain. Are they on the opposite shore escaping the conflagration or are they somewhere else? Perhaps they are shades, ethereal beings, suddenly made visible, hinting at the mythic Welsh conception of the permeable barriers of the Otherworld. The Otherworld isn't a separate place, it is all around us, and we may stumble into it at any time. In *Séance of the Dead Trying to Contact the Living* a pack of ebullient skeletons, some with quite festive hats which clearly outlived the bodily demise of their wearer, reach out joyously, letting us know they are here, and that they are smiling, inviting us to reach back out to them.

Despite training at London's Camberwell College of Art and embracing influences ranging from Hindu philosophy, to German Expressionism, and apocalyptic literature, Cardiff based Abell perceives himself as a Welsh folk artist. Welshness is intrinsic to his work, however, it is far from tokenistic or defining. He is inspired by Welsh prehistoric landscapes, flora and fauna, and Welsh history, yet he is not involved in an explicit identity project of presenting a codified Welshness. Still, Abell engages deeply with Welsh themes and places. The *Rebecca and Her Children*, series exhibited by the National Trust of Wales in 2020, commemorates the Rebecca Riots that took place in Mid and West Wales between 1839 and 1843, protesting the tolls levied on the poor population by the Turnpike Trusts. In Abell's portrayals of these events, the male protestors, the

“Rebeccas”, dressed as women, recall a beautiful, luminous coven of witches in the moonlight, a recurring visual theme for Abell, maybe suggesting the magic and transformation brought about through justice. Abell’s lighthouse paintings are inspired by the lighthouses on and around Ynys Môn (Anglesey) and Ynys Llanddwyn. In many ways these lighthouses feel archetypal, and that may also be true, but they are certainly situated in a real place, and the site of inspiration is important. Indeed, his *Hiraeth for Beginners (Volume 2)* illustrates that quintessentially Welsh concept, the soul deep longing for home, expressing the impact of Welshness on the psyche. Here a girl is curled up naked and alone in the woods, and just outside the forest’s edge are butterflies, stick images recalling paleolithic cave paintings, and the emblematic Welsh Red Dragon. Is she dreaming of home, or just asleep, protected by her allies?

Abell insists that his work is neither didactic nor narrative. His works are koan-like, asking the viewer to sit with a multiplicity of states and meanings. He frequently pairs themes of death and the end of the world with bright colors, happy ghosts, and rather benign looking apocalyptic horsemen, yet one shouldn’t read this as simple contrast. There is death, and there is beauty, the world ends every day. Yet there is a benefit to the soul of reframing the end of the world as inevitable change, and Abell gives us the opportunity to consider various states of persistence and dissolution.

Through Great Waters

Abell’s recent work has been dominated by water, ships, and lighthouses, elementally paralleling the all-saturating anxieties of global warming and the waves of a seemingly endless pandemic. In 2020 and 2021 Abell completed a series of linocuts bordered by poems penetrating the heart of the deteriorating conditions of the planet. The colors are stark, mostly black and white with the hint of bright red, or blue. Water is surging, flooding, engulfing, as people placidly, somewhat sadly, face a shared and eventual fate. Sacrifice is a recurring theme, and there is more than one alchemical reference, suggesting a process of necessary refinement.

A Song for the End of the World is bordered by an adapted section of the 1944 poem by Czeslaw Milosz, “A Song on the End of the World” characterizing the slow roll of transformation and destruction of our current condition, proposing that those expecting a big cinematic ending will likely be disappointed.

The day the world ends
The women walk through fields under their umbrellas
A drunk sleeps on the edge of a kerb
The voice of a violin lasts in the air
And leads into the starry night

This piece is desolate, yet it is not jarring, perhaps portraying the banality of existence against the backdrop of climate change, and the inability of the average person to turn the tide. Inside the border of words, people and animals are caught in a moment of life as the flood waters rise. Women walk with umbrellas, a mother cradles a child. A skeletal angel with a trumpet pulls a woman by her hair, who pulls another woman’s hair in turn, as she reaches out to gently touch

the face of the man sleeping on the ground. In the center of the image, a tiny, tiny, figure, the Hanged Man from the tarot, dangles from a tree. We are being sacrificed, and there is little we can do about it.

A second linocut in the series, *The Space Between* is bordered by the last stanza of TS Eliot's "The Hollow Men", where the world ends not with a bang, but with a whimper, once again robbing those fueled by visions of Armageddon their fiery, rapturous ending. Again, sad women are surrounded by rising waters. Swans glide on the water next to tall ships, alchemically signifying the border of the physical and the unseen worlds. In the center a woman, a goddess perhaps, sits with a fire in her belly and a tree growing from her heart. The flowers on the tree feed birds with a single drop of blood, recalling medieval bestiaries where mother pelicans feeding their young on their blood was part of the Christian visual language of sacrifice. Yet in alchemy, the sacrifice of the pelican created the conditions for the transformation of the soul in preparation for the generation of the Philosopher's Stone.

Through Great Waters is bordered by a segment from Welsh writer R.S. Thomas' "In Great Waters" and also features sacrifice, with Christ crucified on the bow of a ship laden with women, sailing through hard waters. Yet embedded in the piece we find glimmers of hope, a woman with a candle, a light house, trees and birds, and an odd skeleton tutoring a woman on the guitar. Likely the hope here is not of redemption, for it is too late to change course. It is in finding the peace of transition.

Ships and lighthouses also feature centrally in Abell's recent watercolors, appropriate metaphors for isolation, feeling adrift, seeking beacons of hope. Yet in contrast to his linocuts, these pieces are anything but stark, with vivid purples, pinks, and blues quivering on the surface of the paper. Mermaids, fairies, and celestially clad women trace a path to distant lighthouses while flaming ships light up the water. One gets the sense that these lighthouses may not be of this world. Are they in the Otherworld or do they indicate the need for an internal space of refuge? Abell may be trying to convey that serenity can be achieved through a shift in perspective. In *Northern Lights* a ship is engulfed in flame, a rather relatable theme given the times, but in another reference to alchemical processes Abell does not interpret this scenario as a tragedy: "The fairies look like they are trying to save the ships, but they don't need saving. The flames are a purifying fire."

Perhaps Abell is trying to tell us something about the impermanence of existence, or perhaps there is just so much more to reality than our limited perceptions of it. There is darkness in this world and there is joy. He observed that most people, in the West at least, spend a lot of energy trying to stop the very natural process of change. Things change all the time, there is birth, death and transformation:

"My thoughts on change are relatively simple, it's something all people go through in all aspects of life, at all times, yet the idea of change in the main is difficult for people, despite being in a constant state of flux... *Panta Rhei* (everything flows)."

Abell is quite content with change, and despite the dazzling visual impact of his work, he communicates a certain equanimity. Everything really will be alright in the end, and maybe it's even alright right now.