

Fanning the Flames: John Abell's Reflections on Newton House

By Louisa Elderton

And they blessed Rebekah and said to her, "Our sister, may you become the mother of thousands upon thousands. May your offspring possess the gates of their enemies."
Genesis 24:60

Green fields roll into the distance, trees spreading their branches wide and their roots deep within the valley. Fallow deer forage amid the grasses, finding herbs, leaves and shoots. The ruins of a castle look down upon the flowing River Tywi. This is the landscape that John Abell walked through daily during his residency at Newton House in Dinefwr, Wales, a Jacobean building steeped in history, now cared for by the National Trust. Targeted by the Rebecca Riots of 1839–43, the owner Colonel George Rice is said to have awoken one night to find a note by an empty grave dug in the grounds, warning him of his imminent merging with the soil, mounds of earth waiting to bury his flesh. Indeed the house is supposedly haunted; tobacco smoke swirling from the former servants' basement and hushed voices heard echoing in the empty halls.

Such stories are evocative of Abell's recent art, which draws directly upon the socio-political history of this area — and specifically the Rebecca Riots. Civil unrest resulted from the period's economic conditions in the countryside, the population of Wales' rural areas struggling to make ends meet because of paying tithes to the church and land rent to wealthy landlords. It was a new system of 'support' brought in for the poor in 1834 that tipped the balance, the poorest being admitted to workhouses defined by most appallingly cruel conditions. When a tollgate system was then implemented, farmers were hard hit by having to pay for the roads on which they transported lime needed for the soil. Spirits were broken, and riots ensued.

It is this sense of ruination that influenced, for example, *Hard Scrabble* (2019), a linocut of over two metres in width that sees strange folkloric figures merging with the rural landscape. Skeletons rise and hang in the air, muscles still clinging to bone. At the far right of the image, a tree grows from the belly of a woman who sits slumped with surrender. Roses weep huge tears, or perhaps they're spilling their thick bloody nectar back into the earth, which too seems to scream bloody vengeance; a nearby scarlet tree becomes a thick vein, spurting. It is the deep, multitudinous slices of the Abell's knife into the lino that compounds an ominous sense of wounding, of people struggling and scrabbling to survive. The strong diagonal line that traverses the picture plane makes the world seem unstable as bodies slide about and become buried.

Abell has described the scene in relation to "the communal aspects and the psychological pressures the rioters were under: they were in dire poverty." Skin slackens upon sombre faces and birds raise their beaks crying out to the heavens. In the nineteenth century, these male rioters dressed in women's clothing to disguise themselves during the attacks — it's not clear whether women also took part in the protests. Either way, Abell's figures wear long black gowns, merging with the darkness of these nightscapes; their faces are markedly androgynous as men, women and allegorical creatures are all depicted as being part of the same battle, the uprising of the working class.

The kneeling woman bearing a tree from her womb reappears in the linocut print *The Woman Feeds the Willow, Feeds the Flowers, Feeds the Birds* (2019). As suggested by the title, her body nourishes the surrounding landscape and is the source of life. The rioters called themselves "Rebecca and her daughters" after a passage in Genesis 24:60 where Rebecca is described as producing "offspring" for "possessing the gates of their enemies." In Abell's interpretation, she is the calm, benevolent figure of mother earth from which the biblical Tree of Jesse grows — a theological representation of a genealogy. She enables not only the wellbeing of the landscape, but too the survival of generations to come.

In this respect Abell's work is comparable to the artists from the *Die Brücke* movement — a group of German Expressionists from Dresden, formed in 1905, who revived older media methods such as woodcut printing, and even invented the linocut (one of Abell's primary media). Seeking to undermine the national academic style, they often produced Arcadian images of nature and female figures, bodies merging with the verdant landscape. Abell's women too connect to the earth, but as a means of symbolising the political strength of the Rebecca rioters.

Another method of protest and intimidation used by the rioters was to burn stacks of wheat outside the houses of the gentry. One such incident happened at Home Farm, a residence near Newton House, at which Abell also spent time. Two watercolour paintings draw upon this story, *Fire in the Night* (2019) and *Campfire for the Commune* (2019). The former sees a group of women holding hands, their auburn hair entwined with one another as they close their eyes and seemingly sway in a lucid dream. A thick stream of smoke billows above them, pinks, yellows and purples drifting from vibrant orange flames. The deer above look out, inverted in an ungrounded world. The latter painting uses a warmer palette of browns, purples and oranges, bodies leaning towards a fire to warm their hands — or are they fanning the flames? A similar dreamlike mood pervades this scene, as people come together in a dance of war that too is strangely peaceful.

Abell's body of work pays homage to a historical period of protest where people successfully fought against their unfair treatment. The artist sees a connection with the economic inequality that has rapidly grown in the UK over the past decade: "austerity is quite visible on any day in Cardiff city centre, however people don't appear to be as willing to engage in direct action as they were in the 1830s." What will it take for such a sense of agency to be returned to the people? At a time where divisive political agendas seek to undermine the power of the collective — of empathy and care — we must remember to come together and support one another, not least for the health of humanity, but for the survival of our landscape. As Abell knows well, we are part of that landscape, intrinsically.