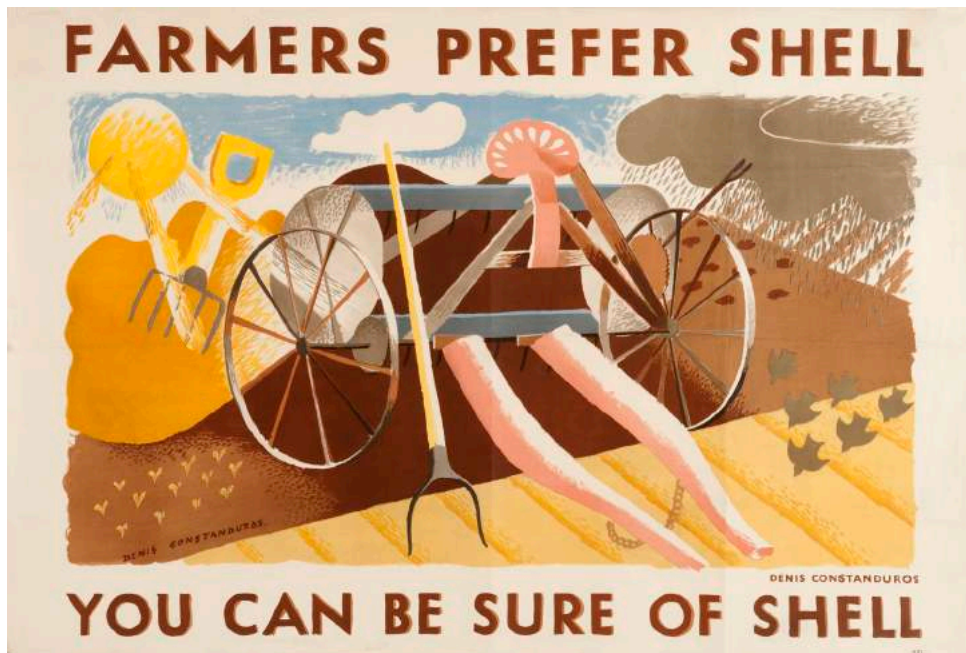


VISUAL ART

Raise a glass to smashing bumpkins

A hugely enjoyable show about the realities of rural life charms
Rachel Campbell-Johnston

Rachel Campbell-Johnston



A 1934 poster by Denis Constanduros
COURTESY OF THE SHELL HERITAGE ART COLLECTION

It's not often that you get to eat artworks, but you can at the latest Hauser & Wirth exhibition. Visitors are presented with an omnivorous cultural menu: lettuces growing aquaponically in aquariums of tilapia; sourdough bread created from a culture of virescent *Azolla*. The latter is an amazingly fast-growing pond weed, says Adam Sutherland, the director of the Cumbrian farm-based arts collective Grizedale Arts, who has curated this show. "Doubling in mass every 24 hours, it has been

investigated by space scientists as a possible source of food,” he tells me. “Its pretty miraculous. In fact, about the only thing that’s not miraculous about it is its bloody awful taste.”

The cheeses will probably taste better. They are made from milk from the goats pastured in the courtyard and are fermented in a mobile production unit belonging to the shepherd’s school, a Spanish project operating in the Picos de Europa, which offers disadvantaged young people the opportunity to learn a traditional and potentially lucrative rural skill. You will get a chance to try them when they are served in the gallery’s (quite expensive) brasserie.

The Land We Live In – The Land We Left Behind takes its title, apparently, from a drinking toast that 18th and 19th-century migrants used to raise. They would down their first glass to the land they had newly arrived in, then follow it with another in remembrance of their native home. It traces the evolution of our strangely ambivalent relationship with the rural as it has manifested, changed, evolved and developed over almost a millennium. This makes for a riveting, if sometimes rather fey, frequently peculiar and often wacky narrative.



Marcus Coates performing Apple Service Provider, 2017
MARCUS COATES/PHOTO BY ANDY GOTT

The show rambles over all four galleries of the Hauser & Wirth farmstead. It features works by more than 50 international artists as well as assorted historical artefacts, documents and bits and pieces of rescued ephemera. Amid the fantastical jumble you may discover prints of the Adamites, an obscure religious sect from the 2nd century who refused to wear clothes, professing to have regained man's primeval innocence. Giuseppe Arcimboldo's 16th-century paintings of fruit-and-veg

faces feature, as do a pair of sandals belonging to the Victorian radical and early homosexual activist Edward Carpenter. There will also be a contemporary performance that will involve the artist Marcus Coates dressing in a costume made of apples and retiring to an architecturally designed apple store room (visitors are invited to eat the fruit) to engage in shamanic rites.

You will meet a mad gallimaufry of characters: medieval hermits who, having retreated into sealed caves, were fed through crannies by locals; the Oxford University team of amateur navvies who, persuaded by the art critic John Ruskin to do something useful for once, donned their cricket whites (they had nothing more suitable) to start building a road (Oscar Wilde professed to have sweated alongside Ruskin on this unfinished project). You will meet the 6th Earl of Lowther, who blew up his stately home to turn it into a piggery and concreted its lawns to replace them with a broiler chicken factory, and Jonathan Meese, a German conceptual artist little known in this country because he is afraid of flying, who appears to have no qualms about applying an octopus to his face.

Don't come expecting to find well-known works by the big names commonly associated with our historic successions of rural movements. All the expected candidates are featured — Ruskin, Samuel Palmer, Eric Gill and Paul Nash among them. Yet, except perhaps in the case of Carsten Höller's huge hallucinogenic mushrooms, the more conventional pieces in this show feel understated and often unexpected. Beatrix Potter appears, but not with some blue-coated Tom Kitten. She draws a mycelium for the Linnean Society.



A Still Life of a laid Table, with Plates of Meat and Fish and a Basket of Fruit and Vegetables by Jacob Van Hulsdonck
COURTESY JOHNNY VAN HAEFTEN LTD

This is a very conceptual and wilfully counterintuitive show. The rustic idyll, it suggests, is a romantic dream. Reality creeps in to puncture it. Sometimes this has a gently mocking edge. Edward Burne-Jones caricatures a fat-bottomed William Morris attempting to scabble up a mountain in a pair of improbable galoshes. Yet when it comes to Nikolaus Geyrhalter's 2005 movie *Our Daily Bread*, the astounding technologies of contemporary farming lead us into some horribly disconcerting territories even as they amaze us with man's ingenuity.

Of course, if you are a local who works on the land it will seem ridiculous to have to go into a gallery to look at a pile of animal fodder, but you can be sure that the curator is aware of this. This show is shot through with a powerful twist of irony. And it doesn't flinch from hard facts. Pollution, the problem of plastics, factory farming and the impact of tourism come under consideration.

The land we live in is not a domain of corn dollies. In fact, bar a peasant smock, there is little folk art to be seen. Our rural

environment, this show stresses (ironically, given its immaculately manicured venue) cannot be dismissed as some tourist brochure-style utopia. Successions of disillusioned idealists have shown that. Rather, our rural environment is a realm of precious, dynamic resources to which the people who work there must find fresh ways to connect. That is what this show says to its visitors. And that is the way, it suggests, to create a new world.

***The Land We Live In — The Land We Left Behind* is at Hauser & Wirth Somerset, Bruton (01749 814 060), from tomorrow to May 7**

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others **visual art**

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An enjoyable show in Somerset shows the realities of rural life, finds Rachel Campbell-Johnston

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in photos (courtesy of Hauser & Wirth) of the show, featuring art installation



FARMERS PREFER SHELL
YOU CAN BE SURE OF SHELL

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