The Guardian

Interview

Stolen Australia: the ferocious anti-colonial art of Helen Johnson

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▲ Invasive species … a detail from Bad Debt (2016) by Helen Johnson. For full image see below. Photograph: Courtesy of the artist

From fat landowners farting the national anthem to gentlemanly chaps passing round bribes, Helen Johnson tells the ugly truth about how Australia was carved up

There's theft afoot at Helen Johnson's new show. Landgrab, pilfering, palm greasing, misappropriation and straight-up burglary all sneak into Warm Ties, her suite of paintings that bring the crimes of Australia's colonisers back to their place of origin.

The exhibition takes place at the ICA, on the Mall in central London. "I was thinking about its context here, in such close proximity to power in the UK," says the Melbourne-based artist, whose slight build and soft speech conceal a political ferocity. "It provided an opportunity to make work about the power structures the UK sent out to Australia when it was colonised."

The significance of this location for Johnson's work is underlined by the view from the upper levels of the ICA, which takes in the Department for International Development and, in the foreground, a memorial to Captain James Cook. We are speaking on the eve of Australia day which, as Johnson reminds me, "commemorates the landing of Captain Cook and the commencement of genocide and dispossession in Australia. But it's a public holiday where everyone has a barbecue and gets drunk."

▲ 'Fat landowners who received parcels of stolen land' ... A Feast of Reason and a Flow of Soul (2016). Photograph: courtesy of the artist

The chasm between the "state-sanctioned account of colonisation that's cleaned up and idealised", and the "violent, brutal process" it conceals, provides the underlying narrative of Warm Ties. Standing in front of these large, unstretched canvases, one must examine layer after layer of image and surface texture, to start piecing together what is taking place within.

Australian government has never made a treaty with any First Nation peoples or properly acknowledged their sovereignty."

▲ Burgled bedroom ... Bad Debt. Photograph: Courtesy of the artist

From the buttocks of a number of figures, little cartoon gusts of wind carry noxious lyrics expunged from the Australian national anthem. And deep within their woollen suits, a faint outline of their bowels can be discerned: lurking within each, like a dark ghost, is a waiting turd. "They're all busting for a shit, these guys," says Johnson, matter-of-factly. "Apparently, it's remarkably common for a burglar to shit in the bed: it's an adrenaline fight or flight thing - so this is that sense of guilt that they're not admitting to themselves."

More excrement appears in Bad Debt, which shows a burgled bedroom, across the surface of which is scattered flora and fauna familiar to us in the UK - thistles, bindweed, marshmallow, rabbits, foxes and cats - but which are invasive in Australia. The flipside of the canvas carries a list of plants classed as noxious weeds in Victoria.

Johnson explains that it's only very recently that indigenous crops have been properly explored as an

alternative to cultivating imported species. “Bruce Pascoe, who’s a Bunurong man, has put a lot of energy into experimenting with growing crops that were staple prior to colonial invasion,” she says. “They don’t need any pesticides or fertilisers, and he’s been moving towards making them agriculturally viable.”

At first sight, Impotent Observer offers a simple amorous clinch between two men, but the words whispered by the first, in colonial dress, that cause visible arousal in the second, in jeans and a sweatshirt, are those of the Australian national anthem. “They are probably rather enjoying themselves,” Johnson says. “I see it as an attempt to illustrate a kind of solipsistic colonial fantasy: the persistence of that mentality is like a sad fantasy.”

▲ 'A solipsistic colonial fantasy' ...Impotent Observer. Photograph: Courtesy of the artist

Behind them is a display of shackles used for transported convicts, which Johnson regards as “part of the same kind of violent process. This shift towards needing to find a new place to colonise occurred after the American War of Independence: it’s arguable that the convicts were being instrumentalised as a means to moving on to the next place, the next landgrab.”

Johnson is fond of a classical reference, and much of her source material for characters is drawn from forgotten material she uncovers in state library archives, including 19th-century illustrations and satirical cartoons. She achieves a mass of surface textures by pressing materials into the wet paint: cloth for garments, knotted string for a wheat field and skeins of thread for hair. Just as Johnson is both unexpectedly fierce and straight talking, so her work disconcerts with its surface beauty and vigorous political kick.

- Helen Johnson: Warm Ties is at the ICA, London, 1 February-16 April.