

# VILLAGE VOICE

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## PRIMORDIAL SEASONINGS

by Jerry Saltz

Visionary, academic, cracked and clumsy; deeply felt, labored, cartoonlike and funky. All these descriptions apply to Verne Dawson's paintings of life in the year 23,800 B.C. (the time of the earliest cave paintings, 21,000 years before Stonehenge). Think Brueghel by way of Hudson River painting, folk art and Poussin; Bosch meets Grandma Moses meets Celestial Seasonings meets The Peaceable Kingdom meets Dr. Seuss meets Bierstadt. To this smorgasbord add pastoral landscapes, cheesy album-cover art, sci-fi visions of the distant past, hippie utopian fantasies, Edenic myths, movies like *Quest for Fire*, natural-history dioramas, Louis Eilshemius, something very boy, a prereligious awe of nature, a twisted sense of humor and an earnest yearning to make a contemporary cycle of the seasons, and you've got the building blocks of Dawson's work.

The labored and cartoony parts of Dawson's work are the hardest to take, and trigger thoughts about how these paintings might look in a less hip context. Dawson, 40, does things in such a particular, controlled and painterly way that he makes you wish he'd find more expansive, far-out ways to make these far-out paintings. His figures can be stiff and clunky, and often not integrated into the landscape; pictures verge on illustration; areas get glutted; the lyricism sometimes turns sappy. And the bumpy texture of the linen he paints on adds to the old-fashioned quality of the work.

But even with all these reservations, I love looking at Dawson's paintings; I love what they're about, the way they're organized and their colors. Sweeping, fantastic, fish-eyed landscapes rendered in lush greens and blues are dominated by gigantic earthworks, natural formations, para-stadiums, or archaic, Guggenheim-like constructions. Space recedes or flip-flops in weird ways. Sprinkled throughout these landscapes, but especially at the bottoms, are scenes of people bathing, juggling, holding babies or engaged in what look like pagan rituals. They act out the signs of the zodiac around primeval maypoles or gather at winter bonfires; they bury their dead, enact mating rites or shepherd mythical animals. It sounds very *Hobbit*, but not only are these new paintings Dawson's most impressive and ambitious, together they add up to more than dippy trippiness. They add up to something moving, almost metaphysical and poetic.

Four of the five large paintings that make up "May Day," his fourth solo exhibition with Gavin Brown, have the title *Cycle of quarter-days observances, circa 23800 b.c.*; a subtitle indicates the era or time of year. Dawson has never claimed these paintings comprise a seasonal cycle, but that's how they read. The summer painting, *Solstice Procession in the Magdalenian Era* (the late Paleolithic period in France), is the best here, and depicts a marvelous, tree-covered, Tower of Babel configuration. Jetties extend from the bottom of this edifice into a beautiful lagoon. Butterflies dot the air; little figures -- nearly all of whom are naked, as if in some arcadian nudist camp -- frolic, fish or meander. Midway up the structure, a figure does a headstand atop a running bull. Above him, at the very top of the painting, a fabulous yellow sun hovers at its apogee. Possibly the acrobat re-creates the path of the sun, possibly he's just having fun. Whatever he's doing, the painting is

simultaneously idyllic and symbolic, very Woodstock Nation or Coney Island in the year 23,800 B.C.

The fall painting, *Burial in Autumn*, is dominated by an ominous autumnal sky of icy whites and hazy grays. Far below, a procession of tiny figures carries a body through a field, over a stream, to an open grave. *When Santa Was a Shaman*, the most Disneyesque of the lot, is a snowy nighttime scene. This oddball winter painting includes a remarkable Santa figure, and may refer to Laplander myths describing archaic shamans who wore reindeer horns (as this one does) and dressed in red and white clothes (the colors of a speckled, consciousness-altering mushroom). Throughout Dawson's work -- and never with a hint of hectoring, didacticism or ecological "statement" -- there is a genuine reverence for and interest in archaic techniques of ecstasy, pantheism and the magico-religious powers possessed by sorcerers.

*May Day, Les Eyzies*, the spring painting, pictures an enormous valley. On the left, people meet and talk. It's a village green without the village. On the right, something amazing happens: A naked man, penis bouncing, rushes toward a beautiful blond Godiva-like female (Spring?) who carries a lyre and rides atop a huge flower-clad bull with a horn coming out of its snout (a prehistoric sign for Taurus?). In any event, it's pure "Rite of Spring," as heartfelt as it is silly. Although we're separated from these characters by roughly 1032 generations, their activities feel familiar. If you take away the bull and the lyre, add clothes, 8 million people and 10,000 buildings, this vignette is reminiscent of the jolt you can get walking down the streets of New York, when suddenly you're bewitched by an indescribable beauty coming toward you. Dawson's just letting us know that this has been going on for a long time.