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ETERNAL RETURNS: THE ART OF VERNE DAWSON

by Bob Nickas

In the distance, a jumbo jet takes off from Newark; others circle in a holding pattern, awaiting clearance to land. Nearby, some nature lovers make their way nakedly through chest-high grass in the Meadowlands. All is wildly verdant, as if this were a primeval landscape, the marshy bog from which life first bubbled forth. For the passengers on those planes, flung out of or back in time, the frequent-flier points will have to be measured in light-years, and the drink carts won't roll down the aisles soon enough.

What's wrong with this picture? Well, nothing really, unless you mind elements of the present and the deep past in the same frame. That's one way of painting the future, and it involves a form of time travel in which Verne Dawson happens to specialize. Since a good 90 percent of Newark International Airport, 1998, is uninterrupted sky, Dawson unambiguously reminds us just how little of the picture we humans occupy. And if this is indeed the future, it appears we're headed for a place where some of us will be foraging among bushes and brambles while others sip aquavit in the first-class departure lounge. Maybe the future will turn out to be a J.G. Ballard story after all.

As Dawson tells it/paints it, this sense of the presence of the past in the here and now, and its implications for what lies ahead, is not so far-fetched, but with us at every turn. Why is there rarely a thirteenth floor in a building? Dawson will tell you that in the ancient calendar there were thirteen months in a year, the last representing the end of the cycle, or death. Why three rings in the circus? They stand for the sun, the moon, and the zodiac. Why seven dwarfs in "Snow White"? Because there are seven days in a week. And who is Snow White, anyway? Something about the moon goddess and a lunar eclipse. For Dawson, it doesn't go unnoticed that the construction of the Petronas Towers in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, at 1,483 feet each the tallest buildings in the world, is only the most recent attempt to reach heaven, a modern-day Tower of Babel. But we're getting ahead of the story, and here's how it might one day be told.

Once upon a time there was an artist fascinated by fairy tales and folklore, Stone Age archaeology, astronomy, the zodiac, the Bible, numerology, calendars, and the marking of time. Just as oral history relies on the passing of stories from one generation to the next, his rendering of these myths and markers was intended to keep them alive in our time, as he believed they in fact were. He practiced the near-obsolete craft of painting—his instruments wooden sticks with animal hair at the ends—and even imagined his ideal studio as a cave in the Dordogne region of France. Cave painting. His style was frequently and mistakenly described as "faux-naif," when "self-taught" was closer to the truth.¹ (Topic for discussion: Is all handmade realist painting today, figuratively speaking, folk art?) When people

talked about his work, they made references to artists as seemingly unconnected as Bosch, Audubon, Rousseau, and Smithson. He'd opened a portrait studio in New York in the mid-80s, drawn to the idea of an artist integrated into the larger community: dentist, barber shop, portrait studio. . . . This not being a utopian society in the age of manual reproduction, however, there were only two commissions in two years. He eventually turned to historical and mythical figures, painting George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Adam and Eve as Africans, Santa Claus, and the Unabomber, subjects no one would think to paint or at least had not for a very long while.

The father of our country, whose portrait was painted time and again by Gilbert Stuart, was worthy of another, Dawson felt. After all, as he reminds us, "Washington could easily have crowned himself King of America," and today we'd all be bowing and scraping like they still do over there, "but he didn't believe in a monarchy." But what about Father Christmas and Theodore Kaczynski? Today, the letters children send to Santa are often e-mailed, his workshop located somewhere between the North Pole and cyberspace, with Kaczynski its self-appointed destroyer. The Santa who has appeared in a number of Dawson's winter solstice paintings is not the jolly fellow we visit in the mall, but a "shaman." The Unabomber, the artist reasons, is related to Santa through the myth of the wild man. "In the New Testament," he tells us, "St. John lives in the wild and represents rebirth through destructive forces." In comparing their portraits, however, we find it's Santa and not Kaaynski who appears to be off his medication.

Dawson has also explored that well-trampled genre, the four seasons, though he thinks of them in ways that have less to do with the changing colors of foliage than with each season's personification: Santa for winter; the April Fool in spring; the green man, a Pan-like, pagan figure as summer; and Dracula for fall. There are three versions of this series, with the larger paintings collectively titled "Cycle of quarter-days observances, circa 23800 b.c.," 2001. (The date refers to the cave paintings in Lascaux; Dawson thus paints scenes from the time of the earliest paintings in recorded history.) When this series was exhibited last spring at Gavin Brown's Enterprise, the artist called his show "May Day," a reference to this celebration in both its benign dancing-round-the-maypole form and its banner-waving political manifestation. As one moves between the simple communal life and labor pictured in these paintings and the postindustrial world in which we live, it's hard not to think of "May Day" as an SOS, a call for help in distress, and one that may not be answered anytime soon. In fact, people in the future may look back on this world of ours as the stage for an ongoing ecological morality play, from oil exploration in once-virgin national parks in Alaska to the fiery destruction of ski lodges in Colorado by the clandestine ecoterrorist group Earth First!, with Greenpeace and the Sierra Club caught in the fray. The key to Dawson's show was Celestial Atlas (after 17th century illustrated atlas), 2001, a tondo that features a sinking ship surrounded by representations of the constellations. Playing connect-the-dots with the zodiac, Dawson asks us to circumnavigate a globe in which the sky is the ocean. In doing so he relates the most ancient mythologies of the skies to the biblical story of the Flood. If ever an artist deserves Cliffs Notes, it's Verne Dawson.

For all the symbolism and myriad references, Dawson's work is also always about painting, and he often ingeniously orchestrates his narratives through composition and detail. In *Big Bear*, 2000, a large brown bear looks upward to the night sky, a ladle on the ground at its feet, There's an observatory on a low hill to the right, If you know your constellations, you can make out the Big Bear and the Little Dipper up in the sky. Dawson has, in effect, painted them twice, figuratively in the bottom half of the picture, abstractly at the top. A painting that is almost equally abstract and representational? To view it in this way is to be suspended between heaven and earth, seeing double, with the observatory, a structure built to look beyond our world, as the fulcrum of the picture. But then we're caught slightly off-balance by Dawson's mystical-comical side: Does a bear gaze up at the stars at night?

In *Praying Boy*, 1990/2000, a painting Dawson began ten years ago, put aside for quite a while, and finished only last year, a young boy in pajamas kneels at his bedside to say his prayers. Perfectly wedged between the mattress and bed frame is a white circle haloed in red. This circle-or hole-at the exact center of the picture is the point around which the entire image turns. Its placement near the boy's midsection, roughly opposite his navel, creates a parallel unseen center point, giving the picture a peculiar sexual energy. The bend of the boy's knees leads us through his pubis to the hole in the bed frame, onto the bed, and out the window, beyond which lies a dense green world much like the landscapes Dawson would paint again and again in the years that passed before he reamed to the canvas. Here, Dawson gives the only abstract element in the picture the greatest representational weight and erotically animates this near still life with the smallest detail.

With a bigger picture in mind Dawson makes visual dues panoramic and lets them take on epic scale. *Solstice Procession in the Magdalenian Era*, 2001, is dominated by a vast earthwork that's some sort of Paleolithic high-rise, or a moss-covered version of Robert Smithson's *Spiral Hill*, 1971. The sun is at the top center of the canvas, just as it is in the sky during the solstice, and it lines up with the peak of this structure. The gently curving river at its base has tendrils of land extending out from the shore as if they were so many spiral jetties. That they also resemble an aerial view of the podlike gangways that lead from terminal to aircraft gives this giant mound the appearance of an earthbound UFO, as if a massive spaceship had landed and taken root here. Are the naked people who frolic at the water's edge merely awaiting their connecting flights?

Back on the tarmac, Dawson not only literalizes the picture plane in Newark International Airport but makes it serve his particular time warp. The runway splits the picture between those nature lovers in the foreground—the present/past—and the plane taking off in the background—the future/present. The runway is the picture's springboard, the point, just as in everyday life, from which we go forward and to which we return.