

INFINITELY FABULOUS

by Ned Denny

When the brightest artists in 19th-century France sought a way out of the dead end of academia, they started painting landscapes. It was a means of getting themselves back into the world and the world back into art, of encountering reality in the form of air and light. Being rooted in this act of exposure, the art of the impressionists was superficially crude but intensely alive. And now there are once more the suggestions of a trend (nothing so modernist-sounding as a movement) that uses landscape painting as a means of circumventing a stale and insular orthodoxy. If Corot and the impressionists were fleeing from the prettified corpse of neo-classicism, these 21st-century landscapists have their own undead to deal with in the form of text-based paintings and slick, bland, mass-produced abstractions.

What both trends have in common is a seeming childlike naivety, and a sense that what is being reaffirmed is the long-forgotten notion that painting can be an approach to earthly beauties. Where they diverge is in their location of this beauty. Even at his most vaporous, Monet's landscapes are always recognisably the fields and waterways of northern France. The artists I'm talking about, on the other hand, make use of precisely those genres (the historical painting, the fantasy) that the impressionists were trying to leave behind. For the visionary landscape painters of today, the sublime is always somewhere else.

The New York-based artist Verne Dawson, currently having his first UK show at London's Victoria Miro Gallery, situates this somewhere else in a remote prehistoric past. In 23,800 BC, to be exact, at which time the earth's position on its slowly wavering axis was the same as it is now. The world of Dawson's paintings, then, is both impossibly distant and yet somehow aligned with our own, a kind of parallel dimension that also seems a thinly disguised metaphor for the way we relate to the space of art. But such considerations aside, his landscapes of the past two or three years are surely some of the most weirdly seductive of recent times. Often centred on a hill or flat-topped prominence, they seem to swell with a nebulous greenness, a verdant plasma that appears not so much painted as stained on to the canvas.

I've mentioned the impressionists as a vague historical parallel, but stylistically Dawson has some less exalted affinities. When I look at his soft-edged Arcadias, I think as much of Middle Earth and Dr Seuss as I do of Corot, of dewy-eyed illustrations from primary school books about "man's African origins". Take the majestic Olduvai Gorge (2002), the work that dominates what is otherwise a slightly patchy selection. This happy but deeply peculiar valley is like a world-in-a-bubble, the anthropological reverie of an inveterate stoner hypnotised by his lava lamp. But this isn't necessarily to denigrate the painting, which at the same time gives the viewer a wonderful feeling of sanctity and reverence. And this is what seems to me

most interesting about Dawson's work - that he uses the kitsch to kindle a sense of the sacred, and a sense of nature itself as a phantom of the mind.

Like those of Dawson, Christian Ward's landscapes are fired with a brilliant and almost supernatural green. But whereas Dawson's green is the sticky chlorophyll of an imagined past, Ward's is like a beacon shining from a digitised future. Aglow and seemingly pixillated, it has the electric radiance of a computerised Eden. Ward is in his mid-twenties and barely out of art school (this show at MW Projects is his first), but his pictures have a transfixing confidence. Visions of fungus-like outcrops and luminous islands bristling among waterfalls, they have clear affinities with classical Chinese painting.

For anyone of Ward's generation, though, a more obvious precedent is the virtual scenery of the computer game. Yet while such landscapes are barely regarded backdrops for various petty tasks, Ward depopulates them entirely and lets their strange atmospheres and textures breathe. You get the impression that the presence of any figures would break the spell entirely, return the mood to one of bouncing along and shooting at things.

The other thing I like about Ward is his subversiveness. He claims to have learnt his fairly basic painting techniques from one of those teach-yourself books that give tips on using a sponge to create an effect. Yet he turns these Sunday painter tricks into images of purest psychedelia, the kind of thing you see when you've had your blood replaced with liquid LSD.

What he shares with Verne Dawson is a disarmingly boundless optimism and a use of flagrant fictions to restore a sense of the miraculousness of Nature. Which is, they might be hinting, the most infinitely fabulous fiction of all.