

THE NEW YORK TIMES

OCTOBER 20, 1989

REVIEW/ART

by Roberta Smith

Verne Dawson Althea Viafora Gallery 578 Broadway (near Prince Street)
Through Oct. 30

In the current plethora of Victorian-flavored art, Verne Dawson's paintings stand out, full of gentle ironies and subtle innuendoes and at times a strange, not-of-this-world glow. His work is primarily abstract, and its sinuous vinelike patterns suggest swatches of unusually willful, psychologically charged wallpaper or schematized garden walls. The latter association is especially strong when the images include small, centrally located ovals reminiscent of waterspouts or, more sexually, navels.

Often Mr. Dawson's patterned, wall-like surfaces seem to have won out over prior, more modern motifs. Various fragments - geometric grids in some cases, unattached roof lines in others - seep through, reminding one of early Mondrian or Picasso. The paintings then become quiet battles between old and new, art and decoration; it makes perfect sense that one of the best is titled "Fin de Siecle." Also noteworthy is the exhibition's one oval painting.

Mr. Dawson's territory is too clearly bounded by other artists, in particular the serpentine abstractions of Phillip Taaffe and the studied dandyism of David McDermott and Peter McGough. He also needs to take more chances with his chosen medium. Nonetheless, there is something distinct and touching - and often promising - in his peculiar meldings of subject and surface.