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ART IN REVIEW

by Ken Johnson

Verne Dawson

Gavin Brown's Enterprise

436 West 15th Street

Chelsea

Through Jan. 16

Among a group of landscapes, intentionally dopey visions of tiny people in idyllic natural settings painted as if by a self-taught hippie, Verne Dawson has included a small portrait that seems curiously out of place. Imitating the dour style of early American folk art, it depicts a fierce, beetle-browed man with a beard and unkempt, upswept hair. He looks familiar; could he be John Brown, the crazed abolitionist? No, it's Theodore J. Kaczynski, the Unabomber, and the paintings, you realize, represent the world as he would have it.

One work, called "Manhattan," depicts a primordial green place with campfires and little half-naked aboriginal people; whether it's before or after the Industrial Revolution is hard to say. In "Rainbow Gathering," a multiracial assortment of people have gathered, some in tepees, some frolicking naked, on an Edenic field; it's like the pharmaceutically assisted fantasy of a reader of "The Greening of America."

Mr. Dawson has executed his amusing concept with admirable finesse. The paintings have glossy, sensuous surfaces, skies like sumptuous Color Field paintings and an expertly done faux-naïf style.

But what lingers in your mind is the split between good and evil. History has proved all too many times that terrible men and their atrocious actions may be motivated by visions of dippy innocence.