

ART

'Aerialists (Red and White)'

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Round and round again

Fellow contrarians Verne Dawson and Urs Fischer put **Martin Herbert** in a spin

On paper, the pairing of Verne Dawson and Urs Fischer is a dubious proposition. The former is an American painter whose work ranges over 30,000 years of human history; the latter, a dozen years younger, is a Swiss sculptor who specialises in slow-burning deception. But this is a smart bit of lateral curating, since – in highly contrasting ways – Dawson and Fischer make work that opposes progress and, accordingly, tends to send the viewer around in circles.

Fischer manages this quite literally. Suspended horizontally from the ceiling by iron chains are a pair of strange talismans: silver-coloured tree branches each with a lit candle affixed to one end and another metal chain looped around the other, apparently as a counterweight. Motors on the ceiling slowly rotate the two branches, which are spaced at different heights and move in opposing directions. As they turn, the candles drip gobbets of wax on to the floor, leaving dusty grey traces in the shape of two rough intersecting circles into which one hesitates to step. You do so anyway, because the thing is a puzzle. At first, it seems that the branches have been painted silver, to match the counterbalancing chains. But there's something fishy about those chains. If they're iron, they should surely drag their end down, despite an off-centre fulcrum. But no. Defying gravity, they're balanced by the candles. Look perplexedly at the handout and you see 'aluminium' (listed among the work's materials, not 'wood'). Step gingerly into one of the magic circles, inspect closely (while

dodging the lighted end) and you discover that the chain and branch are made of cast metal. Impressively, the whole seems cast in a single piece, all the delicate textures – from splintered wood to the chain manufacturer's stamp – caught in the process.

This might explain the how, but not the why. Actually, Fischer doesn't do 'why'; his point is that there isn't one. 'The analyst, whose stock-in-trade is his skill at putting his artist matter before his viewer in pithier or less redundant language, will find no purchase here,' writes fellow contrarian artist Ugo Rondinone, in the show's micro-catalogue. Still, there are qualitative assessments to be made: spider-

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web art like Fischer's depends on its ability to suck viewers into its maw, and pressures the artist not to repeat himself. His cast-metal/anti-gravity shtick is probably reaching the end of its useful life now (it was all over his last show at Sadie Coles). But here he nuances it enough to obliterate what you've seen before, and gives the impression of having plenty more tricks up his sleeve.

Magical rings are all over Verne Dawson's paintings, which chart continuities in human nature: our attraction to ritual, for instance. In

one of a quartet of landscapes set circa 23,800 BC, an icy central oasis is populated by figures dancing around a maypole, including a Pan-like fiend and a shamanistic Santa dragging a sack. In another, naked figures proceed to the peak of a round green mound carved into tree-ringed tiers. A third features a mushroom-like dwelling stranded beneath a vast white oval cloud. Lightly freighted with ecological concerns yet comforting in the way they suggest the oneness of human nature, Dawson's landscapes are seductive gateways to the past that lead to the present.

But, like Fischer, he can't just do one thing forever; and the strings he's added to his bow are somewhat frayed. Dawson's no good at painting people, which is okay when they're tiny blips in a landscape, but in his new 'Aerialists' series his inadequacies are spotlighted. 'Three Aerialists' catches a tense acrobatic moment against an azure sky: dangling from stirrups, an upside-down man stretches out to catch a woman in mid-air, while another man has just grabbed a swinging trapeze. It's a vertiginous image, thanks to a pair of perspective-confusing, criss-crossing tightropes stretching out beneath the trio, but filled with acres of dead paint-handling that belies the ecstatic undertone of the work. Yes, people have been gawking at gymnasts and performers for centuries, but if they looked as leaden as this we wouldn't have bothered. Nevertheless, Dawson's crack at pushing his art forward only bolsters this show's collective argument for constantly coming back to where you started.

Verne Dawson and Urs Fischer are at Camden Arts Centre until July 10.

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