



GALERIE D'AVIGNON

Ron Eady's Dome Nation I (from top), At the Gates and Level 2. Their ashen tones suggest destructive forces have been at work since the heady days of Expo

Symbol of promise, tinged with decay

HENRY LEHMANN
SPECIAL TO GAZETTE

Perhaps a world's fair as uplifting as Expo 67 ultimately has to become a downer, a reminder of all that we can never really achieve.

Expo 67 was, of course, also known as Man and His World, a title as unabashedly brave as it is sweetly simplistic. It was a fair that transformed a tiny sliver of modern Canadian history into something that seemed truly golden - no matter that this vague wonderfulness was primarily the feel-good construct of our collective imaginations.

These days, that utopian fair seems so awfully far away - all the better for people not wishing to contemplate how things might have been had the heady Expo optimism been sustainable in reality. However, now on view at the snazzy Galerie d'Avignon is a show titled Man and His World that packs a depressing emotional wallop.

Mid-career Montreal artist Ron Eady's latest obsession is Expo 67, represented in several of the paintings in the show. In the most evocative of them, we seem to be approaching the famous geodesic American pavilion from straight on, as though on a collision course with designer Buckminster Fuller's monumental bubble enshrining 1960s idealism.

Yet from the ashen tones of Eady's raised encaustic lines that suggest the dome's structure - and from the greyness of just about everything in the picture - we sense that some really destructive forces have been at work. That the familiar dome is in the active throes of blight is also suggested by the strange spikes that transform the structure into a giant thistle. This architectural symbol of the age of Aquarius has, in Eady's treatment, become a thorny memory indeed, one that probably should be humanely euthanized.

Equally disquieting is the scene conveyed in an unusual painting provocatively titled At the Gates. Confronting us at an angle is a series of

Montreal metro turnstiles, presumably a last checkpoint before we exit the metro and enter the Expo 67 fairgrounds. Indeed, there are few people in the station, perhaps because Eady has chosen to depict our public transport system well after the closing of Expo 67.

Still, in this somber, post-Symbolist glimpse at city anomie that recalls the compartmentalized urban vision of U.S. artist Tooker, life, of sorts, carries on. Poised in each of the metallic metro gates is a figure garbed in ghostly white, alluding to religious or mythological life forms. For all we get to know - and there's an intentional dearth of "tourist" info attached to the paintings' labels - these spectres are our assigned guides, sent to lead us across the threshold of daily reality and into a glorified, undefined zone that could never be simply termed Man and His World.

In fact, a better (and less sexist) term might be Humanity and the Afterlife, for in the near distance what we behold is a kind of cosmic luminescence - or is it just mist? - through which we get occasional sightings of perpendicular, dark lines.

These just might represent the structures of windows, but they also refer to the sign of the holy cross. Could it be that Eady is rechristening Expo as a true City of God, designed along the conceptual outlines of Saint Augustine's theology?

The message inherent in Eady's picture, possibly verging on the comic, is that a harmless little imaginary jaunt to the Expo site, a kind of date with nostalgia, can suddenly turn into a rendezvous with destiny and the deeper meanings of life. Could the long-since dormant Expo site, now slightly overgrown with hints of Eden, become a foggy promised land? Just as the American pavilion, so 1960s, and despite assurances that it could never happen, caught fire and became a smoking, postmodern torch beckoning the world's pyromaniacs and cynics?

Eady's vision is ultimately about place as a location-less state of mind, be



it memory, aspiration or self-delusion. On occasion it's easy to feel that the artist is pulling our leg in the name of religion and mysticism. At other times, we begin to perhaps see a bit more clearly now, to borrow from the title of a celebrated pop tune.

Quite possibly, the true meaning of any one of Eady's brooding panels is simply in the paint, and in the power of physical pigment to transcend itself and attain a purely visual state, full-bodied,

yet entirely without physical being.

Then again, maybe Eady is doing nothing more than tickling our funnybone or religious sensibility. Go see this exhibition and see what you think.

Man and His World, Ron Eady's encaustic paintings, is on view at Galerie d'Avignon, 102 Laurier Ave. W., until May 18. Call 514-278-4777 or go to www.galeriedavignon.ca.