

Industrial-strength painting

REGINA HAGGO

The Hamilton Spectator

NEED TO KNOW

Who: Ron Eady

What: Plant Life

Where: Burlington Art Centre, 1333 Lakeshore Rd.

When: Until Nov. 1

Phone: 905-632-7796

Size does matter.

When it comes to paintings, a big one grabs you, makes it difficult to walk away.

Ron Eady's huge encaustic paintings of industrial structures and the landscapes they inhabit are showcased in *Plant Life*, a striking exhibition at the Burlington Art Centre.

Plants belong to nature, but Ron Eady's plants are the exact opposite. They are industrial. Eady's plants recall steel mills and factories of northeast Hamilton. But his views are not totally lifelike. He selects and rearranges recognizable buildings and sites, and sets them against dramatic skies.

Paintings of industrial landscapes became popular in the 19th century, the age that benefited from the Industrial Revolution. Some artists drew attention to the hellish conditions of factories. Others glorified human inventiveness and hard work. Romantics focused on the ways in which humans and nature tried to co-exist.

Eady's a kind of last romantic, pitting human-made structures against the forces of nature. There are no people in Eady's landscapes, so the sites look somewhat abandoned, like the last gasps of a dying industrial age. A painterly haze obscures details and hints at pollution.

In *The Harbour* (2008-09) water, factories and sky rise above one another in rapid succession. A thin strip of water, its waves painted in horizontal strokes, gives way to the land, which is defined by a dark strip of tall rectangular buildings and thin smokestacks. These vertical elements push us upward. A restless sky dominates the remaining two-thirds of the composition.

Eady loads up on the dramatic here. He paints the brilliant and pale blue clouds with dynamic diagonal strokes that contrast with the solid-looking horizontals and verticals below. A fiery patch of orange peeks through at the top.

These paintings are encaustic, which means the pigments are mixed with hot wax, rather than oil or water. Encaustic surfaces can be hard and shimmery like tiles, but they also allow an artist to experiment with textures.

Eady enlivens surfaces with marks and irregularities. He gouges and scrapes, layers paint in places, lets it drip in others.

Texture also plays a big role in *The Core* (2008). We are greeted with a sketchy and highly distracting foreground of energetic cross-hatched blue and white lines. They suggest structures without defining them.

This abstracted area leads to a cluster of industrial buildings that rise higher on the left than the right. The solidity of these buildings contrasts with the weightlessness of the sky in the distance.

Eady's fascination with buildings and sky is evident in a series of slightly earlier paintings. He has called each painting a *Constructure*, and it depicts one tower in various stages of construction.

Each work has an air of something about to happen. Eady shows only the upper level of the tower, so we have no idea how tall it is. The structures look top-heavy with scaffolding, and we are left wondering whether they might topple.

As with the later paintings, people are absent, but Eady's buildings have a life of their own.

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