Edward Burtynsky

Silver Lake Opencut Mine, Kalamalka, Western Australia, 2007

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Over the last three decades, Edward Burtynsky has created a body of images he describes as tracing “the man-made transformations our civilization has imposed upon nature”. This is a modest formulation with which to describe landscape photographs of often vast scale and stunning ocular power. Burtynsky’s camera surveys terrain apparently subject to Promethean forces: quarries sit like mammoth inverted buildings, gouged out according to an unnatural symmetry. A mine tailing spreads luminescent poison across Blackened countryside, a suppurating geological sore. Oil derricks stretch like advancing robots as far as any human eye can see. In Burtynsky’s world nature is both used up and transmogrified: into mountains of tyres and ferrous burlings, densified oil filters and steel drums. A recent book showed us something of China’s epochal transition. A future volume will anatomise the colossus of the global oil industry whilst paying close attention in the text to the complicity of leading industrialists.2 Burtynsky’s imagery inherits the weight of an uneasy modern landscape tradition, to say the least. In all their expansive beauty, his photographs constitute a negative sublime, positing a radically different relationship between humankind and nature. At the same time, Burtynsky’s landscapes labour under today’s critique of the sign, particularly in its photographic form, expressed in the restless questioning of the mediation between a representation and the thing it represents. This is also to distance his imagery from too easy a comparison with earlier landscape traditions, particularly those from the highpoint of European painterly naturalism. If the photographer’s engagement is with a particular strand of landscape representation, it is also an effect of the transformation of that tradition, designated by a technological origin – Guy Debord’s media-saturated society of the spectacle – and our radically different existential experience of global space and time.1 One aspect of this, impossible I suspect to dissociate from his imagery, is the cultural levelling imposed by the global pursuit of mass tourism.3 Burtynsky’s manufactured landscapes thus seem to me to bear a double burden: a profound suspicion of the image, and what might be termed the negative triumphalism of today’s technological sublime.

Whether the photographer is aware of this burden is largely beside the point, although it is clearly reflected in the questioning of those who write about his work.4 For Burtynsky the task appears more direct: that of securing a reliable image dependent in significant part on its startling optical capacity. This is the result of immaculate planning, involving a mapping of sites and due attention paid to timing, preferably a transitional season and a moment in the day when light is at its most descriptive. For a photographer of scale an elevated position is essential and Burtynsky makes use of whatever paraphernalia he can to achieve his viewpoint (including in his most recent Australian photographs a helicopter hovering at 400 feet).

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Edward Burtynsky’s Negative Sublime
DUNCAN FORBES

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Shipbreaking #9a, Chittagong, Bangladesh, 2000
Shipbreaking #9b, Chittagong, Bangladesh, 2000 (opposite)
Oil Fields #2, Oil Sand, Fort McMurray, Alberta, 2001
Oil Fields #2, Belridge, California, 2002 (opposite)
Makrana Marble Quarries #1, Rajasthan, India, 2000

Rock of Ages #7, Active Section, Wells-Cannon Quarry, Barre, Vermont, 1991 (supposed)
Carrara Marble Quarries #24, Carrara, Italy, 1993
Carrara Marble Quarries #25, Carrara, Italy, 1994 (opposite)
Dam #4, Three Gorges Dam Project, Yangtze River, China, 2005

Feng Jie #5, Three Gorges Dam Project, Yangtze River, China, 2005 (opposite)
In the best of his books careful account is given of the sites chosen. We sense a certain complicity, between places that embody a hidden history of labour and a skilled technician devoted to the craftsmanship required of a large format view camera. His landscapes are carefully framed and abstracted, structured in terms of light and colour by a satisfying democracy of content. In such a deliberately way images are formed that pursue something of the inexpressible.

Burtynsky’s technique generates a visual spectacle that scarcely requires iteration: a superabundance of detail, a structural clarity, a startling spatial penetration. His photography constitutes an almost wistful countering of postmodernism’s lack of depth: the spaces are vast, but unlike those of other photographers concerned with the theme of globalization they are rarely disorienting. Burtynsky maps a modernist rhetoric onto his landscapes, although perhaps more in its later functional, rather than earlier analytic form. Above all, this is grounded in a coherent sense of depth, distance and scale: structured by strong, often central, axes his images never threaten dissolution. This produces visual pleasures that have again troubled his commentators and we might recall Frederic Jameson’s observation that the modernist claim to sublimity has been displaced today by decorative tendencies “in which sensory beauty is once again the heart of the matter”.

However, Burtynsky’s is a viewpoint that carries little of the optimistic archaeological imagination at work in the landscapes of August Sander and Carleton Watkins. ‘Influence’ seems in this case too strong a term for the question of similarity, perhaps particularly to the practice of Watkins. In a telling essay, Doug Nickel has argued that Watkins’ photography evolved to match the social and aesthetic aspirations of his Victorian viewers, giving rise to a “distinctively ocular ideology of expansion”. Central to this was the articulation of the hilltop or commanding view, what Nickell describes as a “visual idiom of factuality, measurement, and sheer optical spectacle that retains much of its currency to this day”.

Burtynsky, like other landscape photographers, makes expert use of the commanding view, perhaps especially in his record of China’s breathtaking industrial and urban transformation. Here in photographs of tremendous reach he concentrates on some of the great regions of industrialisation – the Pearl and Yangtze River deltas, the Yellow River valley – with their 350 million or so wage workers. That there should be echoes of an earlier imagery of industrialization is perhaps not surprising. China’s transition to capitalism bears close resemblance to earlier European and North American moments.

Carleton Watkins: the Art of Perception

However, Burtynsky’s is a viewpoint that carries little of the optimism of his nineteenth-century forebear; there is never a sense of triumphant accommodation with nature. Thus his salutary views are literally and metaphorically sidelined with none of the thrill of technological advance embodied by Watkins’ vision. Burtynsky’s landscapes seem more dependent on a morphology of positive and negative forms, emphasising the processes of productive transformation and a finiteous of resources. (Hence the intelligence of Watkins’ photography, although perhaps more in its later functional, rather than earlier analytic form. Above all, this is grounded in a coherent sense of depth, distance and scale: structured by strong, often central, axes his images never threaten dissolution. This produces visual pleasures that have again troubled his commentators and we might recall Frederic Jameson’s observation that the modernist claim to sublimity has been displaced today by decorative tendencies “in which sensory beauty is once again the heart of the matter”.)

Burtynsky’s imagery, the sign and the real are clearly separated, his landscapes remain committed to the cordial materiality of the world. All this raises the question of influence and various modernist predecessors have been named: Burtynsky himself has drawn our attention to the impact of the landscapes of August Sander and Carleton Watkins. ‘Influence’ seems in this case too strong a term and I would prefer the notion of similarity, perhaps particularly to the practice of Watkins. In a telling essay, Doug Nickel has argued that Watkins’ photography evolved to match the social and aesthetic aspirations of his Victorian viewers, giving rise to a “distinctively ocular ideology of expansion”. Central to this was the articulation of the hilltop or commanding view, what Nickell describes as a “visual idiom of factuality, measurement, and sheer optical spectacle that retains much of its currency to this day”.

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How may be that in the face of the continued penetration of the natural world by capital the traditional conception of landscape becomes impossible to sustain. As the geographer Neil Smith, has recently argued, we are witnessing an intensification in the production of nature through “an explosion of ecological commodification”, seen in various forms of financialised credits (for wetlands and carbon trading etc.), bio-prospecting (in which corporations hunt down patentable genetic materials) and the creation of genetically modified organisms.

Our future, indeed the biopolitics of our present, is one of manufactured landscapes with a vengeance. More so perhaps than any other photographer Edward Burtynsky has drawn our attention to this question by mobilising the powerful indexicity of the camera. The implicit challenge posed by his work is how collectively we might produce a new nature.


8. There are many examples, but particularly the work of Michael Marshall, published in Michael Marshall, Global Order, Cairo, 2005.

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