

Edward Burtynsky at Shenyang Heavy Machinery Group Company  
Tiexi District, Shenyang City, Liaoning Province, China in 2005

## Through the Lens of Edward Burtynsky

Text: Cristina Sanchez

Images: Courtesy the artist and Sundaram Tagore Gallery

Canadian photographer Edward Burtynsky is internationally known for his works on man-made landscapes that render, with disconcerting beauty, grave matters of industrial transformation. His works are included in the collections of more than 50 major museums around the world, including the National Gallery of Canada, the Bibliothèque Nationale de France, the Museum of Modern Art and the Guggenheim Museum in New York City.

He is also an active lecturer on photographic art with speaking engagements at the National Gallery of Canada, the Library of Congress in Washington, DC, George Eastman House in Rochester, New York, and the TED conference among others.

For its photography focussed issue, The Hong Kong Gallery Guide caught up with Burtynsky ahead of his exhibition at Sundaram Tagore Gallery, to hear his views on photography as an art form, collecting art, and his creative vision. ▶







Manufacturing #16 by Edward Burtynsky, Bird Mobile, Ningbo, Zhejiang Province, China, 39 x 49 inches, 2009

### On appreciating photography

I have an extensive collection of photographs and books, especially those that engage in a dialogue on the issues facing humanity. Art has the capacity to make us reflect on the world around us, not just for entertainment or pure appreciation of the aesthetics; it adds an interesting layer to our appreciation, it goes further than the ideas at work, than the subject that is being shown. My library has over 600 photography books. I engage in photography all the time, try to understand its function in our society, as an art form. Photographs end up being part of our environment and reside where people enjoy them on a daily basis: on your wall, in a hotel room or a museum. So as an art form, it is interesting to make objects that are active and give something back to their owner or their

public. The work has a life beyond my creating and making it.

### On collecting works of art

When I meet another artist whose work I really respect, and if this respect is mutual, we trade. Why not? It's the beauty of being an artist. It is a continuous back-and-forth with painters, sculptors, and other photographers and print-makers. I do not have a single focus or collect seminal pieces of a particular period of history. I always look for things that speak to me – I want to enjoy the subject and how it's being shown, but I also want it to challenge me, to be intellectually stimulated without failing the aesthetics. You can tell that my work has been created with integrity, intent and excellence in the execution, so I also look for those

things and I aspire for other artists to work at that level.

### On capturing tri-dimensional sensorial reality in an image

It has always been a fascination of mine on how that process occurs and how subtle changes to light and point of view can affect the reading, the meaning, the balance and the ability for the image to lock into our visual field and draw us into its content. Photography is a representation, a print of the real world. That whole process remains a bit of a mystery that you can never fully understand. I can only refer to my own experience and make the assumption that what works for me works for others. If I am being true to myself and listen to the small signals that trigger my brain, then I am hoping that this is transferable. Many artists work this way, having a leap of faith.

In our global society, photography has the capacity to be a universal language. Everyone can get a response and relationship to the visual work.

### On the use of medium

Everyone takes photographs. It is a question of what you do with it. As a photography artist I develop a whole series of concepts, I am creating a body of work that isn't random. I make pictures that connect together into a life's work.

The camera is an elaborate pencil, I use it as a medium through which I transform my ideas into pictures. I use reality as my subject matter, where I draw my materials and my ideas from. The whole world is my canvas, so to speak.

### On the evolution of photography as an art form

For the last 20 years, in the West anyway, it has been the most exciting and the most talked about of art forms. Every museum has been engaged in showing and celebrating art photography.

Digital offers even more control. In my work, I don't compose, I keep the real world intact.

But where digital works for me is that I can control the colour, the density and the contrast. I used film until recently. It teaches discipline, especially with large formats, forcing you to clearly establish your intentions. It changes how often, when and how you make a photograph. Light, point of view, everything has to be perfect before you start shooting, and I have to get it absolutely right on my negative. Those are real differences, with no right or wrong. I would still get the "perfect moment", but instead of two frames I might have 10 and delete what I don't need.

As a printmaker, it is very exciting: I can do things today that I couldn't dream of 10 years ago, and I often have "eureka moments". In the proper hands it's a fantastic tool and because it remains a young media, there is a lot of room for invention and individual innovation.

### On motion pictures

I am responding much more now to the sounds and visual things that are motion-based. I have been shooting in High Definition, and if a movie comes along and we get the financing, I have material of some hard-to-get places that might be added to a film.

Since I have been working on oil and water [Burtynsky's latest works explore landscapes transformed by the oil industry and also water – or the lack of it], I am talking to the same group that did *Manufactured Landscapes* and exploring projects. I am doing a lot more along those lines. I am also coming back to shoot in China after a five-year break.

Motion picture is very interesting and has a powerful immediacy but it works differently, it demands a commitment of time, to sit there and be engaged for an hour and a half.

There is something I like about art on the wall. Photography is not something that you can step out and come back to, like a DVD that is part of your consciousness but doesn't enter your life the same way. A photograph is part of the fabric of your life. ■