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 focused 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.
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 enjoyment. 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 printmakers. 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. It 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. Everyone 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 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 [Burtnessky’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.