Water colours

As award-winning Canadian photographer Edward Burtynsky makes his solo Singapore debut this month, he shares some of the best shots from his latest series, Water, with Gwen Pew

Edward Burtynsky’s photographs are not difficult to identify: the sweeping landscapes as nature is carved up by industry and other traces of mankind, all contorted into an almost abstract canvas, are presented in a larger-than-life format in galleries around the world.

Born in Ontario, Canada, the 58-year-old has earned a slew of honours and awards for his powerful work, having won the first TED Prize in 2005, being named Officer of the Order of Canada in 2006 and receiving the President’s Medal from the Geological Society of America last year. He even had a critically acclaimed documentary film made about him, titled Manufactured Landscapes.

Instead of creating his images just for the sake of it, however, he aims to use them as a visual way to encourage people to start thinking about what we’re doing to our planet. When he made three wishes upon accepting the TED Prize—each winner traditionally has to make at least one wish, which the prize money will help them achieve—they were to work on an IMAX film, to build a website to help children think about how to protect the planet, and to create, in his words, “a massive and productive worldwide conversation about sustainable living”. As a result, Meet the Greens (www.meetthegreens.org) was launched in 2007 with the tagline: “a site for kids about looking after the planet”, and his support for the blog WorldChanging (www.worldchanging.com), of which he is also the chairman, has led to the website flourishing into one of the Top Ten Green Blogs selected by The Guardian.

While his previous projects have focused on oil, quarries and mines, his latest series is entitled Water, which will be showing in Singapore this month at Sundaram Tagore Gallery. There are 190 works altogether, around 30 of which will be shown here. He began working on the series in 2007, and it has since grown to become his most ambitious collection to date.

To capture the shots, he traveled the world, from Iceland to India, and up to heights of over 7,000 feet with planes or helicopters to achieve his desired perspective.

“While trying to accommodate the growing needs of an expanding, and very thirsty civilisation, we are reshaping the Earth in colossal ways. In this new and powerful role over the planet, we are also capable of engineering our own demise,” Burtynsky says in his artistic statement for the series. “We have to learn to think more long-term about the consequences of what we are doing, while we are doing it. My hope is that these pictures will stimulate a process of thinking about something essential to our survival; something we often take for granted - until it’s gone.”

In conjunction with the exhibition, Watermark, a feature film he co-created with Manufactured Landscapes director Jennifer Baichwal during his journey in creating the Water series, will also be having its Singapore premiere at Sundaram Tagore Gallery this month.

Edward Burtynsky: Water is at Sundaram Tagore Gallery from 7 Mar-6 Apr. See www.sundaramtagore.com/events for Watermark screening details.