

# Burtynsky's Account: Adding Up the Price That Nature Pays

MURRAY WHYTE

**E**DWARD BURTYNSKY views the world through a large-format camera and finds beauty in highly improbable places. For nearly 20 years his subject has been the ravages of heavy industry, seen at a scale so vast as to be unimaginable.

Mr. Burtynsky's oeuvre, a detached, ominous yet eerily seductive examination of industrial incursions on the natural landscape, is global in reach. Since the mid-1980's he has photographed rail lines in British Columbia ("Rail Cuts," 1985), marble quarries in Vermont ("Rock of Ages," 1991), nickel mines in Northern Ontario ("Nickel Tailings," 1996) and the Chittagong Delta in Bangladesh, where he extracted gorgeous formal compositions from a coast strewn with the seeping husks of dilapidated oil freighters ("Shipbreaking," 2000).

His 2003 series on the construction of the Three Gorges Dam in Hubei, China, the largest hydroelectric project in history, is no less unsettling. Vast rubble fields, created as the residents of the Yangtze River valley dismantled their homes by hand to make way for the coming flood, are at once splendid and disturbing, given the displacement and environmental ruin they represent. Those images, printed as large as 4 by 6 feet, went on view at the Charles Cowles Gallery in Chelsea on Friday.

Now, as 2004 begins, Mr. Burtynsky, 48, has decided to step back. "I'm taking this year off, in a way, without having a monolithic idea of what I want to do," he said recently over coffee in a restaurant near his West End Toronto studio. "I'm allowing the year to be very splintered, where I'm just letting myself touch on different things that have piqued my interest. There are just a lot of things that I want to go look at."

Mr. Burtynsky's photography is widely

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**A photographer tries to embody, rather than judge, our complicity in ecological tragedy.**

collected by major institutions in North America and Europe. The National Gallery of Canada is touring a major retrospective of his work, which will land at the Brooklyn Museum of Art in 2005. But he's taking stock now, thinking about the meaning of the photographs he has done so far and where he will go from here.

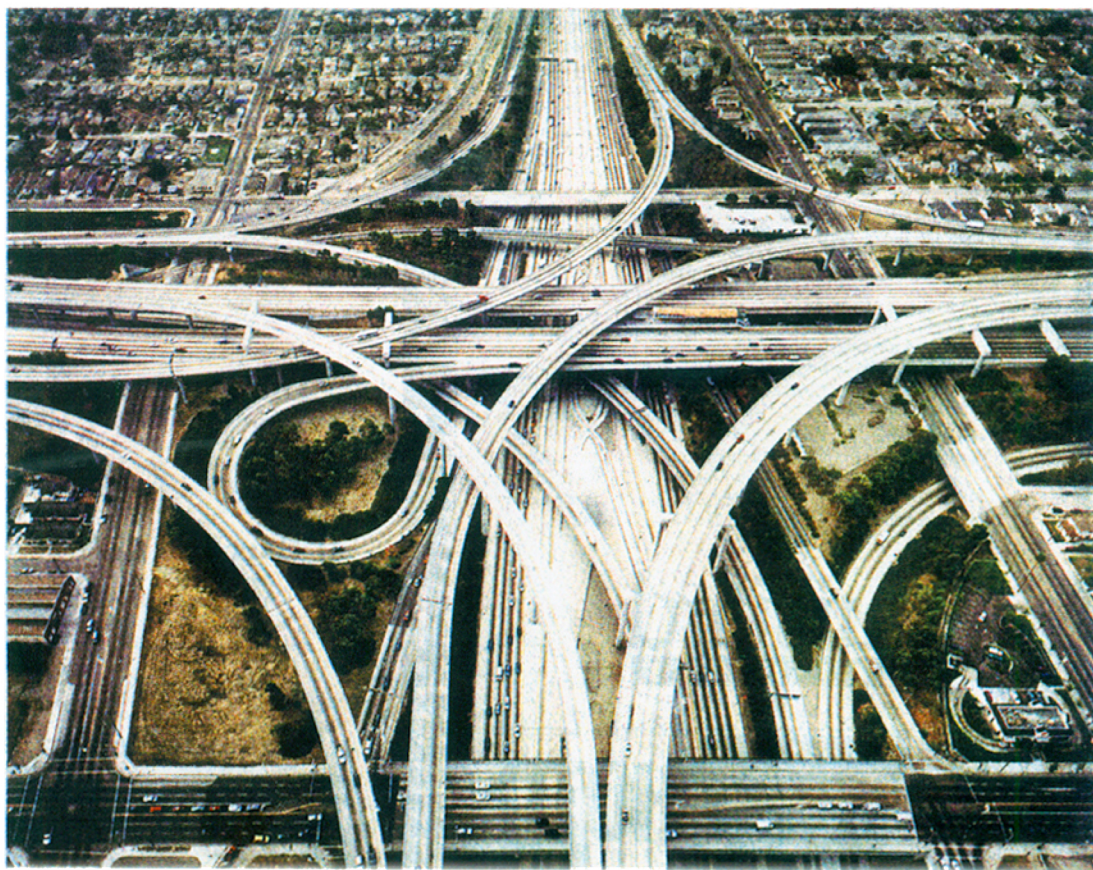
He has no plans to abandon his trademark look: finding and freezing conflicting ideas within each image. "I'm trying to invest an image with a dialogue that allows you to enter it and makes you think different things about it," he said. "One day you might like it for its aesthetic value, and the next day you might abhor it for what it represents."

Lori Pauli, the curator at the National Gallery of Canada who designed Mr. Burtynsky's retrospective, said that his calculated ambiguity helps shift the images from documentary — which they are since they are neither staged nor digitally manipulated — into the realm of conceptual art.

Mr. Burtynsky will continue to work with this technique, but with closer attention to an underlying theme that binds all of his blasted landscapes: oil.

"One of the threads I saw in all the things I did, anything I photographed, was that this was all possible as a result of cheap fuel," he said. "Yes, we have the technologies and machinery, and the industrial age taught us how to build efficient machines, but fuel was the energy source, and that affected the scale at which we were able to transform that landscape."

Mr. Burtynsky has explored the notion of oil before, making images of oil refineries with their burnished steel piping, and of the vast fields of derricks, hundreds upon hun-



Edward Burtynsky's "Interchange No. 1." His most recent work examines highways and their effect on the landscape.

dreds of them bobbing endlessly as they siphon the crude from deep below the earth's surface.

What that activity has spawned is part of Mr. Burtynsky's perennial quest. All over North America, complex systems of highways cluster in urban centers and ramble off in every direction, their tendrils spreading across every kind of landscape. In his most recent and as yet unpublished work, Mr. Burtynsky has taken his camera on the road to reveal their dominance.

"I'm looking at where the largest concentration of roads are and photographing them using aerial cameras," he said. "A highway is a massive transformation and

one that truly changes that landscape forever. But what it also changes is our relationship to the landscape, how we view it, and what it represents."

The images capture the snaking arteries of concrete and blacktop at a scale rarely seen, a perspective both magnificent and chilling, which is, of course, classic Burtynsky. The project, which he describes as a work in progress ("Not all of these will succeed as images I'll go public with," he said), contains echoes of past work.

As long ago as 1985 Mr. Burtynsky was taking large-scale photographs of rail cuts, train lines carved into mountainsides for extracting forest products. His technique

was apparent even then. A monolithic mountain face is conquered by a tiny string of rail cars making their way across the cut. Captured from a distance and rendered toylike in the image, the suggestion is of a virus: tiny but potent and guaranteed to proliferate.

Other works, including "Shipbreaking," also contain a whiff of oil-as-enabler, since the broken hulls once carried crude around the world, and the ships, when operating, presumably used oil as their own fuel. New images, relating to the highway project, include large tableaux of transport trucks, which, using fossil-based fuel, carry the vast

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Edward Burtynsky at home in Toronto: "There are just a lot of things that I want to go look at."

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majority of our consumer goods around the continent on the highways that the oil industry has made possible. These are the facilitators, ever present but rarely considered. Mr. Burtynsky offers the reminder that our amenities don't appear by magic. There is a cost paid by nature.

"I wanted to talk about that infrastructure," he said, "that thing that happens when we fill up our tank, or when we go to a wall and turn a switch on. We don't really fully appreciate or understand the whole process of how that got to us, or what is occurring to make that happen."

All Mr. Burtynsky's work is consistent in tone. Neither heroic nor condemning, it offers an austere beauty and a simple critical pause, which gives the viewer an opportunity to gaze at the scale of the transformation that has taken place in a short time.

"Most of my work is no more than looking in a mirror and wondering about what life on this planet is like right now," Mr. Burtynsky said. "Even though the things I've seen, quite often, are tragic, it is who we are.

**Photographs of highways, ships, rail cuts, all with an underlying theme: cheap fuel and its consequences for the landscape.**

Politicizing the tragedy I think limits the discussion. I place it in the middle, because if I associate it with a statement saying, 'This is wrong,' then it allows the viewer two choices: either you agree or you don't."

Mr. Burtynsky's own perspective is equally ambiguous. "I'm embodying a lot of those things," he said. "I feel like I'm living in contradiction with myself. But I don't know any other alternative to how I live."

"It's a dilemma of our times, in that there's no easy prescription for our ailment. But it is an important time for us to look at it, to gaze at it and understand what we're doing. And I feel that if my work is striving toward something, it's looking at the world straight on, in a way that won't let us immediately turn our eyes away."