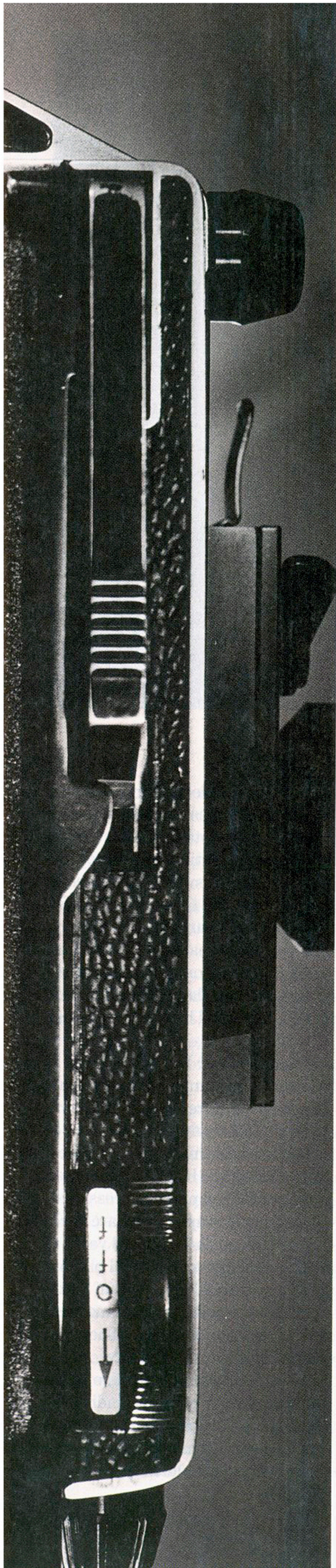
TORONTO LIFE



The eyes of Ed Burtynsky

He has photographed slag heaps in Sudbury, marble quarries in Italy and disintegrating cities along the Yangtze. How a miner turned entrepreneur turned photographer conjures beauty from devastation, changing the way we see the world **BY GERALD HANNON**

WE CAN HEAR THEM, EVEN THROUGH THE WALLS. We are in the countryside near Stratford this crisp fall day, dressed in white coveralls, our hair shrouded in white hairnets, our feet encased in clear, flexible plastic boots. Faintly, through the walls of this football field–long, hangarlike building, we can hear a staticky chirp, mingled with a kind of interstellar shtwark and squeak and whistle, as if the building were host to a convention of short-wave radio enthusiasts and they were all trying to channel Moscow at the same time.

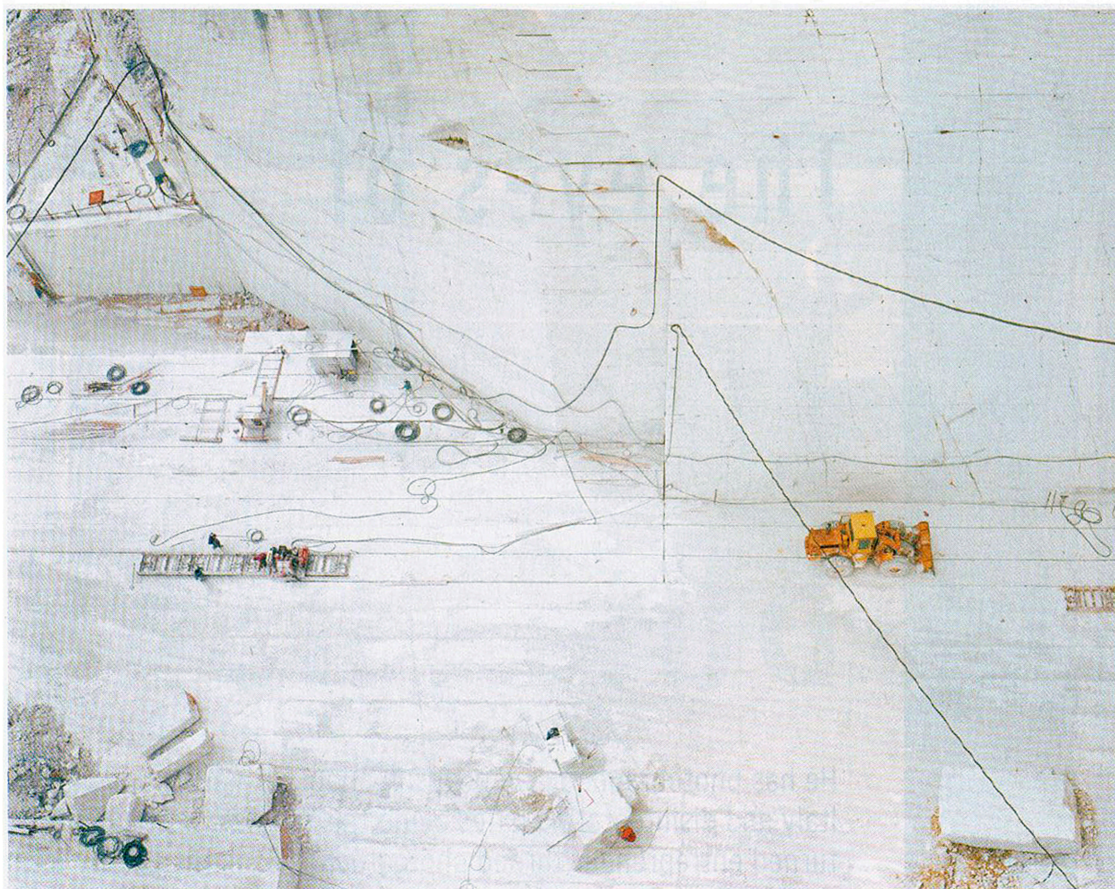
That sound a constant counterpoint, we share a few words with Steve, the affable gentleman who, with his wife, runs this operation. We pet his dog. Steve wishes us well and strolls back to his house, leaving us on our own. Ed Burtynsky opens the building door and steps inside. Burtynsky's friend and colleague Marcus Schubert and I follow him in.

We find ourselves in a room with approximately 5,500 adolescent white male turkeys. (Earlier today, we spent time in a barn containing some 13,000 three-week-olds.) As the sun slants in through the windows that line the entire building, Burtynsky points out how the light catches the birds' vestigial wattles, giving them an almost ruby opalescence. As we walk toward them, they part before us like a twittering white sea and close in again behind us. Burtynsky demonstrates how, if you make loud lip-smacking noises, the turkeys will respond with a rising ululation of their own, their bodies moving almost as one, as if we were watching a single alien creature with thousands of heads. The concerted movement of their feet on the floor produces a low, rumbling bass note you can feel in your gut.

This is Ed Burtynsky's second visit. He is here this time with Schubert and several cases of photographic equipment, including two large-format 4 x 5 cameras. He has come to take pictures of turkeys. He is in exploring mode today, still uncertain whether he is working toward a series of prints, a book, or anything at all. He has followed blind alleys before.

Not often, though. He is one of Canada's best-known photographic artists. His big

PHOTOGRAPH BY NIGEL DICKSON



Left: MARBLE QUARRIES, ITALY, 1993. Burtynsky's photographs of the 2,000-year-old mine launched his career in Toronto and New York

Right: NICKEL TAILINGS, SUDBURY, 1996. In what has become an iconic image, Burtynsky captures human intervention at its most poisonous and most beautiful

show, Manufactured Landscapes, at the National Gallery in Ottawa last year, was a significant success. (Lori Pauli, the gallery's assistant curator of photography, says that the day Burtynsky gave a public tour, "we almost couldn't fit everyone in. We'd never seen such a big crowd.") Essentially a mid-career retrospective, the exhibition, which opens at the AGO January 24, celebrates Burtynsky's more than 20-year obsession with the idea of landscape as a purely human product—a world we have pitted, scarred and poisoned, often with gorgeous results. Marc Mayer, deputy director for art at the Brooklyn Museum of Art, reports that "For the record, Ed has taken New York by storm," and adds that the Brooklyn Museum will be mounting Manufactured Landscapes in the fall of 2005. His work is included in significant public collections, from Canada's National Gallery to New York's MoMa and Guggenheim to Paris's Bibliothèque Nationale de France to the Winnipeg Art Gallery. He sells well, at prices that start at $5,000 per print and go up to $23,000. Elton John has several.

And now, turkeys. In a barn in southwestern Ontario. Raised to die and grace a dinner table. It's not such a leap, really. His work—and in some respects his life—can almost be thought of as a history of loss and a meditation on the gifts that blossom in its wake. This crisp fall day near Stratford, I watch him up on a ladder just outside the barn door, camera cloth over his head, his 4 x 5 Linhof pointed down at a small universe of turkeys. Schubert and I warble and hoot; thousands of turkeys seethe and ululate in response. They are so ugly they have a heartbreaking kind of beauty. The three of us know their world is almost over—it lasts, at most, 18 weeks. Then they enter ours.

I hear the camera's gentle, defining click.

ED BURTYNSKY AND I MET some weeks earlier at Toronto Image Works, the successful photo lab at Spadina and Adelaide that he built from scratch. It doesn't take long to figure out that he is an even-tempered, friendly, unpretentious guy (even his male friends will describe him as "a real sweetheart"), seemingly without the about-to-bristle ego, the faltering uncertainties or the cultivated oddities that characterize so many artists. He is a handsome man of 48, the features rather broad and Slavic, his dark hair and trim goatee on a collision course with grey. Only the eyes, surprisingly flat and wary, seem out of place in a face otherwise animated by a kind of comfy, old-sweater geniality.

He takes me on a tour of his business. When it opened in January 1986, there were just two full-time employees (Burtynsky was one of them) in 2,400 square feet of space. He employs 35 now, including his wife, Jeannie Baxter, who is managing director. And though the address hasn't changed, they now occupy five times the space and have expanded well beyond the original darkroom rental and photo processing to include digital services and training in graphic software packages like Photoshop. It's a busy place—in its past 18 years of business, TIW has become the choice of professional photographers in the city. The classroom is full. The darkroom rental area is a maze of lightless corridors a-bustle with young men, and all the equipment, he says, is state of the art. They also have the equipment to process his large colour prints.

I ask to see how a Burtynsky print is made. Unlike much contemporary painting or sculpture, where the individual artist is sole author of every detail, an art photograph today is a collective enterprise, produced somewhat the way a large painting was in a 17th-century European studio. There, under

IMAGES COURTESY OF MIRA GODARD GALLERY

the guidance and vision of the artist, assistants and apprentices would do a lot of the fill-in work. Here, Dan Ebert, Burtynsky's custom printer, does all of the physical production of Burtynsky's photographs. I watch Ebert work with an eight-by-10 negative in one of the darkrooms designed for large-format printing (the enlarger is one hefty piece of machinery, equipped with a 2,000-watt bulb, that moves horizontally on tracks). The image is from a series taken at the Carrara marble quarries in Italy. Burtynsky is with us, though Ebert would normally work alone. "After some four years of working together," Ebert says, "I know what he's looking for. When he gives me a negative, I can get 90 per cent of the way with it."

With the help of charts, the two of them calculate the length of exposure, the lens opening, the distance the enlarger must be from the wall. Then lights out. In the dark, Ebert removes a 50-by-50-inch piece of colour photographic paper from a dispenser, affixes it to the wall, throws the switch. All I see is a vague pattern projected onto white paper, but it obviously means more to Ebert. His hands flutter like moths in the 14.9-second beam of light, shielding parts of the print, allowing others to darken, a technique known as dodging and burning. The paper is then fed into a large processing machine. Five minutes later, a perfectly dry, flat print curls out the other end.

It looks wonderful to me—a vertiginous glimpse into a white and ochre wound we have inflicted on the earth, a chapter in what I'm beginning to think of as a celebration of loss. But when Burtynsky examines it, this photograph of an Italian marble quarry in use for more than 2,000 years, he suggests that Ebert reduce the exposure by five-tenths of a second and burn in the top left corner a little bit more. He fears that section, mostly rubble, is too bright, will lead the eye astray and off the image. Back to the darkroom, a second round of fluttering hands, a second print. It is almost what he wants, but he suggests that Ebert reduce the exposure by another two-tenths of a second. "The next print," he says, "will be fine." When he is satisfied (and with Ebert, it rarely requires more than three attempts), the photograph will then move into the hands of Rose Scheler, a woman with exquisite colour sense. With paint and very fine brushes, she will spot out any small imperfections produced by particles of dust on the lens. Burtynsky will then sign it on the back, write its title and date of printing, and voilà—a Burtynsky print is ready for exhibition.

HE DID NOT SEEM, BY BIRTH OR BREEDING, destined for quite so stellar a career in the arts. Edward Taras Buratynsky (in his early 20s, he would remove the "a" from his surname, somehow persuaded that a word not overly endowed with vowels to begin with would be more easily pronounced if it had one fewer) was born February 22, 1955, in St. Catharines to working-class immigrant Ukrainian parents. He has two older sisters, Ollie and Krys, and a younger brother, Michael. His father, Peter, arrived here in 1948 and worked in the bush near Kapuskasing for three years until he could afford to send for his wife and daughter. Then, thanks to a new job, he settled his young family in St. Catharines. They were classic immigrants—hard-working, industrious, suspicious of newfangled ideas like buying on credit (Ed's mother, Mary, told me proudly that the only time she has ever paid interest for a purchase was through a mortgage), eager to embrace their new lives but adamant about maintaining their cultural heritage. They raised rabbits for food. They demanded the children speak

Ukrainian in the home, that they attend Ukie School (as they call it) two evenings a week. There was the Ukrainian mandolin band, in which Ed and Ollie played. There was Ukie camp in the summer. There were cultural events and parties at the Black Sea Hall, the Ukrainian community centre.

Ed, if you believe his siblings, was a regular guy, a smart enough kid but seemingly not a special one. Michael remembers him as always good with his hands, particularly in machine shop at school. That he was school chess champion in Grades 7 and 8. That in his teen years, Ed and his buddies transformed the attic over the family garage into a teen-dream clubhouse, with posters, black lights and a stereo (though the only source of power was an extension cord that ran out the building and in through their mom's bedroom window—which meant that mom could, and did, simply pull the plug if parties went on too long or were too loud). His sisters remember a boy whose strongest characteristic, even then, seemed to be his unflappable good nature. And they all remember the arrival of the camera.

He was 11 when he went with his father to the house of a recently widowed woman who was selling her husband's darkroom equipment and his two cameras for $25. His father gave him one, a Minolta A. He loaded it with black and white film, he remembers, "and I went outside and took 36 pictures of my dog jumping in the snow. We'd made the furnace room into a darkroom, and I was anxious to see what I'd done, so I processed the film, cut it into strips, made a contact sheet, picked one or two to print as eight-by-10s. I remember the whole experience—watching the image come up in the developer tray. It seemed pure magic, that I'd made the three-dimensional world into a two-dimensional object. I was hooked from the first moment. That camera became my way of depicting and explaining the world. After that, I always had it with me, and a couple of spools of film."

"MY WAY OF DEPICTING AND EXPLAINING THE WORLD." Those who have seen his recent shows will know him as the maker of large colour prints, photographed over the past decade or so, that provide dazzling glimpses of a world few of us see, of a world behind the world we know, of a world that makes our world possible. If they "explain" that world, they do so untendentiously, in the way of a man who is at argument within himself, savouring the wonders and comforts we mine from our wounded planet, apprehending the woe we are bound to inherit. The most recent series was taken in China, at the Three Gorges Dam Project on the Yangtze River, where whole cities are being taken apart, brick by brick and stone by stone, under a ghastly pall of pollution, to make way for the largest hydroelectric project the world has ever seen. Another series—perhaps his most popular—was taken in Bangladesh, where men tear apart large ocean-going vessels with little more than acetylene torches. Their work is appallingly dangerous and dehumanizing. The photographs are so rapturously beautiful they are often compared to paintings by J. M.W. Turner—so drunk are they with light, with colour. Besides his foray to the Carrara mines, he has photographed rock quarries in Vermont and India, oil fields in California and Alberta, rail cuts in British Columbia, and lurid nickel tailings in Sudbury (these, in particular, seem to show human activity at its most poisonous and most beautiful).

The works have a monumental quality, a product of both their subject matter and his technical prowess. As Marc

Left: THREE GORGES, CHINA, 2002. Burtynsky's most recent work records the demolition of entire cities along the banks of the Yangtze

Right: SHIP BREAKING, BANGLADESH, 2001. Among Burtynsky's most popular series, the images of men deconstructing freighters at Bengal Bay are often compared to paintings by Turner

Mayer puts it, "You can't quite believe that photography has achieved this, that Ed has created a two-dimensional field where everything is in focus. Our own eyes can't do that when we look at the real world." Staring at a Burtynsky print, peering down with him from the lip of one of those marble or granite quarries, can have an almost dizzy-making impact on the viewer. So can the ethical quandary he is putting before us.

The more mundane—though no less difficult—quandary he faces before he begins each project can be summed up with the simple question: how? How to get to sites that are usually declared off limits by timid or suspicious bureaucrats; how to cope with extremes of weather, poverty and pollution; how to walk the minefields of cultural sensitivity and language—and still end up in the right place with the right equipment at the right time of year at the right hour of the day for just that fraction of a second that photography demands.

This is where Burtynsky the artist relies on Burtynsky the businessman. Before he launched Toronto Image Works, he crafted a detailed business plan with the assistance of a fourth-year student from Ryerson's business school. He brings the same methodical rigour to his photographic work. Before he goes to a new place, he reads widely—everything from novels to government reports. He studies maps, government surveys, meteorological data. He employs an assistant, Noah Weinzweig, who speaks fluent Mandarin (invaluable in China), scouts sites, returns with images, advice, suggestions, then accompanies him on shoots. When he has to deal with large corporations, worried they might be opening their doors to a closet environmentalist, he always begins by calling the top guy. He gets a meeting. If it's an industrial site, he says, "I arrive wearing steel-toed boots and a construction helmet. I tell them I've worked in mines. I always bring photos I've done and explain their multiple readings. I tell them I drive a car, that I use a lot of chemicals in the business I run. You can't go in there as a shrinking violet."

It almost always works. Photographer Jeff Powis, who has been following Burtynsky around, preparing a television documentary on his work, says, "He has this uncanny ability to get to people in industry, to get their permission to get to the other side of that industrial fence. He doesn't give up. He'll chip away at them. He'll speak to different people, and he'll do it till he gets what he wants." Once he gets that permission, he's just as tireless in pursuit of his images. Burtynsky came down with tonsillitis in Bangladesh, kept working, even with a 102-degree fever. He and his crew had to be out of bed by four a.m., ready to drive at five to arrive at the beach by six. Shoot till nine or 9:30. Back to the hotel, spend the day preparing for a second shoot around sunset. Back to the site, shoot again, then back to the hotel, where preparations for the next morning would keep them up till midnight. "For those couple of hours in the morning and evening when the light is perfect," says Powis, "you can't even talk to him—he's so focused. He'll say, 'Oh, oh, oh, that's a shot,' and he's gone. Bangladesh was dangerous. The day before we arrived, two workers were bifurcated by a snapping cable, and we had to climb up the sides of ships with no guide rails, looking four storeys straight down. In China, the pollution was so bad—they were burning everything—we were wearing masks, but I had to leave. I was nauseated. Ed went back. He knew the light would be perfect. He is going to get the shot. Nothing is going to force him out of there."

Ed Burtynsky has worked—sometimes at very hard, dan-

gerous jobs—since he was a child. When he got that first camera, he says his father made it known that he wouldn't support his habit. "So I began taking the camera to Black Sea Hall, the Ukrainian Community Centre, and snapping pictures of the events. I charged 75 cents for a five-by-seven print and paid my sister 25 cents to deliver them. Back then, it cost just $4.50 for a 100-foot roll of film, so I made money. I guess I've been relying on my own income since I was 12."

Peter Buratynsky was not, by all accounts, an indulgent father. Perhaps a wise one—his insistence on his son's self-reliance no doubt played some role in shaping him into that rarest of creatures, a successful businessman who is also a respected, successful artist. Father was something of an artist himself—painted in oils, made things out of feathers, built sets (and got Ed to help him) for stage productions at the Black Sea Hall. Artistic, yes, but the other word most commonly used by his children to describe him is "strict." Ed is more explicit, his mild voice even quieter than usual. "Our relationship was not idyllic," he says. "He ruled with an iron fist, and it was almost unbearable. I was the eldest son, and there was so much pressure on me. I was moving toward serious rebellion, and I would probably just have left. Living at home was something I just couldn't bear."

And then his father died. Of cancer, at the age of 45. Ed was 15 years old. His father had worked in a section of an auto parts plant that required close contact with oil highly concentrated with PCBs. "I worked there for a while myself," he says, "six or seven years after my dad died. I asked the guys how many of the men who worked with my dad were still around. Many of them had died, in their 40s and 50s, of cancer. My father's cancer was in his lower bowel and spine. There wasn't much left of him when he died."

After Peter's death, Mary learned to drive a car and went to work in the Lightning Zipper factory. Her eldest daughter had married, but she still had three children to support. Ed stayed in high school, in the vocational stream, graduating from Grade 12 in 1972 with a diploma in machine shop drafting. He thought he would become a tool and die maker, and had he found an apprenticeship in that field, he says, "My life would have been different. This was St. Catharines, an industrial town, and that would have been one of the highest-level, best-paying jobs. Plus I always needed to be involved in making things." No apprenticeship available, he took a job with a car-parts supplier, describing the work as "brutal, heavy labour, lifting over 200 50-pound parts per hour, working in a constant mist of the horrible stuff they sprayed on them. It was the most difficult, ruthless workday I've ever done."

Perhaps that had something to do with his decision to continue schooling. He enrolled at Niagara College in Welland, in a graphic arts course, but also took a night course in photography, encountering a teacher in second year who gave him assignments "that got me thinking about making pictures in a more serious way." That teacher, Archie Hood, also guided him to enrolment in the photography course at Ryerson.

There, Burtynsky remembers another first-year teacher, Rob Gooblar, "who had a great effect on me. He was a great teacher, able to instill a sense that photography could address the wonders of the world. In one of his first classes, he sat there with a seashell and spent half an hour describing all the ways you could look at it. I was fascinated. He had a wonderful sense of theatre, too—I was mesmerized by his style. And then he gave us this assignment: go away and come back with images that show the evidence of man."

Burtynsky photographed sections of the countryside through which the old Welland Canal used to pass before it was filled in and became a highway. He chose to work in what has since become the classic Burtynsky mode: do a lot of research, use a large-format camera (this project was the first time he had worked with a 4 x 5) and create a series of thematically connected prints. "It was the right time," he says. "It was the right teacher, and I was using the right tool. I enjoyed it immensely."

Paul Lowry, a fellow student at Ryerson, remembers that Burtynsky "had a great circle of friends. Everyone knew him. He has this great smile, and you can go a long way with a smile if it's linked to something genuine. He had this nice apartment, always had a girlfriend, and I can't remember meeting anywhere but at Ed's place. Everyone went there. He was this great storyteller, too—vivid stories, wonderfully told, had everyone on the edge of their seats." (I heard some of them—comically chilling tales of working with explosives underground in mines in northern Ontario.) But Paul Lowry sensed something else in his new friend. "I knew his dad had died working at an auto plant. I remember him taking pictures at chicken processing plants while he was at Rye, and I had this sense of there being this bottled-up rage at industry. It's cooled and distilled, though. The rage is under control."

He graduated from Ryerson in 1982, having had to take two years off between his third and fourth years in order to make some money. He was becoming, as well, rather more urbane, having described himself as a "working-class, Kraft Dinner kind of guy" when he first arrived in Toronto. Credit goes partly to Valerie Burton, a teacher at Ryerson whom he dated for about a year—"well after he graduated," Burton is quick to point out. She was the first woman the school had ever hired to teach in the still photography department. Older than Burtynsky, divorced with two children, she introduced him to fine food, wine, the theatre. ("She took a diamond in the rough," says his wife, "and polished him up.") She also recognized talent. "Ed was one who stood out," Burton remembers. "As a teacher, you can tell when certain people will continue and do well in photography. He was one of them." I asked her what she might have taught him that had had a lasting effect. "Never take a photograph of a photograph," she says. "There are standard ways of looking. Don't do that. Instead, really study what you see. And photograph only that."

A hard rule, particularly when it comes to landscape—a painterly obsession for centuries, and stock-in-trade for the photographer since the medium's invention in the 19th century. If you don't know much about photography, you think Ansel Adams, and you wonder if there is anywhere left to go. If you know more, the prospect is even more daunting. It is hard to avoid the feeling that everything has been done. That everything has been photographed. That the only thing left to photograph is, in fact, a photograph.

IN 1983, ED BURTYNSKY APPLIED for and received a Canada Council grant. He used the money to finance a three-month, cross-country tour in a Volvo station wagon. He travelled alone, sleeping in the car, cooking fish he caught en route. He wanted to explore ideas he'd been formulating since graduation, that there were still things to be done with landscape, "but not the pristine landscape, not what Ansel Adams had done. That wasn't true anymore to the times we lived in. Much

more compelling for me was what we've done to transform it." He bought big geological maps, looked for mineral deposits and just went. "I didn't know what I'd find," he says. What he found, most frequently, and not surprisingly, were mines.

"When I first saw an open-pit iron ore mine, I thought, Holy shit—the scale of it. And I realized too that what came out of that hole related directly to the car I was driving." He was contemplating, in some ways, a natural world well lost—a far more nuanced and sophisticated view of man's planetary depredations than is current in our eco-conscious world, and the driving force behind most of his work since. In a catalogue essay entitled "A Dystopian Sublime," the Brooklyn Museum's Marc Mayer writes that "art has managed to suppress industry and its consequences from the realm of good taste and high culture," but that Burtynsky's work "forces us to think such things through to the rational end and without the benefit of sentimentality....He presents these wastes not so much as the antithesis of the Utopian sublime, but as an exotic variant. All of this is new."

It almost didn't happen. Ed Burtynsky had started Toronto Image Works so that the business would provide him with the technical facilities, the time and the money he needed to pursue his art. Problem was, by the late '80s, the business was swallowing him (his wife, Jeannie, jokes that for years they could name every restaurant in the vicinity that would serve dinner after 10 at night). "I had made a pact with myself when I started this business," he says, "that I would never lose touch with my work." But it seemed to be happening. He was in danger of becoming a businessman with a hobby.

He had, however, finished a commission to do some architectural photographs for the Houston Museum of Fine Arts, a show organized by Raphael Bernstein. "He came up to me," remembers Burtynsky, "and said, 'People like your work, but you're not well known. If you could do anything you wanted, what would it be?' And I said, 'Quarries.' He said, 'You go out and make work, and I'll collect it.' He was great—he even did some of the research himself. At that point, I was represented here and in New York, had had a few shows, but hadn't made much impact. He told me my work was valuable, was good—gave me a shove at the right time. Because I could have gone either way—become just a businessman."

Burtynsky showed that quarry series, shot in Vermont, to curator Nicholas Metivier at Mira Godard Gallery in Toronto. He liked it and gave Burtynsky a show in 1992. "Nicholas liked my painterly sensibility as a photographer," Burtynsky says, "and I liked the idea of showing in a gallery that wasn't strictly devoted to photography. Most photo galleries are designed to handle small black and white prints, and I'm doing these huge colour works. Painting galleries can handle that, and it opened up my work to people who love art generally, not just photography." He got very good reviews. The following year, he went to Italy to photograph the Carrara marble quarries, the first time he'd left North America to do work. The show he put together from that trip did well here and did well in New York, too. Every series since has been a hit. If you're attuned to the Burtynsky "look," it seems you're seeing his work everywhere these days—in magazines, on book covers. One image in particular has become almost iconic. *Nickel Tailings #34, Sudbury, Ontario* gives us a black and blistered landscape, a fragile line of trees huddling disconsolately in the background, the foreground dominated by a stream so crimson it is as if the earth has bled.

ED BURTYNSKY IS GIVING US a history of loss. It is not entirely a mournful one, for it is also a history of gifts. Those gifts—the food we eat, the cars we drive, the very wood and stones that shelter us in our homes—all have left, somewhere on our planet, a gouge, a hole, a scar. Sometimes in our psyches, too; perhaps it is not surprising that a man who saw his father wither and die because of careless industrial practices might turn obsessively to that very theme. Peter Buratynsky, after all, introduced his son to photography. He seems also to have tormented him, in the ways fathers often do their sons. And yet, according to Jeannie Baxter, "Ed feels he is driven because of his dad. I remember his mom told him, when we finished building our house in the country, 'Your dad would have been proud of you,' and I could see his chest swell with pride."

Ed met Jeannie when they were practically kids. "It was at a garage sale," she says, "when I was 19 and he was 22. He tried to sell me one of his prints for $75, and I said, 'Are you nuts? This is a garage sale!'" They hit it off, though—she remembers accepting a dinner invitation to Ed's place and his answering the door soaking wet and wearing nothing but a towel. (He did finally manage to put "an amazing trout dinner on the table.") Their second date was a wilderness camping trip. "Probably a test," she guesses. "He's a very outdoorsy guy." If it was a test, she passed.

They live near St. Clair and Dufferin in a modest two-storey house they moved into three years ago. They share it with their young daughters, Meagan and Katya, and Harry the Bunny, a lovable, housebroken lop-ear, whom they do not, despite Ed's Ukrainian upbringing, intend to eat. They are a warm, gracious couple. A late-afternoon interview at their home turned into an invitation to stay for dinner, which turned into a late-night drinkfest after they put the girls to bed.

Yeats once wrote: "Out of the quarrel with others we make rhetoric; out of the quarrel with ourselves we make poetry." Burtynsky is not a man to seethe, but his life—and most especially his work—echoes his still unresolved quarrels. He understands the importance and richness of his Ukrainian heritage but found it too claustrophobic, too "closed in its acceptance of ideas and its lack of interest in exploring a complicated world." He resented the pressure to marry early and marry a Ukrainian girl and have children (he was 40 before he and Jeannie began a family) who would learn the language. He is at quarrel with himself, too, about the very nature of politics and art, sounding sometimes like an ardent conservationist, at others simply like a man who creates work that finds its dazzling palette in the damage we do the earth and the poisons we spread.

I found that quarrel summed up in a line from an essay, not by him, that he gave me to read: "Why can't beauty be a call to action?" Perhaps it can—if, as another piece he gave me suggests, we detach beauty from pleasure. Burtynsky's work never lets you off that easily; there is such pleasure in having your breath taken away by the beauty he finds in the ugliness we do. He understands the challenge of the camera, understands that, though it is far from easy to take a beautiful photo, it is impossible to take an ugly one. The camera seems incapable of denying a moment its dignity, uncorroded by time or personality. We were all beautiful. Once. The world was beautiful. Once. Photography has no other time but once. Any photographer can capture that. Only an artist can give that once its history and its name, can make that once tremble with intimations of our still uncertain, possibly ugly, future. ▬