



the wish maker

What would you do with three wishes? Most of us would consider the notion merely childhood fantasy; yet photographer Edward Burtynsky knows differently.

As a recipient of the TED prize, Burtynsky received his wishes, becoming a founding member of an exclusive club that includes the likes of Bono and Bill Clinton. Make no mistake, however; this is not a prize to be wasted on the self indulgent. Upon acceptance, the winner is charged with saving the world of its ills, armed only with their reputation, a sharp mind and a purse of \$100,000.

COLLECTIONS' Jeremy Finkelstein joined Mr. Burtynsky at his Toronto office to talk about his work, his wishes, and his relentless pursuit to expose industry's impact on the natural environment.

*Shipbreaking No. 11,
Chittagong, Bangladesh 2000*

*Oxford Tire Pile No. 1,
Westley, California 1999*

*Manufacturing #17,
Deda Chicken Processing Plant,
Dehui City, Jilin Province, 2005*



COLLECTIONS: You've been photographing industrial landscapes for over two decades. How has that work changed your view of the world?

Edward Burtynsky: I've always chosen to target specific landscapes which demonstrate the largest incursions of industry on the land. For instance, if I am photographing quarries, I'll find the largest quarries in the world and plan my trips accordingly. And I think that bearing witness to these landscapes, year after year, has allowed me to recognize that something is changing. We've always taken from the land, but never on this scale. I don't think many people realize how rapidly the world is changing and how technology is allowing us to scale up on a level that was unimaginable a hundred years ago.

C: Certainly there is a disconnect between our habits and their impact on the planet. Are you finding that your work is helping to eliminate this or do you find that your method of beautifying industry's legacy is counter-productive?

Edward Burtynsky: I don't know that I'm necessarily 'beautifying'. Some refer to my images as taking something that would normally be considered ugly and making it beautiful. I'm not sure beautiful is the right word, and I've always had some resistance to that sentiment. We all have a system of aesthetics, but I'm trying to find a universal resonance. What I've often felt about photography as a visual language is that it transcends the barriers of the spoken word; it should be transportable across different cultures without translation.

So while I don't set out to beautify the landscape, I have set out to make it visually compelling; and I think the affect has been positive. Certainly, my work is open to interpretation, but it still leads one to a specific place. You still realize that these are man's marks. That ultimately raises the question, 'what is our collective value system that has allowed us to work on this scale?'

C: Your work in China is highlighted by some shocking images as it relates to coal yards and the Three Gorges Dam. Do you feel these images permit your audience to point to China rather than looking within, or does this work spark a personal call to action?

Edward Burtynsky: Certainly the work is not about wagging my finger at China. If they've got a gun, we gave it to them,

and ultimately we're implicated in that. But I think it goes without saying that we cannot deal with the problems that we are dealing with globally without addressing China. China has to be a part of the conversation, as does most of Asia. Out of the world's 6.5 billion, they represent 3 billion, and those 3 billion are trying to come up to our standard of living. It's insane to think we can ignore that.

C: We're currently tapping into Alberta's tar sands. Are there lessons to pass on from your experience in China as we begin the industrialization of the Alberta landscape?

Edward Burtynsky: What's consistent with China and Alberta is the speed at which they're both evolving, and you can't control things if they're moving that fast. With a 10% growth like China's, it's very hard to keep checks

and balances in place. I think Alberta is moving at that speed. We've already started hearing the 'on-the-ground' types of problems in Alberta. For instance, small businesses are failing because no one can find employees at lesser wages when the same person can get \$30 an hour to stand with a shovel in the oil sands.

The oil sands are also the single largest contributor of carbon emissions for Canada. And what is often misunderstood about the oil sands is that over the coming years, if nothing changes in the way we deal with their emissions, the rest of Canada could lead carbon free lives, and we would still be out of compliance with Kyoto. So while Alberta is keeping us buoyant financially, it's also keeping us dependant as a resource economy... and there's a price to be paid for being a resource economy.



Three Gorges Dam Project, Dam #3, Yangtze River, China 2002



Three Gorges Dam Project, Feng Jie #5, Yangtze River, China 2002

C: You've recently come back from Chile. How do you develop a new theme for a project?

Edward Burtynsky: That changes. My work is a compendium of ideas or places that say something about our world; and I'm trying to continually add to that body of work. In Chile, I was photographing an abandoned saltpetre mine in the Atacama Desert, the driest region on the planet. The last recorded rainfall there was fifty years ago. It's like being on Mars. There's nothing. So I went to photograph this mine, and it's interesting because it's a story of how technology can impact a whole industry. The town's livelihood and that whole industry got wiped out overnight because a scientist learned how to synthetically make saltpetre in a lab. Within five years, all of the mines around the world collapsed.

C: Your work was the subject of the film *Manufactured Landscapes*, which won best Canadian Feature at the Toronto International Film Festival. Was it challenging applying your photographs to a different visual medium?

Edward Burtynsky: Jennifer Baichwal, the director, had already worked with photographers, and had the experience to translate a fixed visual medium to a motion picture medium. What I think the film did successfully,

that the still image can't do, is lay down the context for these images. This gives more of a human dimension to the activities and lives of these people.

C: How do you deal with the emotional impact of the subject matter that you're seeing?

Edward Burtynsky: In a way, bearing witness to this year after year, you build a bit of a shield. I have an inquiring mind; I'm interested in where this ends up and where it all comes from. The hardest part for me is that I'm not naïve to think that we haven't always taken. My work is a constant reminder to me that our world is changing rapidly; speed and scale are the things that I find sobering at times. To me it's more of a concern for my kids. If we're already a population of 6.5 billion and they're anticipating it will go to 9 billion in 30 years... well, my kids are going to be in their prime lives then. What's it going to be like for them?

I feel like we've eaten through the filet of what the world had to offer and we're getting near the rump roast. In 40 years my kids might be boiling the bones. It saddens me to think that we can let it go there; and I can see that we're going there unless there is a radical shift in our consciousness.

C: You're putting that consciousness in motion. In fact, you've received a TED award. Please tell our audience a little bit about that.

Edward Burtynsky: TED stands for Technology Entertainment and Design. It's an annual conference that looks to see what technology, entertainment and design can do about the problems of the world. More than any culture, celebrity culture shapes our society's values. So entertainment is very much a player in moving consciousness to new levels.

TED has been together for twenty years, and it's made up of an illustrious group of movers and shakers. Chris Anderson, the curator, wanted to take the group and move it away from a world of ideas into a world of action. So he put in a call to submit candidates for a prize that included \$100,000 and a chance to make wishes that would change the world.

C: What did you wish for?

Edward Burtynsky: I decided to look at the environmental problem in a pragmatic way realizing that the modern environmental movement had failed. Why? Because it failed to recognize that we cannot tackle the environment in isolation of the economy and social safety nets. A sustainable society needs people who feel safe in their jobs, who have a safe place to raise their children, and who have food to eat.

So I sought out a group that was spreading these messages and values, and whom this prize money could help support. 'World Changing' came to me as an organization with great potential because it already had this dialogue going. They were exploring the blog, which I think is going to be the internet's most influential device for the dissemination of ideas and exchange of information. The writers understand that to be effective, you can't just go out

there and bitch about what's wrong with the world. Instead, 'World Changing' isolates an issue like carbon emissions and discusses it. The site has become a central clearing house for the best ideas, and anyone who's interested in making a more sustainable world can go there.

C: With another wish, you chose to engage children in sustainable thinking.

Edward Burtynsky: In building a sustainable world, it is critical to involve children - particularly between the ages of 7 and 12. They pay attention and are able to absorb things in a very profound way. So we ended up working with WGBH, a public broadcast out of Boston. We developed a program for children that's essentially designed to direct kids to a site where they can interact with all kinds of things that revolve around sustainable thinking.

C: Your wishes are grassroots in nature. Do you believe that grassroots programs are more effective than top-down political mandates?

Edward Burtynsky: I often think about what creates a movement. Is it bottom-up or top-down? I think it's a bit of both. And it's about consciousness. As people learn and wake up to realities, it opens them up to new ways of thinking and doing. It's hard, though. Most people have no more than a two to five year perspective.

That's where governments should step in and say, "we're looking out for 20 years from now." Unfortunately the political system has failed in setting agendas today for tomorrow. That failure probably has something to do with how we elect our government. We've turned politics into a kind of popularity contest versus a battle of policies and values... unfortunately, that debate doesn't go on very often.

C: Are you optimistic?

Edward Burtynsky: I try to be. I think it's important that these messages come with optimism. Because I think there is a danger that we move directly from denial into despair. But between denial and despair exists 'hope'. Hope and a willingness to try to change... to try to add to the positive side of the ledger. I think history will judge every one of us on which side we landed because this is a moral imperative. It is a moral decision and we stand at a juncture.

I found it very interesting when Al Gore, in his documentary, showed a globe and described covering it in varnish. That thin coat... that thin coat of atmosphere, that's what we're fighting for. That thin vapour layer is what separates all of this from being just another rock in space.

For more information on the works of Edward Burtynsky please visit EdwardBurtynsky.com • To learn more about World Changing, please visit WorldChanging.com

Tanggu Port, Tianjin, 2005

