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ART & CULTURE

Imprints on nature, from near right: *Nickel tailings* #31, shot in Canada in 1976; Edward Burtynsky sets up a shoot in a heavy machinery plant in Liaoning province; and *Shipyard* #12, taken in Qili Port, Zhejiang province, in 2005.



PRICE OF PROSPERITY

Edward Burtynsky's work enables us to see what relentless consumerism has done to the environment – and to our priorities, writes **Kenneth Lee**



VAST. INTRICATE. Awe-inspiring. Depressing. Momentous. Stagnant. These conflicting words come to mind when gazing on the universally acclaimed works of Edward Burtynsky.

The Canadian photographer is best known for capturing a global panoply of images featuring breathtaking scenes with a man-and-the-environment theme, from China's light-speed industrial growth to the rise and fall of the oil industry.

Burtynsky, who is also hailed as the most important landscape photographer of our generation, pioneered the concept of environmentalism through his works more than a quarter of a century ago.

His photography documents man's imprint on nature, from megaliths like the Three Gorges Dam to the exposed granite quarries in the US state of Vermont.

It also poses, as Burtynsky puts it, the "dilemma of our modern existence," in which "our desire for good living" is in obvious conflict with nature and a sustainable level of harvesting resources.

His grand, sweeping portraits show a headlong pursuit of energy, materials and prosperity to the detriment of our surroundings.

Whether mired in the mud with his equipment in the Bangladesh port of Chittagong, capturing the perilous work of shipbreakers taking apart sections of rusting oil tankers, or peering down from a lofty vantage point upon rows and rows of newly minted automobiles at the Volkswagen plant in Shanghai,

Burtynsky enables us to see what relentless consumerism has done to the environment and, in the final analysis, to our priorities.

Although his photographs are ultimately open-ended, allowing viewers to form their own conclusions, Burtynsky's message seems to be that humanity is at a crossroads where it needs to make a decision on whether to continue its pursuits while damaging the environment, or to shift its focus to protecting it at the cost of slowing down.

"We're great at expansion, but we're lousy at contraction," he explains. "Contraction means recession, whereas expansion has a price on nature."

Such is the dilemma of our times, a global Catch-22 that is not going to go away but become more pressing, with the melting permafrost in the Arctic and the advent of ecological disasters on an unprecedented scale such as the oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico.

"We live in a period when there's an awful lot of dissonance, when we can be enjoying something but we know there is some sort of cost to nature," Burtynsky says.

Calling his prodigious portfolio a "30-year-old lament for nature, where our success is at nature's loss," Burtynsky styles his art as concern photography.

"There is a concern that we are exceeding what the planet can support," says the 55-year-old artist, who in 2006 received the Order of Canada, the highest civilian honor in that country.



"When you look at the footprints that we're leaving behind, [they tell us we are] starting to reach our limits, and there's the question of how far we can take this, when does it start to react negatively?"

His first solo exhibition in Hong Kong will display a selection of his works at the Sundaram Tagore Gallery on Hollywood Road from September 21 to October 23.

"A grand narrative exists in his work," says Sundaram Tagore, owner of the gallery, which also has branches in Los Angeles and New York.

"But he's not being judgmental, because what he documents is essential to human progress."

Tagore, who picks art based on its appeal to human values and concerns, has the highest praise for Burtynsky. "He's truly an artist of this century. His scale is epic, it's truly global."

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