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Beastly-beautiful industrial landscapes through the lens of Edward Burtynsky

The Canadian photographer comes full-circle back to Hong Kong where his fascination with Asia first began

By Ria Vaezian 24 September, 2010



PHOTO BY NOAH WEINZWEIG, COURTESY SUNDARAM TAGORE GALLERY

Edward Burtynsky photographs a factory in China.

Back in 1984 when the HSBC tower was first being built, planes still landed in Kai Tak Airport and the jetfoil ride to Macau was considered a long trip, photographer Edward Burtynsky arrived in Hong Kong.

It was the first place in Asia the Canadian had travelled to. The visit sparked a fascination with China that continues.

Fast forward to the present and Burtynsky is back in town for his first solo exhibition in Hong Kong, the city that first triggered his interest in Asia.

Burtynsky is known for his hauntingly beautiful images of landscapes ravaged by industry. Over the course of his career, the 55-year old artist has managed to photograph some of the world's largest-scale industrial operations.

Constantly traveling, he has ventured to locations such as the quarries of Borba, Portugal; the mines of Kalgoorlie, Western Australia; and the ship breaking yards of Qili port, China.

Today, he has scouts around the globe who are researching, sending digital photographs and reporting on potentially interesting sites for future projects.

This month, a series of Burtynsky's iconic photographs -- including one shot of Hong Kong -- are on view at Sundaram Tagore Gallery in Central.

"People on the street are stopping to stare at these images. Edward works on an epic scale for a global audience. He is truly an artist of this century," says curator and president of the gallery, Sundaram Tagore.

We caught up with Burtynsky just before he jettied off to Fujian province in China, and chatted about being detained by Chinese police, getting access to Saudi Arabian oil fields and that first trip to Asia.



PHOTO BY EDWARD BURTYNSKY, COURTESY SUNDARAM TAGORE GALLERY

Burtynsky's take on manufacturing in China.



Seeing poetry in nickel tailings

CNNGo: What was it like to see Hong Kong in the 1980s?

Edward Burtynsky: When I was here, they were just building the HSBC bank. It was a very modern building at a time when Hong Kong was still looking rough and ready.

The city piqued my interest in Asia then I went to Thailand and that opened my eyes to a whole other world. I started getting an idea of what was happening here.

Really in the mid-eighties, I felt that once Asia would become a consumer society buying into centrally distributed goods and capitalism that it was going to have a profound impact on the world. At that time it wasn't.

Packaged goods were just coming into being in Asia, you went to places where there wasn't garbage, you've had a bit of rice on a banana leaf then the next thing you know they are selling packaged goods with plastic wraps and chocolate bars. All of a sudden packaged goods which weren't really part of that culture arrived. Everyone was buying the American dream so to speak, that is what it felt like.

It was like that model was being pursued, the market driven capitalist model. You could see the first villages getting TVs in northern Thailand. I was seeing the beginning of the transformation. Now the transformation is complete.

CNNGo: *Hong Kong has transformed dramatically. How does it feel to have your works hanging here today in such a consumer-driven city?*

Burtynsky: It is interesting. I think art is a very different kind of consumer purchase. It reflects a lot more on the buyer. It speaks about a value system that the buyer holds or what means something to the buyer. Let's say someone has done well and they buy themselves a brand spanking new BMW, you understand what that says.

But a piece of contemporary art is probably the most challenging consumer product out there. I look at Hong Kong and 90 per cent of the waking activity is either earning money or spending money, so in the constellation of things you can buy, a work of art is probably the most exotic. It is the most challenging and also most revealing of the purchaser of what they value and embody.

I think it takes a level of sophistication before people get through all that other purchasing before they are ready to buy art. People are starting to look at contemporary art, it is showing me that Hong Kong is ready to move to another level of maturity in terms of culture and sophistication.



Oil fields are one of the main themes in Burtynsky's work.

CNNGo: *You managed to get access to some of the most controversial sites in China. Have you ever got in trouble with the authorities?*

Edward Burtynsky: Yes. When I was trying to cover e-waste we were also covering what I call the 'hold-outs' in Shanghai, the people who wouldn't make a deal with the developers to have their houses sold and have them demolished. So I was trying to photograph these singular houses with everything else demolished around them.

Me and Noah [Burtynsky's translator] got pulled over for that. They asked "Why are you doing this?" and I said, "Because I'm a photographer and I find it interesting."

We went in there anyway and a security guard said, "Come on over here. You are not suppose to be taking photographs."

So Noah does his normal cajoling saying "Can we speak to your manager, this is an international photographer."

The guy is listening and watching Noah gesticulating. We are waiting five minutes, we think the manager is coming but all of a sudden six cop cars pull up. We get taken to the police station, all our gear gets taken upstairs. They are looking at who we were, what we were doing, why we were making all these pictures.

They interrogated Noah [because of the language barrier] but I was never afraid. I was just sitting there and I actually found some neat features on my camera. In the middle of the interrogation, I said, "Noah look, look, I've been looking for this feature forever."

CNNGo: *You recently returned from photographing the oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico. What was it like to shoot the spill? Are you a disaster chaser?*

Burtynsky: I think what was interesting was that there were so many unknowns. The oil spill was such an international media event that world was focused on BP and [U.S. President Barack] Obama and the administration and how to cope with this unprecedented disaster.

First they say, "Oh there's 1000 barrels, no there's 5000 barrels a day. Then 20,000."

At the end of the day they said it was 60,000 barrels. It was a black hole of information nobody knew who to believe.

BP was doing a PR suppression campaign to contain media. There were a lot of things on the go. What probably most interesting was that it was very hard to get my lens around it. I couldn't really see that much. That was the lament of the most of the photographers. It was only on my last trip with a journalist Sarah Milroy, which we did as an afterthought, that I saw most of what I saw.

I'm not a disaster chaser. In this case it was a confluence of two big themes: my oil project and my water project. Both were present in the same place in an unusual way.

CNNGo: *What is one of the most moving places you have photographed?*

Burtynsky: Bangladesh was ultimately the most sobering and profound landscape. You really see that life is cheap and that industries are at a level that you didn't know exist.

From a visual and emotion side of the human condition, Bangladesh was a human hell on earth or a human purgatory. Of course I am not a war photographer, I think a war photographer would probably see things that are even more challenging and horrific.

CNNGo: *Your works possess a monumental quality and almost thrust the viewer inside the spaces you photograph. Can you speak about this?*

Burtynsky: I think a lot of times, I am sitting at a higher vantage point so there is a potential for vertigo with the work. I am always trying for the work to not be an abstract pattern. I am trying to create a landscape where on some level you can see yourself within it. What I am defining is a landscape that you can understand and place yourself within.

But at the same time, you become dwarfed by the landscape that is your own creation. We are now a force of nature on the planet. We're creating vast wastelands and vast mines. So how do I begin to take pictures to bring that idea into consciousness?

CNNGo: *Is there a location you that you haven't been able to shoot that you have been trying to get access to?*

Burtynsky: We haven't been able to get into Saudi Arabia yet. We tried for the oil project to get into Ghawar Oil Field. They've been producing about 5 million barrels a day for about 40 years so it's the largest single supply of oil in the world.

There were also a few factories during the China project that we couldn't get into. We tried for probably a year. Right now, I am hitting most of my targets with my new project on water. I've been doing some work in India, China, Spain and California.

Edward Burtynsky in Hong Kong

21 September – 23 October, 2010

Sundaram Tagore Gallery, 57-59 Hollywood Road, Central