

# Paradise lost

*Magnificent, compelling and often disconcerting, Edward Burtynsky's images of manmade (and man-destroyed) landscapes have taken the art world by storm. Burtynsky speaks to Glass on oil, environment and why China is the country of the future*

Edward Burtynsky's photographs are a document of our modern world. From oil-scarred landscapes and the dream like monotony of manufacturing plants, to the booming industrial backdrop of modern China, his work represents the stark and very real repercussions of our modern way of life. But despite the socio-political nature of his subjects, Burtynsky maintains that he is 'not an activist', he is, at the core, an artist. In affirmation of this point, the former Magnum photographer has been named as the recipient of the 2011 MOCCA Award in Contemporary Art. Perhaps a sign that the art world too is becoming aware of the greater need for social and environmental awareness? Taking shelter in the Sundaram Tagore gallery from the driving rain of the Hong Kong typhoon season, Glass sits down with Burtynsky to discover what drives an artist to the ends of the world in search of their subject.

Your pictures undoubtedly portray the bigger global picture. Are you dreaming big through your photography and passing that dream down to us and onto the next generation?

Today, dig down deep and figure out if you are unintentionally keeping your desire small. A drop of oil is deep down in our earth. There is a lot of depth in my shootings. For me, it relates to mining and quarries and the pursuit of metals and stone. But at the core of it all was oil, and I understood that this, coupled with our global population growth – we've tripled in size in my short life – something is happening and oil was at the core, so my shooting is focused on this all pervasive oil. For me this is the black gold revolution. It's driven by fuel. The green revolution is incomplete without the black oil revolution. This interdependence has become ever more critical, and is manifested in the high oil prices and the repercussions which we face today due to the non-seamless nature of this cycle. At the core is oil, just like it was wood for the Roman Civilisation, then when they deforested Europe, they had a challenge to their expansion. So oil is energy and that is our modern day power.

Are we unintentionally limiting our own vision when it comes to energy?

We should concentrate on a lot of energies, many at a time, and look away from oil and the empowerment which it affords us. I am saying that oil is very important, oil is modern day power and the green revolution is only an alternative, but we shouldn't get dependent on fossil fuel. There will be



Edward Burtynsky, Lake Leftoy, Western Australia

Silver Lake Operations #1, 2007



Edward Burynsky, The Three Gorges Dam project, Yangtze River

Dam #2, 2002

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consequences if we don't diversify on just one main source of energy as a lot of the oil producing nations are not happy places and there is a lot of conflict as a result of that oil. It would be a smart thing to make sure that we are not falling into the energy trap by burning up all of the oil rather than conserve.

**Oil, and its effects, have had a particular impact on you and you have been documenting oil since 1997. What changes have you noticed?**

The expansion of oil, and the price of it is going up and up and up, then people start investing in geothermal and solar energies, and then when we hit a recession the price of oil goes down and all of the entrepreneurs who went into business are destroyed, and then when the price of oil goes up again, these alternatives don't want to focus on it anymore. So they get punished for it. I believe that the government should not allow the oil to go beyond \$60 - \$70 [a barrel] and then control it.

**You are particularly taken with the destructive life-cycle of oil...**

My photographic exhibition is, indeed, a life-cycle of oil. In that I went to see where oil is produced. The landscapes I've shot are where oil is extracted, and then comes the refineries where it's converted, and then is the middle-history where oil is consumed, like Trucker and NASCAR, and then the cities and the highways we've built due to this cheap oil, and then in the final stage, every day the car gets older and it comes to a point where it's no longer functional, and then it gets 'recycled' and scrapped. So, these are the stages in the life-cycle of oil. Usually, the first stage occurs in third world countries and that's why a lot of my work takes me to the source and then to the final stage of oil and its by-products, where it ends up. In the middle stage is the entertainment industry like NASCAR. In olden times there were other forms of entertainment; today a lot of our entertainment also takes place using oil - like motorcycle racing, for example. The manufacturing of cars is the first inter-related stage. Then these cars are destined to go around the globe, so they are covered in plastic and once you get it to the car dealers, that plastic is then peeled. Then the third is the use of the car and the fourth is how the car gets recycled.

**In 2001 and 2002, you did a famous "Shipbreaking Series". What drew you to these decaying monoliths?**

It is our responsibility to make sure that the oil tankers do not destroy our ecology. So, as technology progresses, they had to demolish a lot of the old oil tankers for ecological reasons and I followed where this was happening and I found out that this was going on in Chittagong, Bangladesh. So, I made a shooting of how the oil tankers were scrapped for metal and these photographs became a part of my "Shipbreaking Series". This series was largely because I had heard that these ships would be taken apart through a very rudimentary system. It was like a step back in time. It was like the Satanic Mills. Life had no value. I wanted to picture this scene to once again go down in the portfolio of our history.

**You have also travelled extensively in North America: did you find any interesting experiences closer to home?**

Yes, many, and the bottom line is that we should ask ourselves: "Are you limiting what you can accomplish?" In Northern Alberta, for instance, oil is a big issue as it is an unconventional source of oil. It comes from bitumen and it's synthetic oil, it's unlike crude, so it has to be mined by conventional mining methods and then they have to steam it at very high temperatures, which separates the bitumen from the sand. The US doesn't want to have anything to do with that because we are actually burning a lot of energy to produce that small quantity of oil. If we fill our oil tank from that source, then our small car has actually become a Hummer. So, we have to see how we can reduce the carbon emissions and if that means that we should go to unconventional sources, then so be it. We should not limit ourselves in our accomplishments. Oil was discovered in Bakersfield in California, so I concentrated on representing the massive proportions of our drawing oil from our earth, like mosquitoes sucking blood from our body.



Edward Burynsky, Deida chicken processing plant, Delhi City, Jilin Province

Manufacturing #17, 2005

You have extensively photographed China, especially The Three Gorges Dam. What is your vision for China?

The modern day China is a splendid case in point, much like The Three Gorges Dam itself. On the one hand we have the dam and on the other we have the Guiyu (an area in Guangdong Province comprising four small villages, it is the largest electronic waste site on earth) in which they cook the computers until it starts to smoke and crackle and release fumes that can be a travesty against nature, and so in China there is a balancing act of humanity, which begs the question: "In what areas can you expand your desire?" China has shown the world through The Three Gorges Dam that they have the knowledge and expertise and capacity to do something which has been compared to the Great Wall of China. Through this, China has made the world stand up and take note of its technical knowhow, and thus its place in the modern world as an emerged nation. It was interesting for me to go in there and photograph this and it's quite a challenge as a photographer to record this momentous time in the modern history of the great Chinese civilisation. For me, the industrial revolution found its footing in the East, then it went west to England and then further west to the New World and now it has done a full circle and moved back to China – which is now, again, the producer of the world. It was a feat to bring back visual images which went along with these words. I wanted to put things in perspective through these photographs. China has many quarries wherein they extract granite and there is a lot of carving operations from that granite, which are great Chinese architectural feats. China is the extension of the quarries. So also, China represents the next new 'old world'. It has a lot of potential, not just based on its past and culture, but on its modern world feats as well.

What is your proudest shooting experience?

Shooting in Bangladesh for me brought the whole world forward and the images were so unreal that it was the beginning of my ascent. Things changed dramatically for me since then. I had to bring things into consciousness from that time. It made me a global photographer – before that I was mostly concentrated just in North America. Also, I became far more vocal about sustainability once I had kids.

Your subject matter is vast. What do you look for in deciding what to document?

I don't normally chase disasters and go after things that have been wronged by our own actions, but since I was doing the salt pans in Australia and felt an attachment with water, I felt that it was incumbent upon me to go to the Gulf of Mexico and to see where the oil spill occurred. I'm also doing this as a series to a follow-up on "The Three Gorges Dam," in which I did a documentary as a follow-up on the famed Yangtze River. The kind of meditation I did in my book: "OIL". That pursued the subject of 'oil' and now I am making that relevant by extending that concept, with my subject on 'water'. In the last part of that book, I addressed the coming 'end of oil' and now this is the logical sequence, and my backdrop is in China. There is a Chinese saying: "As the Yangtze River forges ahead waves upon waves, the new generation will, invariably, surpass the old."

Can water and oil ever mix?

I thought that to document the BP oil spill (2010) would give a visual plethora of queries as to what happens when oil and water are indeed mixed, and what are the consequences of such a travesty, and how it could affect our planet. It was a challenging issue for me and this event is also a challenging one for our near future. I photographed intentional landscapes. But in this one instant, on the Gulf of Mexico oil spill, it was unintended. It was close to my heart and important, so I thought of bringing it forward, despite me not being a card-wielding environmentalist. The artist transcends the journalist in me, but I bring it up to the fore and outright raised a great sense of consciousness through my art.

Despite the past traumas, we all have moments where we forget the pain and 'feel'. I enjoy the by-products of my work, which make it all the more rewarding indeed.

by Shaad Ali Baig

All photos © Edward Burtynsky, courtesy Sundaaram Tagore, Hong Kong & Nicholas Mettler, Toronto

Edward Burtynsky, Chromogenic print, 27 x 34 inches



Breezewood, Pennsylvania, USA, 2008