

PHOTOGRAPHY REVIEW

# Extracting unsettling beauty from Vermont quarries

By Mark Feeney | GLOBE STAFF   APRIL 29, 2012



HOWARD GREENBERG & BRYCE WOLKOWITZ, NEW YORK/NICHOLAS METIVIER, TORONTO

**Edward Burtynsky's "Rock of Ages #7, Active Granite Section, Wells-Lamson Quarry, Barre, Vermont."**

HANOVER, N.H. — Globalization has a recording angel. For two decades, Edward Burtynsky's large-format color photographs of mining in Australia,

shipbreaking in India, and manufacturing in China have documented how extraction, production, and consumption collaborate to alter the environment to degrees almost entirely unprecedented in human history.

“We are surrounded by all kinds of consumer goods, and yet we are profoundly detached from the sources of these things,” he says in an interview included in the catalog of “Nature Transformed: Edward Burtynsky’s Vermont Quarry Photographs in Context.” The show runs through Aug. 19 at Dartmouth’s Hood Museum of Art.

“Our lifestyles are made possible by industries all around the world, but we take them for granted, as background to our existence. I feel that by showing those places that are normally outside of our experience, but very much a part of our everyday lives, I can add to our understanding of who we are and what we are doing.”

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Unless you live near such places as Barre or Rutland, stone quarries are likely outside your experience — but fancy countertops, grave markers, and national monuments are all part of everyday life, whether close by or as part of civic consciousness. Quarries may seem a lot less exotic than places half a world away where ships are being sliced into scrap and antiseptic assembly lines are the size of multiple football fields — less exotic, that is, until you actually look at them.



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**“OMYA #51, Calcium Carbonate Waste Area, Proctor, Vermont”**



“Nature Transformed” shows a scarred geometry of fractured planes, exquisite colors, lunar textures: a human-carved landscape that’s at once spectacular and ghastly. Large segments of them are like reliefs modeled on Richard Diebenkorn’s series of “Ocean Park” paintings. They are that beautiful in appearance — and that unnatural.

In “Rock of Ages #6, Abandoned Section, Rock of Ages Quarry, Barre, Vermont,” the autumnal hues of the saplings sprouting there chime with the gouges and veinings in the stone. The object visible in the study of whiteness as deadness that is “OMYA #51, Calcium Carbonate Waste Area, Proctor, Vermont” could be a petrified iceberg. The quarry water visible in several of the photographs is a study of greenness as deadness.

Burtynsky visited Vermont five times in the early ’90s to photograph quarries. “I remember looking at buildings made of stone,” he says in that catalog interview, “and thinking, there has to be an interesting landscape somewhere out there because these stones had to have been taken out of the quarry one block at a time. I had never seen a dimensional quarry, but I envisioned an inverted cubed architecture on the side of a hill.”

Marble and granite have been quarried in Vermont since the early 19th century. (A small gallery provides a primer on northern New England geology and includes samples of finished and unfinished granite.) Seeing Vermont quarrying as a precursor of globalization isn’t farfetched. “Nature Transformed” has a selection of more than a dozen vintage black-and-white photographs



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of the Italian stone workers who immigrated to Vermont starting in 1880 to work the quarries. Of the 31 Burtynsky photographs in the show, four are from his 1993 series on marble quarries in Carrara, Italy.

**“Abandoned Marble Quarry #18,  
Rutland, Vermont.”**

Scale is as much a Burtynsky trademark as subject matter. Most of his photographs in the show are 48 inches by 64 inches. Size in photography is often a stunt — or device (that sounds less judgmental). Printing pictures big is like turning up the volume: It gets an instant visceral impact without necessarily enhancing anything. With Burtynsky, scale is intrinsic to what he does. Reproduction doesn't do justice to these images. His subjects are not just big. They're very big. The dump trucks and excavators at the working quarries look like Tinkertoys or LEGO blocks. Showing the quarries small would be, in a real sense, to show them falsely. Images as big as these usually look posterish. It's the visual equivalent of a recording sounding tinny or thin. Burtynsky's look like monuments in two dimensions.

Another reason scale can get tricky for a photographer is that it's a key ingredient of the sublime. Photography trades in the real and glories in it. Part of what distinguishes the sublime from less-exalted aesthetic categories is its sense of the heightened and unreal — or, rather, of a reality beyond the real. Yes, an actual vessel that actually did sink inspired J.M.W. Turner's "Slave Ship." But what makes that painting one of the Museum of Fine Arts' most prized holdings are the effects Turner brought to bear on that subject, not the subject itself. Painting lends itself to theatricality (in some ways, requires it), as photography does not.

There have been photographers whose work has given us the sublime in tandem with a specific subject: Carleton Watkins's Yosemite, Charles Sheeler's River Rouge, Ansel Adams's Sierra Nevada. Other than Adams, it's hard to think of a photographer who has dealt in the sublime as consistently, or effectively, as Burtynsky has.

Economists like to speak of "creative destruction." There may not be much creativity involved in the destruction Burtynsky documents, but often there is unsettling beauty. The lessons he has to offer are as much aesthetic as environmental.