

# DAILYSERVING

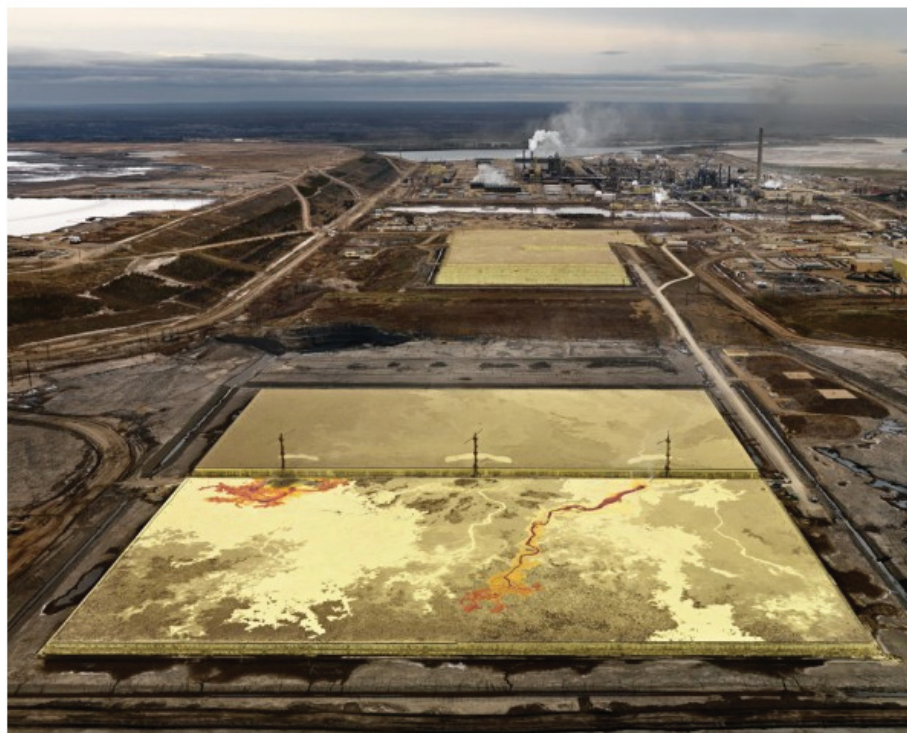
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## The Big Picture: An interview with Ed Burtnysky

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It's often impossible to fully understand the big picture of industrialized development from the limited perspective of the consumer. Each day most of us in the western world go about our business, driving to and from work, using plastics made from petroleum, enjoying foods shipped in from thousands of miles away, without a thought of the very resource that makes this all possible — oil. The impact of oil has consistently reappeared in the work of Canadian photographer Ed Burtnysky for well over a decade. Burtnysky's photographs often soar into the air, freeing us from our limited perspective, offering us the ability to better understand the scale and impact that this material has on contemporary life. It is only through this expansive perspective that we begin to understand the magnitude and consequence of our complicit actions. Recently, DailyServing founder [Seth Curcio](#) was able to speak to Ed Burtnysky by phone about his [current exhibition](#) at the [Nevada Museum of Art](#) in Reno, titled *Oil*. During this conversation, we learn how Ed's research has altered his own relationship to oil, how he uses scale and perspective to shape our understanding of the industrialized world, and what lies ahead of us with the future of oil.



Alberta Oil Sands #6 Fort McMurray, Alberta, Canada, 2007 / Courtesy of the Artist

**Seth Curcio:** In the introduction to your book *Oil*, you said, " In 1997 I had what I refer to as my oil epiphany. It occurred to me that all the vast man-altered landscapes I had pursued for over 20 years had been made possible by oil..." Since that time you have spent a decade and a half documenting the impact of oil consumption globally. How has this ongoing project shaped the way that you interact with the world, especially in regard to oil consumption?

**Ed Burtynsky:** At that point, I had spent 16 or 17 years trying to find the largest events possible around mining and quarrying. I was interested in places that we had collectively engaged, and that illustrate scale. I realized that the scale that I'd been photographing could only have been achieved through the combusive engine and a readily available fuel, such as oil.

These ideas led me to consider the things that are around me, from the fuel in my car to the road that I am driving on, to the plastic container that was in my hand. They are all produced with oil. As I started to look around, I asked myself *what's not oil?* and that became the more interesting question. It was at that point that I began to close the chapter on mining and open the chapter on the oil landscape. That started my research representing the extraction and refinement of oil, the urban worlds and events produced as a result of oil, and the end of the line — the final entropy and physical result of oil consumption.



Oil Fields #22 Cold Lake, Alberta, Canada, 2001 / Courtesy of the Artist



Through this I was fully aware that I was involved in the consumption of oil too. You simply cannot live life in the modern world without the usage of oil. We are all, in some way, participating in the material and resource. But, I'm always trying to find ways to mitigate my own consumption and impact. I planted a forest in 1985 and have since cared for it as a gesture to offset my carbon usage. I've always been careful to purchase fuel-efficient cars, and each time I fly, I purchase from offset companies. It is always my hope to be able to offset my usage through these means.

**SC:** As an individual, our limited perspective often prohibits us from seeing the larger picture of our impact on the planet. Literally, shifting our perspective to 1000+ feet above the ground can drastically change how we see the world. For me, this was strikingly evident in the expansive aerial photograph *Highway #5, Los Angeles, California, USA*. Can you talk a little about perspective and access as it relates to your work?



Highway #5 Los Angeles, California, USA, 2009 / Courtesy of the Artist



**EB:** When you stand at ground level, a real hierarchy begins to form. Everything in the foreground of the picture becomes dominant and hides everything behind it. The middle just becomes irrelevant at eye or ground level. But, then I realized that as you move up a bit, things begin to reveal themselves and you get a real sense of the relationships between the foreground, middle ground, and background. The descriptive power of the elevated point of view becomes so much more interesting than the view from the ground. From this point, you really get the chance to understand the scale of the landscape or how much of something is there, like how many cars are backed up behind you or how many planes are parked together. You get to see and really understand scale from the elevated viewpoint. And for me, that is a way that I can describe the system in which we organize certain things on such a large scale.



Highway #1 Los Angeles, California, USA, 2003 / Courtesy of the Artist



**SC:** That is completely evident in the work too. The perspective instantly brings me back to your seminal question, *what's not oil?*. And this perspective allows you to sense the vastness and excessiveness of our consumption. The scale itself becomes grotesque. I was discussing your work with a friend the other day, and as we looked at your images, he recalled reading a passage by Robert Adams, where he mentioned that for a landscape photograph to fully confront the grotesque and carry that depiction over to a viewer, an element of seduction or even the sublime, must be present. Your images certainly contain a seductive quality that seems counter to the content, but none-the-less draws you in. What do you feel is the role of aesthetics as it relates to your images? How is this considered when you construct and edit your photographs?

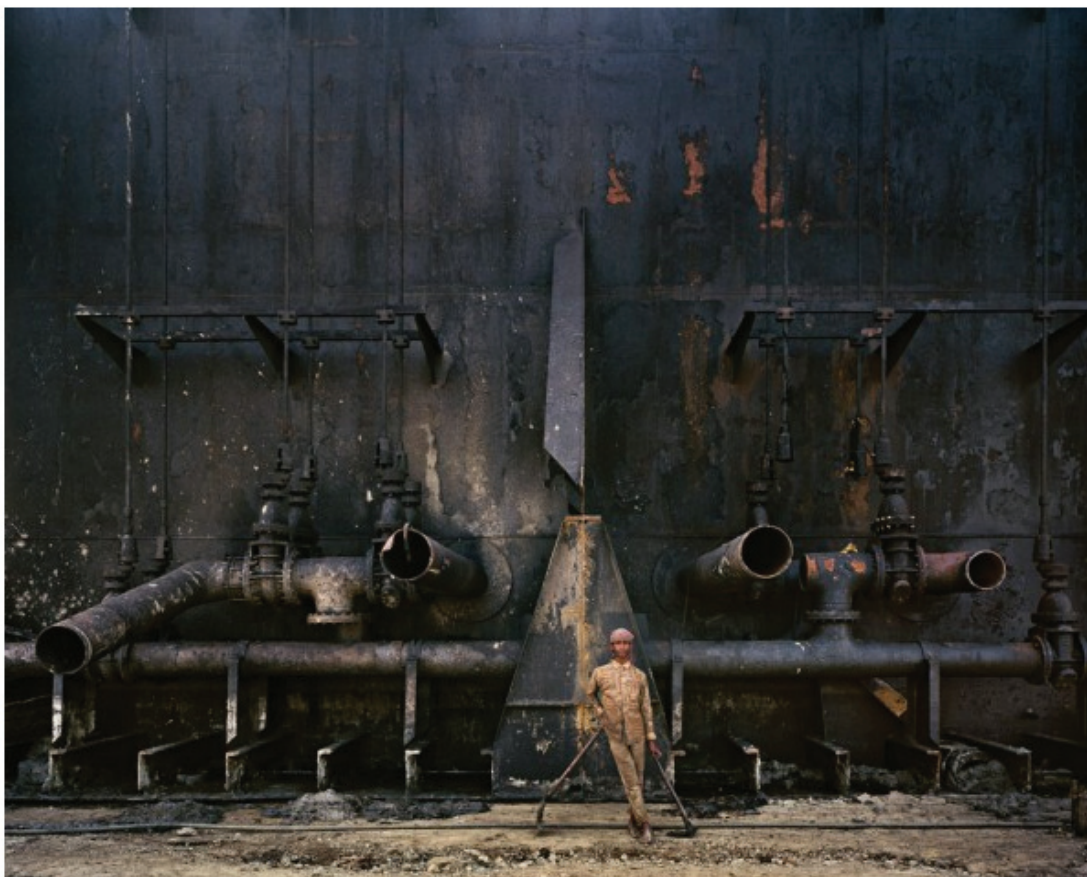
**EB:** I do believe that an image has to be visually compelling to address the kind of landscape that will challenge us and make us ask the important questions. I think that artists don't really have the power to change the world, but we do have the power to raise questions about the world that we are creating. In my heart, I feel that as artists we can hold a mirror up to society and help reflect upon exactly what we are doing and what type of world we are creating. All types of artists have the ability to take on this task. We must take on society and examine the condition of the human experience, and make sense of it as an individual and as a collective society. You are simply not going to get this type of storytelling directly from science. It is the role of the artist to tell this type of story. It's inherent in the creative arts to reflect where we are going in a way that perhaps has not been thought of before. And, aesthetics is a portal through which people will enter to explore these notions. But, if the work is not visually interesting enough for them to enter, then you won't be able to communicate anything at all to the viewer.



SOCAR Oil Fields #6 Baku, Azerbaijan, 2006 / Courtesy of the Artist

**SC:** Your images are simultaneously seductive and aggressive, instantly placing the viewer in the question-asking role. This prompts one to consider their own place within the image, and how one's own culture and daily activities contribute to a much larger problem. Paul Roth has said about your work "the subject is not oil...These photographs are about man, and what he has made of this earth." While the gravity of this resource is certainly evident throughout your pictures, I feel that the effects on humanity are most profound in the portraits found in the group *The End of Oil*. Since you were on the ground engaging with people whose lives are directly impacted by man's use of oil, I wonder if you connected with humanity in a way that was not possible in your more distant aerial photographs? Did making those portraits change the way you thought about man, and what he has made of this earth, as Roth suggests?

**EB:** When I went to Bangladesh it was as if I stepped back in time and was in the middle of the industrial revolution. Many of the people there were engaging in the most filthily, hard, arduous work that can be conceived. I felt that I went back in time because I could never see this type of work in my culture, as that moment had long passed. These men were working barefoot in a scrapyards, cutting metal with a torch and no eye protection, and inhaling clouds of asbestos with no respirators. They are taking part in the collateral damage of western off-gassing. It's a filthy job, cutting down massive ships that are technologically obsolete for our purposes. But, to see these people barefoot and still holding a shred of dignity in these types of jobs, I felt that at some point it is important for humanity to enter this project and for viewers to see humans engaging with the end result of our impact, as opposed to those who participated in the beginning of the narrative. I thought it was important to show humanity in a very unfortunate situation, even as they are attempting to better themselves, so that the first world can really see exactly who is doing our dirty work. And, that is why I wanted to have people appear and at that particular point in the narrative.



Shipbreaking #23 Chittagong, Bangladesh, 2000 / Courtesy of the Artist



Overtime, it has become more apparent to me that these aren't as much landscapes, as they are places that illustrate the systems such as how we extract oil from the ground, how we ship it, and how we build infrastructure to move machines around. The work is about trying to find a way to represent all of the systems that we have created to enjoy the benefits that the internal combustion engine and oil have afforded us. The images are not really about the singular place; they are a stand in for the ways that we have changed our landscape to accommodate all of these things — this new way of life.

**SC:** Absolutely. The impact is so invisible to the western world. There are such small moments where we can see the effects of our culture on the rest of the earth. This brings to mind the times that we do get to see our actions unfold — like with the gulf oil crisis. Considering that you had been working on this project and related projects for well over a decade when the Gulf oil crisis happened two years ago, what went through your mind when viewing those images and video on TV? What is your reaction to the incident and all that has occurred in that region since?



Oil Tanker and Refineries Pasadena, Texas, USA, 2004 / Courtesy of the Artist



**EB:** I went and photographed that area right after the situation occurred. I had been working on a project about water and I thought that this is a perfect example of an immediate oil and water event that was loaded with implications that were real and happening right now. I thought this would give me a change to see these all-important liquids in our life in an unexpected and unwanted marriage. It was like the Frankenstein story, where we did something and really didn't fully understand the risks; we drilled to 23,000 ft – 5,000 ft of water and another 17,000 feet of bedrock to get to the oil. And, then to have it all go bad and lose control of the well. It's like when doctor Frankenstein creates life and then it turns on him and becomes a menace. The same scientists are then trying to contain it and get back into the lab, but its not that easy. It really is the process of science over reaching and then losing control. It's a lesson that we keep repeating — not fully understanding the risk and moving forward anyway. Imagine if this repeats itself in drilling conditions in the artic. If there were a spill in the winter, there would be no way of reaching it, it would just gush all winter long and could very well completely destroy the artic. Imagine the mess that we would all be in then. The idea of an error occurring in the artic is a real nightmare. The Gulf has 35,000 wells. They are not new at this, and they have every bit of technology, help, and resources available at their disposal to help solve the problem. Now the artic is a completely different situation. With all of the resources available, it still took 3 months to stop the oil in the Gulf! In the artic, who is there to help? Who is there to save the day? Nobody. So, it is a scary thought that we would advance into this region in our pursuits of this material.



SOCAR Oil Fields #4 Baku, Azerbaijan, 2006 / Courtesy of the Artist



**SC:** There is so many issues with the inevitability of another spill at the magnitude of the gulf oil crisis. But, the western world is so detached from the actual production of oil that it can seem out of touch. We just know that we still need it, and therefore, another site will be built. Another type of technology will be invented to reach another pocket of oil. This brings me to the lanscape pictures that you made under the umbrella of the *End of Oil*. They are so striking and haunting. These images really get to the essence of not only the impact of our consumption of oil, but also the waste we leave behind. However, we know that now matter how many of these sites are used and abandoned, inevitably another will open to satisfy out needs. So, seeing these images actually makes me consider the future of oil. I'm curious about what your discoveries have led you to think about the future of the man-made world in regard to this material? What do you see on the horizon?



VW Lot #1 Houston, Texas, USA, 2004 / Courtesy of the Artist



**EB:** I see it in terms of peak oil. It is not a question of if, it is a question of when. Its not like peak oil is going to stop. It's just like the 1974 peak oil problem, it crests and no matter how much you pump it can't keep up with the public demand. All of the sudden you see supply go in one direction and demand go in the other. Then, you get market adjustment; the prices go up to help reduce demand. Its like playing ping pong on a moving train, the price goes up and down, but really its always moving up and going forward. When we average it out, it will move from \$100 to \$200, \$300, \$400 per barrel, and that is what it will look like at different price points. As the price goes higher more people will be left behind. Less people will be able to drive, fly in an airplane, and oil consumption will be left for those with more capital, while the rest of us deal with massive inflation. And, third world countries could be completely out of oil, leaving them with huge amounts of social unrest. In countries like China, you can see them purchasing oil fields and natural resources from anyone that will sell, as they know that they don't have many of their own natural resources. They are stock piling from locations around the world in preparation of their expanded development. And, there is going to be a lot of tension globally as we begin to hit peak oil again.



Breezewood Pennsylvania, USA, 2008 / Courtesy of the Artist



But, there is something that we here in the west can do. It is called losing our addiction to oil. I feel that we could reduce our consumption by 30% through conservation – raising the fuel average to 50 miles per gallon in cars, producing alternative energy, and reducing the huge tax cuts to oil companies and giving them to green energy developers. There just hasn't been the right emphasis put in the right places yet. Historically, big infrastructure changes have to come, in part, from the government. Just like it did with when we needed to add telephone lines, highways, and hydro development – it all came from the government. And, if we are going to make these changes in relationship to our oil consumption, if we really want sustainable alternative energy, the government has to be there. It has to create a level playing field. It's got to put oil in the same place as alternatives, and quit giving benefits to oil over alternative energy. Tax people for carbon consumption, and alternatives start looking really good. We all play a part in this.

The exhibition Oil, by Ed Burtynsky, will be on view at the Nevada Museum of Art from June 9, 2012 – September 23, 2012.