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# Edward Burtynsky's Water photos document the way mankind is changing the planet

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COLORADO RIVER DELTA #1 IN BAJA, MEXICO. PHOTOS: EDWARD BURTYNSKY

## WATER

Sundaram Tagore Gallery

No apologies are necessary if you'd never heard of Edward Burtynsky before *Manufactured Landscapes* (2006), the visually entrancing documentary by director Jennifer Baichwal. At once an art-house cinema favourite and a gentle reminder of mankind's reckless destruction of nature, the film follows the Canadian photographer as he wanders a diversity of industrial landscapes for his large-format colour photographs.



More significantly, it introduced him to the world at large. When he is reminded of the film's unexpectedly pivotal role in his career, Burtynsky — who was named an Officer of the Order of Canada in 2006, before the film's release — readily admits its influence. "That's one thing I recognise and I agree with you completely," says the celebrated photographer over the phone from Amsterdam, where he gave a keynote address at the World Press Photo headquarters.

"When the film was released, I had been showing for almost 25 years at museums and contemporary galleries, and I had books on my photography as well. But it wasn't until the movie came out in 2006 that I recognised how far-reaching a motion picture can be. It reached a whole different audience to my fine art."

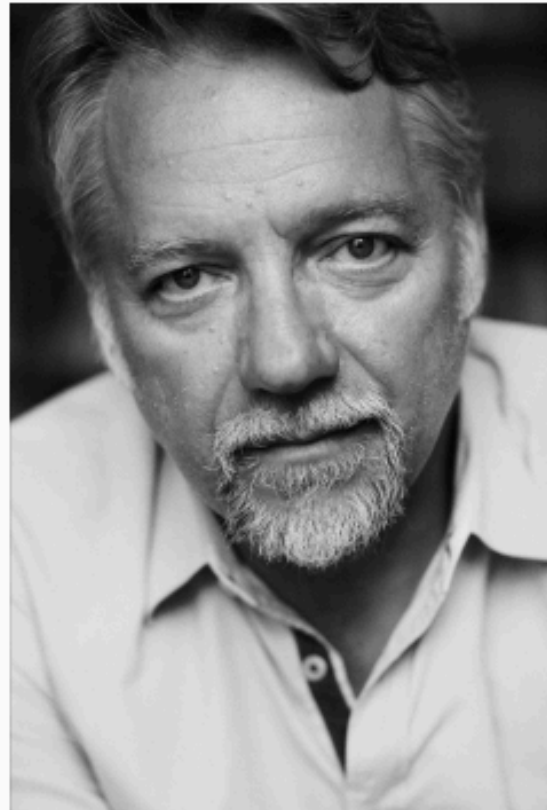
The success of that earlier feature led Burtynsky to reunite with Baichwal for a second documentary project, *Watermark*, where he took on a more active role as a co-director.

The film made its world premiere at the Toronto International Film Festival last September and its Asian premiere in Hong Kong in March. It charts the creative process of the photographer's ongoing *Water* photography series, which he started in 2007.

"We kind of divided and conquered," he says of his collaboration with Baichwal. "I was still handling a lot of the overview, trying to figure out what the subjects were, [such as] the Xiluodu dam and the rice terraces in Yunnan province, or the offshore marine aquaculture in Fujian province. Then the film really tried to take the vision — images I took with my still camera — and extend that using high-definition video cameras."

The *Water* series explores the human use of water and takes Burtynsky to a wide range of locations: irrigation sites in Texas, India's Kumbh Mela and the deserts of Iceland. To give his subjects an epic perspective, many images were taken from the air — sometimes from as high as 2,000 metres — from a helicopter, or, if civil aviation was prohibited, with a remote-controlled camera.

These images were first showcased in a solo exhibition at the New Orleans Museum of Art and, since October, have been shown at various commercial galleries around the world. Starting this week, a selection of images from the series will be on view at Sundaram Tagore Gallery's Hong Kong space, where Burtynsky last staged a solo show in late 2010. The *Water* series has also been chronicled in a book by the German publishing house Steidl.



Edward Burtynsky. Photo: Birgit Kleber

Burtynsky delineates the two consistent factors that have shaped his three-decade body of work. “One aspect is that, visually, it is an interesting place to photograph. I would look for large-scale human systems and [their impact on] the landscape. I need to find the right time of year and the right colour. It’s a backand- forth refinement process that I always have to go through before I find what it is that I want to shoot.

“The other thing is that somehow it must fit into the larger content of how it speaks to human expansion and the scale of humanity. Whether it’s mining or fishing, or whatever it is that leaves a big stamp on the world, I’m looking for examples of how human enterprise is now working at a scale that was almost unimaginable 100 or 200 years ago.

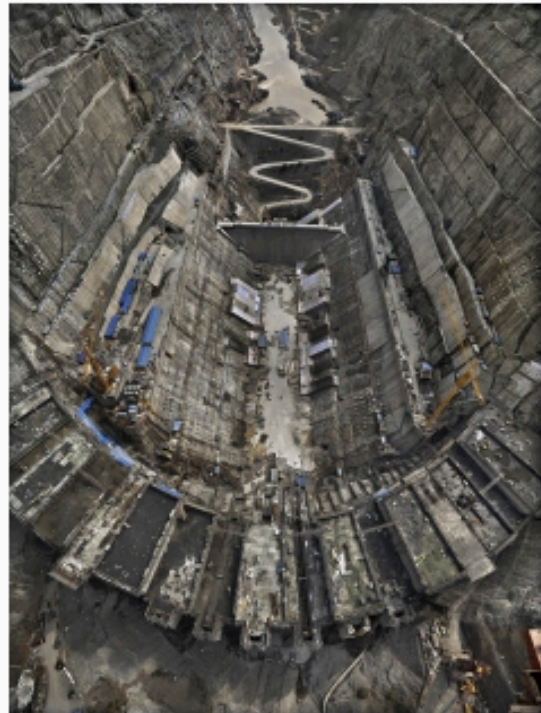
I’m interested in chronicling this new place that we, as humans, have found ourselves in.”

Following the positive attention attracted by both *Manufactured Landscapes* and *Watermark*, Burtynsky is excited by the prospect that “film may continue to have a role in what I do” in the foreseeable future.

He says: “I’ll continue to work as a still photographer and work in the gallery world and museums. In many ways, selling prints still provides me with the ability to work around the world.

“I have to rely on documentary films, too. They’re not very friendly when it comes to making money, although they may make the world a better place. I do love the ideas a film can bring into culture. I think it’s a form that speaks to many more people than a book does,” Burtynsky adds.

Sundaram Tagore Gallery, 57-59 Hollywood Road, Central, Monday- Saturday, 10am-7pm, Sunday, 11am-7pm. May 9-June 21. Inquiries: 25819678. *Watermark* will be screened on May 10 at 6.30pm at the Asia Society Hong Kong Centre, 9 Justice Drive, Admiralty. It will be followed by a Q&A session with Edward Burtynsky; HK\$250 for Asia Society members or full-time students, HK\$350 for non-members.



Xiluodu Dam #2 on the Yangtze river