

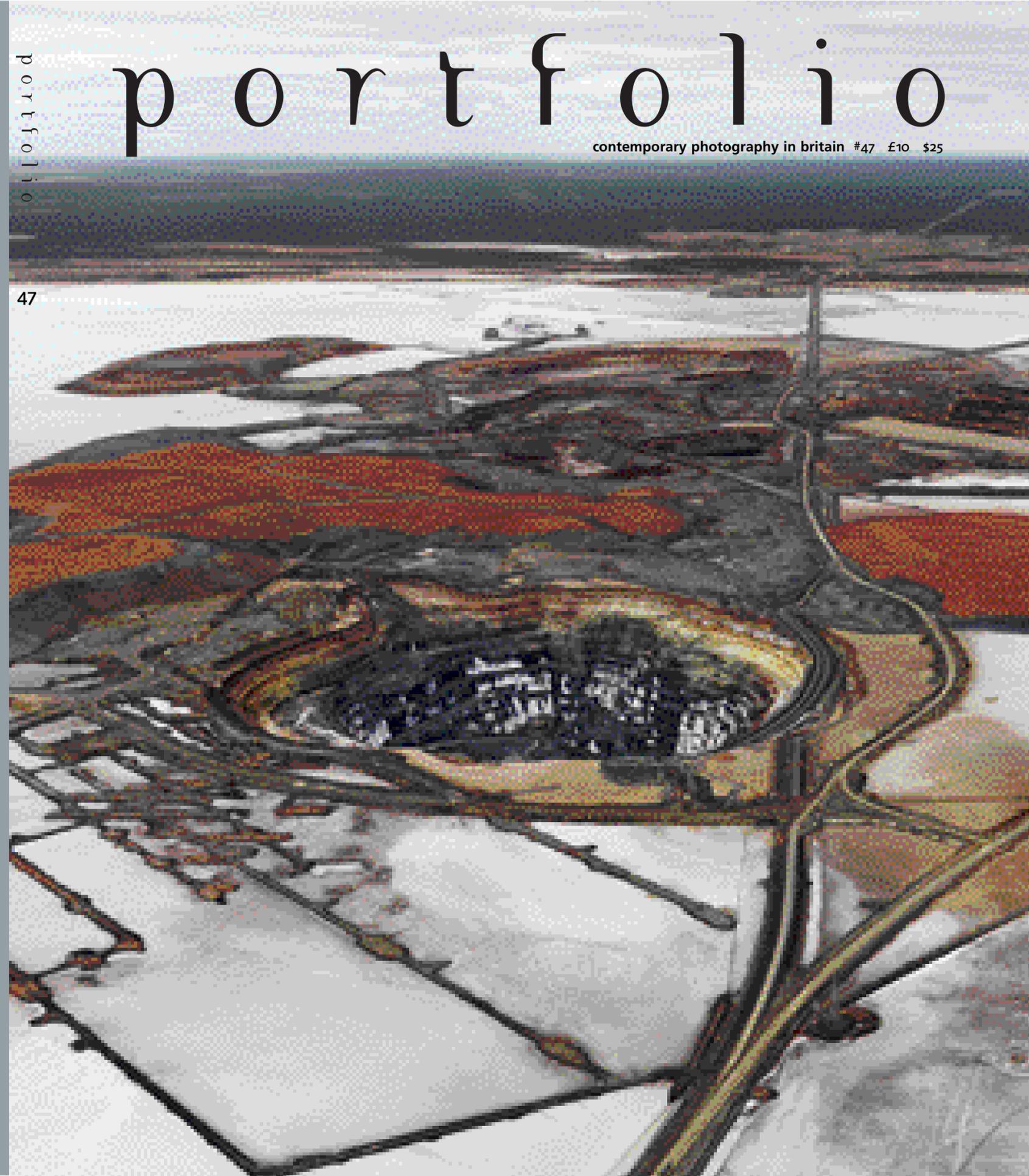
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Marjolaine Ryley Jasmina Cibic Ebru Erülkü Bianca Brunner  
Damian Uceda Cortes Stuart Whipps James Tye Alison Stolwood  
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portfolio

# portfolio

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Edward Burtynsky  
*Silver Lake Operations #2, Lake Lefroy, Western Australia, 2007*  
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# Edward Burtynsky

## Edward Burtynsky's Negative Sublime

DUNCAN FORBES



Nickel Tailings #34, Sudbury, Ontario, 1996 (left); Nickel Tailings #35, Sudbury, Ontario, 1996 (right)

Over the last three decades, Edward Burtynsky has created a body of images he describes as tracing “the man-made transformations our civilisation has imposed upon nature”. This is a modest formulation with which to describe landscape photographs of often vast scale and stunning ocular power. Burtynsky’s camera surveys terrain apparently subject to Promethean forces: quarries sit like mammoth inverted buildings, gouged out according to an unnatural symmetry. A mine tailing spreads luminous poison across blackened countryside, a suppurating geological sore. Oil derricks stretch like advancing robots as far as any human eye can see. In Burtynsky’s world nature is both used up and transmogrified: into mountains of tyres and ferrous bushing, densified oil filters and steel drums. A recent book showed us something of China’s epochal transition. A future volume will anatomise the colossus of the global oil industry as, perhaps at the moment of peak production, it begins to fade.

Burtynsky’s vision is so beautiful, so hellish, so optically compelling that it is easy to be distracted from the question of what his photography might be about. One definition, in the judicious title of a recent catalogue, points to the creation of ‘manufactured landscapes’, spaces transformed by industrial modernity’s awesome power and made over – fleetingly – into highly controlled images.<sup>1</sup> Burtynsky’s photography is thus less about the exploitation of nature than its incessant – we might say systemic – production, the idea that society is internal to nature and that nature’s materiality is always socially produced. This unity is not uniform – industrial development is famously ‘uneven’ – but it now proceeds incontrovertibly on a world scale.<sup>2</sup> Since the early 1980s, the globalised production of nature, including the expansion of industrial and urban environments, has become Burtynsky’s theme, the most extensive and dynamic reordering of space in human history. That this process threatens irreversible destruction is now evident, explaining a gradual hardening of the photographer’s ecological concerns.

Burtynsky photographs the landscapes of late capitalism and as such they require to be differentiated from apparently similar landscape representations in the past. For some, his imagery easily conforms to the tradition of the industrial sublime, an echo of the appearance of manufacturing subjects – mines, furnaces and factories especially – in European art from the late eighteenth century. Generating awe and wonder in the face of mankind’s harnessing of immense elemental powers, such picture-making

nonetheless represented a confident accommodation with nature, a triumphalist expression of man’s domination of the natural world. Since 1945, and certainly since the early 1970s, that confidence has been obliterated, leading to a more despairing assessment of human dominion over nature. (One of its most remarkable manifestations in photography is Margaret Bourke White’s book, *‘Dear Fatherland, Rest Quietly’*, from 1946. It combines aerial photographs of bomb-ravaged German cities with images from the concentration camps, whilst paying close attention in the text to the complicity of leading industrialists.)<sup>3</sup> Burtynsky’s imagery inherits the weight of an uneasy modern landscape tradition, to say the least. In all their expansive beauty, his photographs constitute a negative sublime, positing a radically different relationship between humankind and nature.

At the same time, Burtynsky’s landscapes labour under today’s critique of the sign, particularly in its photographic form, expressed in the restless questioning of the mediation between a representation and the thing it represents. This is also to distance his imagery from too easy a comparison with earlier landscape traditions, particularly those from the highpoint of European painterly naturalism. If the photographer’s engagement is with a particular strand of landscape representation, it is also an effect of the transformation of that tradition, designated by a technological origin – Guy Debord’s media-saturated society of the spectacle – and our radically different existential experience of global space and time. (One aspect of this, impossible I suspect to dissociate from his imagery, is the cultural levelling imposed by the global pursuit of mass tourism.) Burtynsky’s manufactured landscapes thus seem to me to bear a double burden: a profound suspicion of the image, and what might be termed the negative triumphalism of today’s technological sublime.

Whether the photographer is aware of this burden is largely beside the point, although it is clearly reflected in the questioning of those who write about his work.<sup>4</sup> For Burtynsky the task appears more direct: that of securing a reliable image dependent in significant part on its startling optical capacity. This is the result of immaculate planning, involving a mapping of sites and due attention paid to timing, preferably a transitional season and a moment in the day when light is at its most descriptive. For a photographer of scale an elevated position is essential and Burtynsky makes use of whatever paraphernalia he can to achieve his viewpoint (including in his most recent Australian photographs a helicopter hovering at 400 feet).



Super Pit #1, Kalgoorlie, Western Australia, 2007

All images copyright Edward Burtynsky, courtesy Flowers East Gallery, London

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Silver Lake Operations #1, Lake Lefroy, Western Australia, 2007  
Silver Lake Operations #3, Lake Lefroy, Western Australia, 2007 (opposite)



Shipbreaking #9a, Cittagong, Bangladesh, 2000  
Shipbreaking #9b, Cittagong, Bangladesh, 2000 (opposite)



Oil Fields #24, Oil Sands, Fort McMurray, Alberta, 2001  
Oil Fields #2, Belridge, California, 2002 (*opposite*)



Makrana Marble Quarries #18, Rajasthan, India, 2000



Railcuts #1, C.N. Track, Skihist Provincial Park, British Columbia, 1985

Rock of Ages #7, Active Section, Wells-Lamson Quarry, Barre, Vermont, 1991 (opposite)



Carrara Marble Quarries #24, Carrara, Italy, 1993  
Carrara Marble Quarries #25, Carrara, Italy, 1993 (opposite)



Dam #6, Three Gorges Dam Project, Yangtze River, China, 2005  
Feng Jie #5, Three Gorges Dam Project, Yangtze River, China, 2002 (opposite)

In the best of his books careful account is given of the sites chosen. We sense a certain complicity, between places that embody a hidden history of labour and a skilled technician devoted to the craftsmanship required of a large format view camera. His landscapes are carefully framed and abstracted, structured in terms of light and colour by a satisfying democracy of content. In such a deliberate way images are formed that pursue something of the inexpressible.

Burtynsky's technique generates a visual spectacle that scarcely requires iteration: a superabundance of detail, a structural clarity, a startling spatial penetration. His photography constitutes an almost wilful countering of postmodernism's lack of depth: the spaces are vast, but unlike those of other photographers concerned with the theme of globalisation they are rarely disorientating. Burtynsky maps a modernist rhetoric onto his landscapes, although perhaps more in its later functional, rather than earlier analytic form. Above all, this is grounded in a coherent sense of depth, distance and scale: structured by strong, often central, axes his images never threaten dissolution. This produces visual pleasures that have again troubled his commentators and we might recall Frederic Jameson's observation that the modernist claim to sublimity has been displaced today by decorative tendencies "in which sensory beauty is once again the heart of the matter".<sup>5</sup> But whatever the optical gratification of Burtynsky's imagery, the sign and the real are clearly separated; his landscapes remain committed to the sordid materiality of the world.

All this raises the question of influence and various modernist predecessors have been named – Burtynsky himself has drawn our attention to the impact of the landscapes of August Sander and Carleton Watkins. 'Influence' seems in this case too strong a term and I would prefer the notion of similarity, perhaps particularly to the practice of Watkins. In a telling essay, Doug Nickel has argued that Watkins' photography evolved to match the social and aesthetic aspirations of his Victorian viewers, giving rise to a "distinctively ocular ideology of expansion". Central to this was the articulation of the hilltop or commanding view, what Nickel describes as a "visual idiom of factuality, mensuration, and sheer optical spectacle that retains much of its currency to this day".<sup>6</sup> Burtynsky, like other landscape photographers, makes expert use of the commanding view, perhaps especially in his record of China's breathtaking industrial and urban transformation. Here in photographs of tremendous reach he concentrates on some of the great regions of industrialisation – the Pearl and Yangtze River deltas, the Yellow River valley – with their 350 million or so wage workers. That there should be echoes of an earlier imagery of industrialisation is perhaps not surprising. China's transition to capitalism bears close resemblance to earlier European and North American moments.<sup>7</sup>

However, Burtynsky's is a viewpoint that carries little of the optimism of his nineteenth-century forebears; there is never a sense of triumphant accommodation with nature. Thus his railcut views are literally and metaphorically sidelong with none of the thrill of technological advance embodied by Watkins' vision. Burtynsky's landscapes seem more dependent on a morphology of positive and negative forms, emphasising the processes of productive transformation and a finitude of resources. (Hence the intelligence of the recycling images, less a restorative act than yet another stage in the manufacture of nature.) Some of his subjects – abandoned quarries, the old factories of Shenyang City, shipbreaking in Bangladesh – are figured as ruins, pointing to a history of exploitation very different from Watkins' sense of a pliant and endlessly productive territory. An accelerating cycle of creative destruction is far more Burtynsky's theme.

Indeed, there is a potent archaeological imagination at work in these landscapes where traces in rock or cityscape embody histories of exhausted labour. They point to the increasingly uncomfortable co-existence of human and geological time. In some of Burtynsky's quarry images we can make out evidence of older extraction technologies – small channelling holes, for example, drilled out along a fault and packed with dynamite. Recent photographs of the 'super pit' in Kalgoorlie from Western Australia reveal evidence of a network of nineteenth-century tunnels stretching to some 3,700 km, a disturbing contrast when unearthed to the twenty-first century's vast crater. In August 2007, the monthly costs of extracting low-grade gold ore were about \$85 million (Australian). At that time, with the price of gold hovering below \$800 (US) per ounce, the profit realised was just \$250,000. Nature here is being produced to its destructive end.

Despite – or perhaps because of – its formal strength, the spectacle of Burtynsky's imagery is both perceptually satisfying and unsettling. Something of the idea of landscape comes under pressure in these photographs as, indeed, it increasingly seems to in the work of other photographers.<sup>8</sup> Landscape – traditionally an external view – begins to dissolve when confronted by the full extent of today's social production of nature. This tension, it seems to me, is embodied in Burtynsky's imagery, hence a certain difficulty in representing the theme of labour for example, despite its constant, necessary presence. The images from China capture in the arresting scope of factory and urban scenes something of the stupendous proletarianisation of peasant workers: 300 million have moved to the cities over the last quarter century, the largest migration in human history. But it is difficult to map ourselves cognitively against these photographs as something more than spectacle to be consumed (yet again). The commanding view, whatever its newfound insecurity, is inadequate to the issues raised by the labouring body in the landscapes of globalisation.<sup>9</sup>

It may be that in the face of the continued penetration of the natural world by capital the traditional conception of landscape becomes impossible to sustain. As the geographer, Neil Smith, has recently argued, we are witnessing an intensification in the production of nature through "an explosion of ecological commodification", seen in various forms of financialised credits (for wetlands and carbon trading etc.), bio-prospecting (in which corporations hunt down patentable genetic materials) and the creation of genetically modified organisms.<sup>10</sup> Our future, indeed the biopolitics of our present, is one of manufactured landscapes with a vengeance. More so perhaps than any other photographer Edward Burtynsky has drawn our attention to this question by mobilising the powerful indexicality of the camera. The implicit challenge posed by his work is how collectively we might produce a new nature.

1. Lori Pauli, *Manufactured Landscapes: the Photographs of Edward Burtynsky*, Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada, 2003.

2. Neil Smith, *Uneven Development: Nature, Capital and the Production of Space*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990.

3. *'Dear Fatherland, Rest Quietly'*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1946.

4. See especially Mark Kingwell, 'The truth in photographs: Edward Burtynsky's Revelations of Excess', in *China: the Photographs of Edward Burtynsky*, Göttingen: Steidl, 2005.

5. 'Transformations of the image in postmodernity', in *The Cultural Turn: Selected Writings on the Postmodern 1983–1998*, London: Verso, 1998, p. 123.

6. 'An art of perception' in *Carleton Watkins: the Art of Perception*, New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1999, p. 32.

7. Richard Walker and Daniel Buck, 'The Chinese road: cities in the transition to capitalism', *New Left Review*, 46, 2007, pp. 39–66.

8. There are many examples, but see especially the work of Michael Reisch, published as *Michael Reisch*, Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2006.

9. For one take on this question see Zanny Begg, 'Recasting subjectivity: globalisation and the photography of Andreas Gursky and Allan Sekula', *Third Text*, November 2005, pp. 625–36.

10. 'Nature as accumulation strategy', *Socialist Register 2007: Coming to Terms with Nature*, London: Merlin Press, 2006, pp. 16–36.



Shipyard #7, Qili Port, Zhejiang Province, China, 2005

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