

# AN UNEASY CONTRADICTION

# Surveying the career of Edward Burtynsky

BY CAROL McCUSKER



OIL FIELDS #19 (DIPTYCH), BELRIDGE, CALIFORNIA, USA—2003

*Our dependence on nature to provide the materials for our consumption, and our concern for the health of our planet sets us into an uneasy contradiction.* — Edward Burtynsky

From the mid-1980s to the present, photographer Edward Burtynsky has made beautiful images of landscapes we'd rather not see. He photographs sites that are essential to our worldwide energy consumption: open-pit mines, refineries,

quarries, and uranium tailings. More recently, he has photographed landscapes we couldn't imagine without his camera: China's relocation of millions of citizens to make way for the Three Gorges Dam, E-waste recycling, tire dumps, and ship-breaking. For two decades, Burtynsky's environmentally conscious photographs have grown from picturing quiet, seemingly benign hillsides with houses and dogs to the flagrantly poisonous, in the red river tailings of Sudbury, Ontario.

This photographic trajectory, from the subtle to the shocking, is in sync with growing public awareness of critical land-use issues. You could say that Ed Burtynsky and his audience have grown up together in mutual ecological consciousness, with the photographer acting like Dickens's "Ghost of Christmas Future," revealing the malevolent fruits of our collective consumption. "Between attraction and repulsion, seduction and fear...these images are meant as metaphors to the dilemma of our modern existence,"

says the photographer. "We are drawn by desire, a chance at good living, yet...the world is suffering for our success."

Using color film, a large format camera, positioning himself above his subject, often printing to a painterly size of 50x60 inches, with an eye for compositional beauty amid the ruins, his photographs form a detailed archive of the present that acts like a time capsule sent into the future, a future that will know



HOMESTEADS #29, WALKERVILLE, MONTANA—1985

us in part through Burtynsky's photographs. His elevated vantage point of looking down and out often without a horizon line, works on our reception of his images. It incorporates what art historian Albert Boime referred to as the Magisterial Gaze. In 19th-century painting, this gave Americans a view at one with God—hence, Manifest Destiny. Since dramatic skies were an essential part of this view (think Thomas Moran, Albert Bierstadt), one could construe that Burtynsky's frequent denial of the horizon is significant in the reverse. Man's harmony with God's perspective has shifted, become stunted, and feels claustrophobic. Although the photographer avoids a political or moral stance, the accumulated effect of his photographs nonetheless burdens our knowledge of industry and its weight on the earth's ecosystems. At the far end of the spectrum of the Industrial Revolution, we are forced to look down and into the ramifications of our global progress and profit.

Such photographs, and the artist's influential career, have

changed the form and content of landscape photography, as have only a few photographers before him. Young photographers now acknowledge him as their inspiration, as others named Ansel Adams or Lewis Baltz a few decades ago. Through his lens, the earth's prognosis in the new century is aesthetically riveting but environmentally frightening to behold.

**B**urtynsky was born in Canada, "a country with a small population and a vast hinterland," he says, "...that gave this feeling of eternity, and we just a momentary presence." Boyhood fishing and camping trips provided him with a perspective on the natural world, alongside the General Motors plant that employed most of his hometown, including his father. Attending Ryerson University's photography program, he would merge these two perspectives into a life's work. Looking at other artists was also integral to his education, among them,



C. N. TRACK #1, SKIHIST PROVINCIAL PARK, BRITISH COLUMBIA—1985



HIGHWAY #1, LOS ANGELES, CALIFORNIA, USA—2003



VERMONT MARBLE COMPANY #5, ABANDONED MARBLE QUARRY, ROCHESTER, VERMONT—1991



ROCK OF AGES #1, ACTIVE SECTION, E.L. SMITH QUARRY, BARRE, VERMONT—1991



NICKEL TAILINGS #31, SUDBURY, ONTARIO—1996

the celebrated 19th- and 20th-century wilderness or industrial landscape painters and photographers from both Canada and the U.S., Charles Comfort, Charles Sheeler, Carleton Watkins, and Margaret Bourke-White. "The more you comprehend your indebtedness to your predecessors in art," says Burtynsky, "the more you can let those influences enrich your own work."

The first two bodies of work that Burtynsky created, *Homesteads* and *Railcuts*, began in the mid-1980s. *Homesteads*, which calls to mind stalwart 19th-century pioneers, pictures the marks of man upon the land in New York, Montana, and western Canada. Carleton Watkins photographed the optimism of 19th-century frontiersmen in "Eagle Creek, Columbia River" (1867), an image that shows a small settlement—houses built from the immediate environment along a tranquil river. Two people perched on a horse-drawn rail pose for the photographer. The trees and visible wilderness beyond supplied the bounty of the milled lumber stacked in the foreground. It is industry at its most industrious.

Burtynsky's "Homesteads #29, Walkerville, Montana" (1985) is, by comparison, a faded, former glory. "I was born a hundred

years too late to be searching for the sublime in nature" (as Watkins did), he says. Such a sentiment would be contrary to what he was seeing, and "an expression of nostalgia." Instead, he pictures the once-booming mining town of Walkerville, formerly known as "the richest hill on earth" (earlier in the century, it produced one sixth of the world's copper). Burtynsky photographed it three years after the mine was closed due to contamination. Left behind is barren, blown earth, an abandoned rail, the gaping mouth of a mine, a single street light, a car's open trunk, and a lone child playing with dogs; a cinematic limbo, used up but still lived in. The image feels intentionally desolate and not unlike Stephen Shore's signature imagery of the American West, such as "Presidio, TX." (1975). In both images, the photographers use bleaching sunlight on dusty roads that lead to the semi-occupied periphery of small towns outlined by telephone wires and architectural edges, distant, banal and mournfully beautiful.

Indeed, Burtynsky's early images carry the seeds of 1970s New Topographic photographers, of which Shore was one, along with Robert Adams, Joe Deal, Lewis Baltz, and others. Using medium- or large-format cameras, they reacted to Ansel Adams's heroicizing grand landscapes by refusing the drama of



KISS CONCERT PARKING AREA, STURGIS, SOUTH DAKOTA, USA—2008

dusk or dawn light, imaging the nature they saw regularly surrounded by strip malls, freeways, Route 66 motels, and State Park parking lots. Their images loosened landscape photography from the grip of the idealized.

Influenced by their work, but upping the ante on environmental commentary and complexity in the 1990s, Burtynsky began shooting the destinations of the railroads: the mines and quarries. He then shifted his focus to urban mines, densified scrap metals, the oil fields of Alberta and California, then to Bangladesh, China, and Australia. In his images, Carrara marble quarries and cargo ships assume an architectural monumentality carved by negative space or subsumed in subtle shifts of color. The depth of each of his series, his painterly color palette indebted to his early training in black and white, and a growing printing expertise (in 1985, he opened his own color printing lab, Toronto Image Works, which continues today), all grew exponentially alongside exhibitions and publications. Indeed,

before turning to color, Burtynsky was, for twelve years, a black and white photographer. "When I moved to color, I brought a lot of my black-and-white sensibility to the new work," preferring to "use color in a subtle way. ... I tried to find landscapes that literally looked like black and white images in the real world with small bits of muted color coming through." His favorite times of year to shoot are fall and spring. "I refer to these seasons as having 'quarter colors,' where everything is in mid-tone." The photographer also adds, "Over the last ten years I have found myself working to abstract space. I try to flatten it and exclude the horizon line so that you don't know whether the space is advancing or receding. [All] the elements in the image have an equal weight." He favors overcast days where everything has "an equal value so that the viewer will fall into the surface and read textures and detail."

In 2005, Burtynsky was given the TED (Technology, Entertainment, Design) Prize for a life's work documenting humanity's expanding footprint on the planet. Granted three



OXFORD TIRE PILE #8, WESTLEY, CALIFORNIA—1999



DENSIFIED SCRAP METAL #3A, HAMILTON, ONTARIO—1997



SILVER LAKE OPERATIONS #12, LAKE LEFROY, WESTERN AUSTRALIA—2007



OIL FIELDS #27, BAKERSFIELD, CALIFORNIA, USA—2004



SOCAR OIL FIELDS #4, BAKU, AZERBAIJAN—2006

wishes from TED, he built an environmental website for kids; contributes to WorldChanging.com, “a massive, productive worldwide conversation about sustainable living;” and was able to meet documentary filmmaker, Jennifer Abbott, who, with Burtynsky, made *Manufactured Landscapes* (the second most popular documentary film in Canada, behind *The Corporation*).

Burtynsky’s exhaustive approach to his subject has raised the bar among landscape photographers. He has become the global, 21st-century equivalent of Carleton Watkins, carrying heavy equipment, driving through difficult terrain, visiting every continent, hiring guides and pilots, and carefully composing shots amid bureaucracies that want to prevent it. He examines what was optimistically begun in the Industrial Revolution but now threatens our existence. Cautious about preaching, since he implicates himself in the consumption of natural resources, Burtynsky

says, “The landscape photographers of the 19th century bequeathed to us all an image of a new world through the camera’s lens... However, [when] I pursue the industrial man-made landscape... I’m not trying to editorialize; I’m not saying this is right or this is wrong. I want to show the scale of that impact.”

The scale and objects of man’s industry take on forms that can feel otherworldly, especially through his lens, as on the ship-breaking beaches of Bangladesh. Here, Burtynsky’s photographs offer up magnificent, picturesque sculptural forms (suggestive of Richard Serra) of indecipherable origin. When tankers or cargo ships become too old, they are sailed to these beaches for dismantling and recycling by an industry of local men armed with rudimentary tools and little physical protection. The mist and smoke-filled skies are flat in Burtynsky’s photographs, like 19th-century albumen prints, outlining dramatically the ship’s split bows or massive funnels. When dismantled with blowtorches



SHIPBREAKING #9 (DIPTYCH), CHITTAGONG, BANGLADESH—2000

and raw manpower, where do the materials go? In one of the least reproduced of Burtynsky's images, but one that continues the rotating cycle of goods, three workers pose for the photographer amidst battered drums containing oil rescued from those ships. Barefooted, they stand ankle deep in the crude, their hands

and clothing soaked (yet, aptly for the camera, their faces are not). One imagines its stench as it saturates ground and skin. The vacant, lunar-like landscape surrounding the ship-breakers matches their dismantling labor, while the lush green palms surrounding these drums feels threatened by oil-drenched soil. The connec-



tion is that ships at Chittagong are largely decommissioned oil tankers; their by-product moves quickly through their immediate environment. Upon arrival, some oil remains in their holds. "But before they are completely torn apart," says Marcus Schubert, Burtynsky's art director, "men carry out the oil in buckets (on

their heads) and dump that sludge into the ground wells and barrels that you see in the picture." Still, the men in both images who occupy the middle ground of Burtynsky's composition are immersed in the remnants of First World junk, yet they give it a second life through their own.



SHIPBREAKING #11, CHITTAGONG, BANGLADESH—2000

As oil drums proliferate, so too does another product of oil: tires. A single tire is made from approximately two gallons of oil. The Filbin and Oxford Tire Piles, located outside Westley, California, consist of 7 million tires on 40 acres of land. In certain areas, the piles are "six stories deep with tires pancaked flat at the bottoms of ravines from the crush of tons of other tires," says the CalRecycle website. In 1997, the site was ordered to incinerate 4 million tires to generate electrical power. In 1998, a nearby site caught fire, spewing toxic flames and smoke that burned for over two years. In Burtynsky's 1999 photograph, he gives only a glimpse of the tragedy through a cascading, vertical cleft of earth and grass (possibly a firebreak) that shapes the contours to the mountain of tires on either side. From the oil fields of Alberta and Azerbaijan, to this strange rubber crop in central California, Burtynsky's extraordinary knack of capturing the stuff of

energy in its solid form makes us see the world painfully anew.

Burtynsky also employs a cinematic approach to many of his images (a non-literal "before and after" narrative) as in the widespread urban renewal in China that shapes the comparison between "Wan Zhou #2, Three Gorges Dam Project, Yangtze River," and "Urban Renewal #6, Apartment Complex, JiangjunAo, Hong Kong." Creating the Three Gorges Dam, states Burtynsky's website, "relocated approximately 1.13 million people, the largest peacetime evacuation in history. Agricultural lands and cultural/historic sites were submerged. Thirteen major cities, 140 towns and 1,300 villages, along with 1,600 factories and mines, and an unknown number of farms vanished beneath the reservoir's surface," states Burtynsky's website. Wan Zhou was one such village. Here, it becomes a gray, tumbledown heap, sloping toward the river. Dismantled brick by brick by the vil-



RECYCLING #2, CHITTAGONG, BANGLADESH—2001



WAN ZHOU # 2, THREE GORGES DAM PROJECT, YANGTZE RIVER—2002



URBAN RENEWAL # 6, APARTMENT COMPLEX, JIANGJUNAO, HONG KONG—2004

lagers themselves, each received money for materials that could be recycled. By comparison, JiangjunAo, Hong Kong, consists of building rather than dismantling. It is a series of new, colorful, apartment towers soaring vertically. Burtynsky doesn't serve us either view straight up. Our eyes, at Wan Zhou, are allowed to traverse the hill, as well as far into the distance, a landscape that will soon be submerged. JiangjunAo's countless cubicles speak to conformity, in a scale that dwarfs the pedestrians below, with no horizon line or way out. In each there is a single tree—one dead, the other green—that stands as a metaphor for the death of a former way of life giving way to the rapacious birth of another.

**T**hanks to the vision of a single, untiring photographer, breathtaking images of the scale and specificity of our consumption and dumping have become acutely real. Burtynsky's next series of images will address issues of water on the planet. No doubt they will inform us as no other medium can, through no other eyes than his.

*Burtynsky: Oil* opened at the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. ([www.corcoran.org](http://www.corcoran.org)) in October 2009 and will be touring internationally through 2012. A large full-color exhibition catalogue, published jointly by the Corcoran and Steidl, is available online and through fine art booksellers.

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