

Edward Burtynsky: An Uneasy Beauty – Photographs of Western Canada

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Presented by



Edward Burtynsky creates images reflecting today's world. Unlike the romantic landscapes of unspoiled nature captured by photographers a century earlier, he explores the monumental impacts we are making on our geography, in the pursuit of progress. Considered one of Canada's most important living photographers, Edward Burtynsky creates photographs that dramatically record the impact of industrial progress and human development.

Although Burtynsky has travelled around the world for his subjects – from mine tailings in Ontario, and tire dumps in California to the construction of the Three Gorges Dam in China – the works presented in this exhibition specifically addressed Western Canadian subjects: settlements, energy production, resource extraction, trade, and transportation. Many of the works were photographed in British Columbia's Interior and Lower Mainland. While inspiring feelings of both wonder and discomfort, his photographs speak of our place in Canada and the world.

These photographs show both the vast wilderness and impressive landscapes of western Canada, and the monumental scale of the resource industries that underlie the Canadian economy. Burtynsky has said, "In a world as fast moving and complex as ours, I want to make images that evoke a sense of wonder and, at best, make us ponder about the course of progress we have set for ourselves."¹



The images in the exhibition were drawn from six series: Alberta Oil Sands, Container Ports, Homesteads, Mines, Oil Fields and Railcuts, and represent over twenty years of work. Burtynsky's imagery explores the connection between industry and nature; combining the raw elements of mining, quarrying, manufacturing, shipping, oil production and recycling into eloquent, highly expressive visions that find beauty and humanity in the most unlikely of places.

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The attention Burtynsky pays to the framing of his compositions and formal elements such as light, colour, mass, and texture; the physical scale of his prints; and the extraordinary detail he achieves with his large-format cameras contribute to a powerful engagement with his images. Their technical accomplishment is such that Burtynsky shows us far more in one photograph than our eyes could possibly apprehend if we were physically at the site. The scale and hyper-reality put us into a state of wonder, while at the same time, leading us to consider the many issues raised by the subject of these works.

Burtynsky has written: “These images are meant as metaphors to the dilemma of our modern existence; they search for a dialogue between attraction and repulsion, seduction and fear. We are drawn by desire - a chance at good living, yet we are consciously or unconsciously aware that the world is suffering for our success. 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. For me, these images function as reflecting pools of our times.”²

Born in 1955 at St. Catherine, Ontario, Edward Burtynsky is a graduate of Ryerson University (Bachelor of Applied Arts in Photography) and Niagara College (Graphic Art). He links his early exposure to the sites and images of the General Motors plant in his hometown to the development of his photographic work.

1. Artist quoted for the exhibition Edward Burtynsky: In the Pursuit of Progress, Winnipeg Art Gallery, January 22 to April 13, 2008, see: http://www.wag.mb.ca/htmlfiles/EXHIBITIONS/CURRENT_/burtynsky.asp ; accessed January 23, 2009
2. Artist's Statement, www.edwardburtynsky.com; accessed January 23, 2009

For more information about the artist, please visit:

www.edwardburtynsky.com

You can view Burtynsky's TED lecture at:

http://www.ted.com/index.php/talks/edward_burtynsky_on_manufactured_landscapes.html

Acknowledgments:

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