

*Manufactured Landscapes: The Photographs of Edward
Burtynsky, National Gallery of Canada, 31 January—4 May 2003*

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Manufactured Landscapes: The Photographs of Edward Burtynsky

National Gallery of Canada

31 January–4 May 2003

The photograph – the colour photograph in particular – seems to have taken on gigantic proportions. Monumental images are a consequence of technological advances, but, more importantly, the shifting proportions are born from the work's relationship to its place of reception: the gallery. Scale provokes by forcing the viewer to experience with the entire body, not just with the eyes; it is an event – a spectacle. Large-format photographs command their own physical presence in addition to representing space, requiring the viewer to traverse their field within the gallery to fully explore individual elements. "Active viewing" makes connections between landscape photography and physically negotiating terrain to create the image; movement within the viewing space strengthens associations between photographs in proximity, reflecting the photographer's conscious desire to make ideological or aesthetic comparisons and connections between images. But does bigger equal better? The strange irony is that the closer in scale to the real landscape, the more the images seem like billboard advertisements or movie screens. Their surface, however expansive, remains flat.

Manufactured Landscapes: The Photographs of Edward Burtynsky, curated by Lori Pauli, is the first major retrospective dedicated to the photographer, featuring over sixty photographs dating from the mid-eighties to the present, thoughtfully arranged to highlight aspects of Burtynsky's visual interrogation. Burtynsky likens his expertly crafted and composed photographs to archaeology – the exploration of ruins. Continually working through photographic series, Burtynsky explores imprints left by industry and its by-products, whether in the form of rivers running ochre from oxidized iron in his *Tailings* photographs (1995–96), or mountains and valleys of rubber and metal in the *Oxford Tire Pile* images (1999). Burtynsky's work possesses an affinity with documentary photography but goes far beyond, as his compositions are almost painterly in their execution. Trained in black-and-white photography, he has applied its graphic rigour to his colour work, coupled with a keen understanding of the vantage point.

Much of the impact of Burtynsky's photographs is due to their size, but it is colour, captured through the lens, that acts as a mind-altering substance. The luscious, rich tones of his photographs lull the viewer into a state of placid reverie. His landscapes seem pulled out of dreams or science fiction – altogether impossible to conceive of as real places. Moreover, the feeling of dissociation is heightened by the fact that in his landscapes he frequently collapses the horizon or excludes it altogether. It can be a puzzle to figure out where the camera was placed, and to comprehend how far it is from the elements in the composition. Thus, the actual scale of the landscape and the size of the photograph work together to unsettle the viewer's sense of perspective, making the familiar an alien terrain for observation, and the unknown accessible for contemplation.

Burtynsky's photographs reveal sites of cultural contradiction through the repercussions and devastation of technological innovations, underscoring the fact that essential resources are frequently nonrenewable or obtained at great cost to the ecosystem. Walter Benjamin's critique

of photography was that it could transform a garbage heap into something beautiful; Burtynsky's work affirms this criticism by doing exactly this through arresting and strangely attractive images, using lustrous surfaces and hyper-real details to translate even the most disastrous events into something aesthetically appealing. Moreover, Burtynsky's landscapes exist outside of the distractions of their real counterparts – far away from the sounds and smells of industry. They are akin to travel photography, with its desire to bring the exotic up close for visual consumption and collection, while maintaining at a safe distance.

The main focus of Burtynsky's lens is the landscape, from the whole to explorations of its parts. His more intimate investigations are a number of close-up images of consumer waste and scrap metal, such as *Densified Oil Filters #1, Hamilton, Ontario* (1997), in which he creates a composition of repeated forms and reconstituted parts, forcing the eye to seek out new details and creating quiet order within chaotic visual noise. This optical pushing and pulling sensation works as an invitation to the viewer to delight in manifold perspectives offered through a liberated field of vision.

The composition of *Carrara Marble Quarries #20, Carrara, Italy* (1993) is somewhat traditional in comparison to Burtynsky's other images of the site, with its craggy mountain range rising up from the lush green valley into the clouds. The photograph serves as an establishing shot for the series, drawing the viewer into the world of the quarry, and is evocative of the work of nineteenth-century landscape photography, a visual debt that Burtynsky readily acknowledges. In the tradition of the early photographic pioneers, he uses a large-format viewfinder camera, offering exquisite detail that cannot be appreciated by the naked eye. In sharp contrast to the desire to present the landscape as pristine, raw, and unspoiled by human contact, the presence of humanity in these photographs is undeniable. Burtynsky collapses the separations between landscape and urban scenes in his quarry photographs, attesting to the fact that the stone, which is the raw material for buildings and towers, comes out of the earth, calling into question the costs of innovation and design.

In 2000, Burtynsky travelled to Bangladesh, producing a series of photographs on the dismantling and salvage operations of industrial sea vessels – a practice commonly known as "shipbreaking." Environmentally hazardous and physically dangerous, this work is habitually carried out in Third World countries by armies of workers. Actual people figure rarely in Burtynsky's landscape photographs, but the *Shipbreaking* series is densely populated, as though he felt it essential to capture some of the individuals charged with this arduous task. *Shipbreaking #8, Chittagong, Bangladesh* (2000), shows a long line of men snaking across the middle of the composition, bound together by the task of dragging a piece of ship to shore with a cable. The photographs in this series attest to an environmental wasteland, with remains strewn across the landscape like giant rusted carcasses. In a manner akin to the quarry photographs, the *Shipbreaking* series acts as evidence of the realities of industry.

The sheer seductive power of Burtynsky's images is undeniable, yet something strange transpires as a result of such elegance tinged with the weight of its costs. Is Burtynsky really a passive observer, as his claims to archaeological distance suggest? By acknowledging the forces of technology while refusing to overtly pass judgment on their repercussions, he leaves the door open to further questioning. Paradoxically, the marriage of violence, evidenced repeatedly through almost his views of ecological devastation, and aestheticization – the inevitable by-product of rich compositions in all of their gorgeously rendered coloured splendour – anaesthetizes the viewer from delving too far beyond emotional responses. Seduction takes over.

Johanna Mizgala



*Shipbreaking #27,
with Cutter, Chittagong,
Bangladesh*
Dye coupler print
102.0 x 127.0 cm
2001
Collection of the artist /
Collection de l'artiste