

**"The Toxic Sublime" (Edward Burtynsky), *Art in America*, February, 2006, pp. 188-123.**

*The empire of man over things depends wholly on the arts and sciences.  
For we cannot command nature except by obeying her.*

—Sir Francis Bacon, *Novum Organum*, 1623

That we are the inhabitants of a world overcome by the objects we've wrought is crushingly self-evident in Edward Burtynsky's large-scale photographs of vast, unnatural terrains created by the machines, excavations and accumulated detritus of modern civilization. "Manufactured



Landscapes," the artist's currently traveling retrospective, is an extensive group of photographs of astonishing breadth and narrow concentration, taken as Burtynsky traveled from his native Canada to points in the U.S., Europe, India, Bangladesh and China to document examples of the extreme alterations in nature and humankind engendered by our relentless consumerism.

These are places that most of us, as tourists, would probably never see and can hardly begin to fathom. Among them are beaches dedicated to salvage, where mammoth rusting hulls of ships are descended upon daily by armies of Bangladeshi men, even boys, who hack away at them with rudimentary tools; 40 million discarded tires piled together near Westley, Calif.; rivers and rivulets glowing red with the oxidized iron runoff from nickel production; oil fields and refineries, copper and coal mines, and the severely sheared walls of yawning marble and granite quarries. In China, which Burtynsky has surveyed in depth, he began with a photographic elegy for the cities, villages and farmland devastated by preparation for the immense flooding of the Yangtze River that will result when the Three Gorges Dam, the world's largest hydroelectric engineering complex to date, is completed. Later he turned his attention to factories both functioning and abandoned; heaps of recycled telephone dials, aluminum cans and plastic toy parts; aerial shots of urban renewal in a supremely congested Shanghai and seemingly limitless symmetrical arrays of Chinese workers in color-coded garb.

What's even more unexpected than the alien locales Burtynsky portrays is that

these depictions of ravagement emanate an overwhelming beauty, for despite his choice of subject matter these photographs are, before anything else, works of art. Far from using the flattened, deadpan approach cultivated by many contemporary photographers, Burtynsky, with a painter's eye for color and a sculptor's eye for form, displays an uncool preoccupation with composition and light. This is gritty subject matter rendered in a romantic way, and it is this incongruity that makes these pictures so compelling. If Burtynsky portrayed the degradation at these sites as unmitigated, we'd feel assaulted and maybe turn away; it would be just too much to absorb at once. Instead, the deft seduction of his art keeps us transfixed. While always aware of the devastated nature of what we're viewing, we keep on looking because there's always some visual pleasure to engage us, whether in the lyrical graphic and sculptural elements we take in from far away, or in the minute, sharp-focused details that are revealed up close.

At first glance, *Shipbreaking #8, Chittagong, Bangkok* (2000), one of the few photographs that emphasize a traditional landscape horizon line, appears to depict the skyline of a water-edged city made ruddy by the warm rays of early morning sunlight. On closer inspection, the massive odd-shaped sculptural elements in this play of light and shadow suggest the ruins of an ancient metropolis unknown to Westerners. The spectacle dwarfs a row of figures, illuminated via chiaroscuro and evenly spaced across the mid-line of the image as if choreographed, toting a thick rope that begins and ends outside the picture frame. In the foreground the sky is reflected in pools of water on a beach where every pebble is distinguishable. There is nothing in this treatment to intimate that these are poorly paid laborers engaged in the dangerous occupation of breaking up ocean-going ships for salvage. While Burtynsky's shipyard photographs have the look of old-master paintings, *Oil Refineries #27, Oakville, Ontario* (1999) is equally appealing in a Sheeler-esque way: a seemingly endless grid-upon-grid of silvery metal pipes, punctuated by color only in the smallest details, such as a blue valve wheel or a wrap of yellow "Caution" tape in the distance.

One could have a field day in this exhibition, playing the art historian's game of "name that reference." Sure, that veined white marble quarry wall is a dead-ringer for a Diebenkorn, the detail of a Chinese wire yard looks just like a Pollock, that pile of bashed-up oil cans suggests so many Chamberlains, and the monumental rusted-steel remains of ships rising out of the sand could be Serras or di Suveros. However, such references do little more than tell us that Burtynsky has looked at a lot of art and learned from it. It's more revealing to consider Burtynsky's work in relation to the oversize sweeping panoramas of Turner, that cultivator of atmosphere, who, in *The Fighting Temeraire* (1838), used as his subject the poignant image of a once-proud ship being tugged away to be dismantled. As Turner documented the birth of the Industrial Revolution, Burtynsky appears to be recording its demise. When, in *Rain, Steam and Speed* (1844), Turner painted a

locomotive hurtling straight at us, it is as if he was aware that it was a harbinger of monumental change to come. And it's unlikely that he chose to paint *Slavers Throwing Overboard the Dead and Dying: Typhoon Coming On* (1840) because it was just another maritime scenario. There's a palpable humanism at work in Turner, as in Burtynsky, although (or perhaps because) both artists depict people as all but lost in the immensity of their environment, while those who actually command the action are never evident.

Burtynsky's attachment to the land and the people who work on it is deeply bound up with how and where he was raised. He was born in 1955 in the city of Saint Catharines, on Lake Ontario in Canada, which he describes as "a country with a small population and a vast hinterland." That country's endless landscape gave him the sense that "we are just a momentary presence inhabiting this place." His father, an immigrant from the Ukraine, worked ("like everyone else," Burtynsky says) on the production line at General Motors. His father was also interested in photography, at one point buying an entire darkroom full of equipment from a local widow and asking his son, who was better versed in English, to read the manuals and figure out how to use it. From night courses in photography Burtynsky took later while working as a printer (he also worked on the assembly lines and tried gold mining), he went to the Ryerson Polytechnical Institute in Toronto, where one of his teachers gave him the assignment that has informed his life ever since: "Go out and make a set of images that speak to the idea of the evidence of man."

Most of Burtynsky's work is done before he snaps the shutter. In advance of each trip, he carries out extensive research, reading everything from novels set in the area to government reports. "For six months before going to the shipyards," he says, "I was thinking about how to approach it, trying to find a time of year when the atmospheric conditions would be good, where it wouldn't be pouring rain or 50 degrees Celsius. . . . I arranged for a fellow to hire a boat and run along the whole shore and photograph every ship that was being dismantled. I asked him to make me a map and draw a line where the sun comes up and goes down, so I would know where the ships were and how the sun was going to play on them. We also charted out the tides." Once at the site, Burtynsky clearly takes a lot of time to frame it in the large-format viewfinder camera he totes with him, and it is through this activity of composition that he effects the alchemical conversion of a toxic and often dangerous vista into one of sublimity. Back in the darkroom he does not significantly alter the outcome in any way. "What you see," he says, "is what there was." Burtynsky insists he's not "celebrating or condemning" anything. However, his choice of subject matter and its revelatory power lead to obvious conclusions, and, after seeing this work, it's nearly impossible to view one's Subaru, Radio Shock alarm clock or beloved iPod as anything but future landfill.

*"Manufactured Landscapes: The Photographs of Edward Burtynsky" opened at the Cable Factory, Helsinki [Sept. 29-Oct. 15, 2003], and traveled to the Art Gallery of*

*Ontario, Toronto [Jan. 24-Apr. 4, 2004]; the Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal [Oct 8, 2004-Jan. 9, 2005]; the Museum of Photographic Arts, San Diego [Mar. 20-June 5, 2005]; the Cantor Center for Visual Art, Stanford [June 29-Sept. 18, 2005]; and the Brooklyn Museum [Oct. 7, 2005-Jan. 15, 2006]. "Edward Burtynsky: China" appeared at the Robert Koch Gallery, San Francisco [Sept. 15-Oct. 29, 2005], and the Charles Cowles Gallery, New York [Oct. 6-Nov. 5, 2005]. "Edward Burtynsky: The China Series" debuted at the Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art, Winston-Salem, N.C. [Oct. 22, 2005-Jan. 8, 2006], and will travel to the Boca Raton Museum of Art [Apr. 12-June 18, 2006]; the Presentation House Gallery, Vancouver [Sept. 16-Nov. 5, 2006]; the Tufts University Art Gallery, Medford, Mass. [Jan. 15-Mar. 31, 2007]; the Samek Art Gallery at Bucknell University, Lewisburg, Pa. [Aug. 17-Oct. 7, 2007]; and the Jordan Schnitzer Museum of Art at the University of Oregon, Eugene [Jan. 15-Apr. 30, 2008].*

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