



Edward Burtynsky: THE INDUSTRIAL SUBLIME

Gordon Contemporary Artists Project Gallery

May 25–September 3, 2012



Shameless fascination with the working poor dismantling rusty oil-tankers on the Chittagong beach of Bangladesh; reluctant guilt about the mountains of technological refuse left behind by capitalist consumerism; gratification derived from the formalist grids of marble quarries; shock and awe about the poisonous beauty of industrial tailings, the abstract patterning of open-pit mines, or the merciless anonymity of a mega-metropolis like Shanghai—Edward Burtynsky’s stunning photographs evoke contradictory emotions, pose endless questions (what will happen to these mounds of tires, oil-filters, and scrap metal, to these tidy fields of disused airplanes?), and provide merely tentative answers (“the only thing we can do tomorrow that is different from today is manage what we are doing in a better way”).¹

The “industrial sublime,” “the toxic sublime,” the “beauty in the beast,” “paradoxical

beauty,” “awesome ambiguity,” landscapes that are “blighted and beautiful”—these are some of the dichotomous epithets chosen to describe Burtynsky’s work. They disclose the crux of Burtynsky’s photographic practice: the need to balance form and content. “In photography, if you go too far one way, it becomes reportage, too far the other way it just becomes a formalist exercise.”² He uses rigorous composition and the exquisite exactitude possible with a large-format view camera to lure the viewer into the beauty of the landscapes, to examine more closely the uneasy subject of human incursions: mining, drilling, quarrying, industrial waste, tailings, reclamation, over-production, and over-population.

This perpetual push and pull is never resolved and purposefully left hanging in a precarious (im)balance. The artist shows us industrial life cycles from development to deconstruction, from environmental exploitation

to environmental devastation, in a manner that is neither moralizing nor neutral. There are no instant epiphanies, no calls to join Greenpeace, no appeals to return to a preindustrial utopia without mechanical and electronic gadgetry. We are left with the slow and ultimately trenchant recognition that we are all complicit in the negligent stewardship of our natural resources, landscapes, and urban environments—whether we are inhabiting the planet in Shanghai, China, or Breezewood, USA.

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1. Burtynsky, Edward. “The Essential Element: An Interview with Edward Burtynsky.” By Michael Torosian in *Manufactured Landscapes: The Photographs of Edward Burtynsky*, ed. Lori Pauli, Kenneth Baker, Michael Torosian, and Mark Haworth-Booth (Ottawa and New Haven: National Gallery of Canada and Yale University Press, 2003), 46-56, p. 50.
2. Ibid.

For Angelika Pagel’s complete essay, please see the exhibition catalogue *Edward Burtynsky: The Industrial Sublime* in the Frist Center Gift Shop.

This exhibition is organized by the Department of Visual Arts, Weber State University, Ogden, Utah; the University of Wyoming Art Museum, Laramie, Wyoming; and the Frist Center for the Visual Arts.

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Above: Edward Burtynsky. *Nanpu Bridge Interchange, Shanghai, China*, 2004. Photograph, 39 x 49 in. Photo © Edward Burtynsky, courtesy Nicholas Metivier, Toronto / Howard Greenberg & Bryce Wolkowitz, New York Cover: Edward Burtynsky. *Shipbreaking # 13, Chittagong, Bangladesh*, 2000. Photograph, 39 x 49 in. Photo © Edward Burtynsky, courtesy Nicholas Metivier, Toronto / Howard Greenberg & Bryce Wolkowitz, New York