In the exhibition catalog, Hood co-curator Pieter Broucke writes, "(He) subtly combines his instinctive appreciation for the powerful aspects of the quarries with his growing subjective awareness of the devastation that large-scale industrial quarrying has wrought on the landscape."

To that end, many of Burtnynsky's Vermont images show the detritus of abandoned equipment like derricks, sheds, stairs, cables, tanks, discarded blocks and the like.

"Litter becomes increasingly prominent in the photographs," Broucke writes. "(His) initial impression of the monumental voids as formal presences inserted within the landscape gradually includes recognition of the quarries as ecological wounds inflicted upon the landscape."

Some of Burtnynsky's work is exploitative and controversial - not as much with Vermont's quarries. Those had a different kind of appeal for him.

"I thought of our cities, which are made from stone that is kept intact," he said in a published interview that appears in the catalog. "The type of excavation that resulted from dimensional stone seemed to indicate that there had to be a more orderly removal of the materials than at an ore mine.

"The idea I had was that I might be able to find the reverse of a skyscraper somewhere, an inverted pyramid where the blocks had been removed."

But while in Vermont, the photographer also stumbled upon a very human side to the massive quarrying process here.

While shooting images in Barre nearly 20 years ago, Burtnynsky learned from a local quarry owner of the story of stoneworkers who emigrated here primarily from the town of Carrara in Italy. Many of those stoneworkers "brought along with them a love for opera, political activism, and strong values that made their assimilation into American society relatively easy," wrote Nils Nadeau, communications and publications manager at the Hood.

As a result of that rich heritage and lineage, Burtnynsky traveled to Carrara to capture the work that had been done there in those ancient quarries.

That was his first foray to "the global exploration of nature and industry for which he is renowned today," Nadeau wrote.
Burtynsky's eyes had been opened; his art became broader.

While the Vermont works tell one story, Burtynsky was not afraid to tell unflattering stories of mankind's harshest effects on the planet.

In an interview published this week in The Atlantic, the photographer describes his thoughts on his new controversial project, "Oil," which tells "the story of oil, from its origins, extraction, and processing in the tar sands of Alberta or the first offshore platforms in Azerbaijan, through the spaghetti junctions and motorcycle rallies that represent oil's spatial, infrastructural, and cultural footprint, all the way to oil's afterlife in mountains of compacted barrels and broken tankers in the Bay of Bengal."

When pressed by interviewers about walking those lines between glorifying industry, and the struggles of politics and environmentalism, he replied, "I'd say, actually, that I've been careful not to frame the work in an activist or political kind of way. That would be too restrictive in terms of how the work can be used in society and how it can be interpreted. I see the work as being a bit like a Rorschach test. If you see an oil field and you see industrial heroism, then perhaps you're some kind of entrepreneur in the oil business and you're thinking, 'That's great! That's money being made there!' But, if you're somebody from Greenpeace or whatever, you're going to see it very differently. Humans can really reveal themselves through what they choose to see as the most important or meaningful detail in an image."

In the same interview, he was able to relate a similar sentiment back to his artistic origins in Barre.

"After spending about six years and two shows on the Rock of Ages quarries in Vermont, I wanted to do a trade with them: a print for some granite slabs to make countertops in my country house up North. I met with them and I brought 10 of my favorite pictures of their quarries. Most of them were of abandoned sections of the quarries. So I rolled them all out - and they were big, 40-by-50-inch prints - and the whole board was there. And they were totally silent.

"After this uncomfortable, pregnant pause, I said, 'So ... what do you guys think?' Someone - I think it was the director of the quarry - finally said, 'Why would anybody want one of these?'"

Burtynsky went on: "I'd never really had it put to me in that way! I said something like, 'Well, because they're interesting pictures and they talk about our taking of a resource from the land. It's about that accumulated taking - the residual evidence of that taking - and then nature bouncing back into that void. You can see it struggling back into that space."

The trade was made and the artist had been able to convey why the telling of the quarry's story was so important to him.

For the Hood, having the exhibit up less than an hour's drive from the sources of the images brings art, history and education close to home.

The museum is offering workshops and classes based on Burtynsky's work well into August.

For Higby and others who focus on Barre's cultural gifts, including the quarrying, the industry that has been part of central Vermont for generations is a must-have for the state's future. Rock of Ages, the largest of the quarries still active in Vermont, has a seat on the newly formed Barre Cultural Alliance, which aims to raise public awareness about the rich artistic and historical gifts.

In fact, Burtynsky was there, too, even though he was actually on the other side of the planet, shooting.

At the committee's most recent meeting at SPA, the Hood catalog of Burtynsky's work was being circulated.

Everyone there wanted to see how Vermont had played out on the global stage, again.

*Steven Pappas is the editor of The Times Argus.*