My flight from Toronto to Los Angeles was over Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, Utah and Nevada, banking down over California’s Death Valley to the Mojave Desert, the sandy desolation of San Bernardino Mountains and the dry, timberless basins of the coastal hills and canyons. The politics of the western United States has, from the great surveys of the 19th century to the desperate bickering of the 21st, always been about trade, and from 30,000 feet about all one can see is endless, dotted brown, until one finally confronts the horizontals and sparkling blue Pacific. I’m headed west to observe documentary filmmaker Jennifer Brea and photographer Edward Burtynsky shoot the U.S. Open of Surfing in Huntington Beach, California, as part of their first formal collaboration, Watermark.

Walking along the beach in the cool, briny afternoon, Pacific light is mid-afternoon the sun will be blazing high in the sky, the temperatures approaching 90, the white sand blazing in our way to the Huntington Beach Pier, Burtynsky remarks, “This is the kind of light Elite—open and unabashed. People assume that photographers prefer bright light and well-defined shadows, but prefer clear light, because then you can capture a lot of detail. I like situations like now, where these basically aren’t any shadows.”

Burtynsky isn’t exact. Known for spontaneous, real-time street photography, his images of Vermont quarries and the shipyards of China, of expanding deserts and blighted landscapes, are all their implicit political resonance, operate on the register of the sublime. Burtynsky is a formulator who encounters in matters of political and most significant, often from the interior perspective of a helicopter he manages to make environmental devastation

EDWARD BURTYNSKY
EMBARKS ON A
NEW FILM PARTNERSHIP

BY DANIEL BAIRD
California. Watermark will not be alien to the world and in the context of global warming, of which there is many, it will be a film about what water means to us.

“The day after Buttersky and I stroll out onto the Huntington Beach Pier, the first time we find ourselves in a vast stretch sponsored by Surf TV to watch blood, body count staff. The beach seems with the young and the beautiful, the boys sweating and in tight swim trunks, the girls in bikinis that easily conceal their genitals, everyone tanned and hairless and tasteful and with thighs and arms that suggest hours every day in the gym.

Buttersky had not originally intended to participate in the shoot; she thought he would do too much of the male collaborator, hang out with the hot young surfer girls for a few days. Nonetheless, after a few minutes of banter, she removes her cover-up and about town.

Buttersky looks back in a beach chair and provides directions to her steady, well-made, calm voice, while the

I tried to see complexity, I think this comes from my philosophical background. I believe one can express complexity and certain methodological

When I was in university, I ran away from home to spout a year in Morocco, she recalls. "I went to visit Paul Bowles in Tangier and ended up getting to know him. When, years later, I decided I wanted to make a documentary about him, I wrote him a letter, and he, incredibly, agreed to let me interview him at his home. The result was Let It Come Down." She continues. "It’s easy to lap into a kind of National Geographic type aesthetic, especially with the kind of material we had in Let It Come Down, so we decided to filter the entire film through the lens of his prose. Among the remarkable achievements of Let It Come Down are the intense montages delivered by the film’s elated Bowles, shot with the camera focused tightly on his conversational face as he reflects back on his childhood, his years as a composer in New York, and the early days in Tangier. But Buttersky’s approach is everything but starchy. Bowles is portrayed as an irritable egotist who thrives on the mad and sexual licence of his independence Tangier’s, someone whose temperament is sullen and analytical to the point of decadence, and at the same time as someone who remained devoted to the end to his brilliant and troubled wife, Jane. The Hidden 2 Girls is Buttersky’s most intimate film, and the only one in which the scenes as the narrator—indeed, it is her only film that has a narrator. The film is, borrowing a phrase from the poet laureate, behind the curtain a quest for deciphering the father’s actions in his native India. The trip’s begun from a sprawling, chaotic Mumbai to the banks of the Ganges to the Himalayas, from temple riots to hawking rides on narrow mountain roads to day’s driving mist, and the film is itself a visual tour of intimate family scenes shot in grainy video to spectacular 16-mms extreme shots of storms and scarring, close-up interviews. The film’s captivating and most powerful scene, in which Buttersky and her sister蟲 whose father’s ashes she carried to a fast-moving Himalayan river, is shot from a distance with the sound on, and its effect is at once raw, private and dignified.

Buttersky continued her exploration of the nature of representation in a more explicit form in The True Meaning of Pictures: Shelly Lee’s Movies (Appliqués, 2002). The film centres on Adam’s commercial photographs of family life deep in Appalachia’s hollows. Buttersky founds Adam’s up the displaced and where old-timers reminisce about their childhoods and play traditional songs, the film juxtaposes a hand-held and close-up service where make hurdles’ sometime looks into the over congested bodies as they

antioxidingly beautiful and evocative. It can seem as though industry had

Buttersky’s eyes are open at mind, however, always restless and "hearing" the

Several things water came to earth on a figure come. Not eventually the

The Earth should not be called the Earth! it should be called “Water.” Buttersky

Buttersky has a relationship and discerning inquisitiveness, and the science of water is his

Bachrach, Buttersky and Bachrach’s husband, cinematographer and producer Nick de Pencier, have travelled to many corners of the globe, from China to Mexico to California and northern British Columbia, shooting Watermark. Water is a complex, multifaceted, global issue, an issue at the

 Buttersky realized that she wanted to pursue a career outside academia that would have “a different kind of relevance.” After completing a short film on women and personal identity, Looking Back to the Block of the Laid (1995), she went on to make six increasingly acclaimed documentary features for Let It Come Down: The Life and Times of Paul Bowles (2008), The True Meaning of Pictures: Shelly Lee’s Movies (Appliqués, 2002), Manhandled Landscapes (2006), Act of God (1999), and, most recently, Populaires (2012). While much contemporary documentary filmmaking is

potentially—Michael Moore’s Fahrenheit 9/11 (2004) and Davis Guggenheim’s An Inconvenient Truth (2006)—making a less ambitious film—Buttersky’s work is decidedly different. “I’m not just a political kind of person,” she says.

In which the scenes as the narrator—indeed, it is her only film that has a narrative. The film is, borrowing a phrase from the poet laureate, behind the curtain a quest for deciphering the father’s actions in his native India. The trip’s begun from a sprawling, chaotic Mumbai to the banks of the Ganges to the Himalayas, from temple riots to hawking rides on narrow mountain roads to day’s driving mist, and the film is itself a visual tour of intimate family scenes shot in grainy video to spectacle 16-mms extreme shots of storms and scaring, close-up interviews. The film’s captivating and most powerful scene, in which Buttersky and her sister虫 whose father’s ashes she carried to a fast-moving Himalayan river, is shot from a distance with the sound on, and its effect is at once raw, private and dignified.

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chant the mistakes of their kind. This footage is interspersed with interviews with critics, sociologists, and other photographers, who discuss whether Adam’s images are respectful or ultimately exploit the difficult lives of incredibly poor, underserved people with little conception of how they will be perceived by audiences in places like New York and Toronto.

"This is the only film we’ve made that we actually screened first for the subjects,” Batchelor says. "In the film, you make the arc from compassion to empathy. I felt like the same sort of disapproval of these people can be bridged, and that’s what we tried to do with the film. We can live in the space of that question. I think reality is too complex for real answers.

What I do is meditate on the question,” de Pencier adds, wining, "There were people those who looked like they would have been happy to shoot us.

BACHHALL’S FIRST THREE features are all beautifully made and intellectually nuanced, but to a significant extent the traditional conventions of documentary film, in which content supersedes formal approaches, are scandalously absent. Yet real breakthroughs come with her landmark 2006 film on the work of Butrynky, Manifattura Fotografie. Shot by innovative Canadian documentary filmmaker Peter Metzler, director of Gambling, Goals and 540 (2002) and, most recently, The End of Time (2012), Manifattura Fotografie features a gorgeous opening sequence in which workers gather in an open square in China. The camera slowly dollies through a massive factory, the colours bright and hallucinatory, making it clear that this is a film driven by theme, and that the weight of it will be incredibly visual.

'Manifattura Fotografie' is a different kind of film than The True Meaning of Patience,” remarks de Pencier, who was one of the film’s producers. “We didn’t try to do a biography of Ed—it’s an experimental film, and we put all of our energy into creating experiences that are important to us.” It’s about thinking about landscapes,” Batchelor adds. "I wasn’t going to shoot scenes of Ed in the darkness—I wanted to intelligently translate the world of film photography into the world of film.” The moral complexity Batchelor embarked on her earlier film is at once embodied in the images of Manifattura Fotografie and handed over to the viewer: Butrynky’s images of mammoth deconstruction, the ruin of what some call the "Anthropocene," are both sublimely beautiful and harrowing, and they are often so morally abstract that it is difficult for the viewer to grasp their implications.

Manifattura Fotografie ultimately suffers because of Butrynky’s distinctive visual sensibility, as interpreted by Batchelor and Metzler, but the aesthetic problem of holding together a schematic, reflexive film becomes more difficult to solve in Batchelor’s subsequent two movies—the broad, philosophical Art of God and Pashock, about Margaret Atwood’s 2006 Money lecture and book, Payback: Debt and the Shadow Side of Wealth.

Art of God ruminates on chance and fate, and in particular on those whose lives have been either ended or transformed by fleeting entities, the ultimate, random expressions of the physical world’s terrifying power.

“We took a scientific question and put it in a metaphysical perspective,” Batchelor points out. Considering through stories of people struck by lightning while standing in the woods, views of a hospital ward in Mexico
“How do you connect the distressed landscapes to the cause of the distressed landscapes?”

when pilgrims were caught in a sudden storm, and reflections on the electrical nature of the brain, *Art of God* contains some of de Pencier’s most spectacular cinematography—there are spooky scenes of electrical storms Traneigh ever George’s lay the cloud that blurs and deep people, the tolls of lightning phosphorescent white. And while Paul Auster’s
dramatic reading of an autobiographical story about getting lost on a nemesis-scaping hide and a serious thunderstorm—in which one of his
texels is killed by a bolt of lightning—is one of the film’s highlights, *Art of God* struggles to transcend its diversity. One leaves it wanting some
larger, illuminating statement about fate and chance: one almost wants a bigger narrative, of the kind that dominates Werner Herzog’s documen-
taries. Butchwal is of course aware of this problem. “I don’t narrate my films,” she said, hemstitching, “because, unlike Werner Herzog, we are really
care what I personally have to say.”

*IN MANUFACTURED LANDSCAPES,* *Ed* was not as involved as he is with *Watermark,* Butchwal said. “But he was intrigued, and *Ed* is one of those people who are curious about everything, and for that reason being around him is liberating. The project really started when we were showing the oil spill with him in the Gulf of Mexico—*Ed* was already in the second year of a project on seals, and that moment our interests dovetailed.”

“*Ed,* it’s always been about the visual,” de Pencier adds, “which is of course a joy to me. It starts with the visual, but then the real
owns to all the logistics of his shoots is very advanced.” “We have complement-
ary skills,” Butchwal chimes in. “*Ed* can wait all day for the perfect view and the perfect light, white black and it can wait all day in a race paddie
waiting to meet the right people and end up going home with them to have dinner and talk.”

One meeting in Butchwal’s elegant Toronto studio last November, de Pencier was setting up a camera on a long white table, on which Marcus Schabert, Butchwal’s director of media, publications and exhibits, was arranging prints that might end up in the book—and exhibitions—that will be the culmination of the still photograph part of Butchwal’s water project. (The book will be launched in September.) Close to all his gigantic, eerie and awe-inspiring, the images show distric landscapes from Spain to southern California to the Sea of Cortez in Mexico. “I’m not
going to overstate what it has to be done, because then it will seem fake,”

Butchwal firmly insisted. “But you have to go through each chapter of the book, starting with distric landscapes, and say it out.”

“And now you have to forget what Jennifer just said, and forget me,”
de Pencier said, already set up behind the camera. While de Pencier methodically played over the prints on the table, Butchwal and Schabert
discussed the images’ accessible details: the splintered expanses of desert, pools of bright and pure water on a sunny farm, the spine-stretching, growing crystal formations. “These sometimes look like images of the cosmos,”

Butchwal remarked. “These are 1,000 miles of desert that weren’t that long, it’s not so clear cut, they are a distric landscapes.” While Schabert and Butchwal discussed over every detail in the images (they are both ardent photography fans), Butchwal tried to bring everyone back to the central issue: “How do you connect the distressed landscapes to the cause of the distressed landscapes?”

*Butchwal’s* book will be a wide-ranging look at water and our relation-
ship to it, and it needs to go up something more than the sum of its parts. And while film is a linear, time-driven medium that builds its conclusion books and exhibitions of still photographs invite jumping forward and backward at any time, it seems the same will have to be true of *Watermark.*

Buchwal works closely with her longtime editor, Roland Schlimmer, as her films evolve. As of last winter, the scripting was nearly complete—the team was scheduled to go to Allahabad, India, to film the Ganga Kumbh Mela festival, and was entertaining the idea of going to a residential lake in Rajkot. “I don’t want to involve human actors,” de Pencier insisted he would only admit that Russian scientists said it would be safe—but the footage, which was stunning, remained startlingly authentic. “A lot of the work happens as we go along—we don’t start out with a script.”

Butchwal said. “I was on my own long walk last night and it suddenly came to me that we should incorporate the sequence on the Colombo River Delta in a kind of penultimate, and then doing something else—I like seeing rules and then breaking them.” Many of the images in *Watermark* came, Butchwal explains, like the right shots of the construction site of the staggering Xihoumen Dam on the Yangze River in China (it will hold six times the capacity of the Hoover Dam), where workers scramble up 300-metre bamboo ladders, the terrains surreal. There are also more personal, melancholic scenes, like that of an old naked woman in the blazed Colombo River Delta, who remembers the time, some 40 years earlier, when there was an thriving fishing industry.

When de Pencier bowl how she is going to hold all this together, as a single film, she goes uncharacteristically silent. The word de Pencier immediately quips: “That’s why it’s a feature-length question.”

While Pachauri bombarded on a philosophical concept that traditionally fur-
damental to human relationships, Watermark address an issue in the

That said, on the last day of the US Open of Surfing in Huntington Beach, the waves were small and flat. I attended a polette breakfast at the Hyatt Regency, where brekkie-bitten bloody Marys watch the Beach loon’s “twitch here today and it’s gone tomorrow...” The amenities
crisis are not so easy, each crime, each crime, changing, but it’s unclear whether anyone is convinced. And then, suddenly, a chopper containing Butchwal and Pachauri swoops in out of nowhere and lands, somewhat
crashingly, over the course. It’s easy enough to imagine the crew contemplating Australian champion Julian Wilson carving up a foaming break yet feet from the pier’s concrete pilons, and the endless expanse of water whose water’s forewedge her clings.