reFramed: In conversation with Edward Burtynsky - Framework - Photos and Video - Visual Storytelling from the Los Angeles Times

Edward Burtynsky is known as one of Canada's most respected photographers. His remarkable photographic depictions of global industrial landscapes are included in the collections of over fifty major museums around the world, including the National Gallery of Canada, the Museum of Modern Art and the Guggenheim Museum in New York, the Reina Sofia Museum, Madrid, and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art in California.

Born in 1955 of Ukrainian heritage in S. Catharines, Ontario, Burtynsky is a graduate of Ryerson University (Bachelor of Applied Arts in Photography) and studied Graphic Art at Niagara College in Welland. He lists his early exposure to the sites and images of the General Motors plant in his hometown as the development of his photographic work. His imagery explores the intimate link between industry and nature, combining the raw elements of mining, quarrying, manufacturing, shipping, oil production and recycling into exquisite, highly expressive visions that find beauty and humanity in the most unlikely of places. In 2008, Burtynsky also founded Toronto Image Works, a darkroom rental facility, custom photo laboratory, digital imaging and new media computer-training centre serving to all levels of Toronto's art community. Mr. Burtynsky also sits on the board of directors for Toronto's International Photography Festival, CONTACT and The Aga Khan Museum.

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Q: Why did water inspire you?
A: After working on the theme of oil for 14 years I felt that I was conceptually and visually in a place where I could approach water and find images that would speak to our use of it.

Q: What did you learn from this project? Why should we care?
A: While I was in Australia in 2009 I was taken by surprise at the situation Australia was undergoing with a 60-year drought. I recognized at that moment that water was even more important than oil because without water life cannot exist. I wanted to make a series of images that spoke to our use and abuse of this critical resource. At the time I had no idea how I would tackle such a vast subject.

In 2008 I began my research in earnest. In 2010 I joined forces with Jennifer Bichaud to co-direct a film on the same theme: Watermark is the result of that collaboration. It is my hope that this work will contribute to the raising of our collective consciousness for all things physical and spiritual that water provides us with.

WATERMARK: the making of...

Q: Can you sell me on the logistical challenges of this global water project covering 50 countries over a 4-year period? How did you manage this complex endeavor? How did you select which stories you wanted to tell?
A: There is no formula that I need to arrive at the locations I shot. There were ideas that were very compelling from a human interest perspective but had no visuals, such as desalination plants. Equally there were some amazing visual moments that I could have explored yet I felt didn't contribute enough to a story, such as Niagara Falls. I always try to find an equal balance between form and content. As always I look for larger-than-life expressions of the collective human will to adapt like India and the Bahamas, India, China and the Sudan. One lesson for me is that when visiting sites I quickly understand that I need to get high up above the subject to comprehend just how it relates to landscape. A farm shot from the road or a lift just doesn't convey the full scale of our human use of water. Shooting from a helicopter, small plane or remote helicopter became my primary shooting platform. Using a 60-megapixel Hasselblad I was able to create highly detailed images of the systems we have built in the landscape to irrigate farms and create cities in the desert. In 2010 the project grew by bringing in Jennifer Bichaud as co-director and Nick de Pencier as the director of cinema (cinema) photography to create an immersive documentary film of the subject matter I had found most compelling while engaged in the stills work.

Q: Why did you categorize the images into distress, control, agriculture, aquaculture, watercraft, and source?
A: I always like to know what it is I am painting my camera at and how it fits into a larger scheme of a project such as Water. These labels helped to organize my ideas and lessons much.

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Q: Your Water project consists of three parts: a book, a traveling exhibition, and a film entitled Watermark. How did you collaborate with award-winning filmmaker Jennifer Richowel on this feature-length documentary? What do you hope to achieve through this film?
A: We enjoy working together and this subject seemed like something we could both embrace. I would like to add that Nick de Pencier is equally important in this collaboration as he did most of the cinematography and location sound work. In this project Jennifer and I found where our strengths were and honed in on them. In general I accomplished a good amount of the subject and theme selection earlier while scouting the Water stills project, and then extended those with the sweeping overviews. By then Jennifer focused more on the characters and surroundings that gave context to the ideas and allowed the scenes we were shooting.

The film brings a deeper emotional connection to the subject of water. Many people who have experienced the loss of water, people who make a pilgrimage to it, people in China building the largest complex double-arch dam in the world are brought to life in a way that stills can’t. I suspect film production will now become a part of what I do going forward, as I hope the deeper, temporal connection film makes with us.

Q: Where can we see the exhibitions for Water? How many pieces are in the show?
A: The first museum show is in New Orleans, organized by the New Orleans Museum of Art (NOMA) and exhibited at the Contemporary Art Centre (CAC) — featuring for large-scale prints. It opens October 4th, 2013 and runs through until January 19th, 2014. There will be 4 commercial galleries around the world showing the work over the next few months. We’re looking for appropriate venues for the larger, traveling exhibition.

Q: Does art and activism have a special relationship?
A: I believe art can be a powerful tool to help raise awareness around ideas and places that we need to experience first-hand in our busy urban lives. However, I think art or artists can shift politics or policies in today’s world but I do believe they can shape the electorate by giving them a perspective that helps them ask the right questions from their political representatives... just think of the important work being done by Chinese artist Ai Weiwei.

Q: What is the Lake Ontario Waterkeeper? And why is their work so important to you?
A: The Lake Ontario Waterkeeper organization, started by Robert Kennedy Jr. and represented by Lake Ontario by Mark Mattson, is a fabulous environmental group that is making an important difference to our drinking water. Their mandate is to seek out pollutants and take them to court. To date they have not lost a case and have done more to clean our waters than any other group.

Q: What do you think the consequences will be if we continue to live as though we have a seemingly endless supply of fresh water?
A: Grim. Every time we divert water from its natural course those living downstream are more often than not negatively affected. Only fifty years ago China had 25,000 rivers — today it has 15,000. The Colorado River has not reached the ocean for over forty years. It’s a hefty burden for those living downstream.

Q: When, and how, did you discover your love of making art?
A: I got my first camera as an eleven-year-old. I immediately had an intuitive fascination with how that mechanism could transform reality in a way that was extraordinary. I began making pictures with a fascination about how what I was recording would "look" as a photograph.