Art and Evil
On the Photography of Edward Burtynsky

An essay by
Bonnie Nadzam & Dale Jamieson

Here is the Gulf of Mexico, from above: in one image, silver water torn and separated like gauze over midnight blue ocean; in another, seagreen and aquamarine pools shot through with a nervework of mud-brown and iridescent rainbows. They are striking, disorienting, and magnificent photographs—so much that you might not immediately understand what it is you’re seeing. But the more you study the images in Edward Burtynsky’s Water series, the more you begin to sense that something is wrong. The impulse is to look away, but you can’t look away.

The images are often beautiful even when what they depict is not. Most of the photographs in this body of work present us with human transformations of nature, sometimes in ways that are environmentally degrading and almost always in ways that are resource depleting. So, for example, upon viewing photographs of the massive BP oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico, we recognize both that the image is somehow arresting, and also that it is terrible to see—especially if we are aware of the implied damage beyond the borders of the picture. Most of us are probably
used to nature photography that is beautiful, true, and good. It depicts plants, wildlife, and natural landscapes, and seems to offer implicit instruction on how to perceive and appreciate them. The images in Burtnysky’s Water series, however, evoke confusion, anxiety, even rage.

While Burtnysky does not identify as an activist, we may be tempted to see his work as such. What else could possibly be the point of such photographs—of a distant, aerial eye bearing witness on the destructive human impact on planet Earth’s water systems? Just look at what we’ve done, this distant, omniscient viewer seems to say. So we may immediately want to see the work as environmentalist, and may subsequently feel overwhelmed, uncomfortable, and unable to respond in a way that feels appropriate. We want to take a side, to push back or yield, but it isn’t clear what taking a side would mean—is one’s taking a side for or against the photograph? For or against what the photograph is depicting? For or against the photographer? What if, alternatively, we find a landscape rendered unrecognizably strange by center-pivot irrigation to be in some way appealing? What if we see these photographs as abstract art rather than nature photography? Would we have missed something? Perhaps we could excuse ourselves by acknowledging the commonplace presence of center-pivot irrigation and our dependence on this technology for food and sustenance. Burtnysky’s images are strange but not, in a key sense, unnatural.

The transformations of nature depicted in Burtnysky’s photographs are not gratuitous. In fact, most of them are in accord with human intentions and, what’s more, have been unintended to benefit humanity—though they may have unintended consequences, which, in some cases, the photographs reveal. What, for instance, could possibly be wrong with an industrial irrigation system that—in some images—renders its adjacent landscapes colorless, blanched, or even unrecognizable as Earth itself? Isn’t this the kind of system by which we eat five servings of fruits and vegetables a day? And yet, such images are disturbing.

We should also consider that not all of Burtnysky’s Water photographs bring up the same feelings. A viewer will probably not feel the same when observing fields of lush, high green corn as when seeing the BP Gulf oil spill. As human beings, our aesthetic machinery is in many ways crude and may not really help us distinguish—in immediate experience—between the horrifying and the necessary. Some of these pictures reflect human needs and use of resources that may be worth the costs. Water is necessary for life, agriculture, dams, oil, and thus offshore wells, all seem, to some extent, necessary. How do we determine and then live according to an ethics that tells us which of these actions are worth the price of such widespread environmental degradation? And how—if at all—are Burtnysky’s photographs supposed to be assisting us with these questions?

Perhaps the uneasy viewer should purchase, say, the photograph in which we see an irrigated subdivision braced up against an arid desert, and hang it in her San Diego home, so that by acknowledging daily what seem to be the consequences of her lifestyle (e.g. irrigating her tomatoes and citrus trees), she can feel absolved of her sins. Perhaps she can afford to purchase a photograph, but nothing stops her from turning activist: xeriscaping her lawn, recycling, purchasing eco-products, renouncing daily showers. All of these involve actions connected, however indirectly, to the images of distress, spill,
depletion, and the scarring of the landscape one sees in Burtnysky’s photographs.

Or imagine a viewer who is so disturbed and affected by Burtnysky’s water photographs, he donates his car to Friends of the Earth and buys a recycled bicycle, cuts his water consumption by 50%, lives off the grid, and grows his own food with a rain catchment system. How much is likely to subsequently change in the world, in terms of the degradation and depletion depicted in Burtnysky’s work? Not much. Environmental degradation and resource depletion on such a scale present us with a massive collective action problem: together, we produce destructive outcomes that no individual intents, but acting alone, we do not have the power to either produce or prevent such outcomes.

It isn’t surprising, then, if we find ourselves feeling both implicated and frustrated by these photographs. Part of what is so troubling about them is that we know that behind them are the quotidian activities of modern life that we may reflexively consider innocuous or even good: the morning shower, the irrigated salad vegetables, the drive to the kids to school or art class. Yet these disturbing photographs only exist because we regularly engage in these activities—activities that we cannot deny are resulting in degradation and destruction on a global scale. While we understand that we are the engines of destruction, we feel powerless.

Some of the frustration and confusion we feel may be attributable to the photographic medium itself, which is deceptively unsettling in its depictions of modern life. That we may reflexively consider innocuous or even good: the morning shower, the irrigated salad vegetables, the drive to the kids to school or art class. Yet these disturbing photographs only exist because we regularly engage in these activities—activities that we cannot deny are resulting in degradation and destruction on a global scale. While we understand that we are the engines of destruction, we feel powerless.

In addition to frustrations of the medium itself, most of the photographs in this collection are aerial views. Many of these views would not be readily visible to the human eye, even were a person to have a helicopter capable of offering a sense of objectivity that is already true of most photographs. Detached from an anthropocentric perspective, they seem more “true” than a snapshot of the Golden Gate Bridge taken from eye-level, or a photograph a man takes of his mother.

It is additionally frustrating and confusing that, though these photographs seem to embody objective truth, much of the color we actually see is unnatural and artificial. The water in these images is orange, red, unnaturally blue and almost neon green, while what we would expect to be our careless, everyday landscape is barely recognizable. The world around us is blurred and lifeless in comparison. At times it’s not even clear what the photograph is showing us. Together these issues raise questions about who the photographer is, whether he is trustworthy, and the extent to which the images can be taken as documentary. Suddenly, the artist, the medium, and one’s own perception become subject to skepticism. Thus the viewer can feel implicated and unable to respond to images she can readily identify (an oil spill), and is at other times disoriented and confused, viewing photographs of what is presumably her own (albeit unrecognizable) planet’s farms and fields. Photographs are not supposed to be this confusing.

Despite the churning and confusion, don’t we feel that this work must in some way be offering evidence of an argument, though one that remains tantalizingly just out of reach? Just what is Edwing’s point behind our discomfort with his art is that in aestheticizing the destruction he so brilliantly depicts, he is in some way aestheticizing evil. If Burtnysky is in fact aestheticizing evil, acknowledging this might complicate our own responses and even lead us to suspect that modern-day commonplace-like aquaculture, art, in some sense, evil. And what then, if we depend on such commonplace for survival?

There is some difference between art that has the potential to deeply moral under- standing of what is itself morally bankrupt or corrupt, though notions of which constitutes which change over time and are often unclear. Consider, for example, the Seattle artist Charles Krafft. In one of his ceramic works, a teapot features the head of Hitler as its “pot.” In another, a thermometer for measuring ambient temperature is designed as a windmill. Both windmill blades are designed as swastikas. Krafft’s experiments with Nazi iconography were celebrated as ironic and brave—until it was revealed that he is a Holocaust denier who believes Hitler was unjustly demonized. Does Burtnysky think the scenes of destruction and degradation are evil? Does it matter what he thinks? After a showing at the Rena Bransten Gallery in late 2013, the San Francisco Gate gave the year’s “marks for the most anxiety-provoking current show of beautiful work” to Burtnysky for his Water series. And at his exhibit at the Greenberg Gallery and Bryce Wolkowitz Gallery in New York City. The group identified the Water photographs as both exquisite and completely immoral. If we are moved and inspired by the depiction of evil and suffering and recognize the aesthetic value of Burtnysky’s artwork, are we then somehow necessarily approving or forgiving of its content?

In Pieter Bruegel’s sixteenth century painting, The Triumph of Death, legions of skeletons perversely torture and massacre dozens of people, their corpses strewn across a landscape destroyed by fire and war; in William Shakespeare’s Othello, a tragedy of betrayal, hatred, racism, and jealousy culminating in thrilling and spectacular murder; and Leni Riefenstahl’s The Triumph of the Will, a 1935 chronicle of the Nazi Party Congress in Nuremberg, is widely considered to be a supremely crafted film. These infamous works of art all share with Burtnysky’s photographs something of the sublime. All inspire horror and awe, and all raise questions about evil and its portrayal. But Burtnysky’s photographs respond in a way that is morally appropriate. But documentary film and photography raise questions about “evil art” with even more poignancy than examples drawn from painting or theater. The stylistic conventions of the latter to some extent buffer the viewer. In these cases, it is easier to say that what we admire is the artist’s skill and imagination, however dark; we can rationalize that, though death indeed will claim us all, and racism and murder are real forces with which we must contend, The Triumph of Death and Othello are not depicting actual, suffering people. Photographers must not be so forgiving. Photographs, and especially film, are presented as documentary. Of course we know about Photoshop and cinematic manipulation, but what makes their use so powerful and disturbing is photography’s implicit claim to depict reality. We may know that a straight stick looks bent in water, but it still looks bent to us. Images designed to distinguish forms of representation from what is represented—we might say The Triumph of the Will is a great film but of a despicable event—but this does not change the way it appears. It is this feature of photography and film that makes the idea of a person’s moral responsibility (and thus the idea of a pornographic novel. Right or wrong, one is more likely to consider The Triumph of the Will, as well as much photography, including Burtnysky’s, to be depictions of reality. Moreover, a person might convince herself and rest assured that, even granting her inability to truly separate forms of representation from what is represented, at least neither The Triumph of the Will nor Nazism in general are things she supports or to which her daily actions contribute. Burtnysky’s photographs, however, are documenting implied practices to which most of us do in fact regularly and willfully contribute.

One of the most breathtaking images in Burtnysky’s Water series is a photograph of a snow-dusted mountain, high above any elevation where we would expect to see the kind of human impact that has characterized the majority of the water photographs in this collection. And, in fact, there is no visible human impact. In many respects, it looks like the kind of photograph we might have originally associated with “nature photography” like Eliot Porter’s. What makes this particular image so breathtaking?
The way the photographs are contextualized also affects what we see. Were any of Burtynsky's Water images to appear singly, without his categories of Gulf of Mexico, Distress, Control, Agriculture, Aquaculture, and Source, the relationship between the viewer and the transformation depicted would change. For example, a strict vegetarian who doesn't eat meat or fish of any kind might have a different relationship to fields of hogweed and fish farms than a meat-eater would. This is perhaps best and most subtly appreciated when viewing the Source photographs, a section that is remarkable for two reasons. The aforementioned photo of a snow-dusted mountain does appear free of any humans or human impact. In fact, however, given the widespread effects of human enterprise we have already witnessed in the Water series, and the extent to which they contribute to global environmental change, it may be that the human transformation of this remote mountaintop is only invisible to the human eye, for now—and indeed, this is not an aerial view, like many of Burtynsky's other photographs, so we may assume the photograph is being taken by a human being at eye-level. The human impact on this remote mountaintop may be one we can expect may reveal itself in time, in some measure.

Even more striking, the Source photographs come last in the series. Were they first, we might be tempted to view them as more traditional nature photographs. But when viewed after a series of images depicting distress, depletion, control, and overuse, it is impossible to see this snowy mountain without a suspicion or shadow of human impact. As a result, even this remote mountaintop, thousands of feet above us, presents a landscape impacted by human enterprise. At the very least, a viewer may suspect the snow-dusted mountain won't be safe for long, and this particular water source—a lace of powdery white snow—may suddenly seem rather sparse, and fragile.