LARGE-FORMAT VISION

ONTARIO PHOTOGRAPHER EDWARD BURNTYNKY HEADS WEST (AND NORTH, SOUTH & EAST) FOR STARTLING IMAGES OF A CHANGING WORLD

Is there no end to Edward Burtnynsky’s restless curiosity? Pushing a world map tracking his perangements over the last 30 years would show enough full-breadth global crises to send a boardroom of Angelina Jolie types into a budget-crisis panic. An all-inclusive shopping list includes China (multiple pacts and trips, so count it alone as an even dozen), Bangladesh, India, Mexico, Greenland, Spain, Australia, California, Utah, Pennsylvania and – oh, right – Canada.

You get the idea. Burtnynsky sees the world through a large-format camera, plying a photographic vision so broadly universal as to make every corner of the globe sit with subject matter for his expansive worldview. In the 1980s, Burtnynsky, who had studied photography at Ryerson University in Toronto, had an epiphany. Landscape photography, as he had come into prominence as fine art, was a misleading anachronism. Renowned producers, Ansel Adams, say, or Edward Weston, had generated a legacy of striking pastoral beauty that had little to do with a late-industrial world that threatened to push their enchanted nature into the abyss.

This was the world Burtnynsky was driven to capture— one that was precariously, not pristine, sullied, not unspoiled. With his Rolleiflex torsoed into the back of a beat-up hatchback, Burtnynsky set out to find it. He wouldn’t have to look very far. From the Day-Glo orange seepage of molten nickel into the charred landscape outside Sudbury, Ont., to the ravaged escarpment of a uranium tailing pond near Elliot Lake, Ont., long, lonely drives from his home base in Toronto provided ample material.

Some of those works will be at the Vancouver Art Gallery, which is mounting a survey show this spring of Burtnynsky’s images. The exhibition spans those early tests on industrial byways, along with a selection of pieces tracking a life’s work amid monumental, man-made worlds all over the globe, defying beyond sight and largely out of mind for most of us, as we contentedly sit in our urban cocoons, enjoying their fruits.

In time, Burtnynsky’s travels broadened. First, to the eastern United States, where he found early subjects for his Quarries series in Vermont—impossibly deep open fissures that devoured even the largest machines used to extract rock— and, eventually, to British Columbia, where one can find some of the most remarkable unaltered landscapes in the country, if not the world—and, by the same measure, some of the most threatened.

Those pictures are given priority in Vancouver, where quietly apart, the gallery is also hanging a selection of Emily Carr paintings made almost a century ago as she pursued her own vision of a new landscape amid the clearcuts of old-growth forests. It’s a fair comparison: Two artists, each with a vision of a world altered by humans. But it ends there. Carr, famously, was a vociferous proto-environmentalist, as anyone who has seen her 1935 work, Songed At Timber, Behind of the Sky, would take a half-second to conclude: A towering pine, all but its upper branches stripped from its spirally trunk, looms over a road landscape of tree stumpes bathed in the cold, pale glare of a hazy morning. It is one of the saddest paintings in Canadian history, and the most potent reminder with both fury and indignation and a heart-breaking melancholy, it carves out Carr’s fiery opposition to the practice of clear-cutting with no room for doubt.

None of Burtnynsky’s pictures are anything like that. When he began, a nascent but radical environmental movement was defining a polarized debate on issues of the day—Greenpeace had gained fame driving dirigibles into the path of whaling ships—and Burtnynsky was lured to step into the middle. Not because of reticence about the cause, but because of the way issues were being discussed. Instead, he stepped back—way, way back, placing his images on a complex knife-edge able to tip to either side.

“I wasn’t trying to use the work as an indictment,” Burtnynsky says. “Thirty years ago, I felt that immediately limits the reading of the work, and it limits the conversation.” It’s early December, a few months after the successful premiere of Watermark, a documentary film made alongside his most recent series of photographs chronicling the social, cultural and commercial implications of our rampant abuses of water, our most essential—and endangered—natural resource. After years of globetrotting, Burtnynsky is contentedly back in his Toronto studio, enjoying some rare time at home to pause and reflect. The film was still playing then to full houses in Toronto, where it launched at the Toronto International Film Festival. Burtnynsky allows himself a knowing chuckle: More people know me from the back of an airplane seat than anything else.” (This 2006 documentary, Manufactured Landscapes, which chronicled his first sojourn to China, became a staple of festival programming.) “The films have done more in terms of getting my work out there,” he says. “It’s breathtaking how much further it goes than my books or museums and gallery work. There’s really nothing that comes close.”
they're all of a piece, an evolving set of ideas,” he says. “Whether it's mining, or quarries, or oil, or China, or water, it's always the human enterprise and its continuing expansion.” Butryn's remove helps keep him neutral, hovering above often vitriolic exchanges at ground level. “For me, the interest was always more in trying to understand the complexity that we're in, and to try to enlarge a dialogue that reaches across tables and says, 'Well, we have institutions that use materials that provide for daily life, and we have the consumer on the other end.' There's a direct connection between the places in nature where we get stuff and the consuming public that uses it on a daily basis. How do we understand and navigate that territory?"

The resulting view is almost like that of an alien from a distant planet collecting visual data to help explain a strange new world. For his Raffi art series, Butrynsky stood hundreds of meters away from his subject, and the result was a dizzying portrait of a tiny species imbed, nonetheless, with the power to transform the planet. In Afield #6, from 1985, Butrynsky positioned his camera at a distant remove near Spences Bridge, B.C., capturing a freight train-truck rolling across a steel rod face. The train is tiny, its cars strong like beads on a taught wire; at the same time, it's the conqueror, not the conquered, much like a virus slowly, but persistently, taking over its host.

It's not the first time the metaphor has been applied to the human need for large-scale destruction, but Butrynsky's work stands as perhaps its closest visual embodiment. His pictures lack drama in the most powfully deliberate way. There is less urgency than observation; yet nonetheless, a frightening tension. Butrynsky's photographs, mostly of environmental ruin, are undeniable, powerfully gorgeous. The molten orange flow in Nickel Tailings #134 and #35, a 1996 sketch, is potent, electric, as seductive, visceral and charged as the most accomplished Clifford Still painting. Butrynsky has said his pictures can be equally galvanizing for those in the environmental movement, who see them as powerful indictments of industry's indifference to its destructive power, as for executives of the companies whose handiwork he captures, titans of industry who hang them in boardrooms to illustrate their glorious achievements. (It's a dichotomy, it's fair to say, Butrynsky enjoys.)

It was this paradoxical tension that drew Butrynsky to the Chesapeake delta in Bangladesh in 2000, where massive over-decommissioned ocean-going freighters—floating cities, really—were sent to be dismantled by hand and sold as scrap. You have to see it to believe it: entire sections of ships, carved in slices, were prised on oil-slicked beaches in the hot sun. It was the first time Butrynsky had left North America; it was also the first time he had photographed people. His images focused on these massive industrial husks, standing like sentinels on the beach as if abandoned by an ancient, long-sailed alien race. But every new and then, workers, often up-close, their gaze fixed on the camera would appear, their skin and ragged clothing peeling and tattered. For the Cubists, a legion of slummers, ragged hand tools and acetylene torches through the muck.

Viruses. The experience touched something off in Butrynsky, so that when he went to China for the first time a few years later, his pictures were for, him, oddly personal. The experience seemed to loosen his studied indifference. When he won the $50,000 TED Prize in 2005, he donated to Worldchanging, a progressive nonprofit media organization, that used the funds to publish a tome of the same name, which served, essentially, as an exhaustive how-to guide to saving the planet.

When Butrynsky embarked on his oil project, seeded on those slick beaches in Chittagong years earlier, he pursued the industrial bioliphery from its sources worldwide (and here at home: the Alberta oil sands, as you might imagine, were fertile ground) through its processing points and transportation networks to its eventual end use (one suite of pictures, of NASCAR races and Mack truck beauty pageants; it's jarring, say, Butrynsky, yet in the same breath, very him). Naturally, he went up in a helicopter—a favourite tool, given his predilections—to photograph the aftermath of the Deepwater Horizon oil spill. One powerful picture shows freighters scattered like Tinker Toys across the vast, expanding slick.

And then, water—ever more essential, and potentially more dangerous. It sent Butrynsky, among other places, to the Soviet

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Butrynsky co-directed the film—a first—with Jennifer Baichwal, with whom he became close during the making of Manufactured Landscapes, which he directed, traveling alongside him as he studied to capture China’s outside industrial makeover. There, he was interested in the colonial scaling-up process of a nation of billions rushing headlong into its own 21st-century version of the Industrial Revolution—and particularly, the Three Gorges Dam, at the time the largest hydroelectric project in the world. It proved to be fertile ground—so much so that, for his Water series, Butrynsky found himself once again exploring the margins of that country’s burgeoning economy—new, unimaginably massive hydroelectric projects, or sprawling city-sized aquaculture farms, roped together in floating grids that bobbed on the South China Sea.

The work has particular resonance for Vancouver, given the city’s economic and cultural links with China through the Pacific Rim. With Water, as with another recent series about oil, Butrynsky viewed the unfolding crises, as ever, from a distance. “I really think..."