GREEN EDUCATION
EDWARD BURTYNSKY

Edward Burtynsky’s large format colour photographs explore the impact that we, as humans, have had on our landscape. In some places, the landscapes appear scarred, as if the mines and factories Burtynsky is shooting have turned the earth into a raw, gaping wound. In others, one finds the majesty and sheer beauty that nature has painstakingly sculpted over centuries, fighting the onslaught of industrialisation’s voracious appetite. In 2005, Burtynsky was awarded the TED prize for making his life’s work, and in his talk, he spoke about how he wants to alter our view of the Earth and our place on it. We present an excerpt from this talk.

PHOTOGRAPHS AND TEXT BY EDWARD BURTYNSKY

I became very interested in the landscape as a Canadian. We have this Great North, and there was a pretty small population, and my father was an avid outdoorsman. So I really had a chance to experience that. And I could never really understand exactly what it was, or how it was informing me. But what I think it was telling me is that we are this transient thing that’s happening, and that the nature that you see out there—the untouched snow, the untouched forest that I was able to see—really bring in a sense of that geological time, that this has gone on for a long time, and we’re experiencing it in a different way.

And that, to me, was a reference point that I think I needed to have to be able to make the work that I did. And I did go out, and I did picture grasses coming through in the spring, along a roadside. This reef of grass. And then I went out for years trying to photograph this pristine landscape. But as a fine-art photographer, I somehow felt that it wouldn’t catch on there, that there would be a problem with trying to make this as a fine-art career. And I was being pushed into this genre of the calendar picture, or something of that nature, and I couldn’t get away from it. So I started to think of, how can I rethink the landscape? I decided to rethink the landscape as the landscape that we’ve transformed.

I had a bit of an epiphany being lost in Pennsylvania, and I took a left turn trying to get back to the highway. And I ended up in a town called Franklinville. I got out of the car, and I stood up, and it was a coal-mining town. I did a 360° turn around, and that became one of the most seminal landscapes I’ve ever seen. Totally transformed by man. And that got me to go out and look at mines, and go out and look at the largest industrial monstrosities in the landscape that I could find. That became the baseline of what I was doing, and also the theme that I felt that I could hold onto, without having to reinvent myself—this theme was large enough to become a life’s work, to become something that I could stick my teeth into and just research and find out where these industries are. [...]

 [...] We live in all these ages of man: the Stone Age, and the Iron Age, and the Copper Age. And these ages of man are still at work today. But we’ve become totally disconnected from them. There’s something that we’re not seeing there. And it’s a scary thing as well. Because when we start looking at the collective appetite for our lifestyles, and what we’re doing to that landscape—that to me, is something that is a very sobering moment to contemplate.

Through my photographs, I’m hoping to be able to engage the audience of my work, and to come up to it, and not immediately be rejected by the image. Not to say, “Oh my God, what is it?” but to be challenged by it—to say, “Wow, this is beautiful,” on one level, but on the other level, “This is scary. I shouldn’t be enjoying it.” Like a forbidden pleasure. And it’s that forbidden pleasure that I think is what recurses out there, and it gets people to look at these things, and it gets people to enter it. And it also, in a way, defines kind of what I feel, too—that I’m drawn to have a good life. I want a house, and I want a car. But there’s this consequence out there. And how do I begin to here that attraction, repulsion? It’s even in my own conscience I’m having it, and here in my work, I’m trying to build that tug of war.