‘A picture is worth a thousand words’ goes the adage. And that’s certainly true for photography which, as a descriptive medium, has always been used to tell stories. Whilst the single image can communicate meaning instantaneously, stories come into their own when a selection of images is put together as a series. A sense of narrative. But the meaning of the narrative depends on the viewer’s ability to link the images: “Unlike film, which is truly plastic and continuous, a series of photographs is a sequence of arrests in time; the interstices are filled by the viewer” wrote John Szarkowski (Director at Moma, NY) in Looking At Photographs in 1973.

How much more difficult does it become, however, for the viewer to link the images when they are abstracts as we see here in these shots by Edward Burtynsky? Our desire for meaning is so strong that even though it is difficult to know initially what these images literally represent, we still look to link them up into a story.
OUR DESIRE FOR MEANING IS SO STRONG THAT EVEN THOUGH IT IS DIFFICULT TO KNOW INITIALLY WHAT THESE IMAGES LITERALLY REPRESENT, WE STILL LOOK TO LINK THEM UP INTO A STORY.
What do we actually see? A series of geometric shapes, squares, circles and lines. There seems to be a progression from one image to another implied by the repeated shapes contrasting with the changing colours and tones. The first image is green and fresh, the second is predominantly brown and grey, in the third the circle seems to be flaking off the surface, and the lines in the circle have decomposed by the fourth image. From bright green fertility to dirty grey/green decay – it doesn’t take us long to suspect that this is a representation of the flow of time and the natural world, even though the shapes in these images seem anything but natural.

As an aside it’s interesting that even though as a viewer I may have a basic, incomplete, understanding of what the images actually represent, my appreciation of the images as beautiful objects is not hindered at all. I find the repetition of shapes with the variation of colour very powerful and attractive. Beauty and understanding are not necessarily linked. The one can exist without the other.

OK, so I have to admit that I’ve played a little trick on you, the reader, in that I’ve kept you in the dark about the provenance of these pictures, or even their titles. But before I do discuss this, just have a look at the following picture and compare it to the abstract images above. See how meaning and understanding flood in so quickly simply because in this shot we have the horizon and the vanishing perspective point. Classic reference points immediately allow us to recognise the image as a landscape with some form of fields as the main subject and an encroaching rocky foreground in the bottom left of the image.

All these pictures (Pivot Irrigation #39, #10, #25, #38 and #11 respectively) come from Burtynsky’s series on Water. The Canadian photographer shot the series to show human’s use, and misuse, of water, and how it affects the landscape. “While trying to accommodate the growing needs of an expanding, and very thirsty civilization, we are reshaping the Earth in colossal ways. In this new and powerful role over the planet, we are also capable of engineering our own demise. We have to think more long-term about the consequences of what we are doing, while we are doing it. My hope is that these pictures will stimulate a process of thinking about something essential to our survival; something we often take for granted – until it’s gone” writes Burtynsky in his forward to the project.

The specific images shown here all come from Burtynsky’s photographs of the central pivot irrigation fields in the Texan Panhandle. This irrigation method is both a very efficient use of water, but it also has an extremely detrimental effect on the environment. The circles are created by drilling down through the rock to the aquifer, pumping the water up, and then using it to irrigate these fields which can be up to 1 mile in diameter. The problem is the scale. So much water is pumped up that the aquifer cannot replenish itself. Ultimately the land is sacrificed.

For those who would like to see more of Edward Burtynsky’s very beautiful, but also disturbing images, there is an exhibition at Flowers gallery (Kingsland Road, London, 16th Sep – 29th Oct).

The exhibition focuses on the sublime aesthetic qualities of the industrialised landscape and the unsettling reality of depleting resources on the planet, through a series of geometric compositions photographed from the air above the Little Rann of Kutch in Gujarat, India. Titled Salt Pans, this exhibition explores an “ancient method of providing one of the most basic elements of our diet; as primitive industry and as abstract two-dimensional human marks upon the landscape.”

There is also a new book: Essential Elements, an overview of Burtynsky’s work over 4 decades, with a forward by William A Ewing and Burtynsky will be at the gallery for a book signing on the 15th September, 6 – 8pm.