

member where to get cans of ginger ale, if a patient is thirsty for one.

I am not sure where my resident is right this moment, but that doesn't bother me. This is my last call night for the intern year and I am excited to see what the rest of the evening will bring.

I can see Jim wandering over from a room at the end of the unit.

"Hey, Doc," he says.

"Hey, Jim."

"Need you down in room 31. Chest pain. Ten out of ten."

"Got it."

"Start with the nitros, right?"

"Please."

"Already gave him three," he says.

"Now what do you want me to do?"

Time to close the notebook.

"All right, Jim. I'm on my way there."

Hunter Groninger

Department of Internal Medicine
University of Virginia Health Sciences
Center
Charlottesville, Va.

Lifeworks

Unexpected beauty

Manufactured landscapes: the photographs of Edward Burtynsky

Curator: Lori Pauli, Assistant Curator
of Photographs, National Gallery of Canada
National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa
Jan. 31 – May 4, 2003
Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto
Jan. 24 – Apr. 2004
Brooklyn Museum of Art, New York City
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The son of Ukrainian immigrants, photographer Edward Burtynsky says his history begins in Canada. It is fitting that the mid-career retrospective of his work organized by the National Gallery of Canada and exhibited most recently at the Art Gallery of Ontario should open with a selection of his 1985 images of railway cuts through the Rocky Mountains. Exactly 100 years before, the completion of Canada's transcontinental railroad had allowed the young country to assert its nationhood and proclaim its optimism about the future. This spirit of optimism permeates Burtynsky's work: his photographs crackle with an energy that seems to echo the spirit of new arrivals to North America seeking a better life in a fabled land of open spaces and vast potential. They also draw attention to the impact of taking this seemingly limitless resource for granted.

Burtynsky's work is about scale: the massively altered landscapes he documents are transformed into large works ranging up to 100 cm × 150 cm. But, as with every aspect of Burtynsky's carefully considered work, size is

never a superfluous attribute: a huge "canvas" is necessary to convey the monumental scale of his vision and subject matter. This perfect convergence of form and content results in a surprising beauty.

Burtynsky's work is propelled by, and communicates, the same spirit of discovery as the work of Carleton Watkins, who photographed the landscape of the 19th-century American West. Watkins was a great influence on Burtynsky, whose photographs (like

Watkins') are beautiful in the awe they arouse. What is unique in Burtynsky's images, however, is that he is able to render what he terms "transformed" landscapes with the same degree of sublime beauty as his 19th-century predecessor did in documenting those in a more natural state. Burtynsky's ability to achieve this unexpected outcome is the quality that particularly energizes his photographs and makes them so intriguing. When considering *Oxford Tire Pile #8*, *Westley California* (1999) from a



Edward Burtynsky, 1985. *Railcuts #8, C.N. Track, Thompson River, British Columbia*. Dye coupler print, 69 cm × 86 cm

series of photographs of the world's largest pile of discarded rubber tires, one would expect that Burtynsky would compose and frame his image to draw the viewer's attention only to the environmental impact of such waste. Although he does convey this message, he paradoxically chooses a muted, earth-toned palette and a raised vantage point to inject the scene with an element of grandeur, one that seems almost to celebrate the enormous scale of these mountains of tires.

This characteristic reinforces the sense of optimism in Burtynsky's work. Part of this impression stems from his desire to photograph only the biggest examples of any given subject — tire piles in California, spent copper mines in Pennsylvania, or nickel tailings outside Sudbury, Ont. His images somehow manage to communicate both the optimism and the naïveté of our belief in the inexhaustibility of nature. Precisely capturing the inherent contradictions in our North American approach to life, they create an unsettling irony but are also strangely affirming.



Kitchener-Waterloo Art Gallery

Edward Burtynsky, 1999. *Oxford Tire Pile #8, Westley, California.* Dye coupler print, 102 cm × 127 cm

Burtynsky's photographs are not all executed in North America, but they all reveal the enormous labour required to transform the landscapes he documents. Included in the exhibition are images of the world's largest marble quarries in Carrara, Italy, and selections from a series documenting shipbreaking in Chittagong, Bangladesh. In this group of photographs, which physically concludes the exhibition, Burtynsky's work undergoes a major shift, investing his work with even greater impact. To this point, Burtynsky has avoided the overt inclusion of the human presence — it is always subordinate to the machinery that humans have developed to transform nature. In the shipbreaking series, humans are much more prominent because of his realization that so much work in the developing world is still performed by poorly paid

labourers. As he photographed the shipbreakers, dismantling massive freighters by hand, Burtynsky was struck by their primitive working conditions. This personal involvement is conveyed most compellingly through his photographs of the barefooted, vulnerable workers dwarfed by the huge hulks of ships. His inclusion of the tiny, fading marks of their footprints in the foreground sand, in im-



Collection of Vahan and Susan Kolejian

Edward Burtynsky, 2000. *Shipbreaking #31, Chittagong, Bangladesh.* Dye coupler print, 127 cm × 102 cm

ages such as *Shipbreaking #31, Chittagong, Bangladesh* (2000), speak volumes about the conditions in which these men labour.

Burtynsky has stated that his choice of subject matter does not stem not from a desire to editorialize on environmental issues or to make political statements about the impact of industrialization. But in the shipbreaking series his sense of injustice has been aroused, infusing his already outstanding work with additional power.

Vivian Tors
Visual Artist
Ottawa, Ont.

An excellent accompanying catalogue, edited by Lori Pauli and published in 2003 by the National Gallery of Canada in association with Yale University Press is also available at <http://national.gallery.ca>.