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Manufactured Landscapes: The Photographs of Edward Burtynsky

The Morris and Meyer Schapiro wing of the Brooklyn Museum is paneled with Edward Burtynsky's photographs. The Brooklyn exhibition of Mr. Burtynsky's work forms an impressive landscape in itself. At first glance his large scale melanges of pattern, shading, color, and texture hold allusions to the works of artists such as the sophisticated composition in works by Paul Strand, the interest in texture of Anselm Kiefer, or the geometric coloring in works by Richard Diebenkorn, the intricacies of Charles Sheeler.. Moving closer in, you see that his subject matter includes scarred granite of quarries, uranium tailings, oil fields, refineries, and factories. Although his subject matter covers scope of human industry, his powerful investigation of form remains decidedly in the realm of fine art.

Rock of Ages No. 26 is a striking demonstration of pattern and shadow, depicting what Mr. Burtynsky refers to as a negative tectonic formation caused by rock removal in a Vermont quarry. The work makes remarkable use of patterns created by new and older methods of rock removal: the squares of bolted rocks left by current techniques of cutting contrast with the patterns of lines left by the older process of channeling. These photographs evoke the narratives that shape our perception of the landscape: the stories about the techniques used to remove rock, the geologist's story of the landscape, as well as the art world's story of painting, color, light, texture and line.

Dramatic compositions in grey, sepia, an rose, reflecting either fire or sunlight, such as Ship Breaking No. 11, show towering oil tankers (the largest man-made vessels in history) that dwarf the men whose job is to break them apart in a hazardous and deadly process. When we learn that these workers are paid only ten cents an hour for their treacherous work, the piece takes on different level of gravity. Reading the wall text, we learn something of the price of consumer society. These images, which are often quite beautiful, make us wonder if our advances in the landscape might be the fruit of a process that is no longer fully controlled.

The duality of attraction and repulsion in these photographs is in alignment with the spirit of our time. Mr. Burtynsky admits that he is a

participant in the destruction of the landscape, which he documents. He acknowledges that he drives a metal car and works with toxic photo chemicals, and recognizes that we will not get away from our need to extract natural resources easily. He does not look at his work as an indictment. His photographs of urban mines (mountains of tires, phones, and metal ready for recycling) cast their subject matter as a positive human activity.

His later work takes on a global bent. For example, phones from the urban mines are then put on container ships (both subjects for Burtynsky) and then sent off to China, where workers in cottage industries break them up into component parts. Having the effect of a linked story, the subject matter in his China photographs reveal the ambiguous dynamic of an area that is becoming the largest manufacturing center in the world. The factory pictures show a China that is increasingly urbanized. Whereas Maoist China was 90% agrarian, China today is over 40% urban. Shanghai alone has absorbed 4 million people in the last five years. Shanghai claims only a 3% unemployment rate, with most jobs centered on the expansion of the nation's infrastructure. Factories can employ 90,000 workers who work in around-the-clock shifts of 30,000 people. It seems these cities are moving towards a precarious situation. In the *China* series, Burtynsky's camera traces the looming shapes of China's iron and coffeemaker factories, and conveys a sense of the tremendous scope of these industries. His *Three Gorges Dam* series captures various stages in the construction of the dam that is being built to service those industries. The photographs of the destruction, displacement and building involved give an indication of the ambivalence posed by the dam itself, because we still don't know what its full consequences will be. The dam will create a 400 mile long reservoir that is in danger of being filled by silt, potentially rendering the dam useless. Burtynsky's large-scale photographs raise the question of whether work carried out on a scale with big consequences can cause correspondingly large disasters.

Although he is completely absorbed in the subject matter of globalization and human effect on landscape, Edward Burtynsky maintains that he is always trying to transcend the commercial, to document its capabilities as art. He started off as an artist working with Canadian government grants until his work began to attract significant interest from private collectors and public institutions and organizations. Working in analog to capture his images, then scanning off 400 Meg images of his negatives, Burtynsky prints back onto photo paper.

Other aspects of his process are not included in the exhibition. It is not revealed, for instance, that the beautiful patterning of pink jackets in his diptych of Chinese factory workers was staged, in that he had the first five rows pause for him (Manufacturing No. 10 b); or that he had the Chinese government remove parked trucks from a scene of thousands of workers departing from a plant (Manufacturing No. 8). Nor does Burtynsky reveal that he waited five days to get the right light and almost gave up, when he captured a railroad carrying hay that was almost the color of the nearby mountainside in C.N. Track No.1. Nor, when we see what appears to be a flowing river of psychedelic orange liquid (Nickel Tailings, No. 3), are we appraised that we are witnessing a trickle that is no more than three inches wide. Does this revelation change our understanding of the work? Not particularly. Although his work is guided by personal research, he freely follows his passion and aesthetic sensibilities in a way that purely documentary or journalistic photographs would not allow.

Mr. Burtynsky has said, "I find poetry in unusual places. You don't really know about me to get what I'm talking about [in my art]." As an artist, his story and his process are his prerogative, yet his work impels us to draw our own conclusions.

In his research, Mr. Burtynsky seeks out large human industry, seeking objects built on a scale that invokes a sense of wonder that such artifacts can exist. As you leave the exhibit, you may encounter Storm in the Rockies, Mt. Rosalie. A similar sense of wonder must have overcome nineteenth century viewers in the industrializing Northeast. When encountering the painting by Albert Bierstadt, an artist who also edited with an ideological *Yet America* is no longer a manufacturing center. The striking images of the very means by which the buttons on our lapels and the tools in our kitchens are created give us pause.

The exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum of Art will be on view until January 15, 2006

Mr. Burtynsky's work is also being shown through November 5, 2005 at the Charles Cowles Gallery, 537 West 24th Street

