

OIL ON PAPER BY SUZAN BOETTGER

Edward Burtynsky, *Oil* (STEIDL PHOTOGRAPHY INTERNATIONAL, 2009, FORTHCOMING REPUBLISHING 2013)

J. Henry Fair, *The Day After Tomorrow: Images of our Earth in Crisis* (POWERHOUSE, 2010)

Richard Misrach and Kate Orff, *Petrochemical America* (APERTURE, 2012)

Oil is the elixir of the economy and venom to the environment. Beyond its materialization as myriad synthetics from furniture to foodstuffs, this contentious fluid has become the *elan vital* of development—at once pervasive, productive, and perverse. Yet other than smelling its odor at gas pumps and observing spectacles of spills in the news, most know little of its extraction, processing, and collateral damages. Countering that is Richard Misrach and Kate Orff's revelatory compendium of heartbreaking photographs and brilliantly visualized data, boldly titled *Petrochemical America*. This publication was preceded by two other large-format monographs by Edward Burtynsky and J. Henry Fair also making the dreams and nightmares of oil's potency manifest. Significantly for this subject, these artists did not consider their pictures alone to be worth sufficient words. Each incorporates the strong presence of compelling texts. The effect is remarkably overt positions of advocacy new to fine art landscape photography, which suggests the artists' recognition of, and desire to ignite, a sense of urgency.

With his apocalyptic title, *The Day After Tomorrow: Earth in Crisis*, J. Henry Fair is the most impassioned. Of this trio, he is the outlier, as he seems to have come to photography recently, and, as a seasoned environmentalist, a founder of the Wolf Conservation Center in Westchester County. Shooting from the air, his illustrations of diffusing swathes of oil smearing bays appear iridescently sumptuous. Wastewater pools as fields of bleeding and marbleizing saturated hues suggest that Fair came of aesthetic age with Abstract Expressionism, as they resemble nothing so much as richly gestural abstractions by Willem de Kooning or stained fields by Helen Frankenthaler. Another bow to this age is Fair's use of the spare Courier font, with its dated and blocky monospacing of typewriters and early word processing, calling up "authenticity" to the detriment of readability.

Fair's radiant photographs are interspersed by environmentalist testimonials by seven public figures ranging from the climate change scientist-become-activist James Hansen to the memoirist Frances Mayes. But Fair's own pungent commentary is the most effective, as in, "It seems a horrible joke that we are cutting down an old growth forest to blow our noses. Carry a handkerchief." Yet the disparity in mood between his pictures and text is confounding: the images may seduce viewers into reading the disturbing texts, but their flirtation with decorative allure detracts from the dire content.

Burtynsky's aesthetic voice is more reticent, as if the reality of his subject matter is a big enough stick. A globally peripatetic Canadian who has photographed chicken processing in China and quarries in Carrara, Burtynsky traveled for *Oil* to international sites displaying petroleum's life-span from drilling through auto culture to waste. His approach is akin to the "New Topographics" mode of dispassionate

photography in the influential eponymous 1975 exhibition at the International Museum of Photography in Rochester that recognized the photographers' rejection of compositional abstraction or urban drama. Instead the process was the aesthetic and affective withdrawal into ostensibly transparent documentation (think Bernd and Hilla Becher's blunt series of water towers). Likewise, Burtynsky's aerial and generally distant ground-level views under overcast skies exude emotional detachment. The procedural modesty thrusts all the attention onto the dense information of industrial subjects: forests of drilling rigs stretching across barren sands, multilayer arabesques of freeway exchanges, battalions of grounded helicopters ready to be crushed by metal recyclers. The viewer is assaulted by the repetition in crisp detail—numerousness, scale, expanse, vastness—that Edmund Burke identified as landscape's demonic sublime.

Burtynsky's famously iconic "Oxford Tire Pile #8" (1999) shows a narrow cleft between steep mounds of abandoned dusky black tires, at the far end of which a sliver of verdant grass signals nature choked off by consumerism. The dramatic contrast evinces the aesthetic eye, even if rarely conspicuous. So it's noteworthy that none of these three compilations by artist photographers includes art historical contextualization and formal analyses of the images as *art*, as does, say, author Paul Martineau in his essay on of the intimate nature studies from the 1950s to 1970s by the early adopter of color photography, *Eliot Porter: In the Realm of Nature*, (Getty, 2012). The finesse of those images—and the book—are breathtaking.

Two distinctive precedents illustrate changing styles of artists' engagement with political issues in their art. While Porter's popular 1962 Sierra Club album *In Wildness is the Preservation of the World* galvanized the club's conservation efforts, and a century earlier, Carleton Watkins's sparkling exposures of Yosemite led to its becoming a park, neither included practical advocacy alongside their volumes as do the three current photographers. Consistent with contemporary artistic values, the latter's emphasis on social and environmental ethics has swept aside critical consciousness of aesthetics. Rather, in Burtynsky's *Oil*—albeit relegated to the rear—Corcoran Gallery of Art photography curator Paul Roth effuses about subject matter, while in University of British Columbia Professor William E. Rees's scientifically didactic yet lively essay, "Degradation and the Arrow of Time" ("Techno-industrial society . . . may be the first [to collapse under its own weight] knowingly and with so exquisite a portent of its own imminent decline") makes the book's environmentalist position explicit.

Among this group, Misrach's process is distinctive as having originated with a commission by the High Museum of Art, Atlanta and that the book was created as a collaboration with Orff, whose work on sustainability is on view at the National Academy Museum in *Seismic Shifts: 10 Visionaries in Contemporary Art and Architecture*.

Berkeley-based, Misrach is famous as much for his *Desert Cantos*'s exposés of land abuse as for the poetry of his Golden Gate nocturnes. For his museum mandate to photograph the south, he looked at a 150-mile section of the Mississippi River east of New Orleans—the locale of over 100 oil refineries, chemical manufacturing facilities, sugar refineries, and towns—known as "Cancer Alley." Misrach's images of the too proximate intersection of oil industry, aboreal landscapes, and human habitats are also in a muted palette. His scenes are captured from a moderate nearness, immersing the viewer. Some are obscured by dense chemical smog, while others reveal withered trees above stilled marshes crossed by a rusting pipeline or barricaded by chain link fences holding signage forbidding access. Elements of nature appear frequently, thus the pallor evokes terminal debilitation. The sites are unpeopled, as if abandoned ghost towns—the haunting future to come.

For the second half of the book, Orff and her firm SCAPE take Cancer Alley as a microcosm of industrial/social practices. Their encyclopedic "Ecological Atlas" provides comprehensive information on the history, geology, and distribution of oil usage and its social and ecological impacts. The density of data is leavened by ingeniously designed layered collages of illustrative photographs, lyrical drawing in maps and charts, and verbal imagery. A separate *Glossary of Terms & Solutions for a Post-Petrochemical Culture* slipped into a back cover pocket offers proactive solutions, moving forward the book's evidence that we can't live this way any longer. *Petrochemical America* is magisterial in its ambition to span aesthetics and cognition, environmentalist ethics and pragmatic practices.

All three of these volumes are tacitly elegiac, picturing loss of a world prior to pervasive and dominant industrial development. But in a change of emphasis that is inherently aesthetic, they go far beyond nostalgic Romantic reverie to more direct visual and verbal address. Oil is the fulcrum on which our future pivots. As we await President Obama's decision on the extent to which the United States will facilitate Canada's pernicious Alberta oil sands extraction, the numbers rallying against it in both news media and the streets indicate that it has become a galvanizing issue. Political pundits are increasingly urging emission curtailment by a carbon tax. With their courageous mix of affective images and assertive texts, these artists' books of fine art photography should be in the hands of every member of Congress, resident of the White House, museum curator—and yours. ☞

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