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Oil Spill #2, Discoverer Enterprise, Gulf of Mexico, USA 2010. The 2010 Deepwater Horizon disaster off the coast of Louisiana (also known as the BP oil spill) is indicative of what happens when risk is not properly calculated during massive industrial projects. The coastline along the Gulf of Mexico is home to more than 21 million Americans, many of whom rely on the Gulf and its waters for their livelihood. While thousands of wells were drilled here, only 43 of them had been drilled under such immense depth and pressure prior to the accident.

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PHOTOGRAPH BY: EDWARD BURTYSKY

reFramed: In conversation with Edward Burtynsky

Posted By: Barbara Davidson

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"reFramed" is a feature showcasing fine art photography and vision-forward photojournalism. It is curated by Los Angeles Times staff photographer Barbara Davidson. [twitter@photospice](https://twitter.com/photospice)

Edward Burtynsky is known as one of Canada's most respected photographers. His remarkable photographic depictions of global industrial landscapes are included in the collections of over fifty major museums around the world, including the National Gallery of Canada, the Museum of Modern Art and the Guggenheim Museum in New York, the Reina Sofia Museum, Madrid, and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art in California.

Born in 1955 of Ukrainian heritage at St. Catharines, Ontario, Burtynsky is a graduate of Ryerson University (Bachelor of Applied Arts in Photography) and studied Graphic Art at Niagara College in Welland. He links his early exposure to the sites and images of the General Motors plant in his hometown to the development of his photographic work. His imagery explores the intricate link between industry and nature, combining the raw elements of mining, quarrying, manufacturing, shipping, oil production and recycling into eloquent, highly expressive visions that find beauty and humanity in the most unlikely of places. In 1985, Burtynsky also founded Toronto Image Works, a darkroom rental facility, custom photo laboratory, digital imaging and new media computer-training centre catering to all levels of Toronto's art community. Mr. Burtynsky also sits on the board of directors for: Toronto's international photography festival, Contact and The Ryerson Gallery and Research Center.



Photograph by Jim Panou

Exhibitions include *Water* (2013) at the New Orleans Museum of Art & Contemporary Art Center, New Orleans, Louisiana (international touring exhibition), *Oil* (2009) at the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington D.C. (five-year international touring show), *Manufactured Landscapes* at the National Gallery of Canada (touring from 2003 – 2005), *Before the Flood* (2003), and *China* (toured 2005 – 2008). Burtynsky's visually compelling works are currently being exhibited in solo and group exhibitions across Canada, in the United States, Europe and Asia.

*All images in the gallery above are ©Edward Burtynsky, courtesy New York: Howard Greenberg Gallery, Bryce Wolkowitz Gallery / Toronto: Nicholas Metivier Gallery / San Francisco: Rena Bransten Gallery.

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Q: Why did water inspire you?

A: After working on the theme of oil for 12 years I felt that I was conceptually and visually in a place where I could approach water and find the images that would speak to our use of it.

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Q: What did you learn from this project? Why should we care?

A: While I was in Australia in 2007 I was taken by surprise at the dire situation Australia was undergoing with a 10-year drought. I recognized at that moment that water was even more important than oil because without water life ceases to exist. I wanted to make a series of images that spoke to our use – and abuse – of this critical resource. At the time I had no idea how I would tackle such a vast subject.

In 2008 I began my research in earnest. In 2010 I joined forces with Jennifer Baichwal to co-direct a film on the same theme; *Watermark* is the result of that collaboration. It is my hope that this work will contribute to the raising of our collective consciousness for all things physical and spiritual that water provides us with.

WATERMARK, the making of



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Q: Can you tell me about the logistical challenges of this global water project: covering 10 countries over a 5-year period? How did you manage this complex endeavor? How did you select which stories you wanted to tell?

A: There is no formula that I used to arrive at the locations I shot. There were ideas that were very compelling from a human use perspective but had no visuals, such as desalination plants. Equally there were some amazing visual moments that I could have explored yet I felt didn't contribute enough to idea, such as Niagara Falls. I always strive to find an equal balance between form and content. As always I look for larger-than-life expressions of the collective human will so subjects like India and the Kumbh Mela, or China and the Xiloudu Dam were ripe for consideration.

When it came to capturing these moments I quickly understood that I needed to get high up above the subject to comprehend just how it relates to landscape. A farm shot from the road or a lift just doesn't convey the full scale of our human use of water. Shooting from a helicopter, small plane or remote helicopter became my primary shooting platform. Using a 60 megapixel Hasselblad I was able to create highly detailed images of the systems we have built in the landscape to irrigate farms and create cities in the desert. In 2010 the project grew by bringing in Jennifer Baichwal as a co-director and Nick de Pencier as the director of (cinema) photography to create an immersive documentary film of the subject matter I had found most compelling while engaged in the stills work.

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Q: Why did you categorize the images into: distress, control, agriculture, aquaculture, waterfront, and source?

A: I always like to know what it is I am pointing my camera at and how it fits into a larger scheme of a project such as *Water*. These labels helped to organize my ideas and keep on track.

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Q: Your Water project consists of three parts: a book, a traveling exhibition and film entitled Watermark. How did you collaborate with award-winning filmmaker Jennifer Baichwal on this feature-length documentary? What do you hope to achieve through this film?

A: We enjoy working together and this subject seemed like something we could both embrace. I would like to add that Nick de Pencier is equally important in this collaboration as he did most of the cinematography and location sound work. In this project Jennifer and I found where our strengths were and honed in on them. In general I accomplished a good amount of the subject and theme selection earlier while executing the Water stills project, and then extended those with the sweeping overview flyovers. Jennifer focused more on the characters and narratives on the ground that gave context to the ideas and the landscapes we were showing.

The film brings a deeper emotional connection to the subject of water. Music, people who have experienced the loss of water, people who make a pilgrimage to it, people in China building the largest most complex double-arch dam in the world are brought to life in a way that stills can't. I suspect film production will now become a part of what I do going forward, as I love the deeper, temporal connection film makes with us.

WATERMARK Trailer [HD]: Mongrel Media



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Q: Where can we see the exhibitions for Water? How many pieces are in the show?

A: The first museum show is in New Orleans, organized by the New Orleans Museum of Art (NOMA) and exhibited at the Contemporary Art Centre (CAC) — featuring 60 large-scale prints. It opens October 5th 2013 and runs through until January 19th, 2014

There will be 8 commercial galleries around the world showing the work over the next few months. We'll be looking for appropriate venues for the larger, traveling exhibition.

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Q: Does art and activism have a special relationship?

A: I believe art can do a lot to help raise our awareness around ideas and places that we never get to experience first-hand in our busy urban lives. However, I don't think art or artists can shift politics or policies in today's world but I do believe they can shape the electorate by giving them a perspective that helps them ask the right questions from their political representatives... just think of the important work being done by Chinese artist Ai Weiwei.

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Q: What is the Lake Ontario Waterkeeper? ...and why is their work important to you?

A: The Lake Ontario Waterkeeper organization, started by Robert Kennedy Junior and represented on Lake Ontario by Mark Mattson, is a fabulous environmental group that is making an important difference to our drinking water. Their mandate is to seek out polluters and take them to court. To date they have not lost a case and have done more to clean our waterways than any other group.

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Q: What do you think the consequences will be if we continue to live as though we have a seemingly endless supply of fresh water?

A: Grim. Every time we divert water from its natural course those living downstream are more-often-than-not negatively affected. Only fifty years ago China had 50,000 rivers — today it has 25,000. The Colorado River has not reached the ocean for over forty years. It's a hefty price tag for those living downstream.

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Q: When, and how, did you discover your love of making art?

A: I got my first camera as an eleven-year old. I immediately had an intuitive fascination with how that mechanism could transform reality in a way that was extraordinary. I began making pictures with a fascination about how what I was recording would 'look' as a photograph.

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Q: Much of your photographic work is very painterly. Do you paint?

A: I don't paint. It takes a lot of time to develop a mastery of any medium, and at this point in my life I focus all my creative energy on producing photographs. I enjoy looking at painting and sculpture, but my craft is in the composing of photographic images and making of prints.

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Q: Do you like to row, paddle, swim or fish in our freezing cold Canadian lakes?

A: I grew up paddling the lakes of Northern Ontario. I am fortunate to have made the time to explore the wilderness, as it gave me a deep understanding and perspective into what the surface of our planet looked like when undisturbed by humans. I don't think I could have spent thirty years chronicling human-altered landscapes without a profound sense of what was being changed and what we are losing.

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BURTYNSKY: WATER – Dealer Exhibitions

Nicholas Metivier Gallery, Toronto, Canada Sep 5 – Oct 12 (reception Sep 12)

Howard Greenberg Gallery, New York, USA Sep 18 – Nov 2 (reception Sep 18)

Bryce Wolkowitz Gallery, New York, USA Sep 19 – Nov 2 (reception Sep 19)

Arthur Roger Gallery, New Orleans, USA Oct 5 – Oct 26 (reception Oct 5)

Flowers, Cork Street, London, UK Oct 16 – Nov 23 (reception Oct 15)

Galerie Stefan Röpke, Cologne, Germany Oct 18 – Nov 23 (reception Oct 18)

Rena Branstern Gallery, San Francisco, USA Oct 24 – Dec 14 (reception Nov 6)

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kelly - 127 weeks ago

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