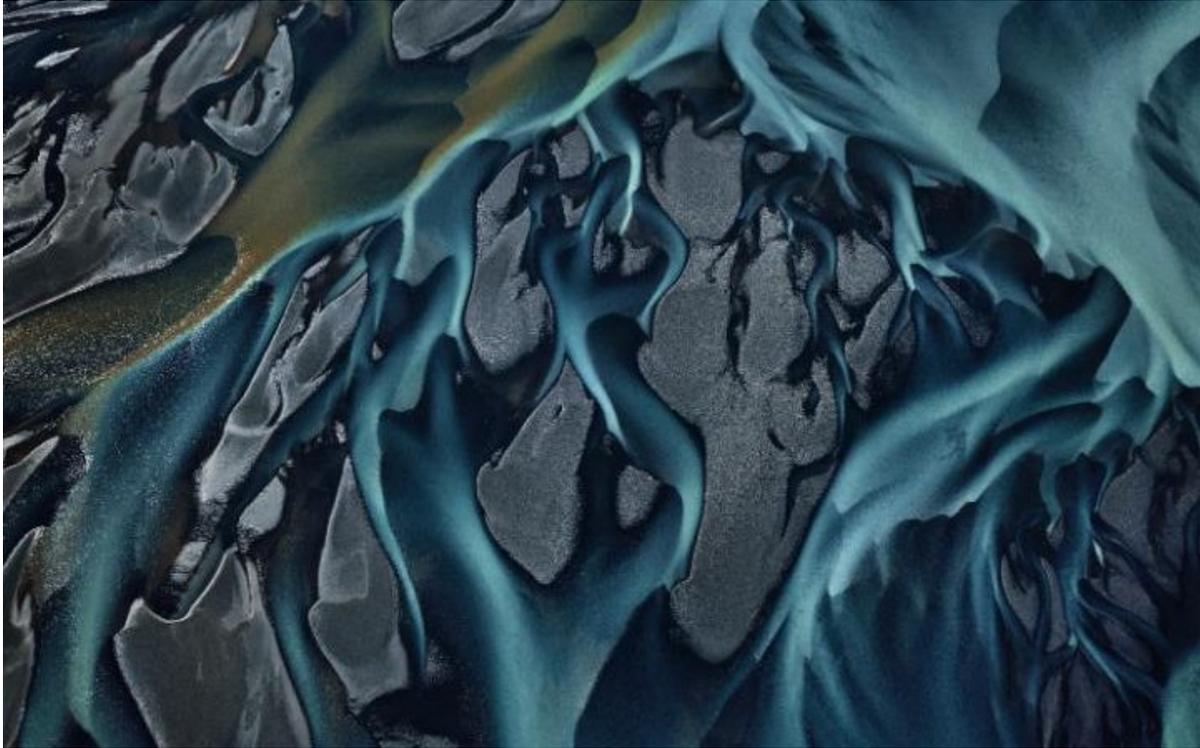


The Telegraph

Edward Burtynsky: the photographer finding art in rivers of toxic waste



'Thjorsá River #1, Southern Region, Iceland', 2012 (detail) CREDIT: EDWARD BURTYNSKY

Alastair Sooke, art critic
5 SEPTEMBER 2016 • 5:00PM

Ahead of a new exhibition of his work, the Canadian photographer tells Alastair Sooke about the toxic allure of the world's most perilous places. "I've been to China a dozen times," says the 61-year-old landscape photographer Edward Burtynsky, "but I've never visited the Great Wall." He smiles. "I don't go to tourist places. I enter into worlds behind chain-link fences and barbed wire."

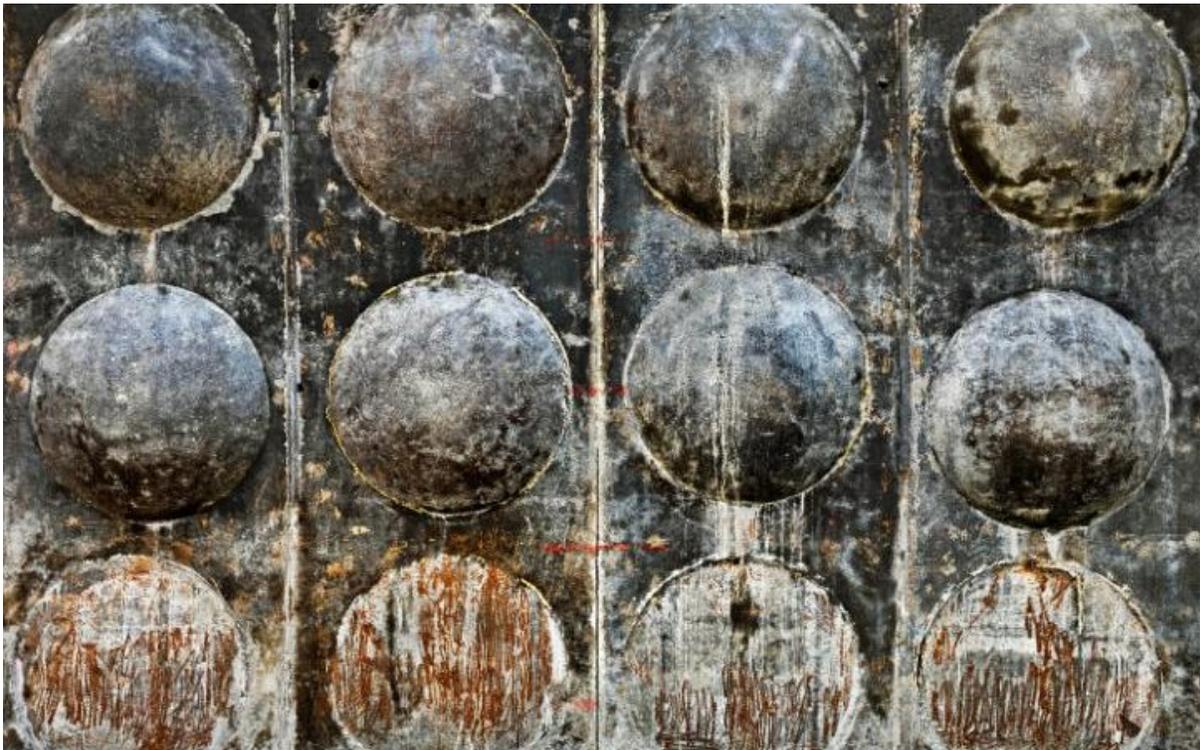
For more than three decades, this sought-after Canadian artist has documented some of the most perilous locations on the planet – from rivers of toxic waste in Ontario, to the noxious ship-breaking yards on the beaches of Bangladesh.



Edward Burtynsky in Berlin, 2012 CREDIT: SOEREN STACHE/DPA/ALAMY

His densely detailed colour photographs, taken using a large-format camera, typically present the disastrous impact of heavy industry and agriculture upon the natural environment. They are awesome, in the traditional sense of inspiring thunderstruck wonder. "Maybe one day I should do a tourist's trip to see things like the Terracotta Army," he tells me. But we both know that is never going to happen.

A new book, *Essential Elements*, is due to be published later this month, offering a fresh look at his impressive career. More than half of its photographs have never been seen before.



'Xiliudu Dam #6, Yangtze River, Yunnan Province, China' (2012) CREDIT: EDWARD BURTYNSKY

To coincide with it, Flowers Gallery in east London is mounting a special exhibition of Burtynsky's work. As well as spectacular prints of images in Essential Elements, the show will include several pictures from his latest series, Salt Pans: extraordinary aerial photographs of a salt marsh in Gujarat, India, where more than 100,000 workers extract a million tonnes of salt from the floodwaters of the nearby Arabian Sea every year.

"I spent a week flying over the area in a fixed-wing Cessna," recalls Burtynsky, who uses a gyro-stabilised digital camera for aerial photography. "The landscape had this beautiful neutral grey background. But the salt also produced all these different colours: greens, oranges, reds. Visually, I thought that was fabulous."



The salt marshes of Gujarat CREDIT: EDWARD BURTYNSKY

Burtynsky lives in Toronto, but we meet at Flowers Gallery, in an office decorated with one of his distinctive images: a large, powerful photograph of a railway line blasted into the sheer rocky slope of a forbidding mountain in British Columbia.

Even though it dates from early in his career – it was taken in 1985, just three years after Burtynsky had graduated in Photography from Toronto's Ryerson University – it is, in many ways, emblematic of his work. The track is visible near the bottom, but only just: most of the composition reveals instead in the abstract patterns formed by the flank of the mountain.

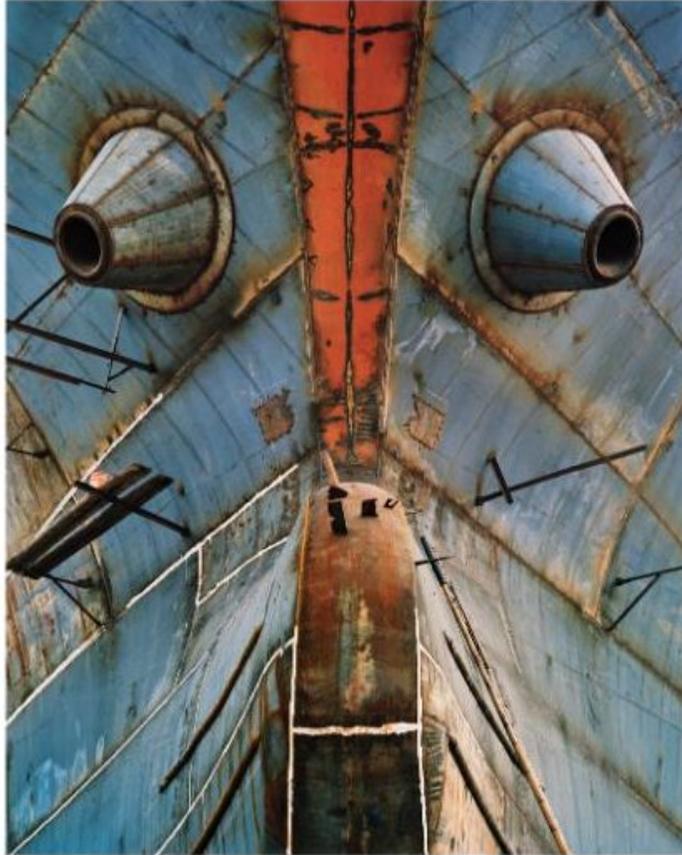
The hues of this rock face – russet, ochre and white, offset by the greys of the scree – provide swirls of colour, creating a painterly effect. There is no focal point, but a flattening of space, with no part of the composition privileged over any other. It feels as though Burtynsky was trying to emulate the "all-over" paintings of Abstract Expressionists such as Jackson Pollock.



'Morenci Mine #1, Clifton, Arizona, USA' (2012) CREDIT: EDWARD BURTYNSKY

Burtynsky's work has always occupied an ambiguous position somewhere in between the twin peaks of photojournalism and art-for-art's-sake formalism. Which does he consider more important: the documentary impulse or purely visual effects?

"When I get it right," replies Burtynsky, who was honoured with a midcareer retrospective at the National Gallery of Canada in 2003, "neither form nor content prevails: they are equally balanced. People often say: 'How do you come up with your compositions? Is there a formula?' And I'm like: not really. I try to be true to my compositional intuition of light and form, line, texture, colour – all these things. But I'm also speaking to a larger idea, about our relationship with the natural elements of the world, and how we usurp and transform them."



'Shipyard #22, Quili Port, Zhejiang Province, China' 2005 CREDIT: EDWARD BURTYNSKY

Over the years, this "larger idea" has come to dominate. According to Brett Rogers, director of the Photographers' Gallery in London – which reopened in 2012 with a solo show of more than 30 photographs from Burtynsky's landmark series, *Oil* – his photography has become "less descriptive and more political", reflecting his growing preoccupation with man's impact on the environment. "Burtynsky is undoubtedly one of the most important and influential photographers exploring major environmental issues of our time," she explains.

Burtynsky says that the most "powerful" place he has ever visited is the seaport of Chittagong in Bangladesh, where decommissioned oil tankers are dismantled for recycling in ship-breaking yards.



'Shipbreaking #9a, Chittagong, Bangladesh' 2000 CREDIT: EDWARD BURTYNSKY

"I felt as if I was stepping back in time to Dickens and the Satanic Mills," he recalls. "Men, coated in oil, were breaking down the largest vessels ever built, with nothing more sophisticated than a cutting torch. Safety and the environment were totally disregarded. They were burning plastics. Asbestos was everywhere. Life was cheap, short, harsh. It was every man for himself." Yet, despite the strangeness of this infernal horror, Burtynsky realised that all of us were "implicated". "They're our ships," he explains. "At some point I must have been in a jet or a car fuelled by oil that came out of one of those tankers. That was a real eye-opener for me."



'Shipbreaking #33, Chittagong, Bangladesh', 2001 CREDIT: EDWARD BURTYNSKY

In *Shipbreaking* (2000-1), the series that emerged from his experiences in Bangladesh, mangled hulks of rusting metal are marooned in coastal wastelands, like modernist sculptures consigned to oblivion. Look closely, and a tiny seabird rests on a girder. Perhaps it offers hope, like the dove after the flood.

Arguably, the "subversive activism", as he calls it, of Burtynsky's output is now more important than the artistry. "Everybody should be concerned with sustainability," he tells me. "The pressure being put on our resources is enormous. We need a global set of rules, but nobody's in charge. How long can we get away with it?"

Right now, he is shooting a new film called *The Anthropocene Project* – the third in a trilogy of feature-length documentaries, following *Manufactured Landscapes* (2006) and *Watermark* (2013), which Burtynsky has made with the Canadian filmmaker Jennifer Baichwal. It will investigate a current scientific theory, which argues that we are now living in the "Anthropocene" epoch, because mankind's activities are shaping – and destroying – the Earth's ecosystems.



'Silver Lake Operations #1, Lake Lefroy, Western Australia', 2007 CREDIT: EDWARD BURTYNSKY

"The last great extinction was when the dinosaurs disappeared after the planet was struck by a meteor," Burtynsky tells me. "But the next great extinction is about to occur – and we are the equivalent of the meteor impact."

What would he say to those who remain sceptical that humans are responsible for global warming? "That's insane," he replies. "We've gone too far not to have deepening consequences. We're in for a ride. The only question is how hard we're going to hit the ground."

Essential Elements (Thames & Hudson, £45) is published on Sept 15.

An exhibition of the same name opens at Flowers Gallery, London E2 (020 7920 7777), on Sept 16.

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