

EXHIBITION REVIEWS

HONG KONG

Edward Burtynsky at Sundaram Tagore Gallery

To separate the visual, the emotive and the structural elements from the human motivation in Edward Burtynsky's works would be to do them an injustice, but it would also reflect the many-sidedness of a man who is both a master of photography's visual language and keenly aware of the social context of his photographs.

The borderline between the documentary and the formal qualities of photography has always been blurred. And though Burtynsky is careful not to describe himself as an environmentalist, his work does document the way man has destroyed many parts of the wild. While the photographic

records he creates are beautiful, they also faithfully document the depredations of man on nature. Their beauty disguises the destruction; but also makes it presentable, and so owners of Burtynsky's work—be they private or public—may put it more willingly on the wall and bear witness in the most painless way. Such 'innocent cunning' matches well the public psychology of Hong Kong, where Burtynsky has just had his first show in a city where wealth is accompanied by indifference at the highest levels of government to the poisoning of the air we breathe.

Burtynsky's work is beautiful, amongst many other reasons because it appeals to



Edward Burtynsky, *Saltworks #1 Sambar Salt Flats, Rajasthan, India*, 2000, Chromogenic print. Photograph copyright © Edward Burtynsky.

the inherent sense of order that we find in the apparent chaos of nature. A forest stretches out before us, but the zigzagging pipeline that, white and slimly elegant, snakes away from the viewer from left-center of the photograph, can be imagined to echo the underlying geology of the land, which in turn determines the pattern of the trees and the grass. A sense of belonging seems to attach to it, though objectively it is an intrusion that represents highly visibly man's negative impact on nature.

Even when nature is absent, as in his image of a ship in a Chinese shipyard, its prow standing phallic and proud in the center of the image, as an acetylene torch welds its upper parts, the gorgeous oranges of the rusting iron and the elegant patterns of the ribs and con-

struction of the ship (in turn dictated by the natural laws that require the force of the waves to be spread predictably and evenly along the hull of the vessel as it steams) convey a sense of balance and of the natural that is conceptual and harmonious, bringing to mind the beauty of the rising ribs of a gothic cathedral.

Equally appealing are the patterns he finds in stacked cubes of crushed oil drums, derived from both the order of their stacking and the accident of the soft blues and greens that intersperse the rusts and grey that predominate, and which hint at a combination of artifice and accident that is almost Zen in its neglect of deliberation. The same effect is created in his images of 'densified oil filters': an accurately ghastly and mechanical description of



Edward Burtynsky, *Shipyard #18, Qili Port, Zhejiang Province, China*, 2005, Chromogenic print. Photograph copyright © Edward Burtynsky.

the subject matter that morphs, courtesy of the artist, into an eye-intriguing pattern of forms and colors when hung upon the wall.

Nature herself also offers the beauty of pattern and color that accompanies more traditional landscape art, as in the greens and blues offered by his view of the Dampier salt pans—again man-made alterations of the land, but their impact in these images is dominated by the varied colors generated as the depth, angle, and distance of the water in the pans change. And when we see the mysterious green eye of Lake Lefroy, where silver operations create a penumbra of red about the black iris and the green pupil, it takes us a moment to realize this is a mine, seen from above. These images transform industrial installations into things of beauty, as alchemy once sought to change lead into gold and silver.

Simple indoor scenes are transformed by his lens. Salt is not something we normally associate with walls. Yet, in one striking image from an Indian saltworks, we see a doorway caked with salt, its lintel crystal-

line, the floor before us dusted deeply in white, and the door's opening, floating with Freudian suggestiveness, warm and gently yellow before us, offers relief to the eye, which is drawn to the interior of the next space, away from the white, pure hardness of the ceiling, walls and floor of the room the camera sits in. Virgin purity proves less attractive than feminine warmth.

Other works offer more orderly patterns. In, for example, a bird's eye view of cars parked in a holding area awaiting transportation, each one white, the pattern slightly disrupted by the accident of one car or another being driven away as the shot is taken; or in his image of the industrially purposive layout of a factory, in which the strong sense of perspective reinforces the awareness that order is imposed on man when he works as an agent of production; or in the beautifully lit oil rigs in Azerbaijan, standing like golden trellises in a gentle grey sea, on which fragmentary reflections of a pale grey-yellow sky create a sense of place and tranquility. And some images succeed in blending order, nature, and industry

so beautifully that we almost wish they were wholly natural; for example, that of the Baosteel facility in which a short ridge of coal fixes the center of the image, framed between two closer slopes rising symmetrically on either side, at a regular 45°, as if they were mountains, an effect reinforced by the crenellations that have been eroded into the central ridge by rain and time, as in the Himalayas, showing sharp against the washed out, bright grey sky behind.

Every viewer will see in Burtynsky's work the aspects of nature, and of man's engagement in nature, that seem most significant to him at the time. It may be the beauty of color; it may be the magic of pattern; it may be the bizarre juxtaposition of beauty and industry, or the betrayal of nature or of man that often results from uncontrolled industrial exploitation. Burtynsky's work can generate this diversity of appreciation due to its accessibility, its universality, and its honesty. The artificial is made natural, and man's attack on nature is made beautifully clear.

Paul Serfaty



Edward Burtynsky, Bao Steel #7, Shanghai, 2005, Chromogenic print. Photograph copyright © Edward Burtynsky. All images: Courtesy of Nicholas Metivier, Toronto & Sundaram Tagore, Hong Kong.