

Nickel Tailings No. 34, Sudbury, Ontario, 1996.

All photographs by Edward Burtynsky, copyright 2009.

Redefining The Landscape

Edward Burtynsky

The industrial landscape is very much a part of Australia, but it's taken a Canadian to reveal it. Ed Burtynsky talks to Alison Stieven-Taylor about his fascination with mining, dam building and large scale manufacturing activities.

A river of molten red snakes its way through a desolate landscape. On either side of its banks the land is harsh, trees blackened, vegetation sparse, evoking an apocalyptic vista. At first the river seems a curious act of nature, or the stroke of an artist's brush, but in reality it is a man-made landscape, an industrial memory from the age of mining.

This photograph features in Canadian photographer Edward Burtynsky's collection *Tailings* shot in Ontario during 1996. *Tailings* is one of many celebrated collections that map the course of a 30-year career.

At the Foto Freo Festival in Western Australia in 2008 Ed Burtynsky and I spoke in detail about the melding of both film and digital in his work, his self-belief and commitment to rigour, and some of the pitfalls of shooting in remote, often environmentally hostile locations. The question about how he has held onto his passion for industrial landscapes over three decades came up early in the conversation.

"It's all about perspective," he said matter-of-factly. And for the past four years he has taken to the

air looking for a new one. He's tried shooting from a small aircraft with the doors removed and harnessed so he can lean out as far as possible to get a clear shot.

At present, however, his preference is for helicopters because "...they can get you closer to the ground, so you don't lose perspective on man's impact on the landscape".

In a newly-published book, *Australian Minescapes*, Ed Burtynsky put his aerial photography skills to work capturing the tortured Western Australian mining landscape from a height of around 400 feet. The works could be interpreted as abstract – Jackson Pollack is a creative influence – but on closer examination it becomes obvious the images are of working mine sites.

"At this height I could ensure the structures on the ground and the mining equipment like trucks weren't lost because of distance. I wanted the viewer to see a working mine."

His interest in mines stems back to his youth when he worked on mine sites to pay his way through university. At these remote locations Burtynsky was

given access to environments few human eyes had seen. What he found was a landscape of his time, a conduit through which he could capture man's relationship to nature as expressed in the industrialised landscape.

"I was always interested in trying to find a language deep in the landscape to photograph. Obviously the traditional landscape has been done – the pristine landscape – so what else can you do that we haven't already seen? Trees, twigs and leaves have been covered really well.

"And, in a way, I also felt there was an opportunity to bridge through my work the kind of disconnect that has occurred in our post modern society where economies are globalised, where things come from everywhere and we really don't have any notion of the source anymore. It is a way to look at the human imprint on the land in pursuit of the materials for our urban existence and to bridge those worlds by exploring the voids."

Today Ed Burtynsky is one of the most respected and awarded photographers in the world with an impressive body of work held in both public and

private art and educational collections. He also has a number of coffee-table books of his collections and regularly holds solo and group exhibitions around the globe.

Australian Minescapes

When *Australian Minescapes* was released this year, I put in a call to Burtynsky in Toronto to talk about his new book. The photographs in *Australian Minescapes* were featured in one of the premier exhibitions at the Foto Freo Festival in 2008.

His voice greeted me croaky from the early hour of the call and the cold he was fighting off. He was in his home office in Toronto. I called early – 8.00am his time, 10.00pm mine – so that he could get the interview out of the way before the day started and his daughters awoke.

He had just returned from overseeing the printing of his next book, called *Burtynsky Oil*, in Germany. He'd also taken a side-trip to London on his way home to attend a conference. He was tired and keen to spend some quiet time with his family.

I asked him how he had arrived at the concept for the *Australian Minescapes* collection. It began with an email in 2006 from Bob Hewitt from Foto Freo, explaining that he was looking for an internationally renowned artist to do a project on Australia.

"My first thought was that I didn't want to cover the territory I'd done before. I usually say no to these types of projects, but what piqued my interest was I had covered this big iron ore mine in China some years ago. When I asked where all the iron ore was



Old Factories No.1, Fushun Aluminum Smelter,
Fushun City, Liaoning Province, China, 2005.

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coming from now I was told Western Australia, and I found that interesting".

When Hewitt asked him what he wanted to focus on for the commission, Burtynsky didn't hesitate, "I said I wanted to shoot the mining. Western Australia is mining – a mining culture, economy and resources. It's what I am familiar with in Canada. But I didn't want to go back to shooting large format off the ground, I wanted to take a different perspective".

He wanted to fly.

Digital Solution

Perfecting the craft of shooting from the air has come at "great expense", says Burtynsky. "Every time you screw up, you lose thousands of dollars for rental".

He tried different film formats – 4x5-inch film and 6x6cm on rollfilm – and different cameras, including aerial cameras.

"Every film solution I found seemed to leave me wanting".

A perfectionist, Burtynsky decided to try digital as an alternative. He rented a Hasselblad H3D fitted with a Phase One capture back, onto which he attached a gyroscope.

"I did a bunch of shots with it and, low and behold, I found that the quality was better than film, my lenses were faster and I could get faster shutter speeds. And I could look through the camera and see what I was photographing rather than guessing." He continues, "It makes a huge difference when you



Silver Lake Operations No.3, Lake
Lefroy, Western Australia, 2007.



Oil Fields No. 1, Belridge, California, USA, 2002.



Wan Zhou No.4, Three Gorges Dam Project, Yangtze River, China, 2002.



Three Gorges Dam Project, Dam No.4, Yangtze River, China, 2002.

have been flying around in the chopper and you get all your film back with crooked horizons or an horizon were you didn't want one. All that changed with the Hasselblad".

Feeling confident with the technology he bought an H3D.

"This camera is ideal for aerial shots. I snap on a gyroscope to stabilise it and that's a \$5000 attachment that steadies the camera, allowing you to capture really good, sharp pictures".

For *Australian Minescapes* Burtynsky was determined to shoot from a point-of-view experienced at the height of 400 feet. The helicopter flew him out over the mine sites in Kalgoorlie and also across the salt lakes.

"The first day I went north of Kalgoorlie, I saw the salt lake and the mine operations. The way they were separated I found very interesting from the air.

The next day I was looking at a huge aerial map that was dotted all over with the symbol of a pickaxe and shovel indicating mine sites. It looked like there were also mines on the salt lakes."

Burtynsky shot the book in just two weeks. On the night before the first shooting day it rained. He awoke to the most wonderful light and flying conditions. Over the salt lakes that morning great pools of still water reflected the blue sky, the damp earth added depth and the white salt pans shimmered in contrast.

The weather held for the entire shoot during which he captured some of the most interesting and best photographs of mining activities he believes he has ever done.

His intention with *Australian Minescapes* was, he says, "...to present the landscape from an interesting perspective, a perspective that we never get

naturally, a point-of-view we rarely, if ever, experience". And also to ram home that irrefutable message that comes through in all his work... that human kind is making a devastating impact on the planet.

China Opus

Ed Burtynsky has covered oil fields, quarries, urban mines and shipping, but of all his collections, *Burtynsky-China* is my favourite. Shot over five years, it took five separate visits, one month at a time, for Burtynsky to amass enough photographs to slake his thirst. He underwrote the whole expedition which originally started with a sole objective to photograph the world's largest dam – the massive Three Gorges project – on the Yangtze River.

"But when I got to China I saw there was a lot more going on than I had imagined. China was a country under major transformation."



Uranium Tailings No. 7, Elliot Lake, Ontario, Canada, 1995.

The idea expanded to chapters on manufacturing, ship-building and recycling.

“One chapter led to another and suddenly I was photographing the reconstitution of the industrial age in China.”

His work on China demonstrated Burtynsky’s commitment to rigour in every aspect of his craft. And for tenacity. Burtynsky will scout a subject three or four times to view it in different lighting conditions in order “to get it right” he says emphatically.

“But when you work in the field you need to be prepared, to be ready to react, to be a master of compromise. You are often trying to wriggle your way into a spot that gives you an interesting image you can interpret. I always look at the potential of a particular place. Quite often it’s hard to find the subject that is doing what I want it to do - the view, angle, light. I shoot for a day or two, waiting for the light to break for a particular image.”

And you also need a strong stomach. Burtynsky said when he was shooting a large manufacturing facility in China, the stench from the filthy river that ran at the back of the facility near the workers’ dormitories almost overwhelmed him.

“I was photographing with a hood over my head to keep out the light. The fumes were toxic. I had that gag reflex happening and was trying to shoot without breathing.”

Even though digital has served him well for his latest book, Ed Burtynsky is still a diehard fan of film. He has bought up the last stocks of Polaroid test film and also of the discontinued Kodak Redipack 160 ISO.

“For me digital doesn’t have the same rigour as film. A commitment with film is different; digital is committing to data and to an image you can delete.”

But, as he discovered with *Australian Minescapes*, digital imaging can be a valuable tool.

“For the first time in my career digital did something better than analogue. I was committed to 8x10 film and, all of a sudden, digital cameras are better in the air.”



Rock of Ages No.7, Active Granite Section, Wells-Lamson Quarry, Barre, Vermont, USA, 1991.

So, 30 years on, how does he keep the work fresh?

“As an artist it’s very rewarding not to have to redefine my theme, but expand it with the rigour I have practiced throughout my career. Over a long career the work is bound, a compendium of ideas with all the images interconnected.” **QP**

Alison Stieven-Taylor is an author and photographer based in Melbourne. Her latest book is Rock Chicks which profiles the leading female rock stars from the 1960s. Visit www.realityillusion.com and www.astloveslife.blogspot.com for more information.



Silver Lake Operations No.1, Lake Lefroy, Western Australia, 2007.