

RACAR : Revue d'art canadienne Canadian Art Review

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Lori Pauli, *Manufactured Landscapes: The Photographs of Edward Burtynsky*, with essays by Mark Haworth-Booth and Kenneth Baker and an interview by Michael Torosian. Ottawa and New Haven, National Gallery of Canada in association with Yale University Press, 2003, 160 pp., cloth \$65.50 Cdn, ISBN 0300099436

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Book Reviews

Comptes-rendus de livres

Lori Pauli, *Manufactured Landscapes: The Photographs of Edward Burtnysky*, with essays by Mark Haworth-Booth and Kenneth Baker and an interview by Michael Torosian. Ottawa and New Haven, National Gallery of Canada in association with Yale University Press, 2003, 160 pp., cloth \$65.50 Cdn, ISBN 0300099436.

Manufactured Landscapes is the exhibition catalogue to the first major retrospective for Canadian photographer Edward Burtnysky. Shown at the National Gallery of Canada, the Art Gallery of Ontario, and the Brooklyn Museum of Art between 2003 and 2005, the exhibition included selected works from Burtnysky's twenty-year career as a photographer. The catalogue, published by the National Gallery in association with Yale University Press, is large and lavishly produced, much like Burtnysky's photographs. The reproductions show both the fine detail and the subtleties of colouration in the photographs, and they serve as reminders of the visual pleasure experienced when viewing the large-scale dye-coupler prints in the exhibition. High-quality reproductions of sixty-four photographs, organized into sections devoted to the subject matter of the work, dominate the book. Essays by Lori Pauli, Mark Haworth-Booth, and Kenneth Baker, and an interview with Michael Torosian, collected at the beginning of the catalogue, contextualize the work and aim to enhance the viewer's appreciation of the photographs.

Lori Pauli's essay, "Seeing the Big Picture," is an analysis of Burtnysky's oeuvre. Pauli, Assistant Curator of Photographs at the National Gallery of Canada, characterizes Burtnysky's work as a sustained inquiry into human interventions in the landscape. She shows that Burtnysky has long been interested in the relation between humans and the natural landscape by identifying evidence of this interest in his student work and by tracing the development of this theme from his early series *Homesteads* through the range of subjects that have engaged him throughout his professional career. Her subtitles correspond to the thematic organization of the plates: railcuts, mines and tailings, quarries, urban mines, oil fields and oil refineries, and ship-breaking. Pauli locates each body of work in a historical context. The *Railcuts* series is compared to nineteenth-century photographs of railway lines; the *Mines and Tailings* photographs are discussed in relation to other photographers and painters who have depicted industrial landscapes. From photographers Carleton Watkins and Margaret Bourke-White to Canadian painters Charles Comfort and Franz Johnston, Pauli shows us that representations of human interventions in the landscape are as varied as the activities that they depict.

Pauli's essay is useful to general readers, who will see that Burtnysky is not the first artist to explore the theme of the

altered landscape and who will then have a context for understanding the way similar subjects have previously been represented. However, by focusing on the subject matter of the photographs, the essay becomes preoccupied with the place of Burtnysky's investigation in the context of art history. This happens at the expense of a close analysis of the work. For instance, Pauli compares the photographs in Burtnysky's *Ship-breaking* series to J.M.W. Turner's *Fighting Temeraire Tugged to Her Last Berth to be Broken Up* (1838) to make the point that "modern images of decommissioned ships seem to evoke a melancholy sense of the closing of an era" (p. 32). She also claims that the series "has strong connections to Caspar David Friedrich's *Sea of Ice* (ca. 1823–25), a painting that Burtnysky has long admired" (p. 32). These comparisons draw attention to Burtnysky's interest in nineteenth-century Romanticism and its evocation of the sublime; however, they fail to explore how he re-interprets Romantic themes. For example, does Burtnysky take up Turner's ambiguous play between the power of nature and the human drive to overcome it? Contemporary artists are not generally characterized by their close allegiance to historical precedent, yet it seems as though Pauli's references to nineteenth-century painting are attempts to legitimize Burtnysky's work by locating him in an art historical lineage. This seems both unnecessary and ineffective. To its detriment, this essay gets caught up in Burtnysky's own narrative of his work (which is subsequently laid out in an interview between Burtnysky and fellow Toronto photographer Michael Torosian). As a result, attempts to root Burtnysky's concerns in art history often overshadow insightful critique.

Pauli's comparisons between Burtnysky and contemporaries such as Sebastião Salgado, Emmet Gowin, Frank Gohlke, and John Pfahl, for example, are more fruitful. As Pauli notes, Burtnysky rejects Salgado's narrative style and his "stance of the 'concerned photographer'"; however, she seems to suggest that the *Shipbreaking* series, like Salgado's *Workers* series, engages with the plight of workers (p. 32). The comparison of these two photographers could be taken further. What is interesting here is that both men share an interest in the human condition in a global economy. Salgado, on the one hand, celebrates the resilience of the human spirit with his heroic depictions of manual labourers, who are at the foundation of the global production of goods. Burtnysky, on the other hand, alludes to the enduring power of nature with landscapes that are beautiful even though they have been devastated by industry. Both photographers share a tendency to universalize and thus to depoliticize the issues. Pauli's discussion of Pfahl and Burtnysky is perhaps her most insightful: "In both Pfahl and Burtnysky, it is this ironic use of a Romantic vocabulary that restrains us from simplistically classifying their work as either industry propaganda or

environmentalist propaganda" (p. 30). With this comparison, Pauli shows us how Burtnysky's admiration for Romanticism affects his work, and we can see how his work contributes to a theme that other contemporary photographers have also explored. A more developed discussion of Burtnysky in relation to his contemporaries would have made this a more illuminating essay.

Torosian's interview with Burtnysky offers readers insight into the photographer's influences and processes. We learn that Burtnysky was inspired by Garry Winogrand's concept of a successful image and that he follows Winogrand in his quest for a balanced relation between form and content. Thus, we can better understand the tension, discussed in various ways by Pauli, Haworth-Booth, and Baker, between the subject and the aesthetic of the photographs. According to Winogrand's criteria, these striking depictions of ravaged landscapes are successful images. We learn that when Burtnysky is planning a shooting trip, he consults topographical maps in search of the high vantage points that viewers will recognize in his landscapes. These elevations in the topography are more likely to offer a point of view that art critic Gary Michael Dault has characterized as "omniscient" and "totalizing,"¹ and it is through this elevated viewpoint that we can see Burtnysky's work as an attempt to understand humanity's place in the world.

Torosian's interview confirms what a careful viewer might have already discerned: Burtnysky is methodical and purposeful. Each foray into a new site is meticulously planned, just as the relation between one body of work and the next is thoroughly considered. Burtnysky clearly feels that it is necessary to generate an oeuvre that presents a unified thematic and a consistent aesthetic. He has worked to achieve public recognition of his artistic practice as systematically as he has planned each shooting excursion. Unfortunately, the result is that certain bodies of work – namely *Urban Mines* and *Oil Refineries* – seem uninspired and even calculated.

The interview is beneficial because it helps us to understand Burtnysky's approach to photography; however, at the same time, commentary from Burtnysky can be limiting. Critical analysis of Burtnysky's work has, by and large, been unduly influenced by Burtnysky's own account of his work. Pauli's essay, in which quotations from Burtnysky abound, is an example of this. She refers repeatedly to Burtnysky's statements about his work to guide her own interpretation, and her analysis gets caught up in the artist's preoccupation with identifying art historical examples of the themes he explores. Although it can be useful to consider how artists approach their practice, it can also be restrictive. Burtnysky's well-honed narrative about his artistic development seems to stifle analytical responses to his work. Artists are rarely the best interpreters of their own work, and critics can offer more insight by exploring

possibilities that develop from their particular areas of expertise. Fortunately, this is something that the other two authors do effectively.

Mark Haworth-Booth, Senior Curator of Photographs at the Victoria and Albert Museum, also contextualizes Burtnysky's work, but he has a different focus from Pauli. Instead of looking at different ways of approaching similar subjects, he concentrates on previous evocations of the "industrial sublime." He then looks at the approach of landscape photographers with whom Burtnysky has an affinity. Although comparisons between Burtnysky and nineteenth-century landscape photographer Carleton Watkins have become routine, Haworth-Booth sheds new light on this relation within the context of his discussion of the sublime. Most interesting, however, is Haworth-Booth's comment on the global quality of contemporary incarnations of the industrial sublime. He takes this up in reference to contemporary Japanese photographer Naoya Hatakeyama, who shares Burtnysky's fascination with the way mining creates new landscapes and who, like Burtnysky, explores this interest through large-scale, colour photography. Haworth-Booth also contributes to an ongoing theme of the catalogue – that Burtnysky is an important photographer – by showing how he furthers the tradition of representations of the sublime.

The essay "Form versus Portent: Edward Burtnysky's Endangered Landscapes" by *San Francisco Chronicle* art critic Kenneth Baker is a refreshing analysis of the relation between form and content in Burtnysky's work. Baker identifies precedents for the aesthetic experience of Burtnysky's photographs. The brilliant orange of the Sudbury *Nickel Tailing* images build on the wild colouration of Fauvism, while the pictorial surface and large-size prints allude to abstract painting. The massive steel hulls pictured in the *Shipbreaking* series refer to the monumental steel sculptures of the likes of David Smith, Mark di Suvero, and Richard Serra. Baker makes the astute observation that, by demonstrating its limits, Burtnysky's work unwittingly points to the much-sought-after truth of photography. Burtnysky emphasizes the limits of photography, Baker explains, through his "oblique but insistent emphasis on what the camera inevitably excludes" (p. 44). Thus, photography "accurately mirrors not the way things work, but our thunderstruck incapacity to comprehend the total world system" (p. 44). By showing us aspects of the work that Burtnysky himself does not explain, Baker's essay enriches the photographs in a way that the other contributions do not.

In a public lecture at Museum London in London, Ontario, during the fall of 2004, Burtnysky noted the importance of this book for his career. He explained that he wanted the book to be more than just an exhibition catalogue. It had to contextualize his work and to demonstrate that the work is the result of a

sustained inquiry into considered questions. It had to show that he was not a photographer jumping on the bandwagon of large prints or landscape photography. The book succeeds in this respect. It clearly demonstrates that Burtynsky is committed to his exploration of altered landscapes. However the book also leaves the impression that the photographer is preoccupied with his own place in art history. Perhaps this is understandable, given the difficulties faced by Canadian artists attempting to gain international recognition. This irritation aside, the cata-

logue is an engaging investigation of Burtynsky's world of *Manufactured Landscapes*.

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Note

- 1 Gary Michael Dault, "The Eleventh Hour in Photography," *Canadian Art* 20, no.1 (Spring 2003), 58, 61.

Sylvia Lavin, *Form Follows Libido: Architecture and Richard Neutra in a Psychoanalytic Culture*. Cambridge, Mass., MIT Press, 2004, 182 pp., 36 black-and-white illus., \$37.50 Cdn.

Affect, moodiness, neurosis, and libido are not typically associated with the smooth surfaces and minimal spaces of mid-century modernist architecture (if with architecture at all). Indeed, a central tenet of architectural historiography posits that modernist design suppressed the vitality of the expressive subject in favour of rationalized and objective form. Eames chairs, George Nelson clocks, Mies's Farnsworth house, or any of Richard Neutra's postwar homes appear in this narrative as paradigms of an anaesthetic "cool," particularly when measured against "hot" contemporary Abstract Expressionist painting. This narrative is challenged by Sylvia Lavin in her new study of Neutra, *Form Follows Libido*, a book which is sure to garner both praise and condemnation for its theoretical positions as well as its infection of modernist purity with the unruliness of the neurotic subject. In this insightful and important work, Lavin – Professor and Chair of the Architecture Department at UCLA – focuses on the complex engagement of American postwar architecture with the burgeoning culture of psychoanalysis.

This engagement is, she argues, nowhere more evident than in the work of Richard Neutra, and particularly in a number of suburban homes he designed for private clients in California between the late 1940s and the early 1960s. These houses, as well as the drive-in church Neutra designed for the Reverend Robert Schuller between 1959 and 1966, form the basis of Lavin's discussion of affect and mood in modern and contemporary architecture. The argument for Neutra as a "contemporary" architect is set out by Lavin early on here, seeing Neutra's production of affective environments establishing him as an important precursor of later environmental design.

Before I go on to outline Lavin's argument in greater detail, I want to be clear: *Form Follows Libido* is a singular achievement in architectural history, remarkable for its seductive and adventurous prose as much as the revelatory force of its arguments. It provides the clearest, and most stimulating, recent example I

know of architectural history as intellectual and cultural history, and should provide scholars in all areas of the discipline with an exemplary model of how to write the history of architecture today.

This history is an explicit concern of Lavin's; her first chapter situates her outlook in a transformation in historical writing she calls "history by choice," following Reyner Banham's "design by choice." Banham used this term to describe the changing role of the architect at mid-century. No longer the master creator of total designs, the architect had become a master selector of objects designed by others. Lavin's "history by choice" reflects the inadequacy today of looking at the past solely in order to find "a truer or more accurate modernism, a more masterful or comprehensive historical narrative, or other normative goals of historical scholarship" (p. 6). The architectural historian today must rather allow herself to be guided by selective arrangements and speculative concerns, to "produce" a specific image of one's object (one nonetheless based in scholarly rigour) rather than "reveal" a comprehensive or readily recognizable history. That such an approach may seem scandalous to any of her readers, speaks not so much to the radical nature of Lavin's project as to the lateness with which art and architectural history have taken stock of theoretical developments that have over the past few decades put to rest the idea of history as an objective truth to be discovered, rather than discursively produced.

Form Follows Libido contributes to a growing body of research into the relationship between architecture and psychoanalysis, research that has gone some way to establishing the centrality of the psychologized and affective subject in the development of modernist conceptions of form.¹ Much of this work partakes of a renewal of interest in the psychology of form as it developed in the work of Heinrich Wölfflin, Theodor Lipps, August Schmarsow, and Wilhelm Wundt in the last decades of the nineteenth century.² Lavin likewise discusses this work, and particularly the development and later vicissitudes of the concept of empathy (*Einfühlung*), as a significant precursor of twentieth-century notions of affective form.