Manufactured Landscapes: The Photographs of Edward Burtynsky, National Gallery of Canada, 31 January—4 May 2003

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Citer ce compte rendu

The photograph – the colour photograph in particular – seems to have taken on gigantic proportions. Monumental images are a consequence of technological advances, but, more importantly, the shifting proportions are born from the work's relationship to its place of reception: the gallery. Scale provokes by forcing the viewer to experience with the entire body, not just with the eyes; it is an event – a spectacle. Large-format photographs command their own physical presence in addition to representing space, requiring the viewer to traverse their field within the gallery to fully explore individual elements. "Active viewing" makes connections between landscape photography and physically negotiating terrain to create the image; movement within the viewing space strengthens associations between photographs in proximity, reflecting the photographer's conscious desire to make ideological or aesthetic comparisons and connections between images. But does bigger equal better? The strange irony is that the closer in scale to the real landscape, the more the images seem like billboard advertisements or movie screens. Their surface, however expansive, remains flat. The composition of Carrara Marble Quarries #20, Carrara, Italy (1993) is somewhat traditional in comparison to Burtynsky's other images of the site, with its craggy mountain range rising up from the lush green valley into the clouds. The photograph serves as an establishing shot for the series, drawing the viewer into the world of the quarry, and is evocative of the work of nineteenth-century landscape photography, a visual debt that Burtynsky readily acknowledges. In the tradition of the early photographic pioneers, he uses a large-format viewfinder camera, offering exquisite detail that cannot be appreciated by the naked eye. In sharp contrast to the desire to present the landscape as pristine, raw, and unspoiled by human contact, the presence of humanity in these photographs is undeniable. Burtynsky collapses the separations between landscape and urban scenes in his quarry photographs, attesting to the fact that the stone, which is the raw material for buildings and towers, comes out of the earth, calling into question the costs of innovation and design.

In 2000, Burtynsky travelled to Bangladesh, producing a series of photographs on the dismantling and salvage operations of industrial sea vessels – a practice commonly known as "shipbreaking." Environmentally hazardous and physically dangerous, this work is habitually carried out in Third World countries by armies of workers. Actual people figure rarely in Burtynsky's landscape photographs, but the Shipbreaking series is densely populated, as though he felt it essential to capture some of the individuals charged with this arduous task. Shipbreaking #8, Chittagong, Bangladesh (2002), shows a long line of men snaking across the middle of the composition, bound together by the task of dragging a piece of ship to shore with a cable. The photographs in this series attest to an environmental wasteland, with remains strewn across the landscape like giant rusted carcasses. In a manner akin to the quarry photographs, the Shipbreaking series acts as evidence of the realities of industry.

The sheer seductive power of Burtynsky's images is undeniable, yet something strange transpires as a result of such elegance tinged with the weight of its costs. Is Burtynsky really a passive observer, as his claims to archaeological distance suggest? By acknowledging the forces of technology while refusing to overtly pass judgment on their repercussions, he leaves the door open to further questioning. Paradoxically, the marriage of violence, evidenced repeatedly through almost his views of ecological devastation, and aestheticization – the inevitable by-product of rich compositions in all of their gorgeously rendered coloured splendour – anesthetizes the viewer from delving too far beyond emotional responses. Seduction takes over.