Edward Burtynsky: THE INDUSTRIAL SUBLIME
Gordon Contemporary Artists Project Gallery
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Shameless fascination with the working poor dismantling rusty oil-tankers on the Chittagong beach of Bangladesh; reluctant guilt about the mountains of technological refuse left behind by capitalist consumerism; gratification derived from the formalist grids of marble quarries; shock and awe about the poisonous beauty of industrial tailings, the abstract patterning of open-pit mines, or the merciless anonymity of a megametropolis like Shanghai—Edward Burtynsky’s stunning photographs evoke contradictory emotions, pose endless questions (what will happen to these mounds of tires, oil-filters, and scrap metal, to these tidy fields of disused airplanes?), and provide merely tentative answers (“the only thing we can do tomorrow is manage what we are doing in a better way”).¹

The “industrial sublime,” “the toxic sublime,” the “beauty in the beast,” “paradoxical beauty,” “awesome ambiguity,” landscapes that are “blighted and beautiful”—these are some of the dichotomous epithets chosen to describe Burtynsky’s work. They disclose the crux of Burtynsky’s photographic practice: the need to balance form and content. “In photography, if you go too far one way, it becomes reportage, too far the other way it just becomes a formalist exercise.”² He uses rigorous composition and the exquisite exactitude possible with a large-format view camera to lure the viewer into the beauty of the landscapes, to examine more closely the uneasy subject of human incursions: mining, drilling, quarrying, industrial waste, tailings, reclamation, over-production, and over-population.

This perpetual push and pull is never resolved and purposefully left hanging in a precarious (im)balance. The artist shows us industrial life cycles from development to deconstruction, from environmental exploitation to environmental devastation, in a manner that is neither moralizing nor neutral. There are no instant epiphanies, no calls to join Greenpeace, no appeals to return to a preindustrial utopia without mechanical and electronic gadgetry. We are left with the slow and ultimately trenchant recognition that we are all complicit in the negligent stewardship of our natural resources, landscapes, and urban environments—whether we are inhabiting the planet in Shanghai, China, or Breezewood, USA.

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2. Ibid.

For Angelika Pagel’s complete essay, please see the exhibition catalogue Edward Burtynsky: The Industrial Sublime in the Frist Center Gift Shop.

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