

**Descriptive Audio for *Edward Burtynsky: Oil*
Institute for Contemporary Culture, Royal Ontario Museum
April 9 to July 3, 2011**

For the last 12 years, Edward Burtynsky has traveled the world documenting the devastation that the production and use of oil has left on our landscapes, economies and way of life over the past century. Burtynsky is known for displaying large format prints so viewers feel like they're inside the image. Photos are blown up to such large proportions that they become a bodily experience and the images, usually shot from above, may cover the expanse of an entire gallery wall.

To communicate this monumental scale, Burtynsky's photos contain a surprising amount of crisp detail. Moving closer to an image often reveals the smallest evidence of human presence, a detail which gives a sense of magnitude to the landscape. In the exhibition, Burtynsky connects our everyday habits and architectures—the morning commute, fast food restaurants, endless concrete freeways—with their true environmental cost. His documentation of the journey of oil from extraction to consumption helps us connect the ecological effect of refineries with modern cityscape, and highway intersections with a wasteland of old tires.

Burtynsky's landscapes are stunning: he often shoots during what's known as "golden hour"—an hour before sunset when the shadows are longest and the light has a beautiful pinkish-golden hue. The effect is jarring: on one hand drawing us to a gorgeous image then taking us aback when we realize what we're looking at.

[Oil Fields #19a & #19b]

In the photographic exhibition, *Edward Burtynsky: Oil* we see the cause and effect of the oil industry, the consequences of living in a fossil fuel dependent culture and the terrifying, yet strangely beautiful, landscapes that the industry leaves in its wake.

These two photos are large format digital chromogenic prints. They're called *Oil Fields #19a* and *#19b* and were taken in South Belridge, California in 2003. They're part of the ***Extraction and Refinement*** section of the exhibit.

Both photographs measure 63 inches high by 78 inches wide or 1.57 metres high by 1.95 metres wide. Together they form what's known as a *diptych*, or pair of pictures that belong together. Side by side, they showcase an enormous and desolate oil field filled with extraction machinery, shown from a high vantage point. According to Burtynsky, he was able to capture these photos by use of a heavy duty truck with a 40-foot extension bucket lift that raised him above the ground the equivalent of about 2 storeys. There he waited with his camera for what he calls "windows of stillness", or perfectly still moments without wind. Any movement of the camera would have resulted in a blurred image but Burtynsky captures it with startling clarity.

The desert-like landscape seems to envelope you; the background the same dusty sand as the foreground. Low hills sweeping across the top quadrant of the frame seem to blend with

the dusty hue of the sky in a classic American West vista. A few lonely white storage tanks dot the distant horizon and gas pipes seem to stretch along the ground forever. Much of the frame is taken up by groups of oil-extracting pump jacks, numbering in the hundreds and spread out about 60 feet from one another. The steel jacks, powered by a series of rod lines, seem ancient, many rusted and weathered. Some jacks in the foreground are close enough to see bits painted red, like the adjusters around the pumping rods and a manufacturing logo reading "Churchill". Also apparent in the crisp details is a red loop of cable at the centre left of *19a* and tire treads marking the arid terrain.

The "horsehead", the part of a jack that pumps up and down, acquires its name from its mechanical resemblance to insects or animals plunging their necks into the earth. The jacks in the left foreground of *19a* are slightly out of focus due to the fact that they're moving in that characteristic head-nodding motion as oil is extracted. However, despite the field being in operation, the photo feels remarkably still.

Jacks extend into the background of each photo and, as they get farther away, become more abstract. At their smallest point, they suggest a scatter of old see-saws in a forgotten playground, but bathed in soft golden light making them look beautiful. Dirt roads criss-cross the field, carving gridlines in the dry earth. At centre of the *diptych*, a set of long grey pipelines run the vertical length of the image, like a scar, and bear right into the distance. An adjacent road running alongside the pipelines, and roads running across the photos, create the effect of a loose network of thoroughfares between pump jacks. Visual tension in these photos is created by the long, sometimes partially buried, horizontal pipes running between the strong vertical lines of the jacks themselves and hydro poles. The oil fields of South Belridge were discovered in 1911. Oil from this field, as well as others around the world, has made the cities, automobiles, plastics, cosmetics, and almost everything we associate with urban life possible. Yet the images feel like the antithesis of a city and more like a forgotten landscape— a landscape we seldom think about or get to observe.

[Alberta Oil Sands #6]

This photograph is called *Alberta Oil Sands #6*. It's a digital chromogenic print measuring 63 inches high by 78 inches wide or 1.57 metres high by 1.95 metres wide, and is also part of the Oil ***Extraction and Refinement*** section of the exhibit. It was taken at Fort McMurray, Alberta in 2007.

This photo exhibits a vast expanse of land and, in particular, a huge industrial facility called an upgrader. This upgrader, owned by the company Syncrude, is one of the first to exploit the Alberta oil sands and develop technology to extract fossil fuel. An upgrader takes the bitumen-- the extra heavy oil-- and the sand in which it's set, and separates them. Tar sands are mixed with water at a temperature of 80 degrees centigrade, which allows the sticky crude to be released from the granules. Greenpeace estimates that the Alberta oil sands industry uses 349 million cubic meters of water a year in this way. That's twice the amount of water used by the city of Calgary.

The oil is then processed to remove sulphur. The processing plant in the background of this image is dwarfed by two, large, rectangular sulphur storage ponds, referred to as "cakes." The focal point of the image, these cakes occupy the entire lower half of the frame.

However reminiscent of ancient Mayan temples... they're actually made of thick yellow sludge with contrasting dark and light areas, creating a pattern resembling the outline of continents on a map or the pattern on a slab of marble. Most striking about these toxic sulphur "cakes" is the river of rich, lava-red liquid that pools like blood from the right side of the pond and curdles in the extreme foreground of the frame, from 2 to 6 o'clock. Another red stream pools from the left hand side of the sulphur cake at 9 o'clock. The vibrant red occurs when sulphur escapes after the upgrader process. It turns yellow over time. However, the blood-like rivulets threading the cakes seem to symbolize the ecological violence of the Alberta oil sands industry.

A road cutting through the left alongside the "cakes" curves around a low rise of land covered with pine trees so tiny by comparison that they appear to be bristles of hair. As the photo was taken in wintertime, the trees are without leaves. Another road cutting from the left disappears into the foreground. The earth surrounding the sulphur pods is scarred with tire tracks.

The processing plants and their smoke-billowing chimneys are miniscule in the distance. The enormity of the upgrader complex is only apparent when small truck trailers at the centre right are taken into account. The trailers are surrounded by stacks of tires that measure smaller than a millimetre by comparison. The smoke stacks themselves are no larger than matchsticks.

As with most Burtynsky photographs, the longer you examine them the more you become aware of small details showcasing the enormity of the landscape. For instance, beyond the upgrader complex is the flat, blue-grey Athabaska River and a darkening sky with low overhanging clouds that appear heavy and ominous.

[Highway #5]

Highway #5 is a large format digital chromogenic print measuring 63 inches high by 78 inches wide, or 1.57 metres high by 1.95 metres wide. It is a grand aerial photograph of the city of Los Angeles, taken in 2009 and is part of the ***Transportation and Motor Culture*** section of this exhibit.

The photo explores how cars have altered city architecture, changed a city's growth patterns and impacted urban life. In this photo, you're like a bird hovering above the city, looking down on it. Large multilane freeway, Highway 5, splits the photo in half like a dark grey river coursing through L.A. until it disappears into the horizon. The focal point of the shot at 6 o'clock is dominated by elevated, interwoven asphalt ramps that run like grey ribbons, twisting over and under each other. The graceful curves of concrete recall the organic way plants grow and disappear off both sides of the frame. A highway bustles with speeding vehicles that whoosh by in the foreground along the edge of the frame.

The vast Los Angeles cityscape sprawls out in an endless grid of rooftops, parking lots and traffic jams. Most buildings are low in elevation, between one and three storeys high, and form dots of colour that create the textured effect of a giant urban carpet; a precise grid pattern of streets stretching into the distance that eventually blur into a collective grey of concrete.

Upon closer inspection, human scale is revealed in tiny details: tidy miniature homes with toy-like SUVs parked out front, a patchwork of parking lots, and palm trees growing amid traffic islands. Street lamps, a baseball field, and even the small yellow M of a McDonald's fast food restaurant are all visible in minute size.

The city centre, a sprouting cluster of skyscrapers, glows slightly pink in the far background around 1 o'clock. The streets all seem to lead toward the Santa Monica Mountains, smudged ridges that surround the far end of the city, visible through thick smog-choked air.

[Breezewood]

This photograph, entitled *Breezewood*, Pennsylvania, was taken in 2008. The large format digital chromogenic print measures 51 inches high by 63 inches wide or 1.27 metres high by 1.95 metres wide. This photo is part of the ***Transportation and Motor Culture*** section of the exhibit.

Breezewood is an aerial shot taken close to an Exxon gas station lot in the soft waning light of early evening. This photo represents what frequently happens when you exit any major highway off ramp in America: you find yourself surrounded, perhaps even assaulted by franchise signs advertising everything from cheap hotels to souvenirs to fast food and gasoline.

This road-side cacophony of neon is almost like a harsh mixture of sounds. Burtynsky captures all the richly saturated, mostly primary colours of these signs- cherry reds, intense blues and brilliant yellows - forming a kind of layered, visual collage of multiple corporate logos. McDonald's, Sunoco, Subway, Pizza Hut, Shell and Starbucks seem to collide with one another, calling out for your attention. Perhaps the most striking triangulation of signs is the Exxon price listing on the left, the Exxon logo that seems to float over the highway at top centre, and the yellow McDonald's M to the right with a souvenir shop just visible through the golden arches.

The left side of the frame hosts the blur of a transport truck and several cars descending the vertical road from 11 o'clock, a web of hydro wires and green, overhead highway signs indicating route 30 East to McConnellsburg, West Toll 70, and 76 Pittsburgh, Harrisburg. In the foreground the Exxon station is dominated by its red striped roof, behind which the shiny silver roof of a Denny's restaurant is barely visible. Though the station is empty, it's well lit and the gas pumps seem to wait expectantly.

This photo is a commentary on the culture of consumption and our reliance on transport that characterizes life in our civilization.

[Oxford Tire Pile # 9a and # 9b]

These photographs, entitled *Oxford Tire Pile #9a* and *#9b*, were taken in Westley, California in 1999. The large format digital chromogenic prints both measure 51 inches high by 113 inches wide or 1.27 metres high by 2.82 metres wide. They're part of the ***End of Oil*** section of the exhibit and, together, form a *diptych*.

These shots are hung side-by-side to form a continuous landscape of what appears to be dark rolling hills. Upon closer inspection, these hills that undulate in gorgeous waves are actually made up of millions of discarded rubber tires. Old treads fill the frame of both

photos: no sky, no horizon. One might say there is a sense of foreboding about this “landscape”.

If you keep studying, you might find a strange order to the jumble of circular forms. In the background, some tires tilt at angles that make them appear squashed. It almost feels like you're viewing an abstract painting on canvas. In the centre foreground is a patch of bare earth with tufts of dead grass – the only ‘real’ landscape left-- a small, discarded, blue plastic bottle-cap, and a large truck tire which stands out from the rest due to the deep grooves of its treads that make it seem brand new.

From the left-hand side to the right, tires lie in layers; some caked with mud, some with inner rims lined with white paint. They seemingly transform before you; some ridges appearing like hills of abandoned shoes or floating circles. Some tires sit atop piles, some seem to dangle, others are compressed by the weight of still more tires that continue into the endless distance. One tire bears the word “junk” written in white chalk and many bear different treads : thick, thin, all shapes and sizes, diamonds, hexagons and figure 8s. The visual texture creates a dizzying effect of patterns melting into one another: hauntingly beautiful in the muted light.

In this photo, Burtynsky manages to create a feeling of the crushing weight of waste, witnessing the immeasurable, hidden by-product of our oil culture. Ironically, the abandoned tires are made of synthetic rubber, a product in itself made from petroleum.

[Recycling #10]

This photograph is entitled *Recycling #10*. It is a digital chromogenic print that measures 29 ½ inches high by 36 ½ inches wide or 74 centimetres high by 91 centimetres wide. It's part of the **End of Oil** section of the exhibit. This section reveals the destructive consequence of our energy economy and forces us to confront the reality of a dwindling oil supply.

This smaller print is of a more intimate scale than most of Burtynsky's work: urging us to draw in and peer closer.

In this photo looking down at the ground, the central focus is of a group of footprints in cracked, clay-like earth. The five footprints showcase both feet and extend from left to right, some on top, some side by side, around 15 cm or 6 inches long. Perhaps what's most striking about them is that they're filled with thick black sludge.

The first print at 9 o'clock is overflowing from toe to heel with black crude: what petroleum looks like straight from the ground before refining—a thick goop. The oil in this footprint has crack marks in its shiny surface and the cluster of prints suggests movement, like a series of dance steps. Like ancient impressions in cracked mud, the prints resemble fossilized human footprints but the photo was taken recently in a place called Chittagong.

This photograph is part of Burtynsky's series about the ship-breaking industry in Bangladesh. There, many old oil tankers used to transport petroleum across the ocean are disassembled by countless workers who operate in extremely dangerous, toxic conditions with no safety regulations. After dismantling the ships by hand for scrap metal, impoverished, often barefoot workers collect the remaining crude for re-use, thus explaining these oil-stained impressions in the earth.

This photo symbolizes our dependence on oil and invites us to contemplate the industry that's come to define us as a species: a relentless industry, Burtynsky shows us, at the heart of everything humans build. In this photograph, oil is literally as much a part of us as it is part of the landscape.

These are some of the pressing questions we are left to think about: Can we be weaned from oil? With oil at the centre of everything we do, could we still live the life we know and enjoy without it? Can we stumble toward a better, carbon-free future? Can we make the well-being of humans and our planet our first priority? Will we be able to clean up our carbon footprint and safeguard our world for future generations?

Edward Burtynsky: Oil will be on display at the Institute for Contemporary Culture at the Royal Ontario Museum from April 9 to July 3, 2011.

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