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Resolution

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Resolution

Sarah Watson

Edward Burtynsky's work is beautiful. Slimy, synthetic, and grotesque, but irrefutably beautiful. He has been trained in a formalistic approach to photography, with a style that is reminiscent of iconic landscape photographer Ansel Adams. However, Burtynsky's work explores themes Adams deemed irrelevant, or even denied—most specifically, the relationship between humankind and landscape. This relationship is illustrated in working communities that have developed around heaps of e-waste, jungles of skyscrapers, and forgotten streams of sickeningly neon chemicals. While documenting the impact civilization has had on wilderness, Burtynsky refuses to limit his work to an environmental message, as much as he refuses to pledge his support to the corporations he observes. Burtynsky's work is realized in the tension between these communities and the audiences that gather around them. This tension is resolved in his motivation to raise consciousness of the impacts of civilization on the environment and his campaign for sustainable lifestyles.

The first community he engages is that which he photographs: the corporate companies that spur industrial growth and their impact on the environment. Although Burtynsky often documents the underbelly of industry, he lacks the didactic tone that often accompanies commentary on the waste of society. Instead, "Burtynsky's landscapes are equivocal in terms of their judgments or opinions; their viewpoint is 'anthropological rather than critical'" (Pauli 10). In this manner, Burtynsky's photography echoes that of earlier photographers such as Margaret Bourke-White, whose photographs tied the capabilities of man and the power of industry (Pauli 10). In Bourke-White's images, ironworks and other majestic manifestations of industry "remind us of a time when the production of 'things' created the wealth of most modern societies, and it brings to mind notions about the heroism of labour" (Pauli 10). Burtynsky's images do not romanticize industry as much as some of his predecessors have, but "he deliberately seeks out landscapes that have been altered by 'the pursuit of progress'" (Pauli 11). Often times, Burtynsky evokes this pursuit of progress by asserting that "abandoned manufacturing sites can resemble ancient ruins" (Pauli 11). Specific portfolios of Burtynsky's work reveal the pivotal role that resources such as oil play in the social aspects of a culture. In his collection of photographs entitled "Oil: Transportation and Motor Culture," Burtynsky depicts cultural, celebratory gatherings around vehicles ("Edward Burtynsky photographs the landscape of oil"). He humanizes oil and the industrial world, demonstrating their almost inevitable ties to human development and culture. Although his commitment to industry does not match that of many of his predecessors, Burtynsky examines industry as an artistic endeavor and an intrinsic part of civilization.

The absence of an accusatory tone in Burtynsky's artwork is partially due to the fact that he is a part of the system which he documents. His photographs "cannot document the ills of industry's expansion without being implicated within the same profligate circuitry" (Bozak 69). To take an accusatory role would be to claim innocence. Considering Burtynsky's participation in industry as a photographer, it would be hypocritical. As a consequence of his "angle" toward industrial corporations—a conscious perspective that honors the role that industry has played in human development and culture—Burtynsky has been relatively well

received by corporations. While photographing in China, Burtynsky was not able to gain access to many international corporations such as Adidas and Nike, but he was able to access local organizations, largely owing to his position as a non-antagonistic role (“Edward Burtynsky photographs the landscape of oil”).

The other community that Burtynsky serves is environmental. Although his work does praise the industrial world on occasion, it also comments on its impact on the environment. Despite the glossy metals and liquids that glow throughout Burtynsky’s work, “More often than not, we find the beauty and the meaning of images to be in conflict” (Baker 40). At a certain point, the artificiality of the industrial world becomes grotesque, almost a perversion of the natural world. Through his work, “Burtynsky wants us to experience the shock of seeing as a fact a bright orange stream flowing through a leafless landscape, and to notice our own resistance to digesting this information” (Baker 40). In this capacity, Burtynsky does not necessarily embody fierce environmentalism, but the images seem to evoke it. Industrialism, labor, and iron may suggest heroism, but “there is something unsettling, even alarming, about scenes that show such massive human incursion into the Earth” (Pauli 21).

Burtynsky’s landscapes force viewers to reconsider their relationship to the land—in Burtynsky’s artwork, humans seem to take shape as a consequence of their creations, as opposed to the reverse. When people do appear in his work, they are often miniscule, “rendering people almost as abstract figures; [in doing so] he emphasizes the dehumanizing dimensions of industrialization”(Bozak 68). The balance between the environmental and the industrial is peculiar—it is hard to tell where the beauty ends and the destruction begins. Throughout his photography, Burtynsky challenges viewers to consider this question, not necessarily in favor of one or the other, but conscious of each. The beauty of Burtynsky’s work comes in its composition, its colors, and its ties to human culture. The ugly is found in that “Burtynsky is illustrating what he perceives as a disturbing disconnection between society and nature” (Pauli 15). He does not demand complete restoration of the environment, but he does demand an understanding of the consequences industry has on the environment.

Burtynsky’s greatest institutional supporter can be found in his effort to resolve the tension between the forces present in his work. Burtynsky was a winner for the Technology, Education, Design (TED) Prize in 2009. As such he was able to articulate “wishes,” how his work addresses such wishes, and how addressing his wishes could change the world (“Edward Burtynsky on manufactured landscapes”). One of Burtynsky’s wishes is for the world to engage in a conversation about sustainability in the use of resources. The concept of sustainability bridges the two forces in his work: it honors the human desire for development and luxury, while affording proper respect for the limits of human development, which will one day be upon us. From an environmental perspective, Burtynsky’s photographs “show us something unexpected: beauty as an unintended by-product of industry” (Baker 42). Equally impressive is the information we gain from an industrial perspective: Burtynsky’s photography “accurately mirrors not the way things work, but our thunderstruck incapacity to comprehend the total world system” (Baker 44). Burtynsky establishes the beauty that can be found within industry, and the way it has been integrated into human society. However, he simultaneously points out that the industry comes at a great cost, which is behind closed doors for many Americans. The unawareness of Americans is reflected in what may be the most important piece of Burtynsky’s

work: the resistance Americans have to digesting his work, and their inability to comprehend the fact that their day to day actions contribute to such circumstances.

Edward Burtynsky's work is realized, embodied, and enabled by his relationship with the environmental community, the corporate community, and the community which blends the two at TED. Burtynsky's major vehicle for pursuing his goal is TED, an organization in which scientific ideas are often born and bred. He borrows elements from all three communities, and his ultimate goal is to raise a consciousness among Americans and the rest of the first world to the consequences of their actions, and the connections that intertwine the fate of civilization and the fate of the environment. Such understanding will allow for a healthier relationship with the environment, with other countries, and with the human concept of self.

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