An uneasy beauty through the lens of stark reality

By Mark Feeney
GLOBE STAFF

MEDFORD — China’s transformation is so clearly the preeminent story of the 21st century we hardly ever think about it. It’s just there, like the Great Wall — except this wall is a tidal wave. Edward Burtynsky’s photographs not only make us think about China’s transformation. They reveal it.

Burtynsky’s abiding subject has been man’s alteration of the natural world — from Italy to Bangladesh to the United States. He’s by no means reductive or moralistic in his response. He recognizes that much of what he presents is magnificent as well as appalling. A factory that blights the landscape can also improve the lives of those who work there or use the products it makes. It can also look terrific.

“These images,” Burtynsky has written of his work, “are meant as metaphors to the dilemma of our modern existence; they search for a dialogue between attraction and repulsion, seduction and fear.”

That statement comes off as rather grand, but its accuracy is borne out by the 20 images in “Edward Burtynsky: The China Series,” which runs at the Tufts University Art Gallery through April 1.
His photos capture stark reality

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Like their subject, they’re very big. Most are in the vicinity of 6 feet by 5 feet. Burtynsky has grouped them in four bluntly designated categories: “Urban Renewal,” “Recycling,” “Manufacturing,” “Dam” (referring to the Three Gorges Dam, the ongoing, 15-year-project that seeks to tame the Yangtze). He gives his photographs just-the-facts titles, like “Shipyard #22,” followed by their geographic location. They don’t need anything beyond that. These images make words seem like paltry things. They show what can be truly imagined, let alone described.

Burtynsky uses scale. It’s central to his enterprise. There’s nothing gratuitous or showy about the size of these pictures. You could even argue his photographs are best understood as oversize miniatures: snapshots from Bobbingstag. The dump trucks in “Feng Ji #6,” at a Three Gorges work site, look like Tonka toys in the vast setting. (Tonka, in fact, now makes its trucks in China.)

“Urban Renewal #4, Old City Overview, Shanghai” presents a layering of human development — a kind of three-dimensional building time line — with tumbledown homes in the foreground giving way to mid-size apartment houses of concrete and stone, then a Manhattan-size array of high rises looming in the background. “Urban Renewal #1, Factory Construction” combines past and future, nature and industry, as two walls of bamboo scaffolding line an unpaved, puddled avenue. Off in the distance is a completed factory.

Even scaled-back scenes can pack a wallop. In “Recycling #2, Cutter” a welder disassembles a piece of machinery. This is human-size transformation, but no less imposing for its relative smallness. The wisps of smoke and acetylene flashes make the junkyard look like a portal to the underworld, its jumble of scrap a terrain of accusation.

Burtynsky, who’ll be speaking at Tufts on March 1, shoots in color, which has a lot to do with his pictures’ immediacy. His work belongs to the tradition of the Industrial Sublime. We think of that tradition in terms of black and white: Charles Sheeler’s River Rouge, Lewis Hine’s Empire State Building, Margaret Bourke-White’s Fort Peck Dam. Much of the memorability of those images comes from how they flirt with abstraction — the people in them, becoming visual components almost as much as the machinery are — thanks to the intrinsically abstract nature of black-and-white photography.

Black and white distances. It puts its subject on a visual pedestal. It’s photography’s heroic mode. The only thing heroic about Burtynsky’s pictures is their scale. His use of color works to shorten his images, humanizing his subject matter. It’s disorienting, too, making for tableaux that are alternately alluring and toxic.

Consider “Shipyard #5, Qi Li Port.” At first glance, it appears to have been shot at magic hour — that time around sunset when actors must view cinematographers to photograph them because its soft, pinkish-orangeish tones do wonders for the complex. In fact, it does wonders for everything: sky, land, buildings. The delicately glowing light in “Shipyard #5” brings a viewer up short. It’s of a prettiness otherwise absent in “The China Series.” There is beauty, yes, but not prettiness.

A closer look reveals the sun sitting fairly high in the sky. It’s not magic-hour light that’s so beguiling. It’s chemical-lake light and the sheen on the water is an oil-slick iridescence. Either way, what matters here — what defines the picture — isn’t the light source, however pastel-pretty. It’s the pair of tankers under construction in the foreground and another quarters floating in the distance.

Color is content as well as form. It provides information. Shot in black and white, something like “Recycling #6, Plastic Toy Parts” would be a massive lump of odd, inexplicable shapes. In color, it’s revelatory: the dump as phantasmagoria. The many pink-clad workers in “Manufacturing #17, Deda Chicken Processing Plant” merge to form a chrysanthemum sea of humanity.

“Manufacturing #4, Factory Worker Dormitory” is another study in pink, thanks to the rectangular ornamentation on the building’s white-clad walls. The interplay between sterile wall and bright decoration finds an echo in the contrast between the starkly rectilinear structure and the matter-of-fact messiness of the clothes left out to dry on nearly every balcony. Planning, no matter how meticulous, can go only so far before bumping up against the untidy actualities of how people lead their lives.

Sometimes the planning — or at least the control — is artistic rather than economic. Also in “Manufacturing #4,” a solitary figure walks past the building. Perfectly centered, he wears a shirt whose color nearly matches that of the ornamentation. One marvels at Burtynsky’s staggering patience — or more staggering luck — in getting just so the passerby’s position and his color coordinating. Just because these pictures are big doesn’t mean they lack attention to detail.

So many of these images suggest vast energy, whether potential or kinetic. Yet the absolute stillness of the scene in “Manufacturing #7, Textile Mill,” conveyed by the attentiveness of the woman in the foreground, makes the unheated looms roar all the louder. The undoubted ringing of that woman’s ears reminds us that there’s nothing abstract about Burtynsky’s portrayal of Chinese industry. The workers aren’t so many extras on grandiose stages. They’re real people, doing real jobs, living real lives. In that sense, Burtynsky puts his very considerable skills at the service of journalism as well as aesthetics. Splendid art as, “The China Series” is essential as documentation.

The Burtynsky show shares gallery space with “Altered States: Views of Transition in Recent Photography.” Some of the 81 images are close kin to Burtynsky’s, such as Sue Tsang Leong’s large color photographs of urban China. Josh Winer’s pictures of mounds of quarry refuse and Steven Smith’s development in the American Southwest clearly have thematic concerns in common with “The China Series.” And Mori Insinger’s visual narrative of the construction of the Atelier 505 project in the South End chimes with all the luxury condos floating in the sky high above Shanghai, too.

Best of all are the slide projections of Chris Smith’s large-format color photographs. Their death-tech titles — “Crushed Cars, Tacoma,” “Sawdust, Tacoma,” “Wall of Drums, Seattle” — are nearly as arresting as the images.

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COURTESY OF TUFTS UNIVERSITY ART GALLERY

Edward Burtynsky:
The China Series

Altered States:
Views of Transition in Recent Photography

At the Tufts University Art Gallery, 40R Talbot Ave., Medford, through April 1. Call 617-627-3518

Manufacturing #7, Textile Mill,” among the 20 images in “Edward Burtynsky: The China Series.”