

It's the end of the world, and isn't it lovely

Edward Burtynsky and 'Altered States' at Tufts

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Toronto photographer Edward Burtynsky spent the 1980s and '90s roaming North America, photographing strip mines, quarries, oil fields, trash heaps, and junk bundled for recycling. Around 2000, his obsession with humanity's industrial exploitation of our landscape and natural resources brought him to China.

In "The China Series," which was organized by North Carolina's Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art and is on view at the Tufts University Art Gallery through April 1, Burtynsky presents 20 photographs of a nation buzzing with construction and manufacturing and growth. Thousands of brightly attired factory workers course down a factory street at a shift change. A river of plastic toys waits to be recycled. Ladies toil at endless rows of machine looms. Workers construct shoes as trays blur by them on an assembly line. Sparkling futuristic apartment towers rise at the edge of a warren of old streets crowded with buildings as part of "urban renewal" projects.

The standout photo here is *Manufacturing #17, Deda Chicken Processing Plant, Dehui City, Jilin Province (2005)*. Thousands of factory workers in pink raincoats, blue aprons, and white masks and boots stand at row after row of long tables cutting up chickens in red tubs. The people seem cooped up, but the pattern of the bright colors of their outfits, seemingly repeating to infinity, gives the image a cheery tone, as if it were some odd musical — maybe a more upbeat, cast-of-thousands version of the Björk-starring *Dancer in the Dark*.

"China is the most recent participant to be seduced by Western ideals — the hollow promise of fulfillment and happiness through material gain," Burtynsky wrote in his 2005 photo book *China*. "The mass consumerism these ideals ignite and the resulting degradation of our environment intrinsic to the process of making things should be a deep concern to all."

Burtynsky's scenes, however, don't exactly fill me with concern. Instead I'm dazzled by the ravishing kaleidoscopic patterns, the romantic lighting, the vast scale, and the profusion of detail captured on his large-format film. The 51-

year-old often shoots from far away and high above, like a god watching impassively from the heavens. The world may be going to shit, but isn't it pretty?

Manufacturing #4, Factory Worker Dormitory, Dongguan, Guangdong Province (2005) depicts a strangely vacant six-story white and pink apartment complex standing next to a canal. Burtynsky shoots the building head on, and what's striking is the repeating grid of the balconies, each one with matching pink and blue wardrobes hanging on clothes lines. It's evidence of people dwarfed, turned into uniform cogs in the machine of gargantuan Communist industry. Burtynsky offers glimpses of the rising New China that we hear much about these days, the Asian juggernaut that's competing with us for water, petroleum, and other natural resources. But ultimately these photos are about an elegant formalism, a reinvention of the minimalist grid, that muffles documentary or social concerns.

In Burtynsky's work, you find echoes of Donald Judd's fascination with repeating industrial forms and Robert Smithson's earthworks. And there's a direct line to Margaret Bourke-White's photos of American industry in the 1920s and '30s, like the shot of Fort Peck Dam in Montana that graced the cover of the first issue of *Life* magazine in 1936. (Has industry ever looked more classical and sexy?)

Burtynsky favors a rigid geometry — he faces his subjects straight on, often with vanishing points right at the center of his viewfinder, or turns them at angles running from one corner of his frame to another. Many compositions are symmetrical or mirrored. Sometimes this formalizing eye can feel dull and repetitive, as in the photographs of dying Chinese factories that he exhibited at Boston's Barbara Krakow Gallery last September, in which all lines ran back to the center of the image like bull's eyes. Who needs more elegant formalist industrial rot porn? But I'm wowed by the dazzling patterns and the awesome scale here. The chicken-processing plant and shoe-sweatshop photos seem like prequels to German artist Andreas Gursky's iconic 1999 photo *99 Cent*, a head-on panorama of an LA discount store, aisle after aisle filled with a dazzling profusion of candy, cookies, drinks, pantyhose — the cheap American capitalist cornucopia.

As Burtynsky's previous work documents, none of this society-and-industry-versus-nature stuff is particular to China, except for the cool color scheme and the super-sized scale. New England was built on mills. We trumpeted our vast constructions — skyscrapers, dams, bridges — and our manufacturing might during the mid 20th century. Massachusetts's 39-square-mile Quabbin Reservoir was created in the 1930s by drowning four towns. And we still express our ambition and pride in the scale of our constructions and engineering feats — from the Big Dig to Mayor Menino's proposed thousand-foot-tall office tower ("We'll be looking for proposals that symbolize the full

scope of this city's greatness") to the cantilevered top floor of the new Institute of Contemporary Art. Burtynsky writes, "The troubling downside of this is something I am only too aware of from my experience of life in a developed nation."

What attracted Burtynsky to China in the first place was the Three Gorges Dam, a 1.3-mile-wide wall being erected across the Yangtze River that is scheduled to be completed in 2009. It's the world's largest hydroelectric dam and when finished will produce more electricity than 10 nuclear-power plants. The dam has already begun flooding the lands it will inundate as far as 400 miles upstream.

Burtynsky offers a wide panorama of dam and water as well as a shot looking down onto the dam floor. They feel over-familiar in their vision, and dull. More moving are his photos of people and trucks crawling over some of the 13 cities, 140 towns, and 1300 villages that had to be abandoned. He aims to get at the story of the more than a million people who've been forcibly resettled by focusing on the ghost towns they left behind. There's always something alluring about ruins, but perhaps Burtynsky's compositions evince too much of a capitalist's concern with spectacle and stuff and not enough of a (true ideological) communist's concern for his fellow man.

The Burtynsky exhibit is augmented by a six-person show, "Altered States: Views of Transition in Recent Photography," that was organized by Tufts grad student Alicia Cornwell. Here are more lovely photos about our ugly remaking of the landscape, our hunger for natural resources, our profusion of junk. Perhaps following the exhibit's environmental theme, it's full of recycled ideas.

Mori Insinger's photos blandly document the construction of a luxury condo and theater building in Boston's South End. Steven Smith, who teaches at RISD, presents black-and-white photos of vacant desert hills carved into grids for houses and snaked by highways and chain-link fencing. Josh Winer offers pretty piles of stones and sand at a quarries.

Edward Burtynsky speaks at Tufts University Art Gallery | March 1 at 6:30 pm | 617.627.3518

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