

## Edward Burtynsky Depicts Our Alien Domain

The photographer's large-scale images depict landscapes altered and scarred by human industry and development.



Louis Bury December 29, 2018



Edward Burtynsky, "Phosphor Tailings Pond #4, Near Lakeland, Florida, USA" (2012), pigment inkjet print, 58 1/2 x 78 inches (© Edward Burtynsky, image courtesy Howard Greenberg and Bryce Wolkowitz Gallery, New York / Nicholas Metivier Gallery, Toronto)

The power of Edward Burtynsky's landscape photographs is undeniable. Their sweeping aerial perspectives are shot in a style that verges on abstraction without losing their figurative referent. The breathtaking, large-scale images depict landscapes altered and scarred by human industry and development. The stepped terraces and switchback roads of a dusty, Mars-red mining site resemble the desiccated ruins of an ancient civilization ("Tyrone Mine #3, Silver City, New Mexico, USA," 2012). A taupe jigsaw of desert roads connecting brine wells evokes a circuit



diagram (“Brine Wells #1, Salt Flats, Atacama Desert, Chile,” 2017). Burtynsky’s intricately patterned and textured landscapes possess a crop-formation exoticism; yet it turns out that we humans are the architects of this unnerving and seemingly alien terrain.



Edward Burtynsky, “Saw Mills #1, Lagos, Nigeria” (2016), pigment inkjet print, 58 1/2 x 78 inches (© Edward Burtynsky, image courtesy Howard Greenberg and Bryce Wolkowitz Gallery, New York / Nicholas Metivier Gallery, Toronto)

For all their considerable power, Burtynsky’s Romantic forms are in tension with their unromantic contents, a contrast articulated by the works’ informational titles. The Art Gallery of Ontario’s blockbuster *Anthropocene* exhibition — featuring rows of Burtynsky landscapes, accompanied by the like-minded films of Jennifer Baichwal and Nicolas de Pencier — handles this tension by placing the images’ labels on the floor, emphasizing their subordinate role. This apt and telling sightline hierarchy is of a piece with the landscapes themselves, whose aerial vantages position the viewer, god-like, above the fantastic scene. In rendering our species alien to itself, the images’ aestheticized, supra-human perspective reinforces our preference to marvel, on occasion, rather than confront daily, the spectacle of our own destructiveness. These exhilarating portrayals of civilization’s ecological self-estrangement are not quite the images we need, but they are the ones we deserve.

*Anthropocene continues at The Art Gallery of Ontario (317 Dundas St W, Toronto) through Jan. 6, 2019.*

