## **HYPERALLERGIC**

Art Reviews Weekend

## Edward Burtynsky Depicts Our Alien Domain

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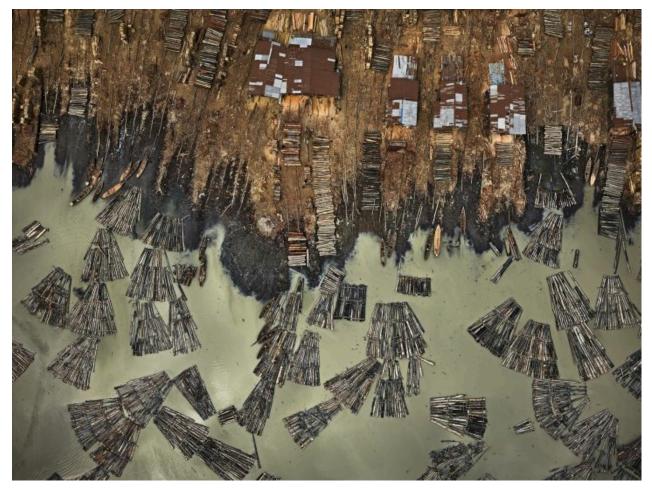
Louis Bury December 29, 2018



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.

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