

Art Review

A God's-Eye-View of Earth's Destruction

Edward Burtynsky's photographs once offered a prescient vision of large-scale anthropogenic changes; now, they feel more and more like a pretext for aesthetic dazzle.



Louis Bury July 7, 2025



Edward Burtynsky, "Modjo-Hawassa Expressway #1, Alem Tena, Ethiopia" (2018) (© Edward Burtynsky, courtesy Howard Greenberg Gallery, New York)

Edward Burtynsky: The Great Acceleration at the International Center of Photography contains the artist's largest ever print, which is saying something. Across a celebrated 40-plus-year career, Burtynsky has been renowned for his work's ambition and scalar play. His fantastic images, often taken from aerial vantages, depict landscapes modified by human industry, from a stepped mine resembling an amphitheater ("Mines #17, Lornex Open Pit Copper Mine, Highland Valley,

British Columbia, Canada,” from 1985) to a salt pan whose multicolored pond rows evoke a painter’s palette (“Salt Pan #20, Little Rann of Kutch, Gujarat, India,” from 2016). The large formats and supra-human perspectives render the Earth alien, potentially confronting the viewer not only with our species’ collateral ecological harms but also our estrangement from them.

Even by that standard, the exhibition’s 28-by-28-foot mural “Pivot Irrigation #8, High Plains, Texas Panhandle, USA” (2012) stands out. The distant overhead view and subdued color palette transform farmland into an almost abstract composition, in which the pictorial space is divided into textured, geometric browns on one side and alternating vertical stripes of washed out blues and grays on the other. A teensy farmstead occupies the bottom left corner and the roads running parallel to the edges of the picture plane serve as a clever framing device. But the two-story-tall print’s physical size produces its most dramatic effects. It dominates the central gallery, dwarfing visitors in a manner akin to the quarry cliffs that sometimes loom over the ant-like human figures in Burtynsky’s other landscapes, such as the miners digging for cobalt, for a couple dollars a day, in “Dry Tailings #1, Kolwezi, Democratic Republic of Congo” (2024).



Installation view of *Edward Burtynsky: The Great Acceleration* at the International Center of Photography (photo Louis Bury/*Hyperallergic*)

Curator David Company’s approach encapsulates the “bigger is better” ethos that Burtynsky’s work at once critiques and embodies. The scope of the artist’s environmentalist muckraking matches the scope of the iniquities it portrays; for decades, Burtynsky has pursued research leads around the globe to capture yet more examples of civilization’s terraforming. Early in his career,

before the term “Anthropocene” became common in academic and artistic circles, such images offered a prescient vision of large-scale anthropogenic changes that were typically out of sight and out of mind. But as others have caught up to and even surpassed that vision (such as philosopher Benjamin Bratton’s concept of “[planetary scale computation](#)”), and its style has remained mostly the same, god’s-eye-view consciousness raising feels more and more like a pretext for aesthetic dazzle.

Burtynsky’s dazzle serves a psychological rather than a moral function. It can provoke in viewers the uncomfortable recognition that harmful ecological realities nonetheless appear beguiling. But it can also occlude the human-scaled implications of those realities. On the central gallery’s terrace level, Campany has helpfully included examples of Burtynsky’s lesser known work: early 1980s portraits of food plant laborers; studies of marshlands taken during the COVID-19 lockdown. While these series lack the wow factor of the artist’s panoramic work, they evidence his eye for formal patterns and keen details. But it’s hard to pay attention to these more intimate and ordinary images when you can look down from the terrace and marvel at how “Pivot Irrigation #8” towers over the people and the artworks in the gallery below.



Installation view of *Edward Burtynsky: The Great Acceleration* at the International Center of Photography featuring “Pivot Irrigation #8, High Plains, Texas Panhandle, USA” (2012) (photo Louis Bury/*Hyperallergic*)



Edward Burtynsky, "Mines #13, Inco – Abandoned Mine Shaft, Crean Hill Mine, Sudbury, Ontario, Canada" (1984) (© Edward Burtynsky, courtesy Howard Greenberg Gallery, New York)



Edward Burtynsky, "Dry Tailings #1, Kolwezi, Democratic Republic of Congo" (2024) (photo Louis Bury/Hyperallergic)



Edward Burtynsky, "Tailings #1, Kalgoorlie Western Australia Australia" (2007) (photo Louis Bury/*Hyperallergic*)



Edward Burtynsky, "Breezewood, Pennsylvania, USA" (2008) (© Edward Burtynsky, courtesy Howard Greenberg Gallery, New York)



Edward Burtynsky, "Salt Pan #20, Little Rann of Kutch, Gujarat, India" (2016) (photo Louis Bury/*Hyperallergic*)



Edward Burtynsky, "Polyfoam Resurrections, Deer Bust, Denver, Colorado, USA" (1982) (© Edward Burtynsky, courtesy Howard Greenberg Gallery, New York)

Edward Burtynsky: The Great Acceleration *continues at the International Center of Photography (84 Ludlow Street, Lower East Side, Manhattan) through September 28. The exhibition was curated by David Company.*
