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My life

Sunday morning

Edward Burtynsky

The photographer tells **Yvonne Lai** why he takes a wide angle view of humanity's industrial impact.



GROWING UP WITH BIG AUTO In General Motors' heyday, in St Catharines, Ontario, [Canada], where I grew up, more than 100,000 people lived and worked for the company. Now there are fewer than 2,000. Every city took a hit when 'big auto' began to recoil and adjust to new competition. I worked at the same factories as my father. My first job [in 1972], when I was 17, was with an independent company supplying truck frames to GM. It was a brutally difficult place to work. Then, I worked at Ford [Motor] for eight months before heading to college.

I was in the photography programme at Niagara College. It was the most expensive programme at university. I had to find jobs that allowed me to buy all the equipment and film I needed for courses. I had a summer job with GM removing toxic PCB [polychlorinated biphenyl] oils, one of the most dangerous oils we've ever created. It doesn't break down in the environment.

[My father died] when I was 15, from PCB oil exposure. Most of his buddies, too, all in their mid-40s.

LEARNING FROM MISTAKES Big business goes for profit first, compliance second. The kind of regulation in the West – which came about due to the power of the unions, work stoppages and the human-rights movement – is

starting to happen in China, which has the benefit of hindsight. It can look at the kind of crap that happened during the Industrial Revolution. The industrial sector in China is not a singular monolithic entity. It's not a level playing field. Different streams of regulation have come at different times. Rules are changing from province to province. Some areas may be tighter on the environment – others might not give a s**t.

THE ART OF NEUTRALITY I'm not an activist. I sometimes interface with the research of the NGOs in the areas I visit but, frankly, I've had to keep myself at arm's length from all that stuff, otherwise I'd be shut down. [Companies] wouldn't let me near them if I was a card-carrying environmentalist. I make it a point to explain the difference between art – which is what I do – and journalism. My life's work is to grow a compendium of our human footprint on Earth, of the aspects that are accelerating us to our limits. Resource extraction is one of the fastest activities towards that. One of the positive things I believe about my work is it raises consciousness in a way that is accessible and non-threatening to stakeholders. You can get the corporate and government leaders and individuals to stand around it and use it as an inflection point for dialogue.

OIL AND WATER For me, the most jaw-dropping act against nature and humanity is Guiyu, Guangdong province. That's where the world's computers and televisions get recycled. I've never seen anything like it. They have gas burners – the same kind used in wok frying. They cook the computer board until it starts to smoke and crackle. Then they take pliers to pull off all the components. The smoke produced is full of killer toxins and dioxins. Coming to this town, your eyes start stinging 10 kilometres away. You get an instant headache. People are raising children in this environment. The birth defects and mortality rates are off the charts.

After following the construction of the Three Gorges Dam [documented in the film *Manufactured Landscapes*], I'm now doing a series on dams further up the Yangtze as part of a series on water. The kind of meditation I did on oil [in a book published in 2008], I'm doing on water. I see them both as having huge human implications.

WEB OF INFLUENCE I became far more vocal about sustainability once I had kids. I got involved with WorldChanging [an online resource to facilitate cross-industry sustainable development] when I won the TED [Technology, Entertainment and Design] Prize, in 2005. Worldchanging.com was a non-profit blog I found funding for because it did not take the normal environmentalist position of "you're bad, we're good". It is much more positive. For example, they look at the problem of urban sprawl, outline where the issues lay and identify who has come up with solutions. The premise is that solutions are all around us. We just need to connect the tools and models. It means anybody can enter their data – whether you are a CEO or government policymaker or an individual fighting to live a more sustainable life.

PLANTING IDEAS I have an apartment in Toronto, where I've become more active in cultural philanthropy. I'm working on a prize for photographers, for example. My place north of the city is near a six-hectare forest I planted 25 years ago. The trees are now 45-feet tall. That helps me feel like I'm offsetting some of my carbon footprint. I'm planning to expand that activity with the help of like-minded people. We are looking for people with fallow land to get them to let us plant trees there. I enjoy finding models in my own backyard that work and then expanding them.

Edward Burtynsky's first solo exhibition in Hong Kong is on view until Saturday at the Sundaram Tagore Gallery, 57 Hollywood Road, Central, tel: 2581 9678.

Picture: courtesy of Sundaram Tagore Gallery