

## Recording human impact on the earth

Edward Burtynsky tells **CHEAH UI-HOON** that he wanted to photograph nature but wished to do it with a different angle

**P**HOTOGRAPHING nature in all its natural glory has been done by greats such as Ansel Adams and other landscape photographers. So when Canadian Edward Burtynsky was looking for his angle, he picked Man's impact on the landscape instead. "It's focusing the lenses on human systems we've put into the landscape," he explains, adding that he knew he wanted to photograph nature, but he wished to do it with a difference. "Most of my work is to connect us, humans, to the landscape. That's the thesis."

It's easy now to see Burtynsky's photographs through the filters of environmentalism, but when he started 30 years ago, the view towards our land and nature was very different, he recalls. "The idea of global warming, that we could fish out our oceans, or run out of petrol, for instance, just wasn't part of the discussion."

Burtynsky began with mines - iron, silver, nickel - and the impact of mining activity on the landscape, such as railtracks in the Canadian Rocky Mountains, in the 1980s. From mines, he went on to photograph quarries in North America to Europe. Then it was oil refineries and oil fields, a trail which brought him to Asia where he photographed ship-breaking work in Bangladesh by early 2000. "That was the game-changer for me," he says, as the images he took of Bangladeshis

breaking up old ships practically with their bare hands, and carrying all that steel on their shoulders, got him noticed. "I was probably the first artist to bring those images to the West." Although he had sold some work to galleries and museums from the 1980s onwards, it wasn't until 2003 that he had a solo in a major museum in Canada. From there, the awards flowed in, including the inaugural TED award in 2005 (an honour which he shared with a guy named Bono, he quips); and being named an Officer of the Order of Canada in 2006.

Burtynsky's current series, *Water*, was started in 2007, and illustrates the scale and impact of manufacturing and human consumption on the world's water supplies - and it's his largest and most ambitious project to date. It took him five years, and he started on his second documentary on the water series in the last three years. Both the film and the large-format photos are now travelling to different countries.

Working on the angle of photographing human scale and impact on nature is what Burtynsky set out to do more than 30 years ago - but one would say there's a greater urgency to his work now. "When I was born in 1955, there were maybe two billion people on earth. When I started photographing mines in the early '80s, the world population was about 3.5 to four billion. Today, there are seven billion," he points out. It stands to reason then that human impact on the environment has doubled, if not tripled or more.

But Burtynsky's art isn't about environmental activism. Instead, they invite a wide reaction. One can appreciate the patterns and symmetry of human impact on nature, or be horrified as well at the same. And then sometimes, one could be equally surprised at human ingenuity in getting what is needed out of nature.

There are some photographs that make you wonder why they are part of the series (since there's no obvious sign of water) - such as the series of concentric circles on brown soil. But that again refers to the human systems in the landscape, explains Burtynsky who shoots with a 60 megapixel Hasselblad camera. Those would be his aerial shots of the Ogolla Aquifer that spans eight states in the US, comprising 27 per cent of the irrigated land there, yielding 30 per cent of the ground water used for irrigation. They were taken from 7,000 feet above sea level, from a single-propeller Cessna with a hole at the bottom of the plane which he shot through. "But the irrigation system is amazing - as this is one way that man has been able to draw water out from the ground, from these trapped lakes," he notes.

There are some more "obvious" ones, though more documentary than artistic - such as those of pilgrims during Kumbh Mela at the Ganges River. "That was actually the hardest picture to take, and I still didn't get the shot I wanted after planning for it for two years," Burtynsky shares. "That was because he couldn't get permis-



**Burtynsky:** 'There's no way you can build up cities and metropolises without mining, quarrying, consuming fuel and forests.' PHOTO: YEN MENG JIIN

sion to stand where he wanted to, on a raised platform, for the shot he had in mind.

But as an artist, it's clear that Burtynsky sees no easy answers to environmental issues. "There's no way you can build up cities and metropolises without mining, quarrying, consuming fuel and forests," he says.

Environmentalists could extrapolate and draw up entire campaigns based on his photographs, but Burtynsky has remained true to his artistic integrity. That impartiality has allowed him to photograph landscapes which the average person wouldn't normally see. His photographs are visually arresting, but there's so much more behind a single picture, as they also reveal much more than what you can absorb at first glance.

[uihoon@sph.com.sg](mailto:uihoon@sph.com.sg)

*'Water' ends on April 6, at Sundaram Tagore Gallery at 01-05 Gillman Barracks. Gallery hours are 11am-7pm from Tue-Sat, and 11am to 6pm on Sun*



**Mass of humanity:** Some of Burtynsky's photos are more documentary than artistic - like this one taken at the Kumbh Mela in Haridwar, India.

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