

**EDWARD BURTYNSKY**  
**The China Series**

September 16 - November 5, 2006

Over the past two and a half decades, internationally acclaimed Toronto photographer Edward Burtynsky has explored the globe, documenting sites irrevocably transformed by industrial activity. His images of quarries, mines, railcuts, oil refineries and shipbreaking are powerful depictions of the earth's transformations through human endeavor. The China Series is an exhibition of newly completed works from the artist's recent trips to China. Included are depictions of the controversial Three Gorges Dam Project—by far the world's most extravagant and intrusive engineering feat—alongside cinematic depictions of China's burgeoning cities and industrial labour force. The formal geometries and tight organizational symmetries of Burtynsky's photographs bring to mind the work of filmmakers such as Leni Riefenstahl and Fritz Lang. The scale and ambition aims to illuminate mankind's intrusion into the natural environment and at the same time, showcase a country whose work force and manufacturing prowess has rapidly exploded, heralding an industrial revolution on a scale not seen since the emergence of the United States as a global superpower.

Burtynsky states: "Nature transformed through industry is a predominate theme in my work. I set course to intersect with a contemporary view of the great ages of man; from stone, to minerals, oil, transportation, silicon, and so on. To make these ideas visible I search for subjects that are rich in detail and scale yet open in their meaning. Recycling yards, mine tailings, quarries and refineries are all places that are outside of our normal experience, yet we partake of their output on a daily basis.

These images are meant as metaphors to the dilemma of our modern existence; they search for a dialogue between attraction and repulsion, seduction and fear. We are drawn by desire - a chance at good living, yet we are consciously or unconsciously aware that the world is suffering for our success. Our dependence on nature to provide the materials for our consumption and our concern for the health of our planet sets us into an uneasy contradiction. For me, these images function as reflecting pools of our times."

Ed Burtynsky was born in St. Catharines, Ontario in 1955. His work has been featured in exhibitions around the world, and was recently the subject of retrospective exhibition organized by the National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa (2003), touring to the Finnish Museum of Photography at Cable Factory, Helsinki, Finland, The Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, Ontario, and The Brooklyn Museum of Art, Brooklyn, New York. The artist is represented by the Charles Cowles Gallery, NYC and Nicholas Metivier Gallery, Toronto.

*Edward Burtynsky: The China Series* was organized by the Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art, Winston Salem, North Carolina.

### Three Gorges Dam

The Three Gorges Dam is the world's largest and most powerful hydroelectric dam. Located on the Yangtze River, and straddling Hubei and Sichuan provinces, the stretches two kilometers across (five times wider than

America's Hoover Dam), standing 185 meters high. Structural work began in 1993 and is now finished, and behind the dam's vast concrete buttress the beginnings of a 600-kilometer lake now form. When it is fully operational in 2009, the dam will control floods, provide for inland shipping, and generate 18,200 megawatts of electricity from 26 turbines—the output of approximately 16 nuclear power plants. Budgeted investment is nearly \$25 billion (all figures quoted in U.S. dollars) but some dam watchers say costs could rise to as much as \$75 billion by completion.

Plans to dam the Yangtze have existed for almost a hundred years. Sun Yat-sen, the 'Father of the Revolution,' is often identified as being one of, if not the, first proponent. However, the original plans were shelved due to unfavorable political and economic conditions until April 3, 1992, when the Seventh National People's Congress (NPC) finally approved it. Former Premier Li Peng, who had long ties to the power industry in China, was a major champion of the project, which he considers his life's work.

Building mega dams in the 21st century has spawned global criticism and is central to a growing debate. To make room for the Three Gorges Dam, approximately 1.13 million people were relocated and their livelihoods challenged. It is the largest peacetime evacuation in history. Fertile agricultural lands and important cultural/historic sites will be submerged under a vast reservoir. By 2009, 13 major cities, 140 towns and over 1,300 villages, along with 1,600 factories and mines and an unknown number of farms will have vanished beneath its surface. Accurate quantitative information regarding human resettlement is difficult to come by as official Chinese government figures often disagree with independent reports.

### Shipyards

Located in southeastern Zhejiang Province, Qili port is home to China's largest mid-size shipyard. On any given day at least 100 ships are in production—lined up against the water's edge with their sterns pointing out to sea. With over 12,000 workers using 500,000 tons of steel, Qili port shipyards build 232 to 250 ships per year. Bulk carriers make up 62 percent of the production, containerships 30 percent and oil tankers eight percent. Ships range in size from 7,000 to 14,000 tons each and on average take eight months to produce. Ninety-five percent of Qili port ships are purchased domestically by Chinese companies and remain almost entirely within Chinese waters, sailing to a rapidly growing port network while feeding China's developing economy with raw materials and goods. According to the Chinese Commission of Science, Technology and National Defense, by 2015 China is expected to become the world's largest shipbuilder, with annual output reach 24 million deadweight tons, or 35 percent of the world's total.

### Manufacturing

In the southern province of Guangdong, one can drive for hours along numerous highways that reveal a virtually unbroken landscape of factories and workers' dormitories. These new 'manufacturing landscapes' in the southern and eastern parts of China produce more and more of the world's goods and have become the habitat for a diverse group of companies and millions of workers. Merchandise common in the west is

produced here, including 90 percent of the world's Christmas decorations, 29 percent of its color television sets, 75 percent of the world's toys, 70 percent of all cigarette lighters and a large percentage of the global trade in textiles. The hard drive for the iPod mini is made in the city of Gulyang, in China's poorest province.

China now plays a central role in the global supply chain for the world's multinational corporations. Wal-Mart alone outsourced fifteen billion dollars worth of manufacturing, making the company China's eighth largest trading partner. Altogether, nearly half of China's foreign trade is tied to foreign-invested enterprises in China. This investment brought managerial, organizational and technical expertise that China has fully integrated into its business model. Since the early 1990s, more than one-half trillion U.S. dollars have flowed into this country's manufacturing sector, mainly from its Asian neighbors; Hong Kong, Taiwan, Korea, Japan and Singapore.

### Urban Renewal

Under Mao Zedong's government, population growth was considered an asset to long-term development and until Mao's death in 1976, encouraged. The population of China in 1950 was 550 million. Today it stands at 1.3 billion. In 1952, urban dwellers numbered 72 million. By 2003 that number was almost 524 million people. Recent estimates indicate that over the next forty years China's urban populace will increase to over one billion city dwellers—the equivalent of the combined population of today's North and South American continents as well as the entire European Union.

During the 1960s and 1970s, China imposed strict limits on migration as a way to maintain reasonable living standards in the cities. Today however, China is experiencing the largest country-to-city migration in history. Millions are leaving their farms for urban centers. Huge cities like Beijing and Shanghai attract peasants from the countryside who search for opportunities in the new economy. Accommodation for these new city-folk will require a feat of urban planning and governance on a scale the world has never seen. It is estimated that from 80 to 120 million migrant laborers are working, or looking for work in China's booming cities. Most find jobs in the construction industry and the rapidly expanding service sector. Because they work outside China's strict *Hukou* urban-work-permit system, these migrant workers have been dubbed 'The Floating Population' and are, in some regards, illegally working in their own country. Beijing and Shanghai each have floating populations of between two and four million people. Once a generally ignored problem, these cities are now attempting to assist many of the newcomers as they provide labor for a rapidly growing service industry. During the 1990 to 2002 period, as much as 38 million square meters of older houses and apartments were removed to make room for modern residential and commercial properties.

The government owns all land in China, but people have the right to use or occupy the land. Shanghai City's plan to modernize has developers from around the world eager to jump into the game. Many of Central Shanghai's old houses sit on the most desirable parcels of land. Often citizens will be notified

of their residential termination by the sudden appearance of the (now ubiquitous) Chinese character 拆 (*Chai* – demolish) painted on the outside of their building. Under Chinese law the government will provide substitute housing for residents of redevelopment areas, even if these substitutions are located hours away in the suburbs. To some, the idea of moving into a new apartment that has functional interior plumbing with hot water, something often lacking in older houses, is a welcome change.

But to many, the idea of dismantling their community, moving away from neighbors and not receiving satisfactory compensation for prime real estate is a battle worth fighting—enter the *Dingzhu* or 'Hold Outs.' Scattered around Shanghai today one can see lone houses or parts of large buildings surrounded by rubble where a neighborhood once stood. It's here, where maverick residents decide to make a stand to preserve their lifestyle and dignity. Developers are now frequently accused of using heavy-handed tactics to edge the older residents out. This has become a growing source of protest—the forcible eviction of millions from their city homes and farms to make way for profitable new construction projects.

### Recycling

Unlike many western nations whose citizens, for the most, participate in recycling due to a combination of environmental awareness and municipal initiatives, in China motivation to recycle is largely economic. There are relatively few government or municipal systems for urban collection. On a local level, Chinese citizens scour the streets of cities and villages daily, collecting anything from soda cans and water bottles to old refrigerators, washing machines or simply anything made of metal, paper, wood or plastic. Many collectors use three-wheeled bicycle carts, stalking high-density residential areas and advertising their arrival by shouting or ringing a bell to alert anyone who might want to part with junk. Recycling is profitable for everyone. Households with unwanted scrap can sell to collectors, and prices are calculated by the amount of resource value embedded in the item. Collected items are dropped off at depots located in the suburbs, which have, over the years, grown organically to resemble shantytowns. A hardworking scrap collector in Beijing can earn about \$125 to \$190 US per month.

On a large scale, China has become a global recycler. Its resource-hungry economy, inexpensive labor force and poorly enforced rules on waste trade make China a choice destination for recyclable materials. Most large scale recycling in China is primitive, but there are exceptions. Organized corporate operations such as Cankun (a.k.a. EUPA), the world's third largest aluminum recycler, have refined the process of recycling into a remarkably efficient industry. Many Chinese businessmen with an established worldwide network of brokers purchase large quantities of material (much of it hazardous) from developed Western and Asian nations then ship it by container vessels to China's eastern and southern ports. Due to the very nature of large-scale recycling, and despite efforts by the central government in Beijing to prohibit the importation of hazardous forms of waste, China faces environmental and human health costs in the form of deteriorated air, land and water.

**Artist Talk**

Tuesday, October 10, 12:30 pm at Vancity Theatre,  
1181 Seymour St (at Davie)  
Admission is FREE

**Reception with the artist**

Tuesday, October 10, 7pm at Presentation House Gallery

**Gallery Hours**

Wednesday to Sunday, 12 - 5pm & Thursday open till 9pm

**Film Screening**

Wednesday, October 11, 9:15pm

Thursday, October 12, 11:30 am

at Empire Granville Theatre Cinemas #3

The feature documentary *Manufactured Landscapes*

screens as part of the Vancouver International Film Festival.

The artist will be in attendance.

**PRESENTATION HOUSE GALLERY**

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