

Oil Landscapes

Edward Burtynsky, *Oil*. Göttingen: Steidl, 2011.

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This extravagant book is larger than most coffee table books, and one that catches the eye not only because of its bulk, but by the visual demand made by the photo on its cover: an army of pumpjacks stretching away to the California desert horizon. This latest collection of Edward Burtynsky's photographs (winner of the 2010 Deutscher Fotobuchpreis Silver Medal) is made up of both new and old photos that address the topic of oil from every possible angle. In Burtynsky's characteristic style, which emphasizes scale and number (most often from the vantage point offered by a construction crane), these photos prompt shock and awe in the face of the visual representation of the sheer size of those varied infrastructures that enable oil to course through the veins of global society.

Burtynsky describes *Oil* (which has been exhibited at galleries and museums around the world, beginning at the Corcoran Gallery of Art in 2009) as the outcome of an "oil epiphany" he had in 1997. "It occurred to me that the vast, human-altered landscapes that I pursued and photographed for over twenty years," he writes, "were only made possible by the discovery of oil and the mechanical advantage of the internal combustion engine... These images can be seen as notations by one artist contemplating the world as it is made possible through this vital energy resource and the cumulative effects of industrial evolution." The book is divided into three sections intended to document the life cycle of oil, passing from "Extraction and Refinement" to "Transportation and Motor Culture" to "The End of Oil." The photos making up each section are heterogeneous in

theme and content, and photographed at numerous locations around the world.

“Extraction and Refinement” includes images of older oil fields in the California desert, which tend to be jam-packed with drill rigs and pumpjacks; the expansive oil sands extraction sites and tailing ponds in Fort McMurray, Alberta; and the complex, visually dynamic (if virtually incomprehensible) twists and turns of refinery structures in Ontario, Newfoundland and Texas. “Transportation and Motor Culture” begins with a series of Escher-like images of enormous highway interchanges, before taking us to massive car import lots in the US and China, as well as sites at which people accumulate around the fantasy of driving, as in the biker and trucker jamboree’s held in Sturgis, South Dakota and Walcott, Iowa, respectively.

If the photos in the first two sections draw our attention to the apparatuses and infrastructures that produce and are produced by oil—from sites of extraction largely hidden from view to the quotidian landscape of highways and car lots—“The End of Oil” probes the consequences of oil society, especially through the detritus that it leaves behind. The multiple images of the ancient oilfields of Baku, as well as of gigantic graveyards of cars, helicopters, planes, jet engines, tires and oil drums, are concluded with a sequence of photos on which Burtynsky made his fame: the shipbreaking yards of Chittagong, Bangladesh, where nineteenth-century labour meets twenty-century garbage through the mechanism of twenty-first century off-shoring of multinational capitalism’s expenses and responsibilities.

Oil is a photo-narrative – an attempt to tell a story through images. Rather than an exhibition of his latest pieces, the book (and the show it represents) is akin to a curatorial exercise in which one aspect of an artist’s thematic preoccupations are drawn out of a

larger body of work. What makes *Oil* unique is that in this case the curator is the artist himself, who has revisited his large body of images in an effort to produce a tale that might generate in its viewers the same oil epiphany that prompted their production. Burtynsky is far from the only photographer to generate photo-essays with political intent. One thinks immediately, for instance, of Allan Sekula's *Fish Story*, though text (the powerful essays included alongside his photos in most of his published work) is important for Sekula in a way that it isn't for Burtynsky: with the exception of a short opening fragment that describes the ambition of this photo-series and the epiphany that kicked it off, no text accompanies the photos—not even titles or identifications of the sites at which they were taken (this information is, however, available in the book's index). There's no doubt that Burtynsky provides us with powerful, alluring and dramatic images. One of the questions that the book raises is the not just whether it succeeds in its political and pedagogic aim—too blunt of a question to be posed to such a varied and vibrant set of images in any case—but what we are to make of the visual mechanisms that Burtynsky employs in his photos and their capacity to name the central place of oil in our social imaginaries and ontologies.

The impulse of documentary photography with political aims is to engage in exposé: to introduce to vision otherwise hidden practices or spaces that we should know about, but don't—either because we don't want to or because we aren't meant to. Though Burtynsky's images retain some of this impulse (it is why they can accompany magazine or newspaper articles less as art pieces than as instances of journalistic photography), there is more going on. His attention to the spectacle of scale and the elevated vantage point from which his images are taken—either full aerial shots, as in the case of the

freeway interchanges, or from above the horizon line—simultaneously exemplify and critique the enduring fantasy of enlightenment knowledge. The god’s eye perspective produces the enormity everywhere on display—a form of knowledge that makes it possible to leave human marks on a vast, almost planetary scale. Burtynsky’s deserts are filled to the brim with cars and planes, and his images of garbage dumps—on a similar other worldly scale—track the detritus left behind when each is junked. There is something of the sublime in these photographs: not the Kantian sublime, that encounter with the unknowable that only re-confirms the Enlightenment subject’s ability to, in the end, know and control everything, but the terror and lack of control that is characteristic of Edmund Burke’s sublime. An oil epiphany can mean that one suddenly understands what one didn’t; in another register, it can mean that one finally comes to understand that one *doesn’t* understand, or can’t possibly understand, what humanity hath wrought to the planet as a result of oil. The feeling one gets in moving through Burtynsky’s photo-narrative of oil from birth to death is more the latter than the former. And this is to his credit: the painful and beautiful images on display in *Oil* never stoop to render oil manageable, not even fully graspable, except as a dimension of contemporary social life whose blunt reality we can no longer hide away from.