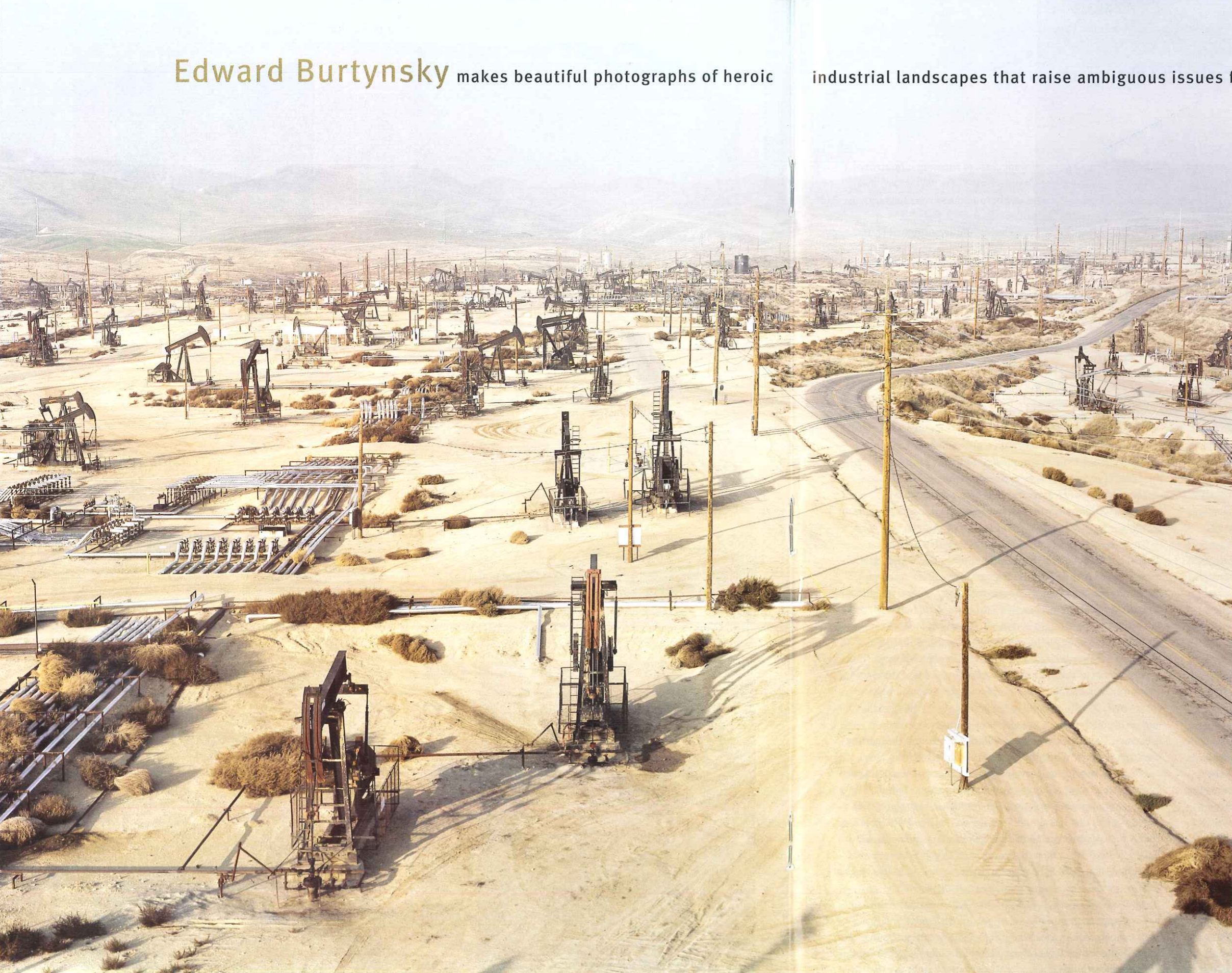


Edward Burtynsky makes beautiful photographs of heroic industrial landscapes that raise ambiguous issues for their audience



## THE ELEVENTH HOUR IN PHOTOGRAPHY

by GARY MICHAEL DAULT

Ed Burtynsky and I were indulging ourselves in a little genial photo-nostalgia one afternoon a few weeks ago in his majestic corner office at Toronto Image Works, the thriving photo lab and digital-imaging centre he established in downtown Toronto back in 1986. We'd just been looking at a colour photograph of his that was nearly as big as a billboard. "I remember when most serious photographs were 11 by 14 inches," I tell him. "And a really big photograph was 20 by 24, right?" he adds.

When was that anyhow? Twenty years ago? Twenty-five? "That's the real reason I began Toronto Image Works," Burtynsky tells me. "I was able to make prints up to 11 by 14 in my basement darkroom" (Burtynsky has been a darkroom adept since he was 11), "but I couldn't make them bigger than that. So I founded a lab where I could." Simple.

Bigness is, of course, everywhere now. Andreas Gursky, Thomas Ruff, Andres Serrano, Thomas Struth, Candida Höfer, Norway's Tom Sandberg (who makes the largest black-and-white photographs I've ever seen), Jeff Wall, Roy Arden, well, almost everyone who, if you'll forgive the pun, has made it big in photography.

## Is he a documentarian, a pictorial epicure, an ironist?

You wonder now why it took everybody so long. At any rate, bigness is the new academy requirement, just as the painting academy required that paintings be big in the fifties and sixties (Motherwell, de Kooning, Pollock, Newman, Still, Held, Rauschenberg, blah, blah). There's an inverse relationship in scale between painting and photography: now that photography is big, important paintings are weighing in small.

It's exciting to look at big photographs—if they are big, *high-focus* photographs—because there is more in them than meets the (naked) eye. That this is so edges us towards both surrealism and sublimity.

Surrealism, because if what we see in the photo is more than we could see otherwise, the photo is more (“sur”) than, greater than real. Looking at crisply focused works that are gigantic is a pleasingly, rather courtly experience whereby the privileged viewer is suddenly privy to the same status as a shard of visual godhead, seeing, as if from the edge of a cloud, the machinations of tiny everydayness on Earth. Everyman as Chaucer's Troilus (*Troilus and Criseyde*), perched, laughing, on the eighth crystalline sphere around Earth, from which he gets things in perspective. To be given extra sight by the photographer makes a viewer feel warmly omniscient, like the see-all, know-all narrator of some teeming 19th-century novel.

Sublimity, because if what we see in the photograph is more than we could see otherwise, the experience is thrillingly, exhilaratingly fearsome in its sudden awful, vertiginous clarities, and it pushes us dangerously, visually speaking, beyond what 18th-century Enlightenment poet Alexander Pope cunningly recommended, in his famous *An Essay on Man* (1733), as mankind's sensual province:

The bliss of Man (could Pride that blessing find)  
Is not to act or think beyond mankind;  
No pow'rs of body or of soul to share,  
But what his nature and his state can bear.

“Why has not Man a microscopic eye?” Pope asks. “Because,” he contents himself, “Man is not a Fly” (I am pretty sure Pope would have felt equally jaundiced about our possessing telescopic eyes). Why bother experiencing “quick effluvia darting thro' the brain” if only, as a consequence, to “Die of a rose in aromatic pain?” For Pope, whose cozy, most-rational-of-all-possible-worlds existence would soon be destabilized by Edmund Burke's investigative codifying of the tenets of the sublime, happiness still lay in being satisfyingly bounded. Beyond the carapace of our gifts and abilities lurked the stridencies, the condemnations of freedom. Sublimity provides the humbling and, at the same time, euphoric feeling of being invited, as a consciousness, into terrain that is too big for us (mountains, the sea, the arcing endlessness of time and space). With sublimity came the advent

of romanticism, and the buoyant curse of runaway subjectivity.

We love being too big for ourselves. These days we are always beside ourselves. And above and beyond ourselves. Our very province is provincelessness.

Ed Burtynsky's photographs are curiously positioned within that heady, disturbing openness. Especially inasmuch as they provide continuing ambiguities for the fuelling of the conventional, long-standing mind-body tussle. What they show us—trains like toys cutting across measureless walls of mountainside, mine shafts apparently photographed on other planets, marble quarries where Michelangelo's *David* would look like a charm fallen from a bracelet, oil fields where a thousand drilling rigs grip the earth darkly like hair implants on a bald head—is mind-boggling. They are invariably so visually stupendous, in fact, that they lull us, by means of their miasmatic beauty (its engulfing feels like the experiential mode Freud would have called “oceanic”) into a sort of initial somnolence, a trance from which we are likely to awaken only when we change perceptual lenses from rapturous scan to focused inspection. “If the doors of perception were cleansed,” wrote William Blake in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, “everything would appear to man as it is, infinite.” Maybe, but when the doors of perception are cleansed, things begin to show their true colours. God may or may not, as Mies van der Rohe once suggested, live in the details, but ratiocination does. And political understanding. And historical perspective. “My photographs are a *body* experience,” Burtynsky tells me. Bodily as opposed to, say, an analytical, critical experience. Thus it is that Burtynsky's widescreen beauty can seduce when it might better have alarmed.

Burtynsky knows all this, of course. He stresses that “the experience of the photograph is different, in complex ways, from the experience of the place itself,” and points out that the reason environmental, sociological, political perspective invariably comes in a sobering second in his photographs of the world's large-scale interventions into previously unmediated nature is because “you can't skew the meaning right out of the starting gate” (you can't?). While Burtynsky is comfortable seeing his photographs as a form of research, it is too easy, he feels, to say of any ecologically pre-emptive undertaking and its fallout (tailings, tire fires, oil depletion, the despoiling of the land, air, water, people) that it is simply “wrong.” While he agrees there are clearly no easy solutions to mankind's planetary problems, he also feels that “looking at them is a good start.” A good start towards a solution, that is to say. As Burtynsky remarked to writer Noah Richler, who accompanied the photographer on a journey to Bangladesh for an article in *Saturday Night* magazine, “Does one believe man is a part of nature, or outside it? If you think man's a part of nature then all of this [the vista before them, in this case the tidal flats of the Bay of Bengal where decommissioned ships are being laboriously cut apart]... has as much right to exist as

PREVIOUS PAGE:  
*Oil Fields #9, McKittrick, California* 2002  
Chromogenic colour print All photos courtesy  
Mira Godard Gallery

RIGHT: *Shipbreaking #13, Chittagong, Bangladesh* 2000  
Chromogenic colour print



a beaver dam. But if you think we're unnatural, then man's industry is yet another blight on landscape, something that spoils the natural environment we were once given.” It isn't so much a case, of course, of our being, as a species, natural or unnatural as it is our being naturally heedless, naturally rapaciously greedy and naturally morally unaccountable.

The problems generated by the dichotomy of perceptual ravishment and subsequent abashment and even discomfiture before Burtynsky's photographs tincture the argument of several of the essays published in the catalogue of the National Gallery of Canada's current Burtynsky retrospective (*Manufactured Landscapes: The Photographs of Edward Burtynsky*, on view until May 4), most subtly by guest essayist Kenneth Baker, art critic for the *San Francisco Chronicle*. “...his subjects, the sites and equipment of heavy industry,” writes Baker, in his deftly titled essay *Form versus Portent: Edward Burtynsky's Endangered Landscapes*, “are in almost constant connotative conflict with his work's aesthetic elegance. Is he an apologist for the industrial order and its new face, globalization? Is he a documentarian, a pictorial epicure, an ironist? Burtynsky's refusal to stand fast in any of these positions explains the improbable emotional authority of his art...”

The astonishing *Shipbreaking* photographs, from the aforementioned Bay of Bengal, are a case in point. Here, squads of Bangladeshi men and boys are engaged in disassembling the grounded and junked freighters languishing offshore, cutting giant shards from their ghostly hulls. The salvaged hunks of ship, now huge, accidentally abstracted, inadvertently eloquent structures, sit on the muddy flats, glowing like chunks of spun sponge toffee in the raking morning light. “These photographs have huge amounts of sky,” Burtynsky tells Richler, “but because

of the pollution, it's very rare that you can actually see the horizon. When it's eradicated like it is today it's as if we're being presented with an ethereal space. That's the look I want.”

The shards of broken ship, as every art-savvy viewer invariably notices, look a lot like works of modernist sculpture. “If I was Richard Serra,” Burtynsky jokes to Richler, “I'd just pick this whole piece up and land it in the MoMA.” Critic Kenneth Baker trades eloquently if perhaps over-subtly on these inescapable associations in his catalogue essay for the Ottawa show: “Before long,” he writes, “the visual affinity between the shipbreaking fields and a sculpture garden enters one's mind. We may find the parallel attractive precisely because it softens the pictures' documentary force. If we are conversant with modern and contemporary sculpture, as Burtynsky evidently is, we may then recognize a sour irony. The Bangladeshi shipbreakers unwittingly invert the ambitions of twentieth-century sculptors such as Richard Serra, Mark di Suvero and David Smith, who dreamed of making a train by hand.”

Baker then sets out to rescue Burtynsky from the stigma of having merely aestheticized his subjects: “...Burtynsky's submerged references to non-photographic modern art slow, perhaps even block, merely hedonistic consumption of his pictures.” Baker's ingenious argument in support of the photographer's unmediated and uncritical visual majesty comes, in the end, to a realization that restraint is “the true mark of Burtynsky's art. How easily he could have turned didactic,” Baker notes, “considering the themes he takes on: humanity's heedless treatment of the earth, photography's potential complicity in narcotizing society's uncomfortable self-awareness, the conflict of irreconcilable values as an inescapable human condition. Yet he trusts his art to work upon us, and us to respond



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appropriately, without being told what that might mean.”

As his career accelerates, the trajectory of Burtynsky's global peregrinations lengthens. His current body of work, to be premiered at Toronto's Mira Godard Gallery in May, consists of photographs taken last year in China. Given his lyric penchant for Faustian industrialism, Burtynsky was drawn to document the world's largest hydroelectric project, the building of the Three Gorges Dam on the Yangtze River.

Highly controversial since its launch in 1992, this dizzying mega-project involves the forming of a 660-km-long channel-type reservoir which, with the completion of the dam in 2009, will result in the entire submerging of 21 cities and counties on over 600 square kilometres of land under a newly manufactured lake 175 metres higher than the water level now. The ostensible twin purposes of the project are to generate power—as much

electricity, apparently, as can be generated by 18 nuclear power plants—and to control the destructive flooding of the lower Yangtze, which regularly kills thousands of people and displaces many thousands more from their homes. And so now, the flooding and displacement is to be regulated—bigtime. It's an old story, told in oversize terms: the project pays off in power and economic clout; what is lost in the trade-off is a previous ecology, a traditional way of life and a rich cultural heritage (the new lake formed by the new dam will drown thousands of important archaeological sites containing irreplaceable artifacts).

Burtynsky's photographs of the systematic levelling of cities and towns and villages to be cleared before the new dam floods them are breathtaking—in many different ways.

I think what happens with a Burtynsky photograph is that first, one is grateful for being taken where he is going, and for

being shown what he can see. All of his photographs are, initially at least, the stuff of revelation—the China photos especially so. It's one thing to read about the Three Gorges Dam project. It's quite another to be tumbled headlong into it (standard size for the China photos is 40 by 50 inches). And that's what it feels like to look at the new photographs. As with all of his work, there is that precipitous moment, that visual intake of breath, as, in the act of beholding, you find you can scarcely believe your eyes.

We are looking together, for example, at a vista, as viewed characteristically from somewhere high above it—a dun-coloured field of gravel and rubble relieved by a few wrecked buildings and, here and there, rhythmically dispersed throughout the picture, tiny Dinky Toy trucks in red and blue, clearing away the now powdered, pulverized city of Fengjie—a city of about 80,000 people which once, until last autumn, lay about 150 km west of the proposed dam. There are a few tiny figures in the foreground of the photograph, striving along a road leading out the bottom of the picture. Then you raise your eyes and you also see that the stricken landscape is punctuated by lots of little vertical black marks. “There are hundreds of people in this photograph,” Burtynsky tells me. I look again. “Every dark mark is a person,” he points out. Revelation. The dark sublimity of a suddenly forced and aghast engagement with what is in the photo.

There are two of Burtynsky's China photos that conveniently and tellingly bracket the astonishing rapidity with which an entire way of life is changing. They are both, again, of the city of Fengjie. They are before-and-after photos—unusual in Burtynsky's canon. The first of the photos was made in September, 2002. It shows the city half demolished, taken apart by hand, felled with sledgehammers (so that the building materials might be painstakingly recycled and so that, as Burtynsky explained, everything made of wood or anything else that might float is harvested, collected and burned so that, when the waters come, the stuff won't float to the dam and clog it up). Half of the city is down. Half of it still consists of ghostly high-rises, grey, empty, their windows staring like blind eyes. The second photograph was taken two months later, in November. Fengjie is gone. The mountains formerly occluded by buildings now endstop a wasteland. You can scarcely believe it's the same place except for the fact that in the first photo there's a large 40-gallon drum lying on its side in the foreground and in the second photo, it's still there. “I expected to come back and find the city half gone,” Burtynsky says. “I had no idea a whole city could be done in so quickly. I got there at the eleventh hour.”

Where there's a will there's a way. On the part of the Chinese, I mean, not Burtynsky. And one is grateful for the privileged view. How grandly, how epically, how operatically the gorgeous sang-froid of Burtynsky's photographs permits us this impotent, totalizing vision! How generously they first furnish us with a certain kind of planar knowledge, and then beguile us into the balm of reverie with the visual music of industrial time. When ignorance is bliss, wrote the 18th-century poet Thomas Gray, a master of scale, distance and moral focus, 'tis folly to be wise. What happens, though, when it's the other way round? ■

*Three Gorges Dam Project, Feng Jie #7,  
Yangtze River, China 2002 Chromogenic colour print*