EDWARD BURTYNSKY AUSTRALIAN MINESCAPES

WESTERN AUSTRALIAN MUSEUM

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EDWARD BURTYNSKY'S MINESCAPES: AN AUSTRALIAN PERSPECTIVE

HELEN ENNIS

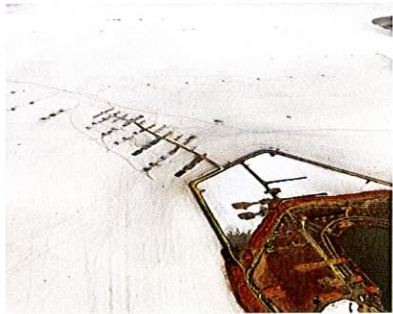
Locating Edward Burtynsky's Australian minescapes within his own oeuvre is a relatively straightforward matter. There is a satisfying logic to the Australian commission, given his sustained investigation of the idea of the industrial landscape and his desire to show 'how we have changed the landscape in significant ways in the pursuit of progress'.[1] For many years Burtynsky has photographed mines, quarries and tailings in his home country Canada, the United States, Europe and Asia, examples of which are published in his impressive 2003 monograph *Manufactured Landscapes*. The scale of his Western Australian subject matter is appropriate in light of his attraction to what he describes as 'the largest example of something', be it an iron ore mine or a shipwrecking yard. As he has said: 'Massive operations result in the greatest and most complex transformations.' [2]

The mining sites Burtynsky visited in Western Australia provided him with the transformative potential that is central to his practice, but how might we compare the work he produced to traditional Australian photography, particularly landscape and industrial photography? As Burtynsky has made clear, his legacy is American and European landscape photography, especially by 19th-century American photographer Carleton Watkins and German modernist August Sander (he speaks eloquently of their influence). Burtynsky could not be expected to have any in-depth knowledge of traditions in Australian photography. Indeed, how could he when we have not yet attained that ourselves? Research on various aspects of photography in Australia is flourishing, but to date there have been no major historical exhibitions or publications devoted exclusively to the subjects of photography and landscape, let alone to industrial photography. This seems surprising when landscape – responses to place, to land, to country – is widely acknowledged as being a potent force in Australian visual arts, including photography, and in the popular imagination.

While a rigorous, extended and critical engagement with photography, landscape and industry is still to come, it is possible to make a number of comments about the intersection of Burtynsky's interests with those of Australian practitioners. The first is that his minescapes relate to the overwhelming preoccupation with the settled or inhabited landscape rather than the 'natural', untouched landscape. Archives in library, museum and art museum collections around the country are filled with landscapes that incorporate human presence – European not Aboriginal. It is either made explicit through the inclusion of human figures or implied through signs of activity ranging from farming to recreation.

It was not until the 1970s that an alternative vision of the un-peopled or wilderness landscape began to cohere, due largely to the efforts of European-born exponents living and working in Tasmania, notably Olegas Truchanas and Peter Dombrovskis (they admired some of the same American landscape photographers as Burtynsky). Representations of Aboriginal inhabitation of the landscape came even later, in the 1980s, through the work of Indigenous photographers such as Ricky Maynard and Michael Riley.

In Burtynsky's images taken around Kalgoorlie and Lake Lefroy, the 'natural' landscape and mining are not presented as separate entities: they are entwined. Such a synthesis is not new, though its meaning and significance have obviously changed given the realities of rapidly diminishing resources and global warming. Photographs of mining appeared as early as the 1860s in the work of Richard Daintree, a trained geologist active in Queensland, and proliferated in subsequent decades in the work of Charles Bayliss, JW Beattie, Nicholas Caire and others. For these 19th-century Australian photographers – and their American counterparts, to whom Burtynsky pays tribute – there was no apparent contradiction between love of the natural world and enthusiasm for the very activities, such as mining, that we now recognise as despoiling it. Progress was seen as being dependent on the transformation of the natural world, a world regarded as being even more extraordinary for the seemingly limitless natural resources it offered.



Silver Lake Operations #15, Lake Lefroy, Western Australia, 2007

In Australia, mining activities were photographed during the 20th century by Frank Hurley, Wolfgang Sievers and others. In the work of German-born Wolfgang Sievers, who undertook numerous commissions for Australian mining companies from the 1950s to the 1970s, nature and industry were seen as discrete, even as mutually exclusive. Sievers focused on the physical structures associated with mining, their massive scale filling the frame. Mining came under a very different kind of scrutiny in Australia in the 1970s, when photographers such as Virginia Coventry, Sue Ford and Jon Rhodes mounted a critique of its effects, not only on the natural landscape but also on local people and communities. Jon Rhodes's essay 'Just another sunrise?' in 1974–5 dealt with the impact of bauxite mining on Aboriginal people in Arnhem Land.

The confluence of advanced photographic and industrial technologies evident in Burtynsky's work has its own history in Australia. Take 19th-century photographer Charles Bayliss as an example. Working in the area around Ballarat, Victoria in 1874, he made a number of wonderfully complex and luminous images of goldmining in an already blasted landscape. To depict the extensive mining operations, Bayliss worked at the limits of what was possible in photography at the time, using very large glass-plate negatives and producing contact prints. His photographic equipment, like Burtynsky's now, was absolutely contemporary, as reliant on technological innovation as the mining industry he photographed.

The elevated viewpoint Burtynsky admires in the work of various 19th-century American photographers – and which he has incorporated so successfully into his own practice – was also in common usage in colonial Australia. For Burtynsky the disorienting space created by a high vantage point is full of creative possibilities. He explains its effects in the following way:

'... the foreground begins quite far away and the scene unfolds as the eye moves into mid-aspect and on into infinity. That hovering - looking out across the great expanse ... turns the space into ... a mythic space, an archetypal sense of the landscape.'[3]

Securing a high vantage point took considerable physical effort in the past and involved climbing to tops of buildings and mountains. Flight offers Burtynsky a shortcut, and a greatly enlarged spatial and dramatic potential. Many of his Australian minescapes were taken from a helicopter; they include expansive views of the area in which the horizon is included, and more tightly cropped, disorienting views with no horizon line.

Aerial photography has its own history in Western Australia, largely through the efforts of Dutch-born photographer Richard Woldendorp. His aerial photographs of the Western Australian landscape now span more than fifty years.

The view from a plane can engender 'mixed feelings', as writer Tim Winton has perceptively noted: 'Godlike fantasies' on the one hand, in which the viewer, relieved of the limitations of being human, can see great distances, geological formations, patterns and colours that would otherwise not be discernible; and on the other, feelings of smallness arising from the recognition of one's own insignificance. In an essay accompanying Woldendorp's photographs of the west, Winton writes that 'to see the land from the air is to witness the forces it has endured, ice ages, floods untold, wind, several mining booms, the feudal grazing industry'.[4]

There is much in Edward Burtynsky's Australian minescapes that can be related to our own photographic traditions, not only in the areas of landscape photography but also in industrial and aerial photography. And yet the question must be asked: Is the search for correspondences and connections at this point in history either useful or meaningful?

Most of the Australian photographers I have cited pursued what can be described as a national and sometimes a nationalist agenda. Their work was part of a larger cultural project in the 19th and 20th centuries that was concerned with defining what was distinctively and uniquely Australian. Burtynsky's photography belongs to a different historical moment and to a globalised world. In his artist's statement published in his monograph *China* he revealed:

'I no longer see my world as delineated by countries, with borders, or language, but as 6.5 billion humans living off a precariously balanced, finite planet.'5

It is therefore not contradictory to say that Burtynsky's Australian minescapes could actually have been taken anywhere in the world. They are not about Australia or Australian-ness as such; despite their geographical and geological specificity and gorgeous palette, it is not their Australian subject matter or any Australian 'qualities' that are the point. Rather, the photographs are entirely consistent with Burtynsky's transnational approach and his long-term concern with the altered landscape, wherever it may be found.

The Australian minescapes, taken in resource-rich Western Australia, create that same deadly mix of awe, incredulity and anxiety we have come to expect of Burtynsky's work. They represent the rapacious appetite of the globalised economy, of which Australia and Australians are an integral part, and are a reminder that as consumers we are all implicated in the exploitation of the natural environment. Not only that, we are also involved in creating a world in which potentially nothing 'natural' will remain.

1 'The Essential Element: An Interview with Edward Burtynsky' in Lori Pauli et al., *Manufactured Landscapes: The Photographs of Edward Burtynsky*. National Gallery of Canada in association with Yale University Press, 2003, p. 47.

2 Ibid., p. 54.

3 Ibid., p. 55.

4 Winton, Tim. 'Strange passion: a landscape memoir' in *Down to Earth: Australian Landscapes*. Fremantle Arts Centre Press, reprinted 2007, p. xxix.

5 Fishman, Ted and Kingwell, Mark. *Burtynsky - China: The Photographs of Edward Burtynsky*. Steidl, 2006.

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