

## Toxicity's Sublime Seductions: Edward Burtynsky



Oil Fields #9, McKittrick, California, USA, 2002

*Text by Robert Shore*

**‘I’m looking at humans and what they’re doing to the planet as if I were an alien’: beauty and terror blend in Canadian artist Edward Burtynsky’s industrial landscapes, which bear seductively powerful witness to the ways in which we are irrevocably changing our world. Robert Shore meets the great documenter of the Anthropocene.**

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This autumn is officially Edward Burtynsky season. Not ‘officially’ in any literal or indeed official sense—neither unesco nor any other earthly authority has to my knowledge sanctioned the international celebrations. But as curator and writer Bill Ewing declared in the Canadian artist’s presence at London Photo earlier this year: ‘You can find an Ed Burtynsky show in the fall near you, wherever you live.’

There are shows and special displays planned, and there will be new books to riffle through and reflect on. Not least significant among all this activity is the volume Ewing himself has assembled for Thames & Hudson, *Essential Elements*. Burtynsky has always presented his images of industrially altered landscapes in subject-based series, but Ewing’s sumptuous retrospective cross-pollinates between projects and pairs images according to formal rather than thematic considerations. ‘It occurred to me that what was missing was a *vue d’ensemble*, something that would highlight his aesthetic rather than see through the filter of a subject like China or oil or whatever,’ Ewing says. ‘You will see colour schemes uniting pictures here, or a certain compositional dynamic doing it there.’ Not that Burtynsky’s environmental concerns are ignored.

Ewing points to the image on the final foldout of the book. ‘And yet,’ he says, ‘this horrific example of environmental toxicity is somehow... beautiful to behold. And that sums up Ed’s work for me. That paradox can’t be resolved.’

In truth, though this may be the Autumn of Ed, Burtynsky has been more or less continuously visible in the global cultural landscape since the National Gallery of Canada presented its mid-career travelling retrospective of the artist’s work, *Manufactured Landscapes*, in 2003. That ubiquity has a good deal to do with Ewing’s Burtynsky Paradox. In centuries to come, presuming there is still someone or something left on Earth with the capacity and interest to reflect on mankind’s legacy on the planet, Burtynsky will surely be remembered as the Photographer of the Anthropocene. The Anthropocene is the name given to the geological epoch in which some say we now live, where for the first time in the Earth’s history man’s actions are irreparably reshaping nature. ‘I’m looking at humans and what they’re doing to the planet as if I were an alien,’ Burtynsky tells the audience at the Photo London talk.

A mid-period Baby Boomer, he was born in 1955. ‘In the ensuing six decades we’ve added 5.5 million people [to the world’s population],’ he says. ‘We’re in what’s called the Great Acceleration. Ultimately the images are pointing to that acceleration. We have always taken from nature but no other mammal has pushed nature to the point where it collapses.’ He mentions the last really major extinction event 65 million years ago when a meteor hit the planet, wiping out the dinosaurs. ‘Now human beings are the meteor,’ he says. We’re also the dinosaurs. (Gulp.)

‘We’ve reached a certain scale with our incursions into the land, taking these materials and converting them into the megacities that we build and the transport systems that we build, there is an unsettling feeling that we’re reshaping the planet in an unprecedented way,’ he tells the Photo London crowd. ‘I can’t see you walking away [from these images] going “This is a really hopeful story.”’ (Double gulp.)

And yet you don’t want to look away from Burtynsky’s images either. As Carol Diehl put it in an article in 2006: ‘the deft seduction of his art keeps us transfixed.’

Burtynsky famously discovered his enduring subject during a visit to Frackville, Pennsylvania. ‘I was surrounded by hills of coal slag,’ he has said. ‘White birch trees were growing up through the black mounds, and ponds were full of lime green water. It was surreal. Slowly I turned 360 degrees and in that entire horizon there was nothing virgin. It totally destabilized me. I thought, is this Earth? The pictures I took in Frackville sat as contacts for almost a year. I kept looking at them and then I realized, this is what I have to do.’

Burtynsky’s nature, then, is a man-altered nature. And in keeping with this changed perspective on the landscape, his aesthetic is a sharply adapted version of the traditional Sublime of the likes of Ansel Adams and Edward Weston. It is, as Diehl’s article dubbed it, a new ‘Toxic Sublime’.

Crucial to this mutated aesthetic is Burtynsky’s use of colour—still something of a novelty in art photography when he was starting out. ‘At university it just seemed that if you were going to be a serious artist, you had to work in black and white,’ he tells me when we speak in the weeks after his appearance in London. But although his teachers only really discussed its use in terms of commercial applications, he found himself drawn to colour.

This artistic decision to become ‘an early adopter of colour as an art form rather than as an advertising one’ also led to a business decision. Finding insufficient provision for colour photographers in Toronto, in 1985 he became an entrepreneur and set up his own colour darkroom rental facility. In 1992 he then opened a digital lab, which again placed him ‘at the bleeding edge of technology, paying for the r&d and suffering from Moore’s Law as anybody who got into digital at that time did’. A serial ‘early adopter’, he remains engaged with new technological developments and recently set up another business, this time related to 3d printing and photogrammetry.

Though his work may lead some spectators to draw radical conclusions about our environment, Burtynsky is no ideologue. The politics of his work are implicit rather than explicit. His position could broadly be summed up as that of an ‘advocate for sustainable development’. ‘This is a story where we’re up against something very complicated. I’m trying not to simplify this complexity,’ he tells the audience at Photo London. ‘I’m pragmatic about the world I live in,’ he now tells me. He’s certainly not a political revolutionary. ‘For all its warts, I don’t see anybody with a system that’s better than capitalism... My parents were Ukrainian and one of my relatives’ sayings was: “You pretend to pay me and I’ll pretend to work.” Communism wasn’t a very productive system. Incentive is really important.’

‘I think to be an artist today, especially if you’re doing photography and working globally, you have to see it as a kind of business,’ he concludes. ‘I can’t sequester myself in a loft with some canvases and paint. I’ve got cameras, flights—you have to manage it, it’s not going to manage itself.’

‘I have respect for entrepreneurs who figure out how to supply something, employ people and make a profit. It’s not an easy thing to do. I don’t reject capitalism because I don’t see another system that’s going to put us to work.’ If *Essential Elements* offers a retrospective reframing of Burtynsky’s career thus far, this autumn sees the premiere of new work that finds Burtynsky exploring fresh subject matter and perhaps even investigating a new aesthetic approach. At Flowers Gallery in East London, for instance, one part of the exhibition will be dedicated to Ewing-style pairings of classic images while another will be given over to a new series of aerial abstractions of largescale salt pans, photographed on a recent trip to Gujarat (a book of this work is also due to be published in this Autumn of Ed by Steidl). Burtynsky’s man-altered landscapes are generally distinguished by their all-over quality, an aesthetic derived in some degree from Abstract Expressionism. ‘The Salt Pans are slightly different,’ Flowers curator Chris Littlewood notes. ‘There’s a lot more negative space.’

If there is an aesthetic shift, however small, Burtynsky’s working method hasn’t obviously altered. Like many of his earlier series, the Salt Pans images necessitated a certain amount of flying time. ‘I did five hours in a Cessna and I had booked about eight hours’ helicopter time,’ Burtynsky says. ‘Out of that there would be two hours ferrying, where I’m just getting out to the subject matter from the airport, so let’s say I did ten hours working with the subject from the air.’

It sounds quite focused, I say.

‘I know what I’m after. But it’s a fair amount of time,’ he responds. ‘I know I’m shooting frames that are probably not going to make it. It’s a way of working that’s very different than large-format 4×5 or 8×10 where you set it up on a tripod and slowly arrive at your precise framing and wait for the precise light, for the wind to die down and then squeeze off that perfect frame. It ain’t like that at all. The door’s open, there’s

wash coming off the blades, it's so loud you can't hear anything and you're trying to shout out instructions to the pilot to get you where you want to go—Higher! Lower! Slow down! Back away! Go left! Right!—while you've got your eye to the viewfinder trying to figure out how to get everything aligned and at the right scale.

'When you're in the air you're constantly in motion. Even with helicopters, they don't like to hover, they shake too much. The chattering gets to be hard to control and not to transmit to the camera. The slowest a chopper might go is, let's say, 15 miles an hour. They want to creep so when you're near what the frame is you shoot heavily. If you miss something and you say "Can we go back?", by and large you can never get it again. So you shoot heavily when you're in the air and you're near the subject.

'I tend to use one lens so the way I look at helicopters is as a kind of tripod, but a very flexible one. I don't use a zoom lens, so if I'm too high and the subject I'm looking at is too low I'll say "ok, we're going to go over that same thing again and try to keep the same relationship to the landscape but go down another 200 feet." And then if it's still not far enough I'll say "Go down another 200 feet. ok, we're there!"

It sounds nerve-wracking and exhausting, not to mention a teeny bit dangerous. Is he a thrill seeker?

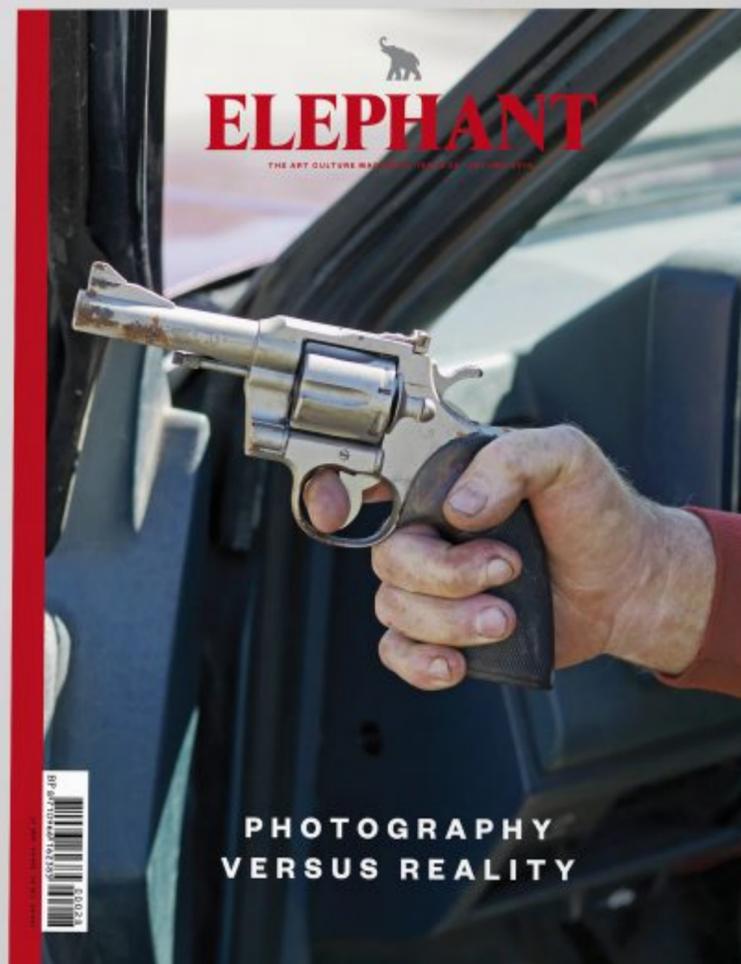
'I tend to be fairly conservative when it comes to risk,' he laughs. He finds his pilots through the film industry, which has a very thorough screening process. 'These pilots really need to know how to handle the craft with technology on board and to have a sense of the eye of the photographer to try and assist them in placing the craft in the right position to get what they need.'

Given the expense, the physical demands, the modest mortal peril involved in making actual flyovers, I wonder whether he's ever tempted to use Google Earth to get on top of his subjects. Recently other artists have used satellite imagery quite successfully to make their points.

The reason for Burtynsky's resistance to taking the virtual shortcut is aesthetic. 'If you stand in front of my prints and there's a truck or a person standing in a field or something that belies the scale, you can see it fully articulated. You can see the roads,' he explains. 'I've not seen that kind of detail in a Google Earth or satellite image. Maybe in the future they will be of [the necessary] resolution, but they aren't at this point.' To make his Pivot Irrigation images, which encompass swathes of land about a mile by a mile or two in area, he had to take a 60 Megapixel camera up to 7,000 feet in the air. If he'd used Google instead, to achieve the same resolution he says he'd have had to picture a much larger area, perhaps 15 by 8 miles. 'For me that's too much. The human element of it kind of disappears—the roads, the trucks, the farmhouses, what's in your backyard, that's no longer part of the picture. And I like that detail. To be able to dig in with your eyes and find those small moments—that's what gets lost if you just go with the data set.'

That attention to detail—the detail where both the humanity and the devil are to be found—is the key to these gorgeous, terrible images, and the heart of the Burtynsky Paradox: you can't look away; you have to keep looking in.

*Edward Burtynsky's show at Flowers Gallery runs until 29 October. 'Edward Burtynsky: Essential Elements' by William A. Ewing is published by Thames & Hudson.*



Words: Robert Shore. Portrait: Benjamin McMahon



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Portrait page: Right: David Laundy/Art & Architecture, London, 2010

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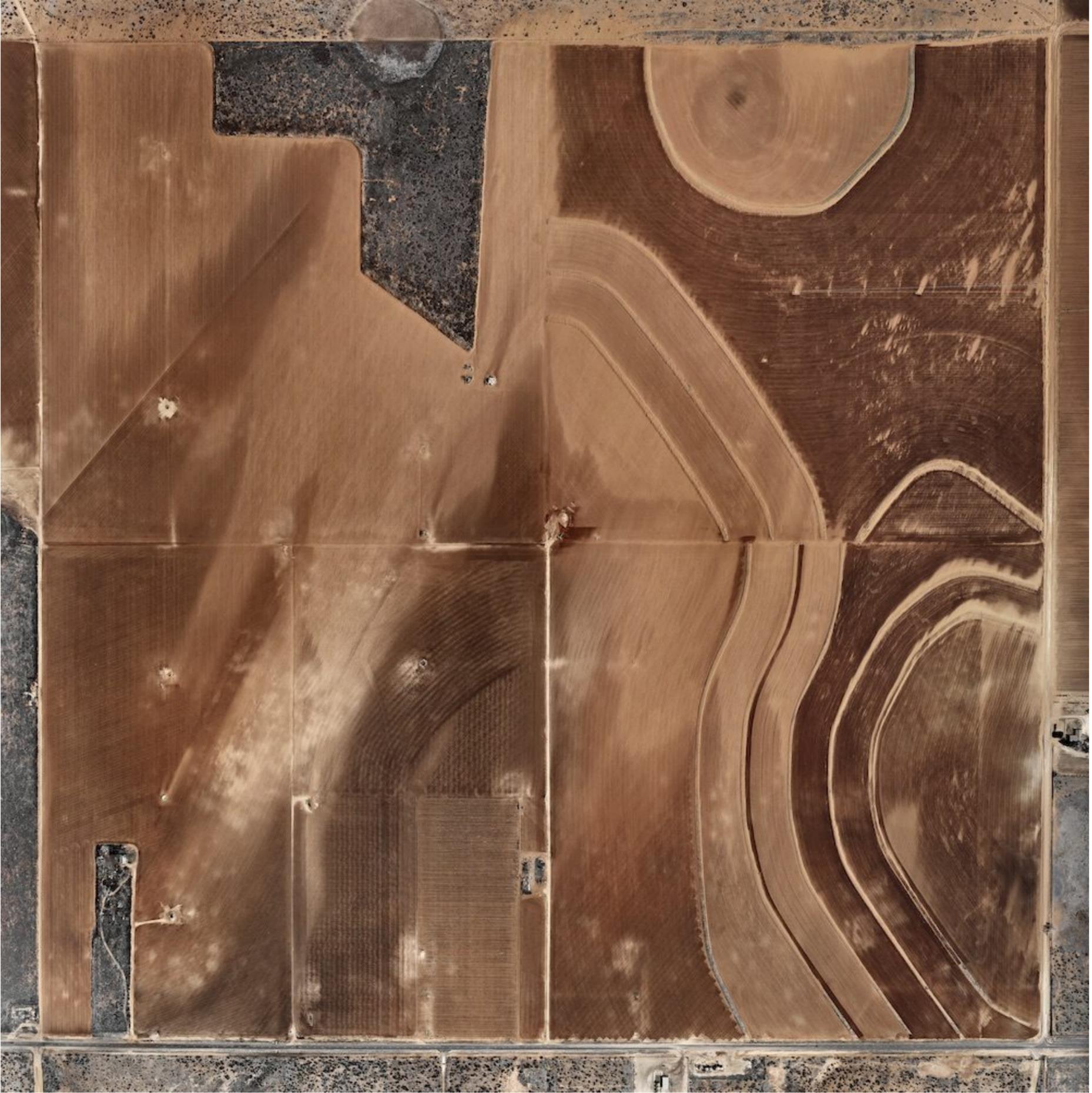
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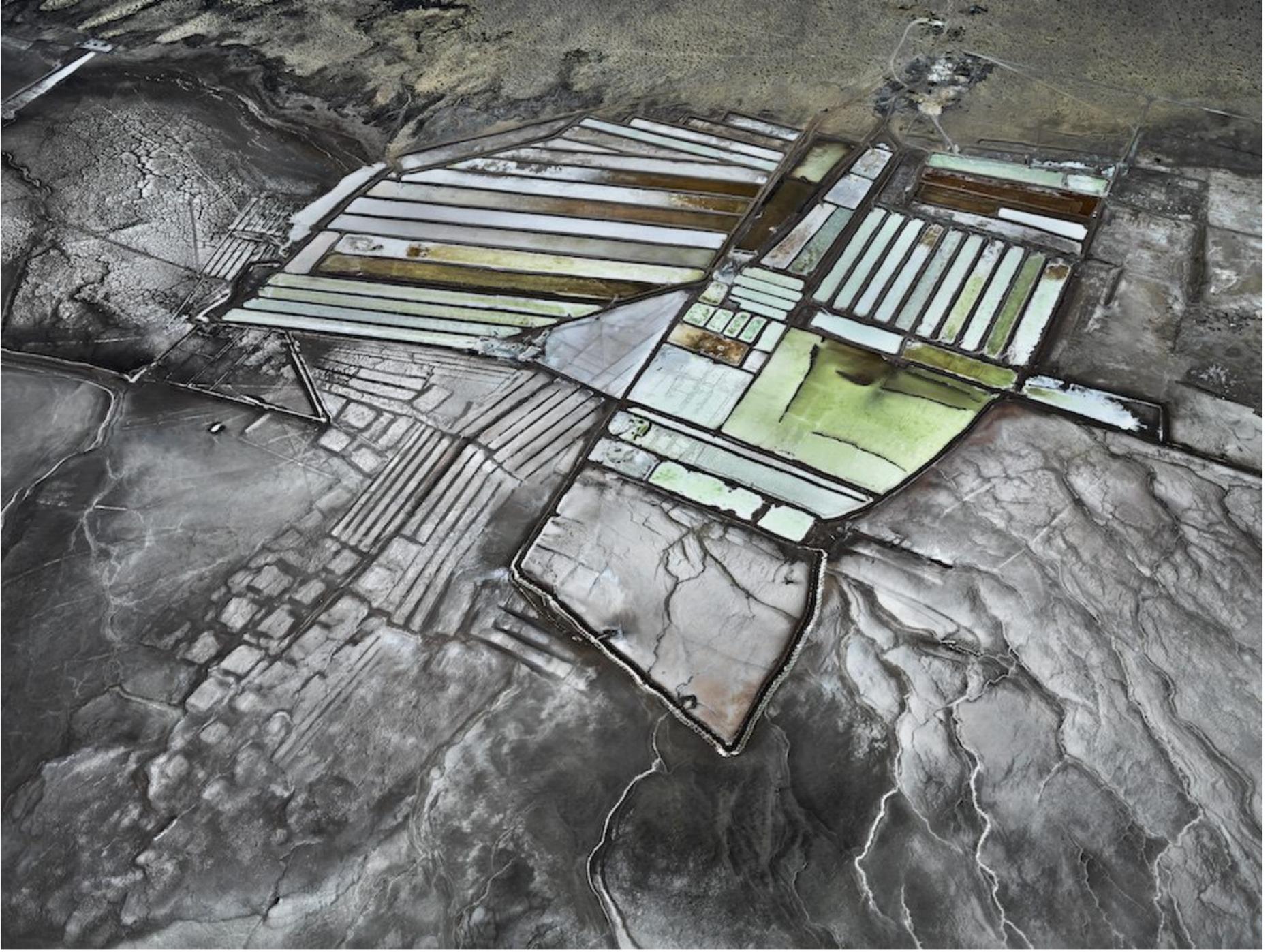
Shipyards #22, Oil Port, Zhejiang Province, China, 2005



Pivot Irrigation #22a, High Plains, Texas Panhandle, USA, 2012



Pivot Irrigation #39, High Plains, Texas Panhandle, USA, 2012



Colorado River Delta #8, Salinas, Baja, Mexico, 2012



Salt Pans #18, Little Rann of Kutch, Gujarat, India, 2016

