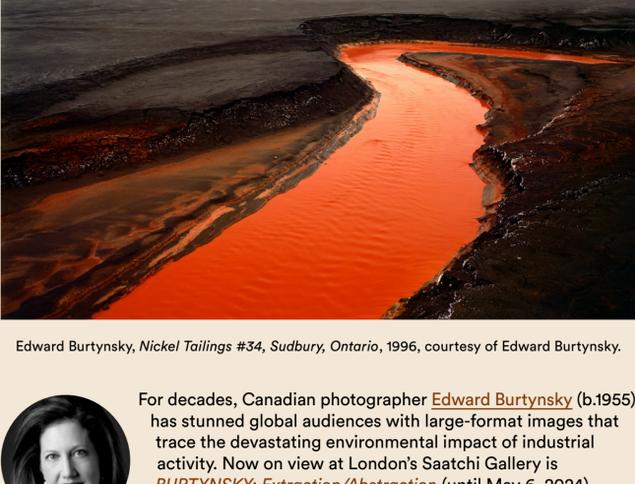


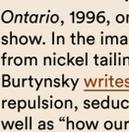
APRIL 5, 2024

CLOSE-UP: EDWARD BURTYNSKY'S ICONIC NICKEL TAILINGS #34

Edward Burtynsky's most expansive retrospective exhibition is now on. To mark the moment, we're taking an in-depth look at his masterpiece Nickel Tailings #34, Sudbury, Ontario, 1996.



Edward Burtynsky, *Nickel Tailings #34, Sudbury, Ontario, 1996*, courtesy of Edward Burtynsky.



For decades, Canadian photographer [Edward Burtynsky](#) (b.1955) has stunned global audiences with large-format images that trace the devastating environmental impact of industrial activity. Now on view at London's Saatchi Gallery is [BURTYNSKY: Extraction/Abstraction](#) (until May 6, 2024), the celebrated artist's largest exhibition to date, curated by [Marc Mayer](#), former director of the National Gallery of Canada.

We're diving into the masterpiece *Nickel Tailings #34, Sudbury, Ontario, 1996*, one of Burtynsky's earliest and most famed photographs in the show. In the image, water takes on the look of lava. Its fluorescent colour comes from nickel tailings, which are waste products of metal extraction and mining. Burtynsky [writes](#) that his works "search for a dialogue between attraction and repulsion, seduction and fear." *Nickel Tailings #34* exemplifies this sentiment as well as "how our consumption and our concern for the health of our planet sets us into an uneasy contradiction."

Sara Angel

Founder and Executive Director, Art Canada Institute

AN EPIC VISION



Edward Burtynsky in Belridge, California, 2003, photograph by Noah Weinzweig.

Burtynsky was born in St. Catharines, Ontario, and studied photography at what is now known as Toronto Metropolitan University. After graduating in 1982, he began creating large-scale photographs, like *Nickel Tailings #34*, that capture the monumental environmental impact of resource extraction and other industries. High-resolution colour photography allows him to achieve an intense degree of detail without sacrificing the broad, sweeping vistas of quarries, refineries, and other sites. His photographs are technically demanding: when an elevated camera perspective is required, Burtynsky uses helicopters and drones to reach the perfect vantage point.

Learn more about Burtynsky in ACI's [Photography in Canada, 1839–1989: An Illustrated History](#) by Sarah Bassnett and Sarah Parsons

BURTYNSKY ON HIS FAMED DIPTYCH



Edward Burtynsky, *Nickel Tailings #34, Sudbury, Ontario, 1996*, courtesy of Edward Burtynsky. Edward Burtynsky, *Nickel Tailings #35, Sudbury, Ontario, 1996*, courtesy of Edward Burtynsky.

Nickel Tailings #34 (above left) is one half of a diptych, or two-panel picture. In [his catalogue for the exhibition](#), Burtynsky writes that it was shot just outside Sudbury, a city famous for its nickel deposits, where, "The oxidized, water-borne waste seen here looks very similar to the molten lava that results from the earlier smelting process when ore is separated from its rock matrix. A hellish picture, it is actually an illusion of scale. We are not looking at a river but a small creek, just over a metre wide that can be easily jumped over. Liquid tailings such as this result from the toxicity that can render the land unuseable for other purposes."

LANDSCAPE COUNTERNARRATIVE



Edward Burtynsky, *Nickel Tailings #35, Sudbury, Ontario, 1996*, courtesy of Edward Burtynsky. Frank Johnston, *Vanishing Winter*, n.d., McMichael Canadian Art Collection, Kleinburg, Ontario.

Burtynsky's photographs offer a counternarrative to the tradition of Western landscape painting. Rather than present an idealized view of nature as glorious and untouched—as in *Vanishing Winter* (above right) by Group of Seven member Frank Johnston (1888–1949)—Burtynsky documents the impact of industrialization. In his works, our landscape is wounded and scarred, not pristine. In *Nickel Tailings #34* (opening image) and *Nickel Tailings #35* (above left), we see a flowing river that, rather than carrying fresh water, is filled with the liquid refuse of nickel mining. It glows a fiery orange against a barren land marked by a desiccated tree line.

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MINES AND TAILINGS SERIES



Edward Burtynsky, *Nickel Tailings #31, Sudbury, Ontario, 1996*, McMaster Museum of Art, Hamilton. Edward Burtynsky, *Nickel Tailings #30, Sudbury, Ontario, 1996*, chromogenic colour print on paper, 100 x 150 cm. Collection of the McMichael Canadian Art Collection, Kleinburg, Ontario, Donated to the McMichael Canadian Art Collection by Mr. E.G. Davis in memory of Mr. and Mrs. E.W.M. Davis of Montreal (1987/44).

Nickel Tailings #34 is from Burtynsky's Mines and Tailings series (1983–2007), which traces the environmental impact and lasting effects of metal mining and smelting practices. The critic Kenneth Baker has [pointed out](#) that in his documentation of unnaturally pigmented rivers (above left and right), Burtynsky invokes the modernist art movement of Fauvism, which "has taught us to tolerate, even to relish, a pictorial anomaly such as a flaming orange river," even though such a colour "must spell trouble."

EXTRACTION/ABSTRACTION



Edward Burtynsky, *Morenci Mine #1, Clifton, Arizona, USA, 2012*, courtesy of Nicholas Metivier Gallery, Toronto. Jock Macdonald, *Orange Impulse, 1955*, The Robert McLaughlin Gallery, Oshawa.

Like *Nickel Tailings #34*, in all of the works in *BURTYNSKY: Extraction/Abstraction* the artist's camera "flattens landscape, giving it a strong resemblance to flat abstract art—colour field, tachisme, hard edge, informalism, action painting, etc.," [writes the exhibition's curator Marc Mayer](#). Consider the similarities between the artist's bird's-eye view of *Morenci Mine #1, Clifton, Arizona, USA, 2012* (above left)—one of the largest copper mines in North America—and the modernist abstract *Orange Impulse, 1955* (above right), by the Canadian painter Jock Macdonald (1897–1960). In Burtynsky's photographs, particularly those shot aerially from a great distance, the surface of the Earth or the workings of heavy industry come to resemble painterly abstract compositions.

Learn more about Jock Macdonald in ACI's [Jock Macdonald: Life & Work](#) by Joyce Zemans

A LANDMARK RETROSPECTIVE



Installation views of *BURTYNSKY: Extraction/Abstraction* at Saatchi Gallery, London, England, courtesy of Saatchi Gallery.

Curated by Marc Mayer, former director of the National Gallery of Canada, [BURTYNSKY: Extraction/Abstraction](#) at Saatchi Gallery in London, England (above left and right), is the largest exhibition of the photographer's work to date. The survey show includes ninety-four of his large-format photographs, thirteen high-resolution wall murals, a tachisme, and augmented reality (AR) experience that allows visitors to examine Burtynsky's images in even closer and more vivid detail. For the first time, the public is able to consult what Burtynsky calls his "Process Archive," which details how the technological demands of his work have evolved.

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Image Credits: [1, 3] Edward Burtynsky, *Nickel Tailings #34, Sudbury, Ontario, 1996*, chromogenic process colour print. Courtesy of Edward Burtynsky. [2] Edward Burtynsky in Belridge, California, USA, 2003. Photograph by Noah Weinzweig. Courtesy of Saatchi Gallery. [4, 5] Edward Burtynsky, *Nickel Tailings #35, Sudbury, Ontario, 1996*, dye coupler print (Ektacolor), 101.9 x 154.4 cm. Courtesy of Edward Burtynsky. [6] Frank Johnston, *Vanishing Winter*, n.d., oil on hardboard, 32 x 44.8 cm. Collection of the McMichael Canadian Art Collection, Kleinburg, Ontario, Donated to the McMichael Canadian Art Collection by Mr. E.G. Davis in memory of Mr. and Mrs. E.W.M. Davis of Montreal (1987/44). [7] Edward Burtynsky, *Nickel Tailings #31, Sudbury, Ontario, 1996*, chromogenic colour print on paper, 100 x 150 cm. Collection of the McMaster Museum of Art, Hamilton, Gift of Mrs. Brenda and Mr. Roger Glasco. Image courtesy Edward Burtynsky. [8] Edward Burtynsky, *Nickel Tailings #30, Sudbury, Ontario, 1996*, chromogenic print, 131.8 cm x 181.6 cm x 2.5 cm. Collection of Mount Holyoke College Art Museum, South Hadley, Massachusetts. [9] Edward Burtynsky, *Morenci Mine #1, Clifton, Arizona, USA, 2012*, chromogenic print, 121.9 x 162.6 cm. Courtesy of Nicholas Metivier Gallery, Toronto. © Edward Burtynsky. [10] Jock Macdonald, *Orange Impulse, 1955*, oil and graphite on canvas, 73 x 91.8 cm. Collection of The Robert McLaughlin Gallery, Oshawa. Donated by the Ontario Heritage Foundation, 1988. Gift of M.F. Fehely. [11] Installation view of *BURTYNSKY: Extraction/Abstraction* at Saatchi Gallery, London, England. Courtesy of Saatchi Gallery. [12] Installation view of *BURTYNSKY: Extraction/Abstraction* at Saatchi Gallery, London, England. Courtesy of Saatchi Gallery.