

2009

Evolving Eden

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Kennedy, Sharon L., "Evolving Eden" (2009). *Sheldon Museum of Art Catalogues and Publications*. 28.
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EVOLVING EDEN

THREE PHOTOGRAPHIC PERSPECTIVES



PARIS - NEW YORK - SHANGHAI

SHELDON MUSEUM OF ART

FEBRUARY 6 – MAY 31

Eden is an idealized place where one experiences happiness, harmony and a sense of timelessness. While some believe this can only be experienced after death, others are convinced that the only Eden is the one we currently inhabit and therefore good stewardship is needed in order to sustain it. Photographers have historically captured our evolving planet and have brought to light its beauty as well as its destruction due to human intervention.

The artists in *Evolving Eden* address the much-discussed topic of the environment and our relationship with our surroundings, using three distinct approaches. While Arno Rafael Minkinen's spiritual images attempt

to eliminate the boundary between self and the external world, Hans Eijkelboom shows us a world of homogenous consumerism in an urban environment far removed from nature. Minkinen's self-portraits leave those material objects and associations, including clothes, behind. He is the lone person in much of his work. Eijkelboom's subjects strive to obtain individuality through their personal style and dress, but in actuality they become elements in a larger collective. Edward Burtynsky's beautiful yet detached photographs of industrial wreckage capture the environmental

HANS EIJKELBOOM, *FROM PARIS - NEW YORK - SHANGHAI*, 2007

consequences of consumer culture and exemplify a lack of responsible management of our natural resources.

Finnish-born American photographer Arno Minkkinen contorts his tall, thin body within pristine, Eden-like environments. Equipped with his lens and without the aid of an assistant, he photographs himself as being in a harmonious, solitary relationship with nature. Minkkinen's approach might best be described as spiritual or transcendental; his body can be seen as a

A new group of artists began exploring identity and physical being through the body in response to the civil rights, feminist and gay movements of the 1960s. With roots in Dada performances and artwork, and experimental theater and dance, artists again took up the focus on the body, but with new ideas and approaches.¹ Beginning with his graduate studies at Rhode Island School of Design under instructors Harry Callahan and Aaron Siskind in 1972, Minkkinen became one of the first photographers of his era to consistently incorporate his body into his art.



ARNO RAFAEL MINKKINEN, *SELF PORTRAIT, KILBERG, VARDØ, 1990.*

metaphor for the land. For almost 40 years Minkkinen has created black-and-white, large-scale self-portraits, unmanipulated, and developed in his darkroom. They are evocatively beautiful yet serendipitous and witty in their defiance of what seems humanly possible to achieve. They take us to places seemingly unmarred by human intervention and remind us of the ideal to seek a balance with nature.

Many of Minkkinen's photographs are made in Finland, his country of origin, but he has also traveled the world to find large swaths of relatively untouched land and water. He spends some time acquainting himself with these pristine environments, until he is moved to shape his body into the formation that speaks to the space; bathed in light his creations seem effortless and pure. Some of Minkkinen's work has been described as totem-like, but in others he renders himself like a chameleon, where without close observation, one could miss his body altogether. Minkkinen appears in perilous positions, poised in air as he does amazing feats of athletic agility in apparent danger. William Ewing in his book *The Body* describes these images as "motionless in the sky, literally suspended between heaven and earth, between spiritual aspirations and earthly constraints."² Many of the images assume the chill and clarity of the setting where they were created. They exude a purity of land untouched by human habitation. Others radiate heat like the desert sand. A few take place in city settings. And although some images are breathtakingly beautiful and others unbelievably complex, occasionally we chuckle at Minkkinen's cleverness. In one comical image, his three giant fingers sit like massive boulders on an expansive, flat surface with a blurred forest background. By using self-

portraiture he is more conscious not just of his body but of his internal workings as well. As viewers we, too, get to know the person Arno Minkkinen, in a physical sense as well as a spiritual sense.

Throughout his career Dutch artist Hans Eijkelboom has focused on conceptual art in which the concept or idea is seen as more important than traditional aesthetic



EDWARD BURTYNSKY, *SHIPBREAKING #49*, CHITTAGONG, BANGLADESH, 2001.

Consumerism and its toll on our natural resources are also an interest of Canadian artist Edward Burtynsky. He states: "We are surrounded by all kinds of consumer goods, and yet we are profoundly detached from the sources of those things."⁷ Burtynsky launched his career at the Rock of the Ages quarry in Vermont. The photographs in his *Quarry* series depict what we might consider an Eden that has evolved to a place that is almost entirely human made. For this series he looked at architecture, in particular stone buildings, and tried to imagine what the land, now void of the stones, must look like. He found large open-pit mines that he likened to "inverted pyramids" or in today's world, "inverted architecture."⁸ To indicate scale he included the ladders workers use to climb in and out of the massive holes. These mammoth sites are impressive evidence of technological advancement and the large-format photographs are seductively beautiful, but it is difficult

to ignore the undercurrents of a damaged environment.

Unlike Eijkelboom's snapshot approach, Burtynsky's photographic process requires thoughtful, intensive planning and much time to set up equipment. To create these large photographs Burtynsky uses an 8-inch by 10-inch Deardorff field camera, a heavy view camera on a tripod with a large lens. Burtynsky looked to pioneer photographer Carlton Watkins and other 19th-century landscape photographers in structuring his photographs and was drawn to the viewpoint they utilized in their work. This involves photographing from a platform or elevated vantage point in which the scene is conveyed without foreground distractions and unfolds into the middle-ground and beyond.

Especially in the quarry photographs Burtynsky draws us in with what at first appears to be a beautiful

and media concerns. Like conceptual artists Ed Ruscha and Bernd and Hilla Becher, he creates multiple images allowing the viewer to compare and contrast the results. The *Paris - New York - Shanghai* work is part of a larger project that began in 1992, and ended on the same day, seven years later. He focused on three cities that he considers cultural capitals of the world: Paris, which he deems the Old World capital of the 19th century; New York as the 20th-century cultural center; and Shanghai as the developing world cultural capital, representing the 21st century.

Eijkelboom spent several months in each city walking the streets without a predetermined image in mind. If he began noticing people with similar characteristics such as clothing styles or accessories, he would spend up to two hours shooting these subjects. With experience, he developed the ability to make quick, furtive shots without looking through the viewfinder and often went unnoticed by his subjects. Although he began the project using a traditional film camera, a significant change occurred when he switched to digital photography in the year 2000. With this new

technology, he became less regimented in his approach and could accumulate more photographs each day, which he then organized on his home computer.

For the *Paris - New York - Shanghai* series Eijkelboom systematically photographed his environs as a daily diary. At the end of the day, he organized his photographs into grids or typologies so he could observe them simultaneously. He also photographed and organized larger images of cityscape scenes for each of the three cities. Together they become what Tony Godfrey described as "a self-portrait, a network map of human consciousness living our lives through the street."³ Like Minkkinen, Eijkelboom uses his photography to better understand himself and the transformation of daily life. According to the artist, this daily recording also has helped him visualize the development of his worldview.⁴

Unlike intentional photographic composition, the snapshot style that Eijkelboom has adopted is somewhat like a photojournalist capturing an unaware subject. The intent is to be immediate, objective and

ARNO RAFAEL MINKKINEN, *SELF-PORTRAIT*, PETRIN HILLS, PRAGUE, CZECHOSLOVAKIA, 1989





EDWARD BURTYNSKY, *IBERIA QUARRIES #7*, MARBITO CO., BORBA-MOURO, PORTUGAL, 2006

straightforward. Some might argue that Eijkelboom's photography is documentary in that he investigates and gives us an eyewitness account of people on the streets. One could also add that his style is anthropological and sociological in nature but without the statistical results. Eijkelboom aims at being detached and neutral in his reporting. Yet his grids guide viewers in making their own comparisons and determinations. As Godfrey states, "Photography is never innocent, but framed by ways of representing that are always ideologically loaded."⁵

When looking at Eijkelboom's work, one is first impressed with the sheer numbers of people represented. From photos of men in dark suits, to parents with infants, and women with Victoria's Secret bags, to images of the homeless, thousands of photographs wallpaper the museum space. In looking at the grids, one is struck by how much the people in each

city look alike, but also there is little difference in the outward appearances of the cities themselves. Although we see differences, there is a certain homogenization that seems to be taking place in our interconnected world. About his work, Eijkelboom wrote: "Globalization, combined with the desire of cities for visually spectacular elements, is leading to the appearance everywhere of city centers that look the same and where identical products are sold."⁶

In Eijkelboom's work we can feel the tension between individualism and conformity, and the pervasive influence of the marketing industry. Given our penchant for individuality, we believe that we can express our uniqueness through what we choose to buy. Yet, seen through Eijkelboom's lens, we appear to be more alike than different. This leaves us to question how much self-expression is really possible for us as mass-market consumers and who controls the choices we do have?

landscape setting. He pays close attention to light and photographs during the colorful seasons. Many of the sites are clearly recovering from human intervention and therefore appear to be lush and healthy upon first glance. Kenneth Baker argues that by incorporating art historical references to modern painting and sculpture into his photographs, Burtynsky further delays our recognition of the environmental destruction that he has captured.⁹ His *Shipbreaking* series, for example, includes several images of huge rusted iron and steel industrial formations from dismantled merchant marine ships in Bangladesh. Rather than focus on the difficulty and dangers of this industry, Burtynsky composes the objects to give them associations with the heavy, arc-like sculptures of American artist Richard Serra. If we subscribe to Baker's argument we might also recognize Burtynsky's references to abstract oil painting through surface patterns and spatial structure and scale. *Nickel Tailings*, for example, is an image of a bright orange river of melted ore; beautifully composed, bold and stylized in appearance, and enjoyable to view, if we are able to ignore the environmental havoc that has occurred.

Burtynsky's technique is classic in appearance and traditional in its romantic sentiment, much like the work of Ansel Adams or Edward Weston. Although his classic style might pay homage to these two well-known photographers, it also alludes to the neutrality of the New Topographics photographers such as Robert Adams and Frank Gohlke by simply giving us a description of a particular place. He does not lecture about the environment but seems content to create a tension between the superficial beauty and the underlying destruction.

If this earth is to be our Eden, then these three artists provide eyewitness accounts of our evolving environment and the relationship we have with it. Minkinen's photographs could be seen as paradise before the fall of man; images of Adam intertwined with a pristine nature. In contrast we might accept Burtynsky's straightforward photographs as innocence lost and destruction at hand. The work stands as a stark reminder of the consequences of our poor stewardship of the planet. The city street scenes of Eijkelboom give us the collective portrait of a new, homogenous and global consumer culture. Ultimately the question

concerns our relationship with what remains of Eden and whether Eden remains sustainable.

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We extend our thanks to Roger Bruhn for his role as co-curator for *Evolving Eden* and coordinator of Lincoln Photofest. We also wish to thank Aperture Foundation, Barry Friedman, Ltd. Gallery, and Charles Cowles Gallery for lending work to the exhibition. Thanks also go to Roger German for offering his time and talents in building an additional wall in the gallery space.

The exhibition would not be possible without the support of the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, Herb and Kathy Friedman, and the Wake Charitable Fund. Additional support is provided by Nebraska Arts Council and Sheldon Art Association. The Photography Symposium held on February 7, 2009, is sponsored by Assurity Life Insurance Company.

NOTES

¹ Keith Davis, *An American Century of Photography: From Dry-Plate to Digital*, *The Hallmark Photographic Collection*, Kansas City: Hallmark Cards, Inc, 1999. p. 444.

² William A. Ewing, *The Body, Photographs of the Human Form*, San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1994. p. 296.

³ Tony Godfrey "The Work of Hans Eijkelboom" essay for Paris-New York-Shanghai exhibition, Aperture Foundation, 2007.

⁴ Godfrey, 2007.

⁵ Tony Godfrey, *Conceptual Art*, London: Phaidon, 1998. p. 301.

⁶ Hans Eijkelboom, Aperture Foundation, unpublished data, 2006.

⁷ Edward Burtynsky, *Quarries*, Göttingen: Steidl, 2007. p. 9.

⁸ Burtynsky, p. 9.

⁹ Lori Pauli, ed., *Manufactured Landscapes*, National Gallery of Canada, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003. p. 41.

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