On his way to document the Gulf spill, the Canadian photographer talks to Edmund Lee about his fascination with the imageries of urban and industrial transformation.

It is with the industrial landscapes created by mankind that one can best judge its progress and failings, and Edward Burtynsky has been taking a front row seat in these spectacles of environmental disasters for nearly three decades. The 55-year-old Canadian artist’s large-format colour photographs have drawn worldwide acclaim for the sublime beauty they captured at such disorienting industrial sites as landfills, quarries, highways, factories, oil refineries and mine tailings across the globe. When we caught him on the phone, Burtynsky, who admits to spending half of his time travelling, was about to head off to photograph the Gulf of Mexico oil spill — like some kind of a tireless angel time travelling, was about to head off to photograph the Gulf of Mexico oil spill — like some kind of a tireless angel...

You’ve been shooting industrial landscapes around the world for decades now. How did you become so interested in this subject? I was interested in landscape as a theme, because I felt that if we are true to landscape, we can understand a lot about our world. But when I was doing the more traditional landscape, looking at nature, I felt somehow it wasn’t very true to our time. It was lacking a kind of immediacy; it was like trying to harrow back to another era. So when I started to think about what is the landscape of our time, I thought of urban and industrial landscapes, as they were expanding and were more in keeping with the world that we were creating.

I think it’s kind of ironic that when you come across your best photographic subjects, it’s usually when you encounter the worst ecological calamities. Does it break your heart sometimes to take these pictures? I certainly have the feeling that we’re kind of overreaching, we’re pushing limits, and possibly not being smart about how far we’re going. So sometimes, yeah, I do feel a bit of concern and despair at the kinds of activities — and the degree of those activities — that we’re engaged in. I’m concerned about when will nature impose a corrective action, and I think that corrective action is kind of inevitable. The question remains: have we gone beyond the point of no return? I think we’re at a very dangerous threshold.

What does it mean to you personally to bring these imageries into gallery and museum space? Do you see it as a mission of sorts? I see it as both trying to create works of art, so that the actual images stand alone as images and have the strength to function in the world as images; and at the same time, I’m trying to invest the image with the kind of content that has equal force to the form of the image itself, so that it isn’t too journalistic, nor is it too formalistic. I’m trying to navigate a world between journalistic, nor is it too formalistic. I’m trying to navigate a world between journalistic, nor is it too form.