

*The Coast Mountains: Recent Works by Edward Burtynsky*

Severn Cullis-Suzuki

Glaciers hold great transformative power. Over millions of years they have advanced and retreated, carving valleys, sculpting mountain peaks, creating moraines, and moving huge amounts of sediment. They have also played a transformative role in our spiritual landscape across cultures, as sites for personal and spiritual rebirth. Today, as these ice forms recede as our global temperature rises, they bring a message to us: to face our dramatic impact on our natural world, and to stop heating our planet -- by transforming ourselves.

The photographs in *The Coast Mountains: Recent Works by Edward Burtynsky* at the Audain Art Museum in Whistler, BC depict glaciers in their raw power, and tell a story of ice and land under transformation. The photographs themselves are important: glacier photography has long been significant for documenting change - over time we have been able to compare icescapes and determine rates of melt. In times of AI and climate change denial, definitive records of changing landscapes and ecosystems are essential. We must continue to document truth, especially in “post-truth” times. Further, these photos tell a story largely invisible to modern, urban humans. 80% of Canadians now live in cities; a trend followed around the planet. In pursuit of the globalized economic promise, we have lost our intimacy with the land, and forget that we need it to survive. Burtynsky often reveals the truths of man-made landscapes ordinarily invisible to our daily eyes, but this exhibition tells truths of natural landscapes usually invisible to us, immersed daily in an urban, digital mindscape.

The legacy of massive ice on the landscape around the glaciers is clear. Though our natural landscapes are all a result of geological forces and time, in our urbanized mindset, we are rarely aware that these forces are always underway.

*Coast Mountains #15, Receding Glacier, British Columbia, Canada, 2023*, baldly shows the impact of frozen water on rock and earth. But glaciers have played a transformative role not only in changing and creating landscapes, but in life itself. Glaciers are in fact life givers: they are a source of the life blood of the land -- our rivers and streams. Around the Earth, 1.5 billion people depend on the water from glacier-fed water basins. Glaciers are crucial for water supply in hottest and driest times, sustaining late summer water flow. Glacial melt moderates stream temperatures. These elements are critical for salmon and other fish populations and spawning habitats. These fish in turn sustain other ecosystems and populations far downstream, and into the oceans. The glaciation conditions since the last Ice Age have provided an incredibly rich set of conditions for life on Earth, one in which we humans have flourished.

It is not surprising that from the beginning of our time, mountains and glaciers have been sacred, transformative places for humans. They have been important places of connection to the heavens, our gods, the Earth, and ourselves. Humans have built trails, temples, tea huts, and ski resorts so we can be at the top of the world. We feel cleansed when we return to our regular material worlds after a time on snow and ice at a summit. Glaciers hold a special role in biocultural identity, offering another environmental landscape for humans to have special connection to place, and part of the mental landscape that makes us who we are.

Today, the mountains are changing. *Coast Mountains #13, Mount Waddington*

*Glacier, British Columbia, Canada, 2023* reveals a glacier in its massive, frozen glory, but change is clear. Glaciers recede at an unprecedented pace due to global heating, caused by carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases released into the atmosphere from burning fossil fuels. As they melt, glaciers are revealing natural cultural archives, showing us our ancestors' relationships with them. Recently, at the Assembly of First Nations' 3<sup>rd</sup> National Climate Gathering, I listened to Kluane Elder Mary Jane Johnson talk about recent findings at the Kluane Glacier in the Yukon – copper points, a hearth, gopher bones. Beneath those, they found a steppe bison. And eighteen inches below that, was a birchbark baby basket with the exact same stitching as her grandmother's sewing on her own baby basket.

The receding ice is revealing who we are, providing a direct connection to a continuum of being, to whom we used to be.

As I look at Burtynsky's photos shot in Garibaldi Provincial Park, I myself remember who I am, and who I used to be. As I recognize the iconic Black Tusk in *Coast Mountains #3, The Black Tusk, British Columbia, Canada, 2023*, my soul recalls myself, a generation ago, when I hiked Garibaldi with my best friend. We were new adults; the world was ours. We had just cycled across Canada: there wasn't anything we couldn't do. Our future was exciting, but also uncertain. Our bike trip had aimed to raise awareness about climate change; we'd grown up with asthma on the rise, and democratic power was clearly beginning to ebb as corporate influence and power grew. We were still optimistic, but also angry at the impacts of the dominant mentality of our species on the ecosystems we loved. And so we went to the mountains for clarity, solace, and inspiration. We went to the Black Tusk, and its attendant glaciers. It was

late summer, and the hike was exhilarating and beautiful. The mountains smiled on us, and we felt safe in the sun and good weather. We could still act like kids, dancing on the snow with our heavy packs, and laughing our way uphill. The Black Tusk was a worthy altar to make our pilgrimage. The glaciers were comforting like grandparents who cradled us. When we descended we felt transformed, ready to be hopeful anew, joyfully reminded of how small we were.

Today, the glaciers are invoking their transformational power in a dramatic way. Here in Southern British Columbia, they are disappearing quickly. As glacier and climate researcher Dr. Gwenn Flowers says, "Glaciers are barometers for climate change, averaging the weather over years to decades. They have no political agenda, they don't lie, so when we see them retreat up the mountain sides, that means the climate is warming." There's no debating a glacier. By the end of the century, 70% of Western Canada's glaciers will be gone, and some parts of Southern BC will be completely deglaciated. Edward Burtynsky's documentation of these, transforming faster than ever before, puts us face to face with the transformation of the natural world that is underway.

This exhibition bids us to pay homage to these great bodies of ice, and to pay attention. Let us recognize what they are telling us: today's stark truth, that we are changing the natural world, our web of life that we all depend on. Let us remember who we are and who we have been, and that we can find spiritual awakening from the mountains, as our ancestors have. Let us awaken to the message of transformation these glaciers are telling us. And let us, in turn, bring about a great transformation in ourselves, us small humans, to stop the practices that are warming our world. Today,

we have all the answers. All we need is to recommit to bringing back the sacred balance of life.