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RIT

Strange Future

By

Nathan Emerson Rochefort

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the  
Degree of Master of Fine Art in Photography and Related Media

School of Photographic Arts and Sciences  
College of Art and Design

Rochester Institute of Technology  
Rochester, NY  
April 25, 2021

**Thesis Approval**

Strange Future

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Thesis Title

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of **Master of Fine Arts** ▼

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## Abstract

According to experts, the planet is now in a geologic period called the Anthropocene in which human action will progressively alter the course of life on Earth and the systems that support it. Every year global temperatures rise, and the frequency and severity of natural disasters increase. All evidence points to these trends continuing. “Climate change” is the name given to this predicament, and it poses a threat of existential proportion.

For the past two years I have been photographing the landscape of the northeastern United States looking for symbols of change. I have explored areas impacted by natural disasters, land displaced by various kinds of development projects, and other sights and settings where the harsh influence of the human hand is undeniable. I have employed key themes and motifs, based on research into both historical and contemporary landscape photographic practice, to document our relationship to the land as it shifts. Overwhelming and intrusive artificial light, monoliths of earthen substance destined to disappear or be reshaped, and flora and fauna that are being unnaturally controlled or cultivated—all feature prominently within my work. And always I come back to the land, to the appearance of troubling emerging vistas, both physical and spiritual in nature, that foretell greater transformations to come. The work I have made is an attempt to bridge our own moment to this uncertain future, to create a space of witnessing and contemplation amid profound disturbance.

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Looking at the world my kind has constructed I can't help but be amazed. The mammoth structures, mounds of soil, rocks, and other earthen resources, linear forms refined to a gleaming polish—undeniably our accomplishments as a species are impressive. How does one square this sense of awe for the built world with the simultaneously oppressive sense of impending apocalypse? Few continue to question any longer humankind's negative effect on the planetary ecosystem. Yet I find myself caught emotionally between the pessimism of talking heads who preach imminent climate calamity, on the one hand, and the lingering hope that we are just one scientific breakthrough away from salvation from this fate, on the other. The truth is that the damage is already done, enough so that major climate disruptions will inevitably arrive in the coming decades. Even were we to halt all pollution and stop all harmful environmental practices today, the boulder of destruction is rolling our way.<sup>12</sup>

For the past two years, I have been photographing the landscape of the northeastern United States. However, my images rarely indicate a specific location. Instead, I have used the unidentified terrain to engage in a generic conversation concerning the Earth's environmental future. The photographs I have produced are less a direct representation of, and more a metaphorical suggestion for, how the world is shifting in ways both measurable and visible. Even more important, however, these snapshots in time are meant to capture how our perceptions and experiencing of the world are also in a process of mutation, one that is futile to resist.

I utilize visual techniques inspired by science-fiction media to put forward images of a future not yet here. This imagery sets a dystopian scene filled with monoliths and barren

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<sup>1</sup> Scranton, Roy. *Learning to Die in the Anthropocene: Reflections on the End of a Civilization*. San Francisco, CA, CA: City Lights Books, 2105.

<sup>2</sup> Demos, T. J. *Against the Anthropocene: Visual Culture and Environment Today*. Berlin: Sternberg, 2017.

landscapes that allude to a bleak future. Books like the *Annihilation* trilogy by Jeff Vandermeer present a backdrop where nature has been transformed into a strange and alien character within the fictional narrative, a force possessing its own relentless agency and indecipherable intentions.<sup>3</sup> These sources have helped me to conceptualize how the strange is born from the known. “Defamiliarization,” a term coined by Russian literary theorist Viktor Shklovsky, is at the core of my work.<sup>4</sup> By reframing the commonplace as things unfamiliar, even unrecognizable at times, one can guide the viewer to approach the subject matter according to a novel perspective. Hence, a new understanding of the present becomes possible.<sup>5,6</sup>

My work has three main objectives. First, it expresses my personal feelings of environmental anxiety that continue to increase as the world’s leaders do either nothing, or the bare minimum, in the face of accelerating climate change. Second, while the images I have produced intersect with an existing body of contemporary landscape photography and its stylistics, my intent is also to expand upon the genre through the zigzagging themes of familiarity, suspicion, dread, and, ultimately, hope that have preoccupied me. Finally, my work is offered as a curious kind of salve for the anticipation of calamity by envisioning the latter in aesthetic terms that are, I think, not altogether unappealing even if stark. The environment is going to change. This much is known. Rather than burying our heads in the sand, we need to acknowledge this reality by embracing the conditions of life that lie ahead. For it is only by accepting the inevitability of climate change that we will move forward and build the most functional and sustainable future possible under challenging circumstances.

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<sup>3</sup> VanderMeer, Jeff. *Annihilation*. New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2014.

<sup>4</sup> Crawford, Lawrence. "Viktor Shklovskij: Différance in Defamiliarization." *Comparative Literature* 36, no. 3 (1984): 209-19.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid

<sup>6</sup> Timberlake, John. *Landscape and the Science Fiction Imaginary*. Bristol, IL: Intellect, 2018.



When venturing into the world to make images, I find myself attracted to certain ingredients more than others: large mounds of homogenous materials, the skeletal outlines of yet-to-be realized constructions, artificial light sources imposing themselves on otherwise dark landscapes, and seemingly out-of-place occurrences both natural and human-made. Two elements magnetically draw my camera's lens: materials in a state of homogeneity that suggests a complacency and acceptance of unnatural materials (or their unnatural assemblage), and the outlier elements that don't quite fit in. These compositions and focal points gesture, beckon, towards what I am most interested in exploring: "Look at what humankind has done and look at how the natural world has responded."



Fig. 1, *Untitled*, 2019



Fig. 2, *Untitled*, 2021

In fact, a phenomenal amount of resilience marks this response. Note, in Figure 1, how a lone plant flourishes amid a bath of glaring LED light. In Figure 2, an unnatural structure formed by abandoned automobile tires mimics the organic mountainous forms in the distance. Human-made elements pervade, and help to constitute, the landscapes in these images, articulating the

themes of environmental uncertainty and a world whose future is at risk. By now, it has become just too complex to track all the influence humankind has had on the natural world, and too arduous to untangle the natural and the human-made.

Challenged by the task of representing our absorption in, separation from, and exploitation of the natural environment, I turned first to historical treatments of the landscape in photography. Timothy O'Sullivan's work in the 1870s provides valuable insight into this endeavor. O'Sullivan photographed the undocumented western territory with a focus on geological structure, making images under the guise of scientific investigation.<sup>7</sup> In retrospect, his work can be viewed under the banner of colonization in the sense of enacting a cultural belief in Manifest Destiny.<sup>8</sup> O'Sullivan's work exhibited how white Europeans saw what they defined as the "virgin" landscape, although it is worth noting that America was far from unexplored or unpeopled at the time.<sup>9</sup>



Fig.3, *Sand Dunes, Carson Desert, Nevada, 1867*



Fig. 4, *Untitled, 2020*

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<sup>7</sup> Aspinwall, Jane L., Brunet François, Keith F. Davis, and Timothy H. O'Sullivan. *Timothy H. O'Sullivan: The King Survey Photographs*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2011.

<sup>8</sup> Mitchell, W. J. T. 2002. *Landscape and power*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid*

Within O’Sullivan’s images several distinct tropes stand out. One of the most dominant, and perhaps the most relevant to my work, is the imaging of tracks, marks, and other signs of exploration left by either his group or previous travelers, inhabitants, and explorers. In my work, the same presence of tracks on a desolate landscape, the evidencing of trespass, plays a central visual role. Another trope from O’Sullivan is the recording of land being removed from the domain of nature and subjugated to the human realm. In fact, such imagery is a through-line found in work dating from O’Sullivan to the most contemporary landscape photographers. This act of conquest is no longer limited to our planet. Look at images from our Moon and Mars missions, and you will find the purposive documentation of foot falls and rover tire imprints.<sup>10</sup>



Fig. 5, *Lunar Soil*, 1969



Fig. 6, *Buzz Aldrin Boot Print*, 1969

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<sup>10</sup> Light, Michael, and Andrew Chaikin. *Full Moon*. New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 1999.

This type of documentation has existed throughout photographic history, serving a supposedly rational purpose. Above, the image on the left shows the untouched lunar surface. The image on the right shows the same area, now containing the prominent boot imprint of Buzz Aldrin.<sup>11</sup> If undisturbed by other visitors, the visual statement made by Aldrin could last for over one million years.

But our desire to leave a physical trace of our presence, to boldly document and memorialize our intrusion, also speaks to the overwhelming human desire to create a story of control while staking a claim of ownership. These marks communicate the physical manifestation of an internalized separation from nature. Within the images I have produced for this project, the prominence of such symbols works in tandem with an impression of otherworldliness to illuminate the distance between human and natural worlds.

The usage of this type of imagery, and its celebration, appears again and again in the portfolios of some of the most highly acclaimed contemporary landscape photographers. In recent work by Canadian Edward Burtynsky, it is plain that the artist is engaged, in part, in the act of exalting the megastructures and megalomaniac terraforming that have been the hallmark of modern society.<sup>12</sup> Burtynsky's unquestionably masterful wielding of his craft renders complex systems and their megastructures sublime. His images are photographic propaganda that impart an awe-inspired, jaw-dropping, "oh my god"-ness at the wonders of human accomplishment. To the extent that Burtynsky offers a rebuke of modernity, it is a quiet one that conflicts with his overwhelming glorification of the human-made.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Burtynsky, Edward, Lori Pauli, Mark Haworth-Booth, and Kenneth Baker. *Manufactured Landscapes: The Photographs of Edward Burtynsky*. Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada, 2003.

<sup>13</sup> Demos, T. J. *Against the Anthropocene: Visual Culture and Environment Today*. Berlin: Sternberg, 2017.

Ultimately, Burtynsky's work seems to align with the agenda of neoliberalism as an elevation of consumerism and corporatization. This is a tendency that has not gone down well with some critics. Burtynsky's work is too reliant on the context in which you encounter it. As photographic theorist Liz Wells states, the work could just as effectively function in an environmentalist organization's hallway as it could on Exxon Mobile's walls.<sup>14</sup> If a work is too dependent on the context in which it is displayed, too much chance is left for how the viewer may understand the image.<sup>15</sup> Burtynsky's bird's-eye perspective of the human-altered landscape only reinforces the idea that we are separate from the land. When it comes to work of this kind, the purpose is facilitative, that is, to be in service to the desires of the observer. What is absent, then, and what I believe is essential when making work to *connect* a viewer to the environment, is including a human perspective complete with its eye-level view of the scene.

Again, none of this is to question the beauty of the removed vantage point that is cultivated by Burtynsky's photographs, which skillfully blend the textures of the human-made with a living natural world. The markings, the interruptions, of nature within these images often contrast color and form, framing a most engaging visual landscape. But photographs of this kind have less to do with the human agency that has destroyed these open spaces and more with the joy that Burtynsky finds in depicting a torn landscape.

Early on Burtynsky declared the non-political nature of his work, further cementing the idea that he has no quarrel with human aggression against the environment. He cast himself in the innocuous role of an observer—though he has recently reconsidered his stance. To take things a step further, I would argue that his removed visioning of a landscape devastated by human action only performs the disservice of abstracting the entire space and the implications of

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<sup>14</sup> Wells, Liz. "Manufactured Landscapes." Lecture, 2021.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid



what has taken place there. The physical space between Burtynsky's lens and the environmental degradation he is often capturing allows for a parallel emotional and cognitive space between the viewer of the work and the subject they are viewing. This distance permits a safe space for the aesthetic appreciation of destruction, letting the viewer off the hook with regard to feelings of obligation, or responsibility, for the daily continuation of said degradation.

Abstraction through distance is not a fault solely within Burtynsky's work. This theme has infiltrated much of modern landscape photography with the increased use of drones as part of photographic practice. Drones do not even require the photographer to be present at the location where a photograph is taken. What occurs is a mediation via technology that pushes the photographer away from the subject and also distances the viewer. Art historian and critic TJ Demos uses the term "The Aestheticization of our Destruction" to describe how this type of imagery can function. By reducing an objectively horrific scene of environmental catastrophe and exploitation to one of beautiful form, color, and texture, the photographer saps the motivation to view the scene unfavorably. In this way, the images are their own subtle form of messaging that promotes the idea of human predation of the natural environment as something acceptable and even positive.<sup>16</sup>

Ultimately, these types of images feed into the mythic idea of nature as separate from the human domain. Through beautification and abstraction, imagery that indulges in the genre of the "man-altered landscape" fails to offer any meaningful critique concerning environmental degradation, blurring the lines between what is good, bad, and necessary. It is generally accepted that the sum of all human activity has pushed us out of the relatively–environmentally-stable

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<sup>16</sup> Demos, T. J. *Against the Anthropocene: Visual Culture and Environment Today*. Berlin: Sternberg, 2017.

geologic period of the Holocene into our current epoch of the Anthropocene.<sup>17</sup> The Anthropocene is defined as the geologic age where human action, not natural systems, constitute the driving force behind climate and environmental shifts. It is widely believed that this action will likely end in a significantly altered version of Earth and its ecosystems.

I have found myself facing the problem of communicating what I feel, perceive, and understand as our, or perhaps more specifically, *my* own relationship to the natural world and the strange world we have constructed around, and within, it evolves. The work of photographers included in the New Topographics show of the 1970s has provided some inspiration in facing this challenge.<sup>18</sup> The way these photographers situated themselves, and therefore the viewer, within the landscape through an eye-level perspective highlighted the increasing domination of the “natural” by the “constructed.” In this photographic vision can be found a more appropriate way of investigating our relationship to the world around us. The lineage of this humanized perspective has now carried forward some 50 years, its persistent influence evident, for example, among photographers included in the extensive collection of images, *The Altered Landscape: Photographs of a Changing Environment*, which was published in 2011.<sup>19</sup>

The perspective I am describing is practical and necessary because most people have difficulty conceiving events and phenomena transcending themselves. It is nothing short of mind-boggling to imagine the scale of a global event such as climate change, a challenge made more difficult because the process can be quiet and invisible (until suddenly it isn't). Like a haunting, it surrounds us, and its presence is known, but there is often a lack of tangible

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<sup>17</sup> Scranton, Roy. *Learning to Die in the Anthropocene: Reflections on the End of a Civilization*. San Francisco, CA, CA: City Lights Books, 2105.

<sup>18</sup> Bannon, Anthony, and Britt Salvesen. *New Topographics*. Steidl, 2013.

<sup>19</sup> Lucy R. Lippard et al., *The Altered Landscape: Photographs of a Changing Environment* (New York, NY: Skira Rizzoli Publications, Inc., 2011).

evidence. Climate change is an omnipresent threat to our world, but we do not see it day-to-day, ubiquitously, as we should. Therefore, it is easy to disengage. Even when there are events that garner national attention, like the now yearly massive wildfires in California, concern only seems to slightly outlast the events themselves. Even worse, each year as such events become more common, much of the public and its leaders seem to accept them as unavoidable realities over which no control is possible. The 2020 wildfires were so destructive that the smoke turned San Francisco's skies a deep orange, creating a scene we have only ever experienced in Hollywood science-fiction blockbusters. What once would have been taken as a world-ending sign is now normalized. We have all become conditioned to the sights and sounds of apocalypse due to a constant stream of hyperbolic infotainment on the subject within our media culture. Not surprisingly, when faced with an actual pre-apocalyptic experience, we process it like we do our favorite dystopian movie.<sup>20</sup>

I believe the average person wants to ensure that the environment, and by extension, our planet remains safe and habitable. I also think, however, that most individuals today feel little agency in effecting meaningful change on this issue. Nor do I blame them; I feel much the same, for reasons that are pragmatic. To move forward, it is necessary to mourn and release attachments to the world that is passing. This is not to suggest we do nothing. We still need to fight for clean energy, more social equity, and the leadership that might achieve these ends. We need to make certain that a livable world of tomorrow exists despite the shortcomings of today.

Rather than revisiting the well-trodden ground of New Topographics, my work seeks to push landscape photography in a different direction, past a fixation with our current moment. With the adoption of visual qualities used in science-fiction media—such as ultra-saturated

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<sup>20</sup> *San Francisco Looking Like Blade Runner / Mars / Chernobyl. YouTube.* YouTube, 2020.  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dSreOPz0Zcs>.



colors, dystopian/barren landscapes, monolithic features, and an overall estrangement of the familiar—I am using my work to interrogate not just the source of contemporary ills, but also where we are heading. Suddenly, the "now" is not as important to me as the “next.” Situating the viewer directly within the landscape, I nonetheless use visual strangeness to force a distance between the viewer and the subject, a strategy that emphasizes the precarity of natural features in contrast with man's actions. My wish is to communicate that our world is changing and headed for a new kind of virgin territory. Will this mean the end of humankind? I don't think so. Not if we can turn our attention and our energy to adaptation. This, it seems to me, is the ground-level insight that comes out of my speculative look at the contemporary world with all its dislocation and denial.

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