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Edward Burtynsky: Pentimento

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Shipbreaking #10 Field Proof, Chittagong, Bangladesh, 2000

Edward Burtynsky's exhibition invites us to pay attention to the man behind the curtain. Mr. Burtynsky is famous for his large-format color pictures of industrial sites, and pictures of the Bangladeshi shipbreaking yards, saturated with mud browns and the reds and yellows of the rusting hulls, are one of his best-known projects. None of that color is here. The eight pictures on display are all titled "Shipbreaking # Field Proof, Chittagong, Bangladesh, 2000," with the appropriate digit after the number sign—but all are black and white. Mr. Burtynsky shot these pictures using Polaroid film. The "instant" film gave him a quick way to check his compositions before shooting them in color. To make the prints in the show, the Polaroids were scanned and printed at 36" by 46", considerably larger than the originals. No effort was made to remove the scratches and imperfections. These field proofs let us see the wizard arranging his effects. In numbers 1, 8 and 24, a solitary hull looms up in a state of grand decay. In 10 and 13, ship parts recede into the misty distance. These are compositions Mr. Burtynsky developed in his meticulous final color images, but they are already monumental in their black and white iterations.