

Chester Arnold



Peninsula Fine Arts Center exhibit explores a world remade by mankind

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Most traditional landscapes embrace their subjects in a reverent, often celebratory way that underscores the beauty and mystery of Nature.

But in a new exhibit at the Peninsula Fine Arts Center, a group of more than 30 artists turns that age-old strategy upside down, exploring instead the epic tragedy of a world gone terribly wrong — or at least reshaped in highly questionable ways by the incessant and frequently careless industry of humans.

Just take a look at any one of a couple of dozen large-scale images documenting such devastating environmental changes as the residential development of a once pristine desert or the extraction of mineral resources through open-pit mining.

Then there are such alarming sights as a massive tire dump spreading through the California hills and a panoramic if deliberately set prairie fire.

These are just some of the provocative revelations showcased in "Environmental Impact," a new traveling exhibit that features 75 paintings, photographs, prints and 3-dimensional

works devoted to examining the relentless physical impact of mankind on the rest of the planet.

Sobering is one word to describe the experience that results.

Another is unbelievable — even when you see the evidence of such giant and profound transformations of the natural landscape with your own eyes.

Many of the most powerful works in the show put together by Wisconsin-based curator David J. Wagner are documentary photographs that record their subjects in a straight-ahead, matter-of-fact manner.

But so stupefying are some of the scenes they depict that you may have to look twice before recognizing exactly what you're seeing.

In Toronto photographer Edward Burtynsky's oversized study of shipbreakers at work in Chittagong, Bangladesh, for example, you may not understand at first that the immense 4-story-tall object dwarfing the grime-covered laborers in the center of the image is the cutaway bow of a weather-beaten ship rather than an enormous rock or a building.

Far off in the tidal mud, moreover, five other huge sections cut from ocean-going vessels rear up into view, some still standing upright on their truncated keels but others so weakened by the shipbreakers' chisels and torches that they've toppled over into the shallows.

Discarded gas cylinders lie on the unnatural-looking ground, which has not only been chewed up by heavy tracked vehicles but also eerily discolored by spilled chemicals and fuel.

Then there's the thin but ominous plume of oily black smoke that wafts along this otherworldly shoreline, adding to the feeling that you're looking not at some part of the Earth but a desolate alien planet.

Similar kinds of experiences can be found in New Mexico photographer Martin Stupich's painfully beautiful shots of an open-pit copper mine near Salt Lake City, Utah, where nearly 50 levels of terraces have gouged out a hole hundreds of feet deep and nearly 10,000 feet around.

So godlike and elevated is the perspective here that the giant machines laboring to make this immense artificial rift still wider and more profound look like tiny bugs.

Mammoth scale adds to the impact of Nevada photographer Peter Goin's study of a prairie fire, too, pulling the eye from side to side and into the far distance through its 6-foot-long panoramic perspective.

Scorched earth, burning stumps and billowing clouds of smoke fill this vast expanse, conjuring up the feeling of an abandoned battlefield as well as an environmental disaster.

Don't miss California artist Chester Arnold's painterly take on a similarly epic disruption of the natural world — this time a colossal open-pit mine that plunges far down through the earth to the beautiful but ominous-looking waters collecting in a holding pond.

Chemical fires, explosions and plumes of black smoke add to the dark portent of this scene, marking the eroded terraces as if they were steps descending into a kind of hell. But it's the menacing blue-green pool of god-knows-what kind of liquid oozing at the bottom of this man-made hole that really makes you worry about the consequences for the future.