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In Hong Kong, a Timely Photo Series on Water

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Slideshow

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Edward Burtynsky

'Oil Spill #14, Marsh Islands, Gulf of Mexico' is part of the new exhibit 'Watermarks' by photographer Edward Burtynsky. [View slideshow](#)

Edward Burtynsky spent most of the past decade with his lens on the oil industry. Now he is shifting his focus to what he calls “the next great liquid”: water.

The 57-year-old artist’s new exhibit, “Watermarks,” opens Thursday at Sundaram Tagore in Hong Kong. Aside from a few photos that have shown at art fairs, this is the first time the series has shown, and it will reappear at other exhibitions and in a documentary over the next few years.

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Mr. Burtynsky, who lives in Toronto, established himself with his sweeping photos of landscapes scarred by mining and industrialization before turning his attention to the environmental consequences of the oil industry.

“Watermarks,” whose goal is to show “how we as humans have shaped water and how water has shaped us,” he said, has been in the works since 2007. He shot many of the photos from helicopters and small planes, including aerial images of irrigation farming in Texas and 2010’s oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico.

“I don’t typically do accidents,” he said, “but this one resonates because it touches on the two themes that I’ve been working on for over a decade.”

Mr. Tagore, who describes the photos as “painterly in nature and abstract in quality,” called Mr. Burtynsky’s work “socially conscious, and at the same time, aesthetically powerful.”

Mr. Burtynsky’s work previously showed at Sundaram Tagore in 2010, an exhibition in which local Hong Kong residents, as well as mainland Chinese and expatriate Western buyers snapped up every available piece, Mr. Tagore noted. The “Waterworks” photos range from US\$18,000 to \$35,000.

None of the photos on view were taken in China, though the country was the subject of “Manufacturing Landscapes,” a 2006 documentary chronicling his forays through its industrial-ravaged countrysides. He said he expects to incorporate China in future installments of his water-focused images, having already shot rice paddies in Yunnan, fish farms in Fujian and a large hydroelectric dam near the Myanmar border.

While in Hong Kong, he plans to shoot the city’s dynamic skyline. “Hong Kong has the most intense waterfronts of all waterfronts,” he said.

It will be contingent on his nemesis, the weather. “In China, especially, the weather can be a real bear,” he said. “I sat in Yunnan for eight days without shooting anything, it was so hazy and gray.”

“Watermarks” runs to Dec. 15 at Sundaram Tagore (57-59 Hollywood Rd., Central, Hong Kong).