Embodied Landscapes: A Dance Between Humanity and the Anthropocene

I saw my first show of the season at the National Arts Centre last night and I was quite impressed! I jump at any opportunity to view the work of Canadian photographer Edward Burtynsky, his work always places me in a state of awe and aporia. His work Natural Order, of all his work, is most profound for me, coming out after the pandemic. In isolation, Burtynsky turned his focus back to the natural landscape, creating a new series that captures the cycle of renewal from winter's stillness to spring's vitality, reflecting the complexity, wonder, and resilience of nature, revealing an underlying order amid apparent chaos. Taken in Grey County, Ontario, they also represent a personal journey of finding solace and meaning in nature during uncertain times. Through this selective contemplation, Burtynsky affirmed the enduring strength of the natural world, regardless of humanity's fate. It was this affirmation that moved me.

UAQUE is a multidisciplinary collaboration between choreographer Andrea Peña & Artists, the National Arts Centre Orchestra (NAC), and Canadian photographer Edward Burtynsky. This piece reflects on the Anthropocene Epoch, exploring humanity's impact on the planet through dance, music, and striking visuals. Burtynsky's images are seamlessly woven into the performance, where dancers embody a journey of resilience and vulnerability, set to live music from the NAC Orchestra, conducted by (very funny and talented) Alexander Shelley, and electronic composer Eƨƨe Ran.

Andrea Peña's choreography stands out for blending dance with industrial design, incorporating contemporary issues into her work. Known for her conceptual approach, she emphasizes a dialogue between the body and space, searching for new choreographic and aesthetic possibilities.

Burtynsky's photographs, depicting the complex interplay between beauty and environmental crisis, engage in a dynamic conversation with the dancers. Together, they create a ritualistic space where humans and the nonhuman world coexist, inviting reflection on our relationship with the Earth.

Edward Burtynsky’s photography and Andrea Peña’s choreography converge in *UAQUE* to form an evocative dialogue between the human body and the altered landscapes of the Anthropocene. Burtynsky’s images, with their haunting portrayal of industrialized beauty, serve as more than mere backdrops; they are living elements that interact with Peña’s dancers, who physically embody the discord between humanity’s ingenuity and the planet’s vulnerability. Peña’s choreography amplifies the emotional undercurrent of Burtynsky’s work, transforming still images into kinetic explorations of survival, adaptation, and loss. The dancers move as extensions of the landscapes—alternating between resilience and collapse—mirroring the fragile equilibrium of the Earth itself. In this collaboration, Peña’s innovative use of space and materiality transcends traditional performance, turning the dancers into both inhabitants and architects of a world on the edge, while Burtynsky’s photographs provide a lens through which the audience can witness the consequences of human actions in visceral, moving form. Together, they create a new interdisciplinary language that blurs the boundaries between movement and stillness, art and environmental reckoning.



A discussion prior to the event with all three talents in this multi-modal experience. From the left, Burtynsky, Peña, NAC Orchestra Director Alexander Shelley being interviewed by Caroline Ohrt, Executive Producer of NAC Dance.

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