

Stormbelt exhibition in Toronto—a dark journey through America’s Sun Belt

An interview with photographer Robert Leslie

Lee Parsons
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Raised in Canada, now living and working in Europe, Robert Leslie is an artist of genuinely humane sensibilities, as his recent photographic work illustrates.

With a background in music and sound art, Leslie has been focusing on photography for the past two decades and his images have appeared in numerous publications, including *Vanity Fair*, the *New York Times* and French *Vogue*.

Toronto Image Works Gallery was founded by famed Canadian photographer Ed Burtynsky, best known for his extraordinary large-scale images of industrial landscapes, as featured in the award-winning documentary, *Manufactured Landscapes* (2006). Burtynsky’s work and supportive association have been a boon to Robert Leslie’s own efforts.

Leslie terms his “Stormbelt”, included in Toronto’s annual CONTACT Photography Festival, “a photographic odyssey”. In it he presents a sampling of his project, which includes a book of photographs and texts, as well as a video of the places and people he encountered on his travels. The dozen or so photographs mounted at the gallery are large format, high-resolution digital C prints that vividly transport the viewer to the time and place he records.

Drawn from his excursions through the southern United States, the most recent at the end of last year, and the first at the time of Barack Obama’s inauguration in January 2009, Leslie’s project documents social decay and ecological damage in America in stark and strangely beautiful imagery.

We spoke about these trips and their impact in a recent conversation in Toronto.

WSWS: I’d like to ask about your personal history before we talk about the work. You have a background in the visual arts and photography in particular, but how much video have you previously done?

Robert Leslie: This is essentially my first project in video. Prior to photography, I was in music and music composition and sound engineering. I was commissioned to create a sound installation for the Rodin Museum in Paris about 15 years ago—and people all along have asked, how come you don’t combine visuals with sound? This was the first opportunity to do it.

WSWS: What motivated you to make this journey?

RL: This was my second trip—I made the original journey in January–February 2009. I’d acquired the [North American] accent in Canada in my teenage years, but I was born and I’ve lived most of my life in Europe. The majority of my previous shooting was location and assignment work internationally, recording the remnants of the great empires.... the Roman, the Spanish, the British.

In all my years of shooting, I’d never really photographed North America. I always had this idea about maybe coming to Canada and

looking at the country I’d left, but also to America. To be documenting the rise and fall of empires and not to look at America was kind of peculiar.

I’d followed American politics quite closely through let’s call it the “Bush era”, and I was just curious to see what was going to happen with the arrival of Barack Obama. I chose the starting point of my journey as the day he arrived in the White House. I attended a broadcast of the inauguration at a performing arts center in Miami and it was basically like a rock concert ... except there were eight-year-old white girls and ninety-year-old black women, and everyone else in between, cheering every time his face came on the screen. And I thought, “That’s interesting ... this is the new fuel in the American engine ... let’s go take a look at the rest of the machinery”.

WSWS: You’re talking about how you see the current period as a decline of empire, whether its in Europe or America.

RL: A key turning point for me was the chance to take three trips to China during 2007 and 2008. Prior to that, I had also made a couple of trips to Brazil and to India. Out of the four emerging economic blocks, BRIC—Brazil, Russia, India and China—I’ve only missed Russia. I was curious to see the transition in their societies environmentally, economically and socially.

At the end of visiting those three emerging powers, and seeing in particular the scale of investment in China (with its obvious downside of environmental pollution), then to go to America, which is theoretically the world’s number one economic power, and to find that none of that huge amount of money going through its accounts is trickling down to its infrastructure ... it was really baffling!

On top of that, I started at the height of the recession in Miami, one of the foreclosure capitals of America, along with Las Vegas. I began with the perspective of taking a look at the economic situation, but as I drove further and further, I became aware of the environmental devastation too, man-made and natural, throughout the South.

WSWS: At what point did you meet Ed Burtynsky of Toronto Image Works, because I know he did some work in China as well?

RL: I met Ed five or six years ago. By coincidence, I bumped into him on the last day of my 2009 journey. He had just finished that morning doing a helicopter shoot over Los Angeles, shooting the super-highways. It was the last piece of his oil project that’s now just opened at the Photographers Gallery in London.

I found my trip started on the eastern part of the country in a more sociological, journalistic kind of way and as I moved further west ... I don’t know if it was the distances, the kind of transition geographically and economically from the Gulf Coast ... but the space just kind of put me into much more of a landscape-meditative space, closer to Ed’s approach.

of America! Its just spiritually and economically a disaster.

WSWS: I raised Burtynsky's work because I've always admired the sort of duality to it, particularly *Manufactured Landscapes*, which deals with the product of human industry in an environmental sense. One is struck by the awesome scale and beauty of this industry, but at the same time aware of the ecological devastation that accompanies it. It raises really troubling questions about the current social order.

RL: The piece that he submitted for my book talks about the state of the American situation with the arrival of Barack Obama. What does this marker in history indicate? Ed has always walked a fine line. ... He likes to present the evidence and let you conclude yourself what's going on. He's never directly political about what he's saying, but indirectly, I find his work is completely political about society's respect or disrespect for the earth's resources.

WSWS: The exhibition that you have on now certainly deals with the landscapes of the Sun Belt, but it really just touches on the social devastation of that region.

RL: I had an idea or some clues about places that I was curious about and drawn to in the South, like the Mississippi [River]. I chose not to take major interstate highways and, with the discipline of going 7 am to 7 pm, to take smaller roads through rural areas whenever possible.

What I was trying to do was to bridge an area between Ed's work, its huge scale where man is suggested, but where he's not really present, and the efforts of photojournalists, who shoot scenes with people three feet in front of them ... I wanted to visually make a space between the two. Part of the motive of the journey on the second time around was to make people present, but not as photographs.

WSWS: Tell me more about the video? There are some startling juxtapositions. There's one terrifying image of a crucifix against the backdrop of a factory at sundown.

RL: This power plant and cemetery is somewhere I visited in 2009 on the Mississippi, a water source for the breadbasket of America (that's rapidly drying up), whose original claim to fame was its connection to slavery on the plantations and which now is most important for its role in the petrochemical industry.

I had seen the location when I was driving. It's west of New Orleans about 20 or 30 miles. It was a place I really wanted to get back to, because I found the juxtaposition of a cemetery right in front of this huge petrochemical refining plant staggering.

People can hold whatever beliefs they want to, but I found the amount of energy and resources put into these particular religious beliefs is ... I'm trying to be ambivalent here ... The combination of the fuel processing plant and the Christ figure I just found sums up two cornerstones of the American belief system. It happens that there was this stunningly beautiful sunset behind it. I found that watching it, with the ever-present sense that a security guard might nail me, summed up something strong about where America is at the moment.

The image didn't appear in the book as I put it in the video. I always liked that piece of filming and I had recorded some quotes and conversations with some of the people I'd met along the way. The guitar parts in the full-length video I recorded in a hotel room in Las Vegas, and the piano parts I composed and recorded in Philadelphia right after the trip. ... The sequence you refer to is one of the most reflective moments in the film content.

There's a picture in the book where there's a homeless guy who's surrounded by six security guards. First, there's no care for the homeless. Second, there's no care for the aged, like this eighty-year-old native woman under the Vegas lights in this other photo. The whole notion about how Vegas is the "land of dreams" ... despite being the foreclosure capital

Talking about technology and society, you talk to any sixteen-year-old kid about what they think entertainment or culture or art is, they're not going to say they want to go into a room with a bunch of suits and look at perfectly framed pictures. They want to have an experience, and all the technology is out there. My nephew, who is eleven years old, can make a website faster than I can, just because that's the language they live, eat and breathe. I think that, as artists, we should be open to all those possibilities.

WSWS: In a climate where so much of what is produced commercially excludes any focus on what's actually taking place in the world, you have gravitated towards looking, particularly at America, at the heart of the global crisis.

RL: It's funny that you use the word heart because, for me, there seems to be such a coldness in the statistical approach to things. There seems to be no heart involved. I just want to draw attention. Like I say, there's all this money that goes through America, but very little of it seems to trickle down to enhancing the conditions of the population. I find there is a predominant tendency toward short-term thinking, that when coupled with rampant consumerism, has led to a disastrous combination for the population and the planet.

WSWS: How do you view things going forward?

RL: This was part of a concept. It was to do with the continuity of the road, the route, the rails that built America. First, I don't own a car, and, second, I don't watch television, so, through being in a car and watching American television, you learn an awful lot about what they're trying to promote there.

Moving forward, I would say there needs to be massive, progressive action immediately to get the country back on its track, or rails. ... You mentioned the Occupy movement. When I came up with the idea that I'd take a second trip through America last year I was intimidated by the idea of interviewing people, so I tried to get a writer to come on the trip with me. I proposed it to a friend of mine who did one of the China trips with me back in 2007 who was a journalist for *Newsweek*. He was going to come with me, but then very last minute he had to pull the plug ... now he's the editor of the Occupy Wall Street newspaper.

In terms of future projects I would like to develop more projects in North America, including Canada, illustrating social, economic and environmental inconsistencies.

For WSWS readers this video clip is available using the password "Stormbelt": <https://vimeo.com/42557800>

The full *Stormbelt* catalogue is available in e-book form at: <http://www.blurb.com/bookstore/detail/3154513>.



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