

# all about earth



Now in its second year, the 2009 edition of the Prix Pictet drew submissions from over 300 photographers around the world, all of whom tackled the theme of *Earth*. Following the shortlist of 12 artists in July, the winner will be selected by a jury comprising leading members from the arts, media and science industries in October, followed by a travelling exhibition.



TEXT BY MICHAEL BENSON  
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In the antique theatre in Arles, there is a sweet spot centre-stage where, thanks to the genius of Roman acoustic engineering, a whisper amplifies to a shout. It was here on 9 July, on a giant screen erected specially for the purpose, that the portfolios of each of the artists shortlisted for this year's Prix Pictet rolled through the Provençal night. Unaccompanied by commentary, each of them spoke with power and eloquence of the threats facing our planet.

The screening of the Prix Pictet shortlist was part of the opening events of this year's *Les Rencontres d'Arles*, curated by the American photographer Nan Goldin. This year marked the 40th anniversary of the festival and each night of the opening week saw special screenings in the antique theatre. Before an audience studded with some of the biggest names in international photography – including Josef Koudelka, Martin Parr and Willy Ronis – the Prix Pictet shared a stage with the legendary Duane Michals. It would have been easy to have been overawed in such company, but it is a measure of just how far the Prix Pictet has come in less than two years that the presentation of the 2009 shortlist was a major event in its own right.

### Capturing the World

Drawn from over 300 photographers who had submitted works on this year's theme of *Earth*, the submissions of the 12 shortlisted artists speak of the damaging and often irreversible effects of exploiting the earth's resources and reflect on both the immediate and long-term impact of unsustainable development on communities across the globe. As Stephen Barber, Prix Pictet Director, said in his moving presentation of the shortlist, "We are all of us, all too familiar with the great issues of sustainability – climate change, environmental degradation, deforestation – yet how many of us here tonight have experienced personally the devastating consequences depicted by these photographers?"

The shortlisted images range from the painterly to the documentary and all points in between – in most cases within a single submission. A number of the shortlisted photographers have made work that unsettles the viewer by presenting something that is not what it first appears to be. The German artist Andreas Gursky, for example, makes large-scale colour photographs that are distinctive for their critical look at the effects of capitalism and globalisation. His nominated work



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*Untitled XIII, 2002* confronts the viewer with an apparently infinite landscape of garbage. From a distance, this work appears abstract and colourful, but closer inspection reveals tiny figures desperately searching a dump in Chimalhuacán, Mexico City.

Like Gursky, Naoya Hatakeyama's dramatic submission *Blast, River and Tunnel* also plays with viewers' perceptions to jolt us into a reflection on the relationship between people and their environment – we are alternately in the very midst of the eruption of a blast mine or standing waist-deep admiring the angular beauty of dirty water channels beneath the cities of Paris and Tokyo.

In his *Mountain and Water, 2006–7* the Chinese artist Yao Lu presents images of lush mountainous vistas swamped in mist and surrounded by sea, but they are not what they seem. The peaks rising from the water that dwarf the tiny speck-sized

boats are in fact gargantuan piles of rubbish and construction waste, by-products of China's building development, shrouded in huge lengths of green netting. Like Gursky and Hatakeyama, Lu uses photography to both distort the truth and represent reality while also taking the viewer back in time to when the landscape was a fertile and untouched area.

#### Lunar Projections

The London-based artist Darren Almond was nominated for his series *Fullmoons, 2008–9*. Almond uses the moon as his only source of light and an extensive exposure time of 15 minutes or more, to turn night into day. He creates meditative landscapes that have a unique and mysterious quality. Almond was nominated for the Turner Prize in 2005.

Edward Burtynsky's remarkable depictions of global industrial landscapes are in the collections of over 50 major museums. For the Prix Pictet he is nominated for his *Quarries* series, a group of breathtaking angular images that present active and abandoned quarries across America, Europe and India as vast sculptural forms of spectacular, dizzying beauty.

Christopher Steel-Perkins uses an iconic symbol of

Previous page: Ed Kashi. *Nigeria, 2006* from the *Curse of the Black Gold: 50 Years of Oil in the Niger Delta* series. 2006. Archival inkjet. 40 x 50 cm.

Facing page: Two images from Abbas Kowsari's *Shade of Earth* series, 07 (2007) and 05 (2008). Both shot in Talaiye, south of Iran in digital chromogenic colour print. 70 x 105 cm.

Above: Two images from Edward Burtynsky's *Rock of Ages* series. #8 and #3, both 1991 Chromogenic colour print. 121.9 x 152.4 cm.

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Japan that has inspired many Japanese artists, most notably Utagawa Hiroshige, for his iconic series of woodblocks, 36 *Views of Mount Fuji*. Mount Fuji is a national park, but the surrounding area is now dominated by golf courses, resorts and scrapyards and has been a military testing ground. The work can be seen as a commentary on modern Japan and the erosion of natural beauty in the name of progress.


Both Edgar Martins and Nadav Kandar chronicle a disappearing world. In his series *The Diminishing Present, 2005 & 2008*, the Portuguese photographer Martins captures the progress of advancing forest fires in Portugal. His beautiful, painterly images show the vivid greens of vegetation about to be consumed by flames and the charred land left in their wake. The fires of 2005 and 2008 followed an extended period of drought and extreme heat that many believed to be a result of global climate change. Kandar's *Yangtze* documents the rapidly changing landscape and communities of China's Yangtze River, from its mouth to source – more people live along the river's banks than in all of the USA. China's current programme of development is destroying the country's heritage and displacing many of its people. These are images of a community in transition; images of a diminishing world, which can never be made again.

#### The Rape of the Land

Three of the photographers take the exploitation of Africa and South America as their theme. The Congolese photographer Sammy Baloji superimposes colonial black-and-white archive photos, from the mines of Katanga in the Congo that were run by Belgian companies, with his own colour images of the mines today. His nominated work *Memory, 2006*, speaks of the lucrative industrial past of the area which benefited the Belgian colonisation, while the local people were forced into

slavery. Ed Kashi's *Curse of the Black Gold* is a graphic look at the profound cost of oil exploitation in West Africa. His work traces the 50-year impact of Nigeria's relationship to oil and the resulting environmental degradation and community conflicts that have plagued the region. *Capitolio, 2008*, by the Canadian photographer Christopher Anderson, explores the cycle of consumption, destruction, violence and political turmoil that ebbs and flows with the price of oil in Venezuela, where the entire economy is built around the ever-expanding exploitation of the earth's resources.

Finally, Abbas Kowsari's *Shade of Earth* is a starkly beautiful record of the annual *Nowruz* (Iranian New Year) pilgrimage of hundreds of thousands of Iranians to the fronts of the eight-year long Iran–Iraq war. The pilgrims, often family members of the half a million soldiers who died, travel from all parts of Iran to where the fighting was the heaviest; a journey known as the Caravan of Light (*Rahian-e Noor*).

And so four months on from the announcement in Arles, the 12 shortlisted artists will present their work in London and Paris, beginning with a preview at Purdy Hicks in London, followed by a major exhibition of each of the shortlisted portfolios at the Passage de Retz Gallery, Paris. The Prix Pictet Jury, whose members include Zaha Hadid, Fumio Nanjo, Benoit Aquin and the UK government's former Chief Scientific Adviser, Sir David King, will select the photographer who will receive the Prix Pictet 2009 from Kofi Annan (Honorary President of the Prix Pictet) on 22 October. At the same time, one of the shortlisted artists will be selected to complete the Prix Pictet Commission 2009. And then, as last year when it was seen by over 45 million people, the Prix Pictet embarks on a global tour. 

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