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Burk Uzzle's American Puzzle

By Rena Silverman Jun. 15, 2015

If you ask [Burk Uzzle](#) what he has been up to lately, he'll most likely tell you he has just been "poking around." That means hitting the road with a couple of Leicas, a small shoulder bag and a few rolls of film. He's done this for some 50 years, taking the time between assignments to drive somewhere along side streets and back roads, to get out and follow his whimsical vision.

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“I’ve been a restless fellow all these years, on the move, not letting grass grow under my feet very much at all,” he said in an interview from — where else? — his car. “I try to avoid interstates and turnpikes and things like that and stay on all the small roads and keep my eyes open. That’s been the backbone of a lot of those photographs.”

A selection of those images is on view at the [Steven Kasher Gallery](#) in Manhattan through July 31, in an exhibition that features 70 of his black-and-white prints from the 1960s through the 2000s. The show has also been given a title that makes pretty good use of a great last name: [“Burk Uzzle: American Puzzles.”](#)

“My dad told me it was Scotch-English way back yonder,” Mr. Uzzle said of his surname. “And he grew up in Raleigh, N.C. I’ve never tried to get further into its origins than his information.”

The pieces of his puzzle include “Park Slide,” which shows a figure, arms up, shooting down the left of the frame. He took the photo in 1967, off the road, while still on contract with Life magazine. Living in Annapolis, he had been driving back and forth to Washington when the photo was taken.

“That was strictly just a matter of walking around or driving around,” he said.

Taken on the other side of the country was “Wall With Paint and Man,” from a 1975 trip to Santa Barbara, Calif., which shows a man whose face is obscured by the rim of his car window.

There are, in fact, quite a few photographs in the exhibition from 1970s California because of his many trips there for various Life magazine assignments.

“There were some years that I probably shot more film there on assignment in California than I did in New York,” said Mr. Uzzle, who has also been a member of [Magnum](#).

Then there were farther trips, like one to Haiti, which started as an assignment for Life, when it heard rumors that Papa Doc Duvalier might be toppled (he was not). But the photo in the Kasher exhibit, “Boys With Wall,” happened several days after that 1974 assignment, when he went back on his own.

“I was so fascinated by Haiti that I actually went back on my own nickel myself and hung out there for a week or so and poked around,” he said.

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Andy Under Diving Board. North Carolina. 1975

Many of his photographs involve details in the corners. “Tuba and Steps, July 4 Parade,” taken in Washington in 1967, shows the curl of the instrument clinging to the right side of the image.

“It’s not often that you could crop off the right third of the picture or the left third of the picture or even 10 percent of it and not lose something that is important,” he said. “It just wouldn’t work.”

This could especially be said of “Legs, Vermont,” a large-format image made in 2002. A chair showing one of the two pairs of legs in the image forms a triangle of only a hint of negative space all the way off to the left bottom corner of the frame.

After he composes the picture — from front to back and left to right and corner to corner — his subjects fall into place. This was inspired by a suggestion from Henri Cartier-Bresson, whom he met numerous times while working for Magnum. Mr. Cartier-Bresson told him to check out quattrocento paintings, which Mr. Uzzle said made him pay special attention to those corners.

“When he told me to go study those paintings he didn’t tell me why,” Mr. Uzzle said. “He just said, ‘I want you to do it.’”

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Although through his work Mr. Uzzle has ended up living all over the country — from Atlanta to Houston, Chicago, New York, Annapolis, Philadelphia, Daytona Beach, Fla., St. Petersburg, Fla., and, briefly, Seattle — he has come full circle. For the past seven years, he has been living in North Carolina, about an hour's drive from where he was born.

"I really wanted to photograph the country and where I grew up," he said. So he bought a couple of "big old buildings," which includes some studio space and a darkroom.

And, yes, he drives and "pokes around," occasionally finding subjects on the back roads near his studio in Wilson.

"The home that my heart lives in is found mostly out on those small, rural roads, or the towns that they connect."