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Burk Uzzle: American Puzzles @Steven
Kasher

By Loring Knoblauch July 15, 2015



JTF (just the facts): A total of 88 black and white and color photographs, framed in black and matted, and hung against white walls in the two room divided gallery space. 70 of the works are gelatin silver prints (mostly vintage) made between 1964 and 1984; 17 additional gelatin silver prints were made between 1997 and 2005, and 1 chromogenic print (hung in a small back alcove) was made in 2005. The black and white prints are sized either 8×10 or 11×14 (or reverse), while the unique color print is roughly 32×40. No edition information was provided. (Installation shots below.)

Comments/Context: While Burk Uzzle's reputation as a photojournalist was long ago cemented by his work at LIFE and as a member of Magnum Photos, his personal photography, often taken in between assignments, has gotten less attention. This expansive show brings together five decades of this overlooked imagery, and along the way, highlights the consistency of Uzzle's meticulous compositional control.

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Many of Uzzle's early images are studies in the arrangement of photographic space, where foreground and background are collapsed, geometries are realigned into flatness, and contrasts of white and black or light and shadow are used for balance. Whether it was a park slide or a tire shop, a railway underpass or a refinery stairwell, he was able to pare down the found forms with striking precision, turning walls, telephone poles, garages, and rooflines into constructions of angled planes and lines. Had Uzzle continued along these lines and refined and simplified his vision further, he would have likely ended up stylistically near Ray Metzker or even Lewis Baltz.

But the siren song of American absurdity was seemingly too tempting to resist, and most of Uzzle's best images take that undercurrent of strict compositional rigor and apply it to the quirkier side of life. Visual one-liners abound: the painted wolf howling at the Last Supper, the half car with one leg sticking out, the matching spots of dogs and owners, the legs sticking up from the backyard swimming pool. And while these routinely evoke a snort or a knowing chuckle, his indirect humor is wittier. Restroom visitors at the Danbury fairgrounds intermingle with various mannequins attached to the roof. A man touches his face in the crowd at a street fair, echoed by the cigar store Indian in the background. Oversized dollar signs are left near a Christmas tree. And a dour-faced girl sits sullenly on the rocks as a couple makes out behind her. These are pictures that have been made vital by their spatial relationships and the clever way Uzzle has composed the scenes.

A few pictures go further, into the zone where we stand in appreciation, nodding our heads at the smartness of the craftsmanship. A boy captured under a diving board is bisected by the expanse of whiteness, leaving a puzzling combination of just head and legs. A painted arrow boldly juts its way inward toward a counter in Coney Island. A lone woman stands alone amid the endless repetition of beach houses on the Jersey shore. And the kitschy teepee forms of the Wigwam Motel cast a perfect triangular shadow on an empty white billboard. In each case, the real has been made surreal by the organizational structuring Uzzle has done inside the frame.

Given the small size of the prints, the show unfortunately feels like it was unnecessarily expanded to fill the available gallery space – it could have been meaningfully tighter and more persuasive in just one of the two rooms, with some thoughtful grouping of like minded images and visual echoes to show off the breadth of his approach. As it is, the show wanders and meanders a bit too much, ultimately diluting the impact of Uzzle's vision. But regardless of this overstuffing, there is no denying the formal clarity and eccentric humor to be found in Uzzle's work. That he could so effortlessly and successfully bridge from exacting rigidity to offbeat playfulness says volumes about his innate understanding of how photographs function.

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Collector's POV: The black and white prints in this show range in price from \$3500 to \$6500; the single color print is \$40000. Uzzle's work has little secondary market history, so gallery retail remains the best option for those collectors interested in following up.

