

Film documents photographer's work with African American community



Burk Uzzle is known for photographing the remains of the Confederate Soldiers Monument. It stood in front of the Old Durham County Courthouse until it was pulled down by protesters in 2017. (Photo courtesy of Burk Uzzle.)

By Hannah Towey
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A couple hugging as the sun sets in Woodstock, a woman crying in despair after she sees Martin Luther King Jr. lying in his coffin, a KKK member, arms folded as a cross behind him is engulfed in flames.

These are just three of the moments expertly captured by famed photographer Burk Uzzle, an artist whose images are now recognized as some of the most poignant visual representations of American history.

At the Full Frame Documentary Film Festival, held in downtown Durham each spring, moviegoers from across the nation were able to attend the North Carolina premiere of “F/11 and Be There.”

The feature film, directed by Jethro Waters, served as a rare documentation of the immense effort behind a single Burk Uzzle photograph, a process that on several occasions nearly costed his life.

Waters, who Uzzle called his “new

brother” and “closest friend,” said that directing and editing the film was a “learning experience at the same time it was a creation,” and that it provided him the opportunity to “to get a master’s class from someone as genius as Burk is.”

From sneaking into a torture prison in Haiti under the “Papa Doc” regime to dodging bullets and death during the Cambodian Civil War, Uzzle credits his artistic genius to his complete commitment to both his medium and his subjects.

“One thing I am absolutely dedicated to is the power of the medium of photography, and it has been my life,” said Uzzle. “I have given my life to the medium, and the medium has given its life back to me.”

Though much of Uzzle’s 50-year-old archive contains images spanning the globe, his recent work has largely focused on the African-American residents of his current home of Wilson, North Carolina.

Growing up in a small town in Harnett County, Uzzle was no stranger to the rampant racism that plagued his hometown

and the surrounding communities.

“To this day that whole region down in Harnett County, Lumberton and so forth is a strong Klan environment,” said Uzzle. “(My father) confided to me that were he not in a politically appointed job, he would’ve joined the Klan because it was the social thing to do, just to be part of the local men’s social group. And he was anything but a racist.”

The film’s purpose

Back in Durham, Uzzle is known for photographing the remains of the Confederate Soldiers Monument that previously stood in front of the Old Durham County Courthouse until it was pulled down by protesters in August of 2017.

As a companion piece to “F/11 and Be There,” Waters also directed a short film titled “Remains” in order to document Uzzle’s process of photographing the collapsed statue in addition to his lifetime involvement in civil rights movements. “Remains” will be screened at the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington, D.C.

“Seeing the form in a fetal position, I sought to make a dignified and touching picture of its remains,” said Uzzle in the film. “I hope this picture can touch our humanity outside the realm of politics recognizing that each of us adhere to distinct beliefs, just like religion.”

As “F/11 and Be There” faded to black in Durham’s Carolina Theatre and humanity’s collective history of both pain and beauty settled over the crowd, audience members thanked Uzzle and Waters for creating such impactful work.

One viewer cried as she held the microphone, “What struck me so much about your work, and it brings me to tears, is that it was a work of soul,” she said. “I could see a life apparently transformed as you saw the spirit and soul within them.”

It was noted that the demographics of film festivals often do not accurately represent the subjects documented through the film. Waters and Uzzle are working to make the film more accessible to rural communities to those they photographed.

For more information, or to recommend a screening, please contact Jethro Waters at: jethrowaters@gmail.com, or <http://www.f11andbethere.com/contact-1>.