

Q & A WITH JERRY UELSMANN

For the past four decades Jerry Uelsmann, a pioneer of photo manipulation in the darkroom, has been ultra-successful in creating a never-ending array of surreal photographic montages by hand. Critics have often likened these composites to "dreams that slip past our perceptual defenses, triggering a response but never quite revealing their meaning." In the interview that follows, *PDN* talks with Uelsmann about his life, his love for photography and how he creates his mystical, magical art. In this age of ever-advancing computer technology, Uelsmann is more than content to remain cloistered in his darkroom—cup of coffee by his side, music blaring—with as many as five or six enlargers at his command to create, distort and expand on his vision. "My whole career has been built on—and continues to thrive on—the silver print," says Uelsmann. "That is where all of my energies go."

PDN: Was there one defining moment in your life where you said, "I know that photography is what I want to do forever?"

JERRY UELSMANN: My first involvement in photography occurred when I was in high school, when I essentially thought I wanted to become a commercial photographer. I enrolled in the Rochester Institute of Technology and as fate would have it, they had just begun a four-year program and had hired Minor White and Ralph Hattersley, people who soon introduced me to the notion that photography could be used as self-expression, which greatly appealed to me. After RIT, I went on to Indiana University and initially began a program called audio-visual education, because I thought I had to make a living somehow. But there was a man there, Henry Holmes Smith, in the art department, who virtually changed my life. He pushed me out into the deep water. He was a very profound and challenging professor who constantly questioned me about what I was doing. Because of him, I switched over into the fine-art program and that opened up the possibilities for me.

PDN: So you would encourage high school students or anyone interested in photography to attend photo-oriented or technical schools which might help solidify their career choice?

UELSMANN: I've always felt in academia that the best that can happen is that you meet two or three great people. And I was blessed with meeting Beaumont Newhall, Minor White, Ralph Hattersley, and Henry Holmes Smith, all of whom really expanded my horizons. I went right from graduate school to the University of Florida to begin my teaching career. And I stayed at that same institution because academia has been the patron for people working purely in the fine-art area. You could not have that in the Fifties or Sixties, it had been very difficult to get any kind of income. There weren't galleries or that sort of thing back then.

PDN: What was it like taking classes conducted by someone like Minor White?

UELSMANN: Minor White had a very interesting personality and a sort of spiritual presence. He was always showing us abstract pictures with rocks and talking about how they related to his feelings or to certain other issues, certain spiritual issues. And he had us reading books like *Zen in the Art of Archery*. It was sort of mind-boggling. Some people had difficulty with it, but I always felt that Minor appreciated my willingness to try to learn things. He would talk about a photograph and say, "Now the spirit came down when I took this" and I'm this inner-city kid from Detroit saying, "Excuse me. What was that like when that spirit came down?" And he would try to talk about that. And since that time I've experienced these sort of magical moments where certain things happened that intellectually you're not aware of . . . it's only later that you realize the power and the impact of that particular time.

PDN: And when do these moments occur?

UELSMANN: Well, we traditionally put the primary creative gesture at the camera, that when we click the shutter this is it and then you go into the darkroom and become essentially, a craftsman. But I would like to have people know that the same decisive moment defined by our French photographer with the hyphenated name [Henri-Cartier Bresson] can also occur in the darkroom or when you're working with a computer—even then there's a certain moment when things just come together. And in the darkroom you can get that same feeling of it being a cohesive visual image that has some kind of resonance to it, as when you click the shutter.

PDN: Do you, as an imagemaker, have a certain quest that you are on?

UELSMANN: Simply stated, my hidden agenda is to amaze myself. The quest is to produce something that is uniquely mine. And obviously I can do this because I don't work with clients, I'm just trying to satisfy myself in certain ways. Every year I produce at least 100 different images. At the end of the year, my agenda is to find 10 that I really like. On one hand, I get frustrated by the notion that every time I go in the darkroom only 1 out of 10 times I will produce this thing that survives. But on the other hand it's also like saying, "Hey, we've got this short time together, let's just be profound, OK? Let's not fool around." I'm not going to grow another head and suddenly start doing street photography, but within my work, I do want to sense some kind of personal growth.

PDN: Meanwhile, you have managed to be successful without having clients, per se, and you manage to make money doing what you love to do....

UELSMANN: Well I guess success is something that happens to you but it was never my agenda. I am very happy when people want to use my photographs and as long as they're using them in some way that is not offensive to me—like supporting smoking or something—then great. I'm very happy that my images have another purpose... it's amazing to me that you can be well paid for that. I had some photographs used on the introduction to a TV show

called *Outer Limits* ; they just run these things for a matter of seconds and do some kind of montage. I was overwhelmed because I don't function in the commercial world but I made more money on that than any gallery show I've ever had, and just for this blip on the screen thing. So, yes, I guess I've been successful but success for me is each year keeping myself a viable, growing person. My hope is that I can constantly push back barriers and have something new and different happen to me each time.

PDN: It's been said that a lot of your photographs have psychological and/or spiritual dimensions? Is that your intention when making an image?

UELSMANN: I think my images have a lot of both. I also think that that has been a detriment to me in terms of the contemporary art scene because it's much more difficult for critics to write about work if they don't understand what's behind it. Most of my work places a great responsibility on the audience. I like that people have come to me and said, "Oh, you made a photograph that was one of my dreams." People have various interpretations of my images. One of my most popular images is of this man that is walking on a desk in a study that has a cloud ceiling. I think it's popular because it falls within what we generally call the narrative tradition. You just want to make up a story about it. I find that although I have left this image untitled, one of my gallery dealers, when he wants this picture, he always says, "I would like to get a copy of the *Philosopher's Study*."

PDN: How much time do you currently spend in the darkroom?

UELSMANN: I work on a regular basis in the darkroom. I guess my wife [digital artist Maggie Taylor] would tell you, I'm a workaholic. I start wherever I'm at and try to build an image that is meaningful to me and sometimes they are just silly pictures. Sometimes, though, they're depressing, they're darker. There's a whole range of emotions. Later, I try to address them and figure out intellectually what they're about. One of my images that is reasonably popular is of leaves floating over a couch in a museum setting and behind the couch is a picture on the wall of a tree that's barren. When I look at this image I can think of how this thing gradually evolved over a long period of time. It started when someone at one of the darker times in my life—when I was getting divorced or something—gave me a poinsettia plant. And as the leaves fell off, I thought, "Gee, these are interesting." Sometimes, that's all it takes for me to develop an idea for an image.

PDN: Do you often have a pre-arranged vision of an image or does a lot of your work start out as one thing and end up as another?

UELSMANN: This is a good question. It's like where do you start? You have to start where you're at basically, with the material you have. When I was in Washington recently, I had the opportunity to photograph at some of the museums there and that was all fresh material for me. But sometimes—I'm sure you've had this experience as a writer—sometimes you start something and the characters just run away from you; they become their own entity and you don't even know what it's about. Other times, it's a much more painful delivery, calculating "What can I do next? What else can I do to change this image?" Believe me, it's a struggle. I move back and forth in terms of things that I had done previously.

PDN: It's been said that you are totally open when it comes to your darkroom processes. Can you talk technique for a moment?

UELSMANN: The techniques that I use are essentially quite old. It's just a multiple printing technique in the darkroom where you have this blank piece of paper and you can keep part of it from being exposed when you're printing it. You can then print something else on that side, on the other side or in the foreground or background. That's the easiest thing. In these pictures, there's one where a building becomes a tree, a tree becomes a building...well, in one enlarger, I would have the building and in one enlarger, I'd have the tree and I'm simply blending them together by moving my paper from one enlarger to the other. And I'd block below the enlarger lens, which causes a very soft edge to occur where one image fades into the other. Over the years, I've developed other techniques in the darkroom, but it's like trying to tell someone how to tie your shoe without showing them.

PDN: Do you ever use the computer as a tool in your image-making process?

UELSMANN: One thing that I have learned over the years is that my creative process is really integrated with the traditional darkroom process. I look at contact sheets; I have coffee, put them together, and go into the darkroom. There's something about the ambiance to this dimly lit place that greatly appeals to me. I always listen to the blues in the darkroom, the water's running. . .it's just a magical place for me. If I do any kind of meditation or if I have a religion, I suppose its photography. I've done a few projects using the computer, and I've been very pleased with those results, but overall my place is in the darkroom.

PDN: You are known, after all, for the silver print...but what about the actual act of taking a photograph? How much of that do you do now, as opposed to just building new images from your library of existing work?

UELSMANN: To me the camera is a license to explore. It's a glorious instrument. Without a camera, if you stop to look at a crack in the sidewalk, people question that. But as long as you have a camera, there's a kind of heightened perceptual awareness that is very much a part of my consciousness. So I still shoot quite frequently. I also have the freedom, at that point, in not trying to complete the image. On the other hand, I also I have this huge supply of pictures that I've made over the years. So, if I want clouds, I can find a lot of different clouds I can put in to a new image. Sometimes I'll set things up in the studio, like the image of the chairs in a circle on the beach with a lone figure in the background. Maggie bought a bunch of these little toy chairs on E-Bay one day and I happened to notice them sitting in her studio area. I thought they looked like real chairs so I just set them up on the white board and photographed them, not knowing where I would use them. But because they were on a white background, it was relatively easy for me to print them on to my image of the beach. I also have some images where a floating boat occurs. And that's just simply a little toy boat that I've put on a piece of Plexiglas and then photographed.

PDN: I've noticed that most of your older images are marked "Untitled." Was that a conscious decision?

UELSMANN: Well, I used to title my pictures a lot. And then, when I started getting a good amount of success back in my 15 minutes of fame in the late Sixties, I found that the critics would focus in on these titles, so, then I did less of that. But now as I'm getting older, I title them. I like the titles to be a little bit cryptic too but sometimes they can provide a clue as to what your feelings are. I mean, I'm happy to share with people what I'm thinking about at the time these things are happening but I also want to allow for them to have their own interpretation.

PDN: You seem to have a lot of themed series of work. Windows are one; hands are another... Can you explain why you like doing this?

UELSMANN: It took me many years before I felt comfortable using the same negative again and again, but sometimes I get attached to them and then realize that, the images all function differently but have the same common kind of base structure. The hands are a kind of open ended metaphor, the "he's got the whole world in his hands" kind of thing. There's actually a whole series of images I have where I sort of anthropomorphize nature. There's one image where a figure becomes part of a waterfall; there's another image where a figure is sort of embedded into a rock form and then a face occurs. I really like those pictures in that they sort of symbolize for me this whole basic mythical concept that somehow you imbue nature with human qualities and you find some kind of resonance with that.

PDN: What are you working on now?

UELSMANN: My current project is called *Referencing Art*. I spent 40 years in an art department discovering images that make direct references to art, which is why in this book I pay homage to artists and photographers who have inspired me over the years...Ansel Adams, Aaron Siskind, Man Ray, Joseph Cornell, Max Ernst... I recently had the opportunity to photograph at The National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., where I could not use a tripod but I still survived and came up with some material that I could use in the book. With this project I just want to make a positive statement that I've learned through the vision of others.

PDN: Any words of wisdom for photographers who haven't found their niche yet?

UELSMANN: Well, when you're young, you really have many paths. I mean, my early work is like the history of photography of America in the Fifties. I had work in the decisive moment approach; I did a lot of documentary kind of work at one point; and then I started exploring the darkroom using various techniques. For young people today, they really should explore as many different areas as they can and then find the ones that they feel closest to. There's suddenly been the resurgence of the silver print yet we also have the whole computer revolution. I think that it's a healthy time for people who are visually oriented to explore their options. At the same time, you have to work on the reality of, "Hey, I've got to earn a living," so that's when you have to let some of these other things impact upon whether you want to try to do some form of commercial or journalistic work. And if you choose fine art, realize that you are going to have to either find a teaching position or some other means of subsidizing your food supply.