

# Jerry Uelsmann's Visual Surrealism

*By Zhanna Zabello*

## CONNECTIONS

**A**lmost 20 years ago I have witnessed a symbolic burning of a paper giraffe. The giraffe was swaying in the wind attached to a string with a clothespin. The string was tied to a couple of branches in a wooded patch near an apartment complex right outside a small resort town of Pyatigorsk in a South of Russia.

The burning symbolized a sacrifice to our current god Salvador Dalí. To be precise the chief priests were our local geniuses and surrealist poets Felix Khushinski and Sergey Riabov. We were all students of Pyatigorsk University of International Studies.

The rest of us, Marina Buchina, Tania Korkina, Tania Tutubalina, me, and Filix's wife Nadia were there to simply have a good time and be a grateful audience of this act of converting life to art.

Within the next five years Felix and Nadia will end up in Canada, Tania Korkina in Belgium, Tania Tutubalina in Greece, me in the USA, what happened to Sergei is not known to me. Marina Buchina is in a tiny dusty town of Svetlograd in the south of Russia married to a remarkably boring blacksmith 10 years senior. She was the most talented one, often compared to her famous namesake Marina Tsvetaeva.

We lived through incredible times when Rubicons and giraffes were burning. These were the times when fresh wind of unbridled freedom swept over Russia. Many were gone with the wind. Like us. Memories are all that is left of the old Russia of grandiose and remarkably painful perestroika.

A month ago I was visiting a small but prominent gallery downtown Palo Alto, the Modernbook. The memory of the burning giraffe stirred in my mind. Works of Jerry Uelsman that were exhibited there penetrated thought the layers of new lives and new skins that envelope me, and I clearly remembered the ceremony that was just a spark in a history of my youth full of mystery, poetry and fire.

But let's not lose our focus. This essay is not about me. 20 years ago Jerry Uelsmann was only 54 years old. Now he is 74. He is 3 years younger than my mother. He was born on Monday, June 11, 1934 in Detroit Michigan.

## EVOLUTION OF UNDERSTANDING

**W**hen I started reading up on Uelsmann I focused on printed sources primarily. There is an extensive amount of material available on the Internet, including Uelsmann's own website with links to his interviews. But printed matter provided a unique prospective not only on evolution of printing quality. It allowed to track evolution of critics' understanding and interpretations of Uelsmann's work.

By the way, it should be noted that in spite of fluctuations of printing quality, Uelsmann's works look almost as good now as they did in the 60's.

In the 60's labeling photography that deviates from a traditional photographic order as *trick photography* is abandoned. Term "experimental" is adopted, but questioned as this label is "still carrying a suggestions of something unresolved..."<sup>1</sup>

Luckily in 1962 Uelsmann's own writing helped the critics out. Since then, when we say "post-visualization" and "in-process discovery", we think Uelsmann. Both terms refer to Uelsmann's creative process of collecting fragments of a future artwork usually without any particular final product in mind and then letting his inspiration and artistic taste assemble these fragments into a final work of art.

In the 70s Uelsmann is becoming to be fully recognized as one of the monumental figures of the medium. *Creators of Jerry Uelsmann's stature may have been seen to have altered the language, the substance, and the direction of their art*<sup>3</sup>, writes Peter C. Bunnell in his introduction to Jerry Uelsmann *Silver Meditation*, published in 1975. Bunnell categorizes Uelsmann's work as *synthetic photography* and says that this field has been cautiously embraced.

Cautious approach to Uelsmann's art fades slowly. In 1971, Uelsmann goes on leave under a faculty development grant from the University of Florida for the academic year, and spends much of that time traveling, delivering lectures, and holding workshops. He delivers the fourth Bertram Cox Memorial Lecture for the Royal Photographic Society, in London, titled "Some Humanistic Considerations of Photography." The lecture was repeated in four other cities.

The National Endowment for the Arts granted Uelsmann a fellowship in 1972. The following year, he was made a Fellow of the Royal Photographic Society of the U.K. He continued to hold exhibitions and visit academic institutions around the country presenting lectures and workshops. In 1974, Uelsmann became a graduate research professor at the University of Florida.

It demonstrates that Uelsmann's popularity and recognition not just happened. It was a happy marriage between his creative genius, his ability to verbalize his creative method in coherent and approachable way and his interest and aptitude to being a teacher.

In the 80s Uelsmann is recognized as a prominent figure and his approach and method is widely embraced or at least widely accepted.

No doubt, Uelsmann's own writing helped critics to accept his process and methodology.

"*I think of my photographs as being obviously symbolic but not symbolically obvious*" is one of the most well known quotes from Uelsmann's writing?<sup>3</sup> Influences on his art are defined: Minor White and Ralph Hattersley at the Rochester Institute, where he was enrolled, Henry Holmes Smith at Indiana University, Edward Weston, Ansel Adams... Ansel Adams' interpretation of Yosemite as a sacred temple of nature is well known. Enter Uelsmann with his Jungian interpretation. In the 90s a book *Uelsmann/Yosemite* is published. And nobody had a hart attack from it.

By now Uelsmann has exhibited his work in more than 100 individual shows in the United States and overseas. His photographs are included in the permanent collections of major U.S. museums as well as those in Japan, Sweden, France, and Australia.

## UELSMANN AND SURREALISM

It noticed that critics in the 80s do not seem to agree upon whether and how to apply a term surrealism to Uelsmann's work. James L. Enyeart in *Jerry N. Uelsmann/ Twenty-five Years: A Retrospective* writes *Uelsmann is only mildly surrealist. The relationship is purely visual and not philosophical.*<sup>4</sup>

A year before that Hilton Kramer wrote an article *Photography: Uelsmann's Surreal World*. It was published on January 2, 1981 in *New York Times*. He writes *Surrealism invented this dream space, and Magritte long ago defined its essential character. Yet Mr. Uelsmann brings a distinct authority of his own to this Surrealist tradition.*

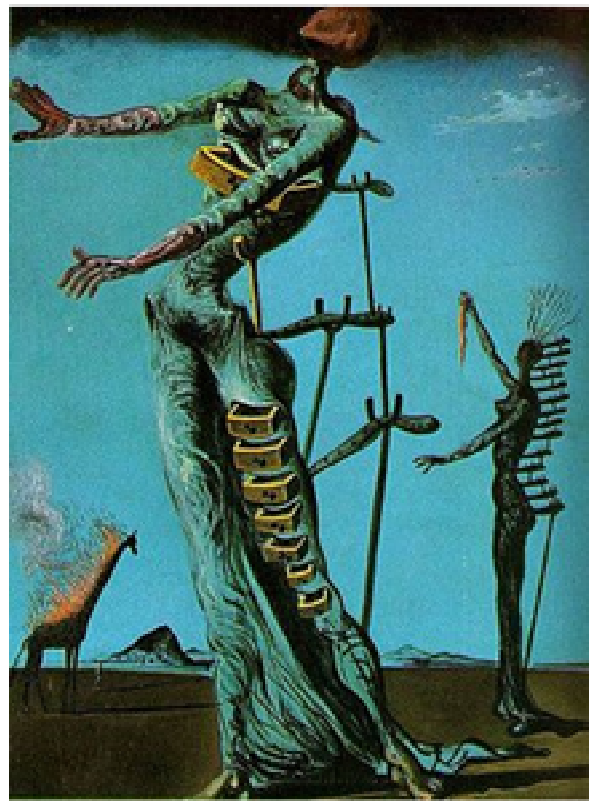
Personally, I see many parallels to surrealist images and not only to Magritte, but to Salvador Dali, too. It could be all in my head but when I compare the following images, I see similarities in the choice of symbols and their prominence.

Compare the Burning Giraffe by Dali and Animal Dreams by Uelsmann. See Exmple 1.

### EXAMPLE 1



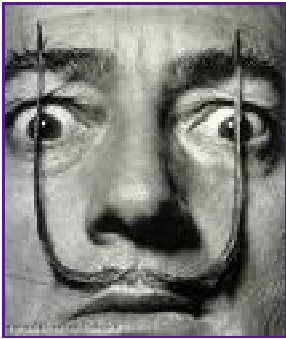
Uelsmann



Dali

I find Dali-like bulging eye in a number of Uelsmann's works. See Example 2.

## EXAMPLE 2



Dali



Uelsmann

I rest my case. As much as I see even superficial similarities, overall Dalí's work is more stimulating to our emotions, while Uelsmann's work is more soothing and, of course, meditative.

### VIRTUOSO, OR HOW HE DOES IT

*I often collect fragments that I respond to. They might later become part of something I would call a meaningful image. A simple thing like a piece of paper blowing in the wind might serve as a foreground of an image yet to be realized. Rarely I decide while I'm taking the photograph where the element will end up. Sometimes it is obvious that a particular old home might serve as a background or a particular rock might work in the foreground. But most of the time I've no real knowledge of where it is going to end up.*<sup>5</sup>

These are Jerry Uelsmann's own words. Because of this methodology Jerry Uelsmann has been called a *collector with a camera*. I really like the colorful description of his collection process in Ted Orland's introduction to Uelsmann/Yosemite, ...*there we were again Jerry and I standing beside one of the Sunrise Lakes at some ungodly hour of the morning. (Well, sunrise to be exact.) Jerry carefully adjusts his camera and tripod, waves his light meter in the manner of a priest giving benediction, patiently waits for that decisive moment when absolute stillness blankets the water's glassy surface – and then picks up a huge rock and hurls it thirty feet out into the lake! SPLASH... long pause... click. Well there you have it: another master photograph in the making. No, not the Sierra Nevada mountain range. Not even the lake. The ripple.*

If one wants to follow Uelsmann's creative process step by step, one needs to pick up his book *Uelsmann: process and perception*. I will just give a quick excerpt. *In my dark room I have eight enlargers. Rarely do I use that many, but it is helpful to have more than one enlarger to execute multiple printing techniques. All of the images in this section [of a book – ZZ.] require the use of multiple enlargers, one negative in each*

*enlarger. Sometimes I block immediately below the enlarger lens to keep part of the white paper so that it can receive second and third image. Other times I mask with black paper at the easel on the base of the enlarger.*<sup>7</sup>

The technique has not changed since. It presides digital photography and digital photographic manipulation. Why not? Why switch to an electronic keyboard if you are a violin virtuoso?

## LIFE AND ART

**A**ctually according to Ted Orland Jerry Uelsmann was not a stranger to playing a piano, mechanical player-piano to be exact, on which he *harmonized in full volume with the pedal generated chords of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony... sporting a giant cigar in one hand and kazoo in the other.*<sup>8</sup>

This description, I think, is a tribute to the humor that often shines through Uelsmann's artworks. *My images deal with what I understand to be real world, the here and now. These images grow out of problems, emotions, and ideas.*<sup>9</sup>

*... Uelsmann used more broadly based, subjective definitions to categorize these broad areas of visual concern, such as predicament of Man, nature-energy, embedded figures, dream moments and portraits.*<sup>10</sup>

Look at Uelsmann's artwork. It is meditative, Jungian, symbolic, *a place where angels linger, paradox abound and the earth sometimes yields darker secrets.*<sup>11</sup> Among his famous works are Magritte's Touchstone with a rock flying towards a beauty sleeping in her dress in the middle of an open bare field; Untitled (1969) with a tree and its roots suspended in the air over an island in a lake on the background of magnificent mountains. A reflection of a seedpod is floating in the water. ... James L. Enyeart says, *Uelsmann's photographs should be considered in terms of visual mythology: as events and creations outside ourselves.*<sup>12</sup> I would add that each of Uelsmann's artworks represent a unique world, a new dimension of our reality. They mesmerize, and hypnotize, and enchant with their exquisite beauty, intelligence, and wit. They make us come back as we come to our personal, private space, because we instinctively feel that any one of them is a different thing to different people.

*Sometimes I feel that I am on the first page of a personal visual diary that I am slowly evolving in an effort to define mine own existence*<sup>13</sup>, writes Uelsmann. This subjective approach is what appeals to us as it allows us to be subjective about understanding of this diary. That makes us comfortable and at ease, as we will not be judged on the "correct" perception and understating of Uelsmann's photographs. We are fortunate that Uelsmann in his wisdom and intuition avoids giving interpretations to his works.

That is why he will probably forgive the parallels I drew between his work and the work of a great surrealist and eccentric Salvador Dali. Most of his life Uelsmann worked at the University of Florida in Gainesville. He is retired from teaching now and lives in Gainesville 154 miles, 2 hours and 40 minutes drive, from the Burning Giraffe, this *masculine cosmic apocalyptic monster*<sup>14</sup> permanently exhibited in the Salvador Dali museum in Saint Petersburg, Florida.

1. The persistence of vision: Donald Blumberg, Charles Gill, Robert Heinecken, Ray K. Metzker, Jerry N. Uelsmann, John Wood / edited by Nathan Lyons. (1968)
2. Jerry N. Uelsmann: silver meditations / introd. by Peter C. Bunnell. (1975)
3. Some Humanistic Considerations of Photography, p. 168.
4. Jerry N. Uelsmann, twenty-five years: a retrospective / by James L. Enyeart, (1982), p. 21.
5. From original draft of Darkroom, Eleanor Lewis, ed (1977), p.3.
6. Uelsmann/Yosemite : photographs / by Jerry N. Uelsmann. (1992), p. x
7. Uelsmann : process and perception : photographs and commentary / by Jerry N. Uelsmann ; essay by John Ames. (1985), p.3.
8. Uelsmann/Yosemite : photographs / by Jerry N. Uelsmann. (1992), p. xi
9. Jerry N. Uelsmann, twenty-five years: a retrospective / by James L. Enyeart, (1982), p. 35.
10. Jerry N. Uelsmann, twenty-five years: a retrospective / by James L. Enyeart, (1982), p. 68
11. Uelsmann/Yosemite : photographs / by Jerry N. Uelsmann. (1992).
12. Jerry N. Uelsmann, twenty-five years: a retrospective / by James L. Enyeart, (1982), p. 62
13. Jerry N. Uelsmann, twenty-five years: a retrospective / by James L. Enyeart, 1982 p. 36.
14. Salvador Dali: Telegram to The Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, Il.