THE MIND’S EYE traces the growth of one of the 20th century’s unique artistic minds. The images range from rarely seen documentary photos of the 1950s to the complex photomontages that challenged the very notion of what a photograph could be.
For my wife and soulmate Maggie Taylor, the beacon that is my resourceful and loving navigational confidant.
The photomontages of Jerry N. Uelsmann are as instantly recognizable as any photographic images made in the second half of the 20th century. Today they stand as germinal, the progenitors of an approach to photographic image-making so well-established and widespread that it’s strange to recall (and, for a younger audience, no doubt difficult to imagine) the storm of controversy that raged around them as they first began appearing in the early 1960s.

When Uelsmann began working in this form of photography almost five decades ago, the context in which he labored was diametrically opposite to that in which he functions today. Partly due to his consistent and determined efforts—as practitioner, as theorist, as teacher, as public lecturer, and generally as exemplar—the working definition of what constitutes the full field of ideas and strategies in contemporary photography is a far more expansive one than that which was operative when he set out on his path.
Unlike photollograph, with which it’s sometimes confused, photomontage is generated on photograph paper or film and often looks—at least at first glance—the unmanipulated imagery. As Ulmann’s surgery demonstrates, even when the combinatorial nature of the finished work is recognized it may offer little or no indication of where one component ends and another begins. Those who employ it deliberately propose a radical alternative to the naturalism that has been the stock-in-trade of photography since its inception. Photomontage provides unsettling evidence that, paradoxically, although the camera must always address something in front of the lens, some photographs portray events that never happened.

These are not documents of any single moment of external “reality.” Their purpose is not to delude the viewer into the permanent conviction that the world really looked that way. Instead, they contradict the viewer’s assumptions concerning the predictability and literalness of the photograph. This heightens awareness of the imagery’s artificiality, evoking a different set of questions in regard to its purpose. Dispute has always swirled around this practice. Photomontage first attracted widespread attention in the mid-nineteenth century through the directorial, literary work of Henry Peach Robinson and D. G. Regan’s, whose techniques and results were the subject of heated and even violent debate among photographers and critics. Vernacular photography—postcard imagery and portraiture in particular—popularized it. In the 1920s it became a staple of modernist practice in Europe, even entering the photography curriculum devised for the Bauhaus by László Moholy-Nagy, who called it “simultaneous seeing by means of transparent superimposition.” But modernists in the U.S. repudiated it, and the photo-historical establishment in the States, sharing their biases, virtually banished it from the scene.

Yet even when photomontage fell into disfavor, it refused to die. Before Ulmann and others of his generation began exploring this set of practices, such North American experimenters as Barbara Morgan, Edward Taddeo, Clarence John Laughlin, and Yves Tanguy were pursuing them. However, in the U.S. photo scene after World War II, the “pullar” approach advocated by such figures as Edward Weston, Ansel Adams, and the West Coast school was dominant. They preached what Adams called “pre-visualization”—the full realization of the image at the moment of exposure; by their lights, any subsequent tampering with the data on the negative was anathema.
Uleman—guided into his inquiry by his mentor at Indiana University, the late photographer, educator, and theorist Henry Holmes Smith—set out to demonstrate that there was another way. In the late 1950s and early 1960s (during and after his graduate studies under Smith), Uleman began a great deal of study, experiment, and energy to refining the processes he found relevant to his vision. Compiling and using an image bank of negatives from which he could draw specific components, he evolved an indissociatic methodology. In this approach to praxis, the darkroom became a locus for what Uleman refers to as “in-process discovery.” Eventually, he developed his printmaking skills to the point where he could blend any number of those components seamlessly into one final image. (Eschewing the expedient of the copy negative, which many photomonteurs employ as a labor-saving device, he continues to make each gelatin-silver print of any given image by reassembling the component negatives and starting from the beginning.) By the middle 1960s he’d produced a body of work that, in his opinion, his opinion proved the viability of photomontage as a contemporary image-making strategy, along with a theory and a teaching methodology to go with it.

Then he took the step—rare in photography, though not uncommon in the other creative media—of issuing an articulate, cogent manifesto—cum-credo, explaining in broad terms what he was doing, why he was doing it, and why he continued to call himself a photographer. Publishing in 1967 a position paper that described his contrary methodology as “post-visualization,” this seemingly mild-mannered Detroit native threw down his gauntlet. In the words of curator and historian Peter Bremell, this challenge—and the way in which Uleman has risen to its demands as a picture-maker over the years—can appropriately be seen to have altered the language, the substance, and the direction of [the medium itself].

From the beginning, Uleman has elaborated a sometimes obliquely and sometimes directly autobiographical dream-world. This microcosm partakes of the surreal, in its non- or anti-literary evocation of dreams, fantasies, visions, and hallucinations, as well as in the recurrent symbol of the hand, a key element in classic surrealist photography. It also is imbued with strong elements of the grotesque, in that same traditional anti-historical meaning. Grotesque motifs throughout his imagery include bizarre appropriations of disembodied human parts, the merging of human beings with various natural objects, and the blending and intertheorizing of other animal, mineral and vegetable forms.
Yet these images resist easy categorization: to label Uelessma a surrealists, a pantheist, a mythologist, or a diarist is to disregard other, equally significant aspects of his work. What seems irreplaceable is that, in addition to proving the validity of his approach by producing imagery that at its best is unsettling, enchanting, magical, and oddly melancholy, Uelessman has demonstrated a remarkable consistency of vision. Again and again in his imagery, a lonely and often shadowy male figure (a stand-in representing the photographer) searches consolation, mysterious, multi-dimensional scapes pervasively animated by the Feminine, seeking contact with the Other. Fundamentally, he’s a wanderer through inner space, a light pool using a new language to recount his adventures. And part of it pleasure, of engaging with Uelessman’s photographs, is that fluence of symbols therein seems theory-driven, intellectualized, or otherwise forced, but emerges, unmediated, through play and experiment.

Due to the omnipresence of digital imaging systems today, darkroom-based photomontage as a craft can already be considered archaic. (Indeed, the Rochester Institute of Technology, where Uelessman studied the medium as an undergraduate, will begin to teach gelatin-silver printing itself as an “alternative process” in the fall of 2008.) Ironically, versions of the disputes that took place over Uelessman’s early imagery within the microcosm of the photography community in the 1960s are now appearing in the mass media, in relation to the increasing prominence of electronically generated composites images.

It seems to be Uelessman’s fate to have established darkroom-generated photomontage as legitimate and viable within classic photographic practice by bringing it to its pinnacle of virtuosic expression, only to witness the obsolescing of that practice in its entirety by the onslaught of electronic imaging. In that sense, he constitutes a terminus. But we can also view him as a springboard: in building a wide international audience for his own imagery and encouraging his colleagues in their parallel experiments, he helped prepare that receptive soil in which computer-generated imagery has now taken root.

Yet, as long as he’s permitted to pursue his own inclinations, he doesn’t appear to regret that cultural transition. This was never a man spoiling for a fight over what was or was not permissible in creative photography, merely someone whose vision carried him into one. Still, it’s safe to say that no future study of the history of photomontage will be considered seriously unless it takes the theory, the practice, the teaching, and—most importantly of all—the imagery of Jerry Uelessman into account.
“My visual quest is driven by a desire to create a universe capable of supporting feelings and ideas.”

JERRY UELSMANN
"I am drawn to art that challenges one's sense of reality."
“The camera is essentially a license to explore.”

JERRY UELSMANN