

JERRY UELSMANN & MAGGIE TAYLOR

# PARTNERS IN ART

By Steve Carlisle

**F**or more than 40 years, Jerry Uelsmann's amazing images have often caused viewers to do double takes.

His trees may have faces and roots that look like arms, or dolphins may playfully leap from a river at Yosemite. Surreal

visions have long been this former Guggenheim Fellow's staple.

These days, such digital image trickery is everywhere. But Uelsmann was doing it long before Photoshop by using several photographic enlargers to blend different negatives into one print. His black-and-white silver prints sell for thousands of dollars. Uelsmann prints are also in the collections of the Museum of Modern Art, the Metropolitan Museum, Chicago Art Institute, and dozens more around the world.



After a long career of fashioning images through creative darkroom work, Uelsmann has recently begun to move into digital printmaking. His composited surrealistic photographs now may be the result of manipulating images in Photoshop in lieu of traditional darkroom magic.

A big factor in his decision to explore digital printmaking has been his wife, Maggie Taylor, whose own brand of surreal images is no less eye-catching than her husband's works. There is also a significant amount of

artistic collaboration between the two.

"My wife, Maggie, works on the computer on a regular basis," Uelsmann says. "She asks me for my opinion on a lot of things, and I get to see all of the things she can do. Now that I know that, I get to situations in the darkroom where I think, 'If I could only put that over there it would probably be a little better.' But I can't because of the technical limitations of the darkroom. Then I think, 'Well it could be done on a computer!'"

Taylor's interest in digital work began when "a few friends using the computer encouraged me to experiment with Photoshop," she remembers. "When Jerry and I had the opportunity to sit in on a Photoshop workshop at the Anderson Ranch Arts Center in Colorado, I really knew this was a method I could use in my artwork."





*"Three Women" by Uelsmann*

"It took a little experimenting for me to realize that the result I wanted could be achieved by using a flatbed scanner in place of a camera. At first I thought I would use the computer to rework photographs made with my camera, having the files output to film, and then printing them in the darkroom," recalls Taylor. "But once I saw an Iris print, I was really intrigued by the texture and quality and the way the ink is absorbed by the paper."

"I still love the darkroom," Uelsmann says. "My whole career has been built on that." He begins a typical darkroom day by spreading contact sheets on a large table in a room next to his darkroom. These contact sheets

are his visual diary. "They contain the seeds from which my images grow," he says. "My images initially exist as these contact sheets from 40 years of making pictures. I ponder these sheets, seeking fresh and innovative juxtapositions that expand the possibilities of the initial subject matter."

"On those occasions where I have an image I think could be improved only on the computer, I get Maggie to help me," adds Uelsmann. "Initially, she would make certain elements that I would re-photograph and introduce into the print photographically. But you can finesse an image on the computer so much more than you can in the darkroom."

"I have tried pin-register systems and Kodalith film to drop something that is highly detailed into an image and maintain that edge," he continues. "No matter how careful you are, there is no dimensional stability in paper and film. You get some tiny little white line where the two images come together. If you make 10 prints you might get only one to work and the others will be off. In photography you've got to complete the print at that time. Chemistry is mixed, and it's getting exhausted. Even after you finish you've got another two hours of work to make the images archival. With the computer, though, Maggie can stop and start up again the next day."





*"Home Again" by Taylor*

Taylor's work starts from a much different point. Her dreamlike prints often begin with a hand-painted watercolor or pastel background of intense colors, which she scans into the computer. "My backgrounds can be built up with four or five layers from different paintings," Taylor says. "I collapse all of the layers, and it then becomes the stage set for the playful little characters."

She then introduces a wacky cast of characters acting out one-scene plays for her scanner. Tintypes also appear often in Taylor's work, which is primarily focused on people and ani-

mals, occasionally both.

"I try to express some of the peculiar, uncertain, puzzling, and mysterious aspects of everyday life. At times these little objects take on all kinds of meaning for me; many of them carry a real history," Taylor says. "By using the computer I have been able to weave together a variety of objects to try to create a more rational, whole world inside the images. Sometimes I think of the images as pages in a storybook, where certain characters appear, transform, disappear, and later reappear, each one telling its own story."

It's unlikely that Uelsmann would

have tried the computer without his wife's help. "I do not like sitting at the computer; it's just not me," he says. "I spent 38 years as a college professor, and sitting at the keyboard reminds me of administrative chores!"

Uelsmann is nonetheless excited about his foray into digital image-making. It took him a while to get comfortable with digital tools, and he warns of getting carried away. "You have to walk a narrow line. It is so easy to get into overkill by using every tool available in Photoshop. You need to keep it muted in terms of its technical options so you don't overwhelm the image."



# FROM DARKROOM TO DIGITAL: THE EVOLUTION OF “TINTERN ABBEY”

For “Tintern Abbey,” Uelsmann combined photography and traditional darkroom work, then used digital printmaking to bring several photographs together. While traveling in Wales, Taylor and Uelsmann visited old castles Taylor had discovered while visiting years before. Using a wide angle 6 x 9 medium-format camera designed for shooting architecture, Uelsmann photographed the ancient archway. It wasn’t until years later that the contact sheet containing that image caught Uelsmann’s eye. He decided to combine it with photographs he

had taken of his wife’s hands holding a nest.

“Someone had given us some bird wings,” Uelsmann remembers. He photographed the wings on a light table. In his darkroom he used the bright background of the wings against the light table to blend into the bright sky of the archway. The hands were on a black background that he could blend into the dark foreground of the archway.

But he wasn’t happy with the result. “It was longer and narrower than I like my images to be,” says Uelsmann. “I thought if only the hands in the foreground could just be bigger.” That’s when Uelsmann turned to Taylor and her computer skills.

He made separate silver prints of the archway with wings already printed and the hands holding the bird nest. After each print was scanned into the computer using a drum scanner, Taylor opened the two files in Adobe Photoshop. She masked the background of the hands image so it could be enlarged and moved up into the stairs of the archway.

She then surprised him by showing him how easy it was to make the image wider without distorting it. Taylor used the cloning tool to bring the texture and detail from adjacent parts of the foreground. As a finishing touch to the image, which was printed at Bruce Bennett Fine Art Printmaking in Rochester, New York, they added a face to the sidewalk.

“I always feel that an artist shouldn’t compromise, so I’ll use digital tools to move an image to the next level,” Uelsmann says. “I feel the Iris print of this image works better than my photographic version. I love the way Iris prints look with the ink soaked into the watercolor paper. I’ve always had an admiration for printmakers and the creation of great prints.” ❖







*"Man, Woman and Bird" by Taylor*

Taylor, on the other hand, is right at home on a Macintosh, as she is a master of Photoshop in creating her own Iris prints. She also enjoys collaborating with her husband, working side-by-side in front of a 21-inch monitor and Macintosh G3.

Taylor's assistance on her husband's work, especially on the technical end where she has much more experience, has been valuable in producing strong works. It has also led Uelsmann to work on images that might have been difficult or even impossible in the darkroom.

Take the image "Three Women,"

for example, which began as individual shots of a model taken with several Polaroids. Uelsmann arranged the images of the model at a 90-degree angle to create a horizontally formatted work. Nearly all the 20 x 24-inch Polaroids were vertical because the camera couldn't easily be rotated, however. And there were problems with the exposure and the color.

That's when Taylor's expertise with the computer came in. She worked on these problems and used test prints from the Iris printer to make the adjustments needed to get the desired result.

While she enjoys collaborating with her husband on the technical end of his work, Taylor is also an artist and photographer in her own right. Her work is in galleries all over the country, including an upcoming show at the Center for Photographic Art in Carmel, California, from mid-September through late October.

"I began photographing still-life images about 13 years ago," she says. "Until that time, I had been using the camera to photograph suburban landscapes; images about what people put in their yards. For a variety of reasons I felt that collecting and assembling





*"Just Looking" by Taylor*

tableaux of small objects really appealed to me. It allowed a more personal, individual form of expression and a way of working with ideas from both my dreams and memories."

"Once I started to photograph fabricated imagery, I really never ventured out onto the street with my camera again," Taylor recalls. "I photographed in my backyard, using sunlight and an old 4 x 5 camera, setting up small scenes with things I found in the yard and my little dolls and toys. Sometimes I would even incorporate bits of trash or broken pieces of metal and glass," says Taylor.

"As my collection of stuff grew, sometimes there were items I really wanted to include in a scene but didn't think would photograph well," she says. "Sometimes size or scale was a problem, and the photographic image

just fell short of what I had mentally envisioned and wanted to express." Then along came scanners, and it opened up many more options for her.

Uelsmann and Taylor also share a common approach to their art in their constant collecting of material to be used, and both are very selective about what they use. They are even more selective about the works they like.

"Every year I produce 100 images, but at the end of the year I may have only 10 that I like," Uelsmann says.

One image in that category never would have made it without the assistance of digital technology. "Undiscovered Self" was a long time in the making and almost literally had to be rescued from Uelsmann's archives of old images before it was finished. It actually began several years ago as part of a Polaroid-sponsored campaign to intro-

duce the rare 20 x 24-inch Polaroid camera to well-known artists.

Uelsmann doesn't generally compose still life arrangements in the studio, and he ran into a number of other problems. "I'm used to manipulating images, but with the Polaroid you've got to do whatever you're going to do right under the camera," he says.

The camera was set up at Massachusetts College of Art in Boston, where Polaroid's John Reuter helped him work out a series of complicated multiple exposures. Taking almost an hour for each shot, he made as many as five exposures through a number of colored filters on a single piece of Polaroid film. Alignment of the multiple exposures was difficult, and the ghostly images were often out of register.

"They let me have half of the litter, and I kept them for years." Uelsmann says. But he wasn't overwhelmed with them. Then, not long ago, a dealer friend asked to see the photos. That got Uelsmann to thinking. Could they be improved by scanning them into the computer?

"I figured Maggie could finesse them in the computer. I also knew Iris prints had a greater archival life than the Polaroids," Uelsmann says. So Taylor recommended that he send some of the prints to Thunderbird Editions in nearby Clearwater, Florida, where they were scanned into the computer.

"The 'Undiscovered Self' began with three images that already contained multiple exposures," Uelsmann says. "We built one image with the best parts of the three."

Taylor explains some of the techniques they used to bring the old images to life as a digital print. "By altering the transparency at the edges and building a layer mask we were able to blend them in with the base image. Sometimes we used the gradient fill tool, and other times we used the paintbrush at different levels of opacity.



We had one little bit of paper we used as a luminosity layer to make the corner of brown paper look better and have greater luminosity.”

Uelsmann also asked Taylor to darken one side of the image because he had used side lighting on the original. The two artists labored at the computer for six hours on the image. Taylor says much of the time was spent deciding which parts of the various images to use. Uelsmann took his time analyzing the possibilities while Taylor experimented with arranging parts of the various images.

“I’m very proud of the photograph!” says Uelsmann. “This Iris print was a case of an image that went to the next level because of the controls of the computer that were available.”

Taylor also finds that working digitally has influenced her work, both in terms of how she works and in how she visualizes her results. “I think of the computer and the scanner connected to it as my camera now,” she says. “I enjoy not having to buy film and darkroom chemistry. At some point I might try using a digital camera, but for most of my objects the scanner works quite well.”

The unusual quality of the scanner’s light combined with the limited depth of field of its lens gives her own images a mysterious, almost surreal effect.

Taylor, who began making Iris prints at Thunderbird Editions several years ago, says she favors her earlier prints over her newer work. “I can look at them with fresh eyes and be surprised by them,” she says.

She finds that her work has steadily grown more complex since switching from conventional photography of still lifes to digital imaging—a trend that she would like to reverse. “I don’t really like that,” she says. “What I’m after are really simple, slightly disturbing environments or portraits of my little characters.”



*“Undiscovered Self” by Uelsmann*

Uelsmann also finds that a real challenge for an artist is to not get so carried away with the freedom of digital work that you lose sight of your original artistic vision. For example, he likes the way Iris printing allows color to be manipulated in a subtle way. But he also feels that it’s easy to go overboard with color and that images shouldn’t be printed in color just because the color looks so good. “You can lose the content,” he says. “If the content is the main thing you sense and the color supports that, then it’s fine.”

Today, years after attending that first digital workshop at the Anderson Ranch in Colorado, Uelsmann and Taylor are still making the trip there every summer. But instead of partici-

pating in the classes, they are now instructors, with half the class in the darkroom with Uelsmann and the other half on the computer with Taylor, with the groups interacting to discover how the two methods can work together.

It’s an approach that reflects how this photographic husband-and-wife team works, bringing together the best of both the traditional and the digital in photography. Their story also reflects the growing intersection of photography and digital printing that is shaping American art today. ❖

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# JERRY UELSMANN

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