

How to analyse a Photograph - my example



Identify: Find the artist name, artwork title, year it was created and the media used.

Jerry Uelsmann (American, born 1934)
**Untitled (Hands with boat
and clouds)**
1996

Research Some information written about the artwork by the artist, art critics, museums etc. - I found 2 sources:

<http://www.artnet.com/artists/jerry-uelsmann/>

Jerry Uelsmann is an American photographer best known for his innovative work with the photomontage technique. Throughout his practice, Uelsmann creates allegorical and surreal compositions through painstaking handmade collage. His photographs are made using only analog tools—much like the earlier photographer Oscar Gustave Rejlander, Uelsmann relies on multiple exposures and uses many enlargers to achieve his dream-like imagery. Notable examples include *Apocalypse I*, which features a cloud resembling a bomb exploding in the distance, and *Journey into Self*, which depicts an individual engaged in meditation. Born on June 11, 1934 in Detroit, MI, he studied for his BFA at the Rochester Institute of Technology and received his MFA from the University of Indiana. Uelsmann had his first solo show in 1967 at The Museum of Modern Art in New York, which launched his professional career. Today, the artist's works are in the collections of the Art Institute of Chicago, the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, and The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, among others. Uelsmann lives and works in Gainesville, FL, where he taught photography for nearly four decades at the University of Florida.

MoCP - Museum of Contemporary Photography, Chicago

Made entirely in the darkroom, Jerry Uelsmann creates his surreal photographs in a series of steps, masking and exposing different areas of photosensitive paper as he changes negatives. He maintains some loyalty to the aesthetic of traditional landscape and still life photography, insofar as the seams and edges of each successive element are concealed, and the resulting composite suggests the unity of a singular view or scene. The metaphoric and symbolic force of Uelsmann's photographs is derived from these juxtapositions, consistencies, and forms. Uelsmann's photo-montages extend the tradition of surrealist photography pioneered by the avant-garde photographers and painters of the 1930s and 40s: positive and negative spaces are inverted and false reflections appear in earth and water, architectural elements like windows and doorways bound tapestries of sky and sand.

Techniques used: How is it created?

Eg. Gelatin silver print black and white photography, albumen prints, calotype process, wet collodion process, collotypes, daguerreotype process.

How is the photograph created? – single photo, staged, multiple exposure, collage, photomontage, ripped edges, invisible joins, carefully, invisibly, erratically?

Can you see the techniques used or is it seamless?

What does the technique tell us about the mood of the photograph?

How do these techniques affect how you see the artwork?

For example, do they suggest it is calming/chaotic, ordered/anarchic, realistic/surreal, happy/sad, scary/safe?

Jerry Uelsmann Untitled (Hands with boat and clouds) 1996



Colours

Black and white, monochromatic or coloured?

Sepia tones, blue tones, warm tones, primary, secondary, hot, cold, pastels, bold, muted, shiny/dull?

How do the colours affect your reading of the artwork?

What mood do the colours suggest?

Happy/sad, sinister/fun, sombre/bright

My examples:

Techniques Used: Gelatin silver print, 26.7 x 32.7cm.





This photograph is a combination of 3 images, the hands, the clouds and the boat on the water. Uelsmann has used photomontage to create his work, using multiple enlargers in the darkroom. There is no computer manipulation.

The combination of elements is created in a seamless way so there are no jarring edges where the images join. This gives a calming, relaxing feel to the photograph.

This is a black and white photograph, although Uelsmann also created a sepia toned version. The black around the edge of the hands creates a frame to hold the hands in the centre. The lightness of the clouds draws your eye to the back of the photograph and increases the sense of leading line.




COMPOSITION - ISSUES AND ELEMENTS

Format



Portrait format Landscape format Square format Grid Format

Location/Depth of field



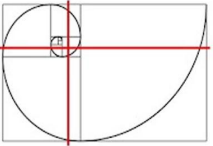


Foreground Midground Background

Use this slide to help inform your answers for the next part of the analyse.


Format- How the artwork is layed out.

Location- A particular location inside of the artwork.

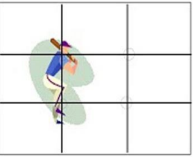
Placement/Focal Point






Golden Section




Centered



Rule of Thirds










Cropped or Closure



Focal point- What draws our eye, the centre of interest in a piece.

Lines



Leading Line Framing Diagonal Horizontal Vertical

Lines- What helps lead our eye around the artwork. Lines help make up the artwork or define a form.

COMPOSITION and CONTENT

Use the composition slide to gather information which will help answer the following questions:

How would you describe the artwork to a blind person.

How does the artist arrange the content in the frame.

What effect does the artist want to create by using these elements in this way.

Overall, why do you think the artist has chosen to compose this work in these ways.



Jerry Uelsmann
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My example.

The photograph is landscape format. The boat is in the foreground on the foreshore of the lake, the horizon line is in the background with the white clouds and the hands hold the composition together, with the surrounding negative space framing the artwork. The contrast of the white clouds and the black background increases the sense of leading line. Leading line creates a sense movement as your eyes are drawn from the boat in the foreground to the horizon line in the centre of the background. The hands are centered from the wrist up and cropped at the fingertips. The hands are cupped and close together generating a sense of holding and nurturing.

Uelsmann's sepia toned version of this photograph lends a sense of the past, a time gone by, as sepia toned photographs were the norm for early photographic work.

COMPOSITION

My Annotated example - what I did.

I looked at the composition slide and described the *format*:

The photograph is landscape format.

I then looked at *location* on the composition slide and described what is where in the photograph: The boat is in the foreground on the foreshore of the lake, the horizon line is in the background with the white clouds and the hands hold the composition together, with the surrounding negative space framing the artwork.

I thought about what this made my eyes do when I look carefully at the painting:

The contrast of the white clouds and the black background increases the sense of leading line. Leading line creates a sense movement as your eyes are drawn from the boat in the foreground to the horizon line in the centre of the background.

I looked carefully at the photograph to see what *placement* or *framing* I could see:

The hands are centered from the wrist up and cropped at the fingertips.

Then I described what I saw as the *subject matter*:

The hands are cupped and close together generating a sense of holding and nurturing.

Uelmann's sepia toned version of this photograph lends a sense of the past, a time gone by, as sepia toned photographs were the norm for early photographic work.

WHAT IS IT ABOUT - MEANING?

Concepts and themes the artist is conveying:

- What do you think the artwork is about? Eg. What do you think the hands, clouds and boat could represent and why?
- How effective is the use of black and white in this work? What does the colour make you feel about the artwork?
- If you had this artwork on your wall and walked past it every day what feeling would it evoke in you?
- How good do you think this work is?



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For merit and excellence grades you need to research the artwork and find out what the artist intended and reference this in your answer.

The next slide breaks down content, composition and colour to help you write about the artwork as a whole. You could use this method to do your own example.

How does content, colour and composition combine to project an idea?

List information about these three elements to help you write your final statement. Your statement should say what you think the artwork is about and justify it by referring to what you see in the content, colour and composition.

My Example of note-taking:

Colour

Black, whites and greys
Calm and relaxing

Black framing hands giving
a greater level of nurturing
Feelings: Calm and
relaxing
Evokes heaven

Composition

Foreground and background
elements give a sense of a long
depth of field.

Framing of the black surround
around the hands and the
cupped hands holding the lake,
boat and clouds gives a sense of
another being having control.

Content

A boat, a lake, a horizon line with
white clouds all cupped in 2 hands.
Hands are from the wrist up and
cropped at the fingertips, framing the
elements, the background then frames
the hands.
The content gives the sense of peace
and calm and the idea that someone
else is in charge, as though Uelsmann
is suggesting a heavenly place.

Use these notes to write your statement about the meaning of the artwork. My example is on the next slide.

This is your statement about the artwork – what does it say to you and why?

My Example:

Meaning of the artwork:

I think this artwork is about nurturing and caring for the environment around you and it suggests a place where you could aspire to be. It has a calm and peaceful feel as if Uelsmann is suggesting that the scene is heavenly and someone else is in control. **The reason I think this is because** the photograph is created in a seamless, tidy manner which lends a sense of order and calm to the work. **The composition supports this idea because** the cupped hands give a sense of nurturing and the black background furthers this sense as it encloses and protects the hands from outside elements. The sense that this could be heaven is further suggested by the boat on the foreshore which could be a reference to Charon the ferryman and the river Styx, where the dead are said to pay the ferryman to take them across to Hades.

The use of black and white photography as opposed to colour **is effective because** it suggests a sense of time gone by and the contrast of the white of the clouds and the black of the background draws you into the photograph, which in turn suggests travelling into the calm and peaceful environment which should be cared for.

Art critics say:

Uelsmann is well known for creating allegorical and surreal compositions through painstaking handmade collage which have a dream-like quality. *'He maintains some loyalty to the aesthetic of traditional landscape and still life photography, insofar as the seams and edges of each successive element are concealed, and the resulting composite suggests the unity of a singular view or scene.'* This results in the calm and peaceful effect of the photograph mentioned above.

Uelsmann creates metaphors and symbolic meanings in his work through juxtaposing multiple images together. This references the tradition of surrealist photography pioneered by the avant-garde photographers and painters of the 1930s and 40s: *'positive and negative spaces are inverted and false reflections appear in earth and water, architectural elements like windows and doorways bound tapestries of sky and sand.'*

I believe Uelsmann has created a photograph which suggests a sense of order, peace and calm, his own private reference to what his heaven would be like a world of nurturing and caring. His juxtaposition of multiple elements in the photograph lead the viewer into his other world using devices such as leading line, contrast and framing. His allegorical references of myths and legends and portals to another world further this idea.

What I did

After looking at the information I had written about colour, composition and content, I decided what I thought the photo was about:

I think this artwork is about nurturing and caring for the environment around you and it suggests a place where you could aspire to be. It has a calm and peaceful feel as if Uelsmann is suggesting that the scene is heavenly and someone else is in control.

I then looked at the photograph to find evidence for my decision:

The reason I think this is because the photograph is created in a seamless, tidy manner which lends a sense of order and calm to the work.

I looked for evidence in the composition to support my idea:

The composition supports this idea because the cupped hands give a sense of nurturing and the black background furthers this sense as it encloses and protects the hands from outside elements. The sense that this could be heaven is further suggested by the boat on the foreshore which could be a reference to Charon the ferryman and the river Styx, where the dead are said to pay the ferryman to take them across to Hades.

I then looked at the colour to see how this supports my idea:

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Referencing others:

I looked back at my research to see what other art critics had said that had relevance to my idea:

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References to the past:

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What do I think about his thoughts?

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My finished example



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Meaning

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