

# PHOTOGRAPHY & CONTEMPORARY COLLECTIONS

**Jerry Uelsmann**

***Apocalypse II***

1967, printed 1972

Gelatin silver print

10<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> × 13<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> in. (27.3 × 34.3 cm)

Gift of the artist

PH-72-47-I

*Apocalypse II* is one of those rare masterpieces of contemporary art that retain a sense of surprise and mystery even after repeated viewing—in this case, more than four decades after its creation. When Jerry Uelsmann began his teaching career at the University of Florida in 1960 he had already earned a reputation for his surreal montages created by innovative darkroom techniques. He became a master at combining negatives of different subjects

and scenes into seamless photographic montage. Some of his most complex works involved numerous negatives, more than a half dozen enlargers, and complicated darkroom burning and dodging.

Part of the magic and power of *Apocalypse II* is the simplicity of the artist's manipulations. The view of a beach with silhouetted figures looking out into the receding water is probably from a single negative. Yet what starts as a serene, almost clichéd scene is totally transformed by the tree form printed into the sky. This tree-cloud was created in just a couple of easy-to-decipher steps. Uelsmann double-printed his negative to create an impossible symmetrical pattern of branches and printed it into the sky to create a tonally reversed negative image. The result is a powerful demonstration of Uelsmann's unconventional approach, which understands light-sensitive paper as being receptive to a layering of exposures and multiple images, not just a mirror of a single negative.



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Uelsmann's title for this work directs our interpretation toward the obvious reading of the tree form as an atomic mushroom cloud. His symbol-laden work has been fruitful territory for interpretive readings, such as William E. Parker's 1967 article "Uelsmann's Unitary Reality" in issue 13:3 of *Aperture* with a provocative comparison of Uelsmann's strange juxtapositions and imagery to symbols and archetypes in Carl Jung's writing. The greater enduring value of *Apocalypse II* may be that it does not need a deeper reading. It is both a comment on the anxiety of the cold war era and an artifact, even a satire, of that time. This picture's main symbolic subject may actually be the politics of art rather than the politics of nations. Uelsmann's easy transformation of a clichéd sunset beach view into a dark rumination on nuclear annihilation is a bold expression of his manipulative power and a rejection of traditional and confining ways of using and thinking about photography. His presentation in such a richly nuanced gelatin silver print worthy of Ansel Adams and other classic art photographers makes Uelsmann's work an even more powerful twist on traditional straight photography.

