

JUAN USLÉ

Dark Light

CENTRO GALEGO DE ARTE CONTEMPORÁNEA
Santiago de Compostela

Curated by Stephan Berg

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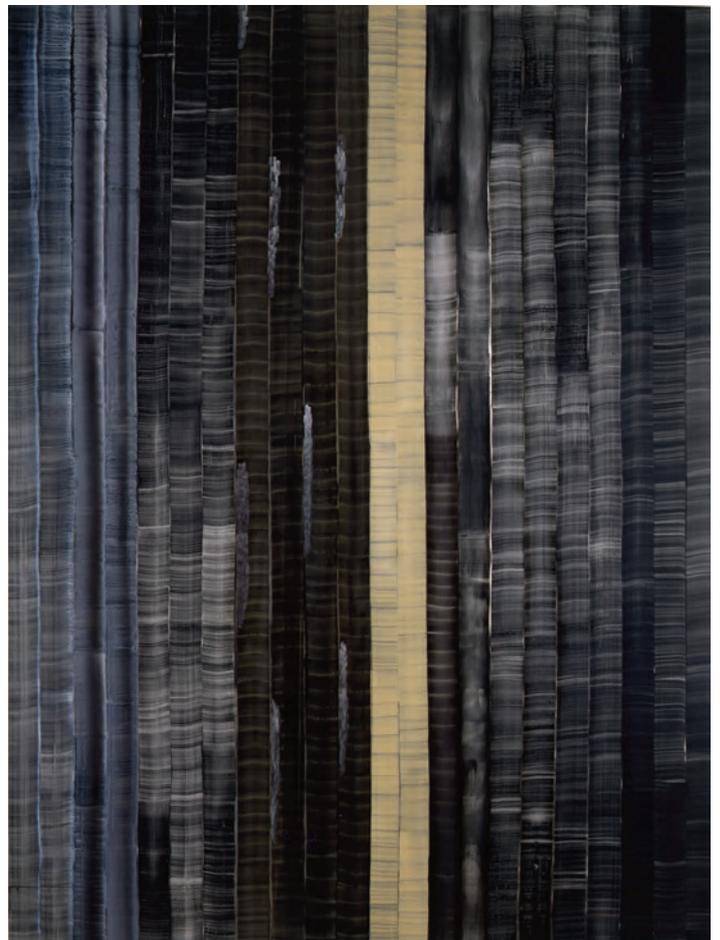
The eye is the brain, Juan Uslé has Captain Nemo say in his interpretation of Jules Verne's *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea*, suggesting a congruence of vision and thought, of perception and reflection, that is as ideal as it is paradoxical. For Captain Nemo, their equivalence is not just compelling but vital as well: as the commander of a submarine, he is existentially dependent on his eye and its periscopic extension and expansion into the outside world—without it, he would have not the faintest idea of what is going on around him.

Until the late nineteen-eighties, the novelistic character acts as a guiding figure in Juan Uslé's art and even, after a fashion, as the Spanish painter's alter ego. So Nemo not only makes appearances in the titles of Uslé's works; as a metaphor of reflection on the artist's own relation to the world, he also becomes an explicit subject in the paintings. The periscopelike implement with a circular eye breaching the dark surface of the water beneath a murky sky in *Julio Verne* (24 x 48 inches), a painting created in 1990, is thus not merely a reference to the elemental significance of the sense of vision in his art. It also spells out the loneliness of the see-farer: trapped in his floating submerged iron capsule, he would be utterly disconnected from the world were it not for his instrument. And as Uslé notes in an essay, its mirror not only shows him what is happening outside, but always also confronts him with the reflection of his own eye.¹

This virtual coincidence of inward and outward vision is constitutive of Uslé's entire expansive oeuvre, which is marked by a crucial caesura that is also its mainspring: in 1987, the artist moves to New York, or more precisely, to pre-gentrification Williamsburg (he subsequently divides his time between the US and his Spanish residence in Saro, Cantabria). The decision to leave the Old for the New World is accompanied by a profound change of technique in his paintings. The physical heft, material density, and dark melancholy of the early eighties gives way to an increasingly lighter, brighter palette of colors that sometimes seem energized by an electric charge, and instead of the objects themselves, it is now the iridescent and dematerialized interrelations between them that take centre stage. Like Captain Nemo's submarine, the pictures rise to the surface from

gravity's dark watery depths and begin to weave airy webs of delicate correspondence in which the gap or disruption is no less significant than the ensembles held together by these connecting filaments: 'Lines are hypothetical answers to continuous questions, those posed by the painting,' the painter says in 1995.²

Juan Uslé has described his New York experience as a form of amnesia: 'I lost my memory and my pictures in New York,' he remarks, immediately adding that this loss was also the beginning of something new.³ After Mondrian moved to New York, he began to invest his abstract geometric grids with the dancelike energy of a 'Broadway Boogie Woogie,' and the city's checkerboard street map and its yellow taxicabs infiltrated his compositions. Similarly, Uslé's New York pictures are always thoroughly infected by the city's light and atmosphere, although he never aspires to narrative representation. Uslé pointed out this affinity between Mondrian's art and his own as early as 1995: 'His "Broadway Boogie-Woogie" series reflects this decline in the purity and rigour of a transcendental empty space when his spaces begin to waver, to zigzag (...) and he stimulated me to comment on it, with great respect, in my painting *Boogie-Woogie*.'⁴



Juan Uslé: *Soñé que revelabas V*, 2000/01
Fundación Caja Madrid. Photo: Bill Orcutt



Juan Uslé: *Soñé que revelabas IX (Ikuro's dream)*, 2000/01
Private Collection, Madrid. Photo: Christopher Burke

For the Spanish painter, New York becomes the scene of a double emancipation, from the heavy symbolism and neo-romantic mysticism of his own early work, but also from the relative isolation the post-Francoist Spain of the late seventies and early eighties had only begun to leave behind. The distinctive and open pictorial grammar Uslé develops in New York incorporates central elements of American postwar abstraction and the movements in painting that followed in the sixties and seventies, including the use of the brushstroke as a gesture of self-expression, serialism, geometry and the grid, but as the artist emphasizes, his goal was never to systematically collect them, to build a virtually objective toolkit. From the very outset, his painting pushes back against the idea of an ostensibly non-subjective and ahistorical pure abstraction. Uslé seeks to chart a way of painting that keeps the picture open to the personal and subjective echoes that resonate in it without becoming obscure or hermetic.⁵ His goal is to avoid the fiction of a painted space of illusion and to devise a process-based compositional blend that will maintain the precarious balance between the accidental and the deliberate. The style of painting we encounter in his work is metanarrative in allowing the artist's own immediate experience of the world to inform the picture and at once undertakes a reflection on the syntax and grammar of his own

painterly vocabulary.

Uslé's oeuvre has long evolved in sets of thematically related works, often produced with a view to an upcoming exhibition. The series 'Soñé que revelabas' (SQR), which is not directly associated with any particular project, stands out among these groups—others include *Gramática urbana*, *Rizomas*, and *Celibataires*—because Uslé has continually worked on it since 1997. The SQR paintings are not only the largest unified set, they have also emerged as a sort of *basso continuo* in his oeuvre as a whole: a sequence of dark and mesmerizingly vibrant chords whose nocturnal blackness constitutes the foundation for the radiantly neon-tinted and rhizomatically interwoven explosions of color and light that come to define his work starting in the early nineteen-nineties. Unlike the other groups of paintings, which are often quite heterogeneous, the SQR series is imposingly coherent and self-contained, whence its air of monumentality, which is heightened by the formidable dimensions of the pictures (each measures exactly 108 x 80 inches).

These canvases present the poetic-emotional conceptualism that pervades Uslé's visual universe in its most rigorous and concentrated form. Each is the product of the incessant repetition of a dark brushstroke—from picture to picture, the color varies between gray, brown, and black—filling the canvas line by line and engendering a peculiar sort of shallow depth. Black pictures appear early on in Uslé's oeuvre. For example, in 1987, he creates a series of small pieces (*1960 Williamsburg*) whose lightless obscurity reflects a naval disaster off the Spanish coast near Santander in which several residents from nearby villages lost their lives. The aspect of existentialist narrative that prevails in these black pictures gives way to a more rigorously formalized approach in the works of the *Amnesia* series. One particular work from this series, *Encerrados (Amnesia)* (1997), may be seen as a direct precursor to the SQR pictures. The canvas, a wide rectangle, is covered with black lines drawn with a wide brush across the surface in closely spaced horizontal lines; where the brushstrokes end or break off, a bright vertical gap remains, resulting in a picture that resembles a dark lattice fence through whose cracks a cold white light falls. Unlike the abovementioned works, which are all in landscape formats, the SQR paintings are organized by verticality throughout. That is more than a formal modification: it implies the shift from a conception of the picture ultimately derived from the landscape, in which the horizon line is the most basic structural element, to a more tectonic pictorial measure that at once also reflects the verticality of the human body. At nine by almost seven feet, the works are large enough to encompass us with their presence, to envelop us, as it were, while also framing the idea of a bodily counterpart we can directly relate to.

The conditions in which this art, which is defined by the same fusion of dreamy emotionality and conceptual aspects that is characteristic of the entire oeuvre, is created are crucial to an understanding of the SQR pictures. Initially conceived out of the wish to produce exact repetitions of one and the same picture, the series hews to two methodical stipulations. For the most part, the artist works on these pictures at night; and he invests them with a positively existential physicality by placing each brushstroke on the canvas in the exact rhythm of his heartbeat, pressing the brush down on the surface until the next heartbeat. Uslé has taken the brush imprint that represents nothing but itself—an invocation of the great historic longing in painting for the absolute absence of mimetic reference, for pictures that do not imitate anything—and turned it into a sort of painterly cardiogram,⁶ a work that reflects and responds to the history of painting and may at once be read as a self-portrait in a very elemental sense. As an echo of the history of black pictures from Goya to Ad Reinhardt, it is thus tangibly not propelled by the desire for the ‘final picture’ or an ultimate purism of the sort that motivated Reinhardt. Nor does Uslé’s black carry any overtones of the religiously inflated ideology of absoluteness with which Malevich endowed his black square. Still, the black in these pictures is most certainly a colour of transgression, of crossing from visibility into invisibility. Black is a passage toward the pictures of silence, of the dream and the night. And for Uslé (this is where his art bears resemblance to Reinhardt’s), this non-colour that is at once the sum of all colours constitutes a crucial tool that enables him to render light, which plays such a salient part throughout his oeuvre, visible as such precisely by confronting it with its opposite. So the amnesia Uslé has described as a productive premise of his painting is complemented by a sort of blindness: ‘not-seeing or seeing-nothing as the prerequisite of a different, an inner vision.’⁷ SQR demonstrates impressively how rich and colourful such a darkening of vision may be. The earliest work in the series, created in 1997, is also one of the blackest overall; the horizontal linear structure⁸ of the brushstrokes and an infinitesimal colour gradient down to a blackish blue in the bottom third of the canvas only gradually reveal themselves to the eye of the beholder, who must wrest visibility from the canvas, as it were, in gaze upon gaze. The organization of the pictorial surface in lines suggests a legibility that seems to challenge us to ‘decipher’ it, and simultaneously refuses to offer any resolution.

The text these pictures write derives its density from its work on its own obscurity, its creation, brushstroke after brushstroke, of an image of its own mysterious impenetrability. The title ‘Soñé que revelabas,’ which may be translated as ‘I dreamed that you revealed,’ not only suggests that the genesis of the pictures is shaped by the power of the imagination rather than exact planning. It also alludes to the photographic process, to

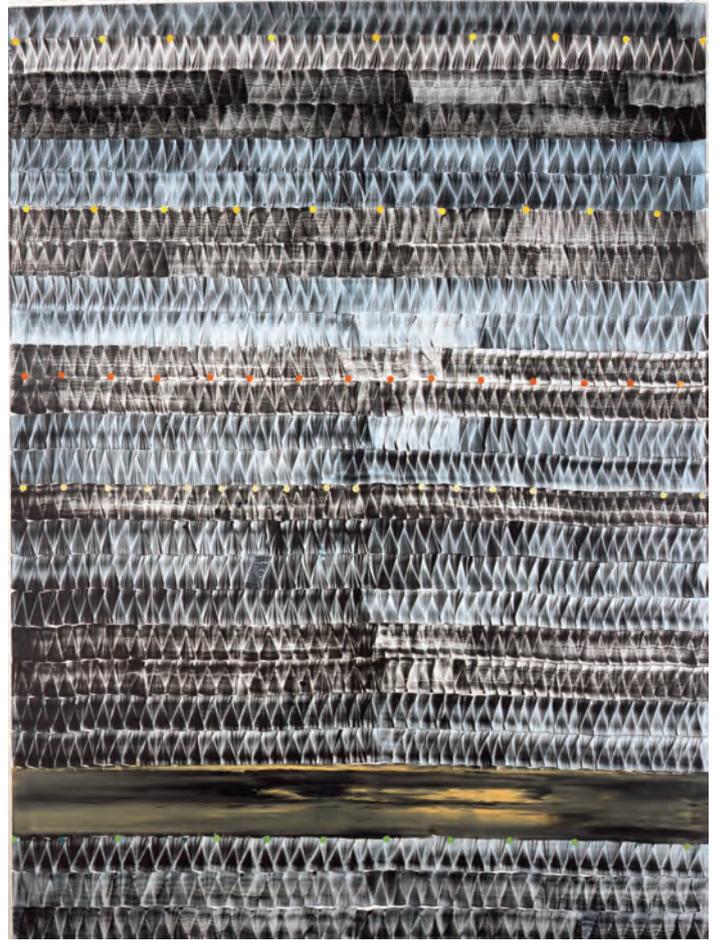
the mysterious emergence of the image in the laboratory’s developing bath. Over the years, there are phases of lighter and more transparent brushstrokes, and wide horizontal bands of colour occasionally interrupt the strict rhythm of the discrete rectangular imprints of the brush; see *SQR XII* and *SQR XV* (both 2002). Uslé also takes the liberty of enlivening the sternly ascetic monochrome black-and-grey surfaces with isolated lines and dots of colour (*SQR XIV*), which take on an almost ornamental radiance before the dark ground. In some pictures—especially the lighter ones, where the brush impressions do not form a uniform grid of very fine parallel lines but instead manifest themselves on the canvas as a bright band of zigzagging dashes—the pictorial structure looks as though woven, with an aspect of ornamental serialism that recalls carpet patterns; see *SQR IX (Ikuros dream)* (2001/2002), *Onon* (2008).

Yet the structure of the SQR paintings also elicits an even more obvious association: cinematography. First and foremost, there is the texture of the brushstrokes, which, in their endless addition, look like film strips.⁹ Uslé’s extremely thin and translucent application of vinyl and dispersion paints and the pigment spread across the surface of the pictures like a superfine powder reinforce the impression of celluloid-like



Juan Uslé: *Soñé que revelabas (Abierta)*, 2005/06
Uslé-Civera Collection, Saro. Photo: Mathias Schormann

transparency; the paintings always 'also exude a sense of the phantasmatic, the aura of a virtual non-space.'¹⁰ The cinema and movies as well as the experience of the metropolis lit up by flickering neon lights are indeed crucial influences in the Spanish artist's oeuvre.¹¹ As Uslé explains in an essay he wrote in 1993, what fascinates him most about the cinema is the passage of real time spent on watching a film.¹² The observation brings us to another central aspect of the SQR paintings: the link between picture and process. In an endeavour that informs his entire oeuvre, Uslé strives to produce a pictorial reality whose totality allows the viewer to see and experience both the process of its genesis and every individual moment in that process. In this sense, passing moment and duration, process and result, are inextricably fused in each SQR painting. The momentum of the brushstrokes adds up to a process generating a picture that, in the iridescent narrow time-space between presence and evanescence, always also captures the stretch of time it took to paint it. Without turning into a meta-text, Uslé's SQR pictures store up a wide range of aspects of what a picture can be, is capable of being, today: self-reflective painterly act, portrait-like expression of the artist's own physical self-awareness, process-based recording of fleeting instant and passing time, and vivid representation of the eternal longing for a picture that would reveal what is, and ultimately must remain, structurally invisible.



Juan Uslé: *Soñé que revelabas XV*, 2002
 Los Bragales Collection, Cantabria
 Photo: Mathias Schormann. Courtesy of Galerie Thomas Schulte, Berlin

Essay by Stephan Berg, originally published in the exhibition catalogue
Juan Uslé. Soñé que revelabas, Distanz Verlag, Berlin, 2014.

- 1 See *Juan Uslé: Back & Forth*, exh. cat., IVAM, Institut Valencià d'Art Modern (Valencia, 1996), p. 252.
- 2 *Ibid.*, p. 259.
- 3 *Ibid.*, p. 262.
- 4 *Ibid.*, p. 260.
- 5 John Yau, 'Embrace: The Paintings of Juan Uslé,' in *Juan Uslé: Switch on/Switch off*, exh. cat., Centro de Arte Contemporáneo de Málaga (Málaga, 2008), p. 73.
- 6 See John Yau in conversation with Juan Uslé, *The Brooklyn Rail*, April 2011, repr. in *Juan Uslé*, exh. cat., Galerie Lelong (Paris, 2013), p. 37 ff.
- 7 Stephanie Rosenthal, *Die Farbe Schwarz in der New York School*, doctoral dissertation (Munich, 2003), p. 51.
- 8 With the exception of SQR V (2000/01), where the brushstrokes form vertical lines, all works in the series show a horizontal linear structure.
- 9 See David Carrier in conversation with Juan Uslé, in *Juan Uslé: Open Rooms*, exh. cat., Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía (Madrid, 2003), pp. 38–39, and John Yau, 'Embrace,' pp. 74–75.
- 10 Stephan Berg, 'Das Momentum der Malerei,' in *Juan Uslé: First Time Germany*, exh. cat., Museum Morsbroich (Leverkusen, 2002), p. 22.
- 11 Compare the work of David Reed.
- 12 *Juan Uslé: Back & Forth*, p. 255.

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