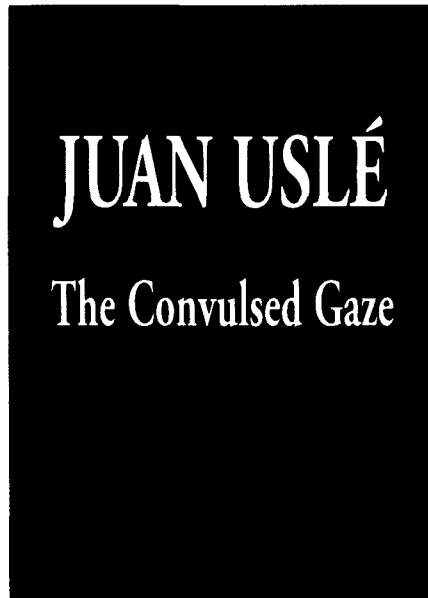


REVIEWS

(Interview held in Valencia in conjunction with the retrospective exhibition at IVAM (October 1996 - January 1997), curated by Kevin Power).

Between June and October 1996, Juan Uslé opened three major exhibitions in Spain: a selection of his early work was presented in a show dealing with the first ten years of his career (1986 - 1996) at the Valencia Institute for Modern Art; more recent paintings, executed during the last two years (1995 - 1996), at the Museum for Contemporary Art in Barcelona; and a series of watercolours begun in Lund, Sweden, exhibited at the Soledad Lorenzo Gallery in Madrid. Uslé considers his painting to be infused with the idea of travel, which it impels and of which it is also the simulacrum; it is reproduced in each painting, often in a somewhat traumatic nature. The three exhibitions allow us to reconstruct the trajectory of work that, despite the impact of the artist's experiences, has the appearance of being self-determined, of living alone, of entrenching itself in peacefulness in order to give itself up to contemplation by an anonymous spectator. Uslé, who lives in New York, does not refute the painter's permanent uncertainty and occupational solitude, which, paradoxically, can only be countered by painting. Fear of error or of succumbing to the limits of real and fictitious things reveals itself permanently in the realm where the desires for occupation and return coincide, like a refugee in his "blind



room" — the title of one of the paintings "Habitación ciega" to which he refers in the interview that follows. Uslé's life is inhabited by painting; he can do nothing to resist. The retrospective at IVAM is an exhibition that allows us to enter into the artist's interior labyrinth, not so much via the magnitude of the works that have been included but rather by the rigorous criteria employed by the curator, Kevin Power, in the selection process. There have been few opportunities to examine the work belonging to the period 1986 - 1990, which lends a special degree of interest to the show. Uslé has always maintained that he sees his own work as a process of exploration and experimentation, in or through which he tries to glimpse something that, despite its absence, is predisposed to the search. It is self-referential painting and, reciprocally, is conceived of as an open-ended, constantly-evolving process. For Uslé,

painting is identified with the "other side", a placeless place, an empty mirror from which we are seen, never indifferent to existence, whose movement provides pictorial space with forms, with a logic that is irrational and irreducible to any system.

Q. The exhibition at IVAM suggests a chronological passage, beginning in 1986, that presumably takes us back to the commencement of your career. The painting from that date must have a special significance, if only for its mere placement, and a symbolic dimension that probably requires some clarification on your part.

A. The oldest painting and the first to be included in the exhibition is "1960", and belongs to a series that I painted in Susilla under the generic title "Rio Cubas" in '86. It is a small village located in Valderredible, an area that lies between the region of Cantabria and the province of Palencia; it is almost abandoned, surviving primarily on potato farming. When we arrived, in summer of that year, only three houses were still inhabited. It was there that I prepared the exhibition I later held in the Montenegro Gallery in Madrid. The Cubas River is a place from my childhood, a place of games and dreams, of magic and fear, where, soon after my birth, I lived for nearly 10 years with my parents and siblings. But Susilla and Cubas are quite far from each other — more than 100 km — and this separation encourages the exercise of looking at the past from a blurry site

that I preserved within. The painting takes on a rather ghostly aspect; prussian blues, the mysterious mountainous waves on which a vessel is positioned. The painting's subject was inspired by a real event; the shipwreck of a vessel bringing wheat from the U.S. that was going to unload the cargo in a northern port. It was a tragic event. The ship disappeared near Gijón in a storm and was stranded off the Langre coast, no more than 100 metres from the shore. People threw ropes and helicopters came but nearly all the sailors died. It was an event that made a profound impression on me, both visually and emotionally. It is my first memory of images published in the press. Its impact on me meant becoming conscious of catastrophe, "frozen", like an image fixed in memory. While I was painting the paintings that made up the series, the sequences of the event reappeared with strange persistence. In the painting "1960", I placed the ship in the place of the "convent" next to which we lived. Thus the "house" is the ship. The inhabited ship, unstable on the liquid that it displaces, now "remains" stable. I later used this reversal in the other paintings as well.

Q. It is rather like a leitmotif throughout a considerable portion of your later work, and which is articulated with your own experience of "separation" and displacement caused by your move to New York. Where do you place it in what you refer to as the "eye's journey" from 1986 to 1996?

A. At first, my intention was to place a second version of "1960" in

front of the one I have just described. I painted it when we settled in Williamsburg, in 1987. After beginning the series "Rio Cubas" in the Montenegro Gallery in Madrid, we went to New York, where we still live. Unfortunately, the painting was not loaned for the occasion. I was hoping to place the facing one another and thus establish an imaginary "bridge", a metaphor of the crossing in time between the ship, in one direction, and myself in the opposite direction. "1960-Williamsburg" is one of my favourite paintings, although it is rather dramatic. The solidity of the landscape, in the first version, hill or mountain is a rock, surrounded by blue air, blue sky, blue water. The drama springs from the intercrossing of circumstances: I made my voyage in the opposite direction of the freighter that sunk off the Santander coast, and I return to the starting point. But the price to be paid is abandoning nature, omnipresent in Susilla, which is a tiny village of half a dozen inhabitants, and the trauma of arriving in a city like New York, where it is replaced by architecture.

Q. How did you deal with solitude upon arriving in New York, and how did you resolve the basic problems of everyday life? Those days must have been difficult, in order to continue painting.

A. If Vicky hadn't been with me, I might not have been able to bear it. We settled in Brooklyn, in the Williamsburg area. The neighborhood was sordid in appearance, and the studio, which was as large as it was strange, was filled with

machinery. Under those circumstances, the predominant emotion was fear, fear of everything. And uncertainty. But you hold on. Because you are filled with hope and, at the same time, we knew that we had to get out of Spain. But once there, recent arrivals, painting did not cease to be a symptom of fear. The theme of the journey, of my journey, crossed with the crossing of the freighter; my circumstances as a castaway trying to survive was transformed into a delayed image of the ship that foundered off the beach at Langre, near Santander. From that point onward I journey in my work, with each painting further dissipating the trauma, and accepting to a loss of memory that is necessary for enduring separation and distance. My paintings are darker, becoming almost completely black. The images are blurred. But conceptually and emotionally I am still working with the same subject.

Q. I would like to know why you use the irregular format of "Before 1960". Did you work with this sort of format for a long time, and were you aiming for some specific goal in not utilising conventional frames, or do you merely attribute it to a lack of means?

A. The format of this painting comes from some pieces of wood that I happened to find in the street, the remains of some shelves or remnants from somewhere else. I utilised them by covering the surface with canvas on which I painted the entire series. I have next to nothing from the series; some are in Paris. From that same period come some small-scale paintings that consist

of paintings on plaster panels that are used in construction. I made about 20, and the story of the journey was present in all of them. I never exhibited them.

Q. When and how did you emerge from poverty? Did it coincide with the beginning of the larger-scale formats and the intense darkness of the paintings that immediately followed? What happened?

A. In an inauguration in New York I was casually introduced to someone who had a gallery in Paris. Hearing my name, she said that she had purchased a work of mine in Cologne, or something like that. She had three or four of my paintings. I knew that she had wanted to exhibit my work in Paris, in 1984. She was Fasidah Cadot; she insisted on coming to my studio and bought three paintings. Later, she sent me a letter, telling me that she hoped to put on an exhibition in her gallery. The title of the exhibition, which was my first in Paris, was “1960 Williamsburg”. The paintings were small and were dominated by total darkness. They were all hung at the same height along the four walls of the gallery. They were inward visions that I attributed to a possible sailor in that ship during its crossing. Alleged “dark” visions, full of foreboding, that I attributed to a member of the crew of a shipwrecked vessel — of course it was imaginary. I continued alluding to the same ship and the same event, for instance in “Between two Moons”, where the route ends symbolically between two circular shapes in the upper section that are identified with the two continents. I try

to “organise time” in this painting, and the land masses surrounded by water in “1960-Williamsburg” disappear before the presence of those eyes that are also the equivalent of moons, and that are witnesses to a time in which the images of a voyage and a shipwreck predominate. It is a dark painting, with more fluid blue washes in the upper section.



Juan Uslé. “Mal del Sol”. 1994. 112 x 198 cm.

Q. What is the source of the “Book of Landscapes?” Is there some particular feature of the most recent watercolours exhibited in the Soledad Lorenzo Gallery on which you would like to comment?

A. I was walking along the street and I tripped over one of those books of old accounting ledgers. I picked it up and opened it under the light of a streetlamp; I was soon surprised to see that the pages seemed to be blank. Later, upon closer inspection, I noticed anonymous characters in a pale calligraphy. The edges of the pages were yellowed, and turning the pages I saw that the stains came from the ink in which the names and numbers had been written. As I was scrutinising it I came across a date — 1942 — and out of

curiosity I took it home with me. With some watercolours that I had recently received as a gift, I shut myself up for a week, wetting the brush and drawing it across the paper, moving it slowly and without any fixed ideas. I painted right on the written pages, creating a sort of bridge between what was printed and what I added, between what disappears and what simultaneously was beginning to appear. Up to that point, the light had always come out of the material; the paintings were black and thick and full of pigment. In watercolours, to the contrary, the light comes from the background and crosses through the pigment and colour. That is how I think I met Nemo (Nobody), and later I dreamed about him. I made about 60 watercolours that I grouped under the title “The Book of Landscapes”. The only one that has its own individual title is, however, “The Last Dreams of Captain Nemo.”

Q. How did this experience affect your work on canvas? What were the most obvious changes? It seems that these sketches, as you sometimes refer to these watercolours, progressively liberated you from the trauma that had been inflicted in the earlier paintings.

A. Yes, they were very useful to me. Light began to slowly reappear in my paintings soon after the watercolour series, coinciding with a loss of material. The images emerge from within the eye, but they begin to have less weight. Particularly after the watercolour that I have mentioned, I formulated another self — Captain Nemo, who borrows his name from a character of Jules Verne. In

Greek “Nemo” means “nobody”, and I liked the idea of a “captain nobody” who was non-existent and couldn’t even paint. In the paintings from this period — such as “Casita del norte 2”, “L’Oriental”, “Crazy Noel”, “Verde Aguirre” or “Yellow Line” — there is a sort of centre which is not a centre, like the equivalent of the pupil of an eye, where the images are located as if they were within the interior. That same year, due to a pinched vertebra, I spent a few months doing nothing, trying to ease the pain, and I wrote a bit. In one of the things I wrote I said that Nemo didn’t use a periscope, since he only saw his own eye reflected in it; I ventured to describe the infinite landscapes where he lived, although I suspect that it wasn’t necessary. In reality I was still narrating the voyage to New York and its consequences, but from a different distance.

Q. What was that distance, and why is separation still such an obsession, even after all this time? How far do you take this identification with the double who writes and paints and is painted?

A. From my studio, which was a long, closed box without any windows, nature became a loss that I found difficult to bear. The shipwrecked boat that I painted on the mountain, in the place where I spent my childhood, then became my studio, a sealed vessel that is more like a submarine than anything else. In this ship I am Captain Nemo. My world is this world, isolated from all the rest, surrounded by streets and buildings that I can’t see since there aren’t any windows or peepholes

through which I might see the exterior. I am perfectly aware of who I am and the circumstances in which I live; I invent an “other” (no one), Captain Nemo, in order to explain it. I talk about him, but I am only talking about myself. When Nemo looks in the periscope he doesn’t dare to look out; he always finds himself with his own pupil. His pupil in which the seascape is reflected, as if in a mirror, a solitary place. The same thing happens to me with my pupil, where I only see my studio.

Q. How do you explain the hanging of the show, keeping in mind the function of your abstract painted images which, despite their autonomy, bear titles that help identify them?

A. We have attempted to show the evolution of the pictorial discourse via exhibition rooms, grouping and arranging the paintings chronologically, using a strategy that I would place between “the eye and the recognition of the image of water”. In the third room there is a painting, “Gulf Stream”, where I physically reproduce the idea of internal currents that begin condensing underwater. The central mass is green and turquoise. “Nemo vision” approaches Nemo’s conscience as he reflects on his own life. It appears as if Nemo were also looking for an alter ego. And look at “Cuaderno de Bitácoras de Nemo” from the perspective of the dream I describe. In the fourth room we have placed three large paintings, “Martes”, “Piel de Agua” and “Below 0°”, which facilitate the circulation of the visitor. This and following room are connected to the ninth room via the

construction of a false wall, on the back of which is a painting from 1996 and on the front of which another painting entitled “Vidas Paralelas”; it faces three small horizontal paintings that belong to a long series called “Nemaste” that I painted after travelling to Nepal. The title comes from a word that the Nepalese use in greeting: “Namaste”. I change the vowel of the first syllable so that the word appears to have been derived from Nemo, in his memory. Nemo is nobody, which attracts me; he’s in an unknown country and he doesn’t know how to experience reality. From the end of 1988 until 1990 I worked on three series simultaneously: “L.D.C.N./Last Dreams of Capitan Nemo”, “Nemaste” and “Duda”. With the series “Nemaste” I tried to open the language, to expand it. I do things that I wouldn’t have dared to do before; my back had healed and my attitude toward life changed, I’ve done it all, I’m different. “Vidas Paralelas” is testimony to what happens during a period of transition, during which I work simultaneously on the three series already mentioned.

Q. It is easy to imagine the complexity of the show’s installation, given the grandiloquence of the space and its clear architectonic characteristics, to say nothing of the lighting. How did you solve the problems that arose?

A. My first impulse was to create a double exhibition, or perhaps I should say an exhibition with a double route. I almost always turn to the image of the artist who recognises the importance and

the limitation of language in naming the world. I had considered leaving the building's hallway or central chamber empty, but with a painted blue strip, 4.5 metres high, it continued. On these walls I wanted, instead of paintings, to hang photographs, which we finally placed in the final room before the exit.

Q. The inclusion of photography in the retrospective show came as a surprise, since Uslé the photographer is completely unknown. How long have you been working with photography? It is clear that some of these images bring to mind some of your abstract paintings, as in some of their underlying schemes.

A. For me, taking a photograph means seeing the world from a different distance. I have always taken photographs; the earliest that I have exhibited here is from 1978. I have saved thousands of images on slides, although I hardly ever develop them on paper in large formats. Shortly after my show opened at IVAM I opened an exhibition of photographs at the Buchmann Gallery in Cologne. In the "Carmen" space, I am particularly interested in showing the proximity and the distance that oscillates between one medium and another within the range of my work.

Q. "A años luz" is one of the most unsettling paintings since it is quite disturbing, not because of the underlying diagonal schemes that is so characteristic of some stages in your work, but rather in the enigmatic figuration that you superimpose on them.

A. Yes, it is a somewhat "strange"

painting, which seduces me with the multiplicity of the spaces that it generates with the apparent fixity of the central area. In my painting I use grammatical elements that are quite common, but the slightly-surreal and highly-graphic sort of figure that results is a strange presence. It evokes distance, passing through different phases and stages, and the title which is "stolen" from Allain Tanner can add some further information. "A años luz" may provide the most insistent display of the contradictions and complexity of my painting; it is painting with questions, that reveals an Uslé who doubts, who continues forgetting about reality, like Nemo, and who still disguises himself as that reinvented literary character. Rembrandt also disguised himself as a Turk in order to recognise himself, and we all need to lose our memory in order to return someday to the same place.

Q. There is another recent painting in this exhibition that suggests the presence of forces in tension and a conflictive situation without an apparent solution. Iconographically, it provokes confusion; you seem to be seeking and not finding a way out, and you even seem to remain trapped among the disordered strings that your doodles resemble.

A. When I paint I usually write down thousands of things, I talk and I distance myself, but I also establish a very physical dialogue, bodily contact with the painting. The painting that you refer to, "Mecanismo gramatical", is related to the urge to doodle on paper while I talk on the telephone. I began

the painting by transferring to canvas the random doodles made while talking on the telephone. When they were already on the canvas, I sketched in some oval blue shapes, like ears or headphones, to which I added another element in order to bring to a close the connecting circle between the two sections of the painting, the upper part that belongs to the realm of the signifier, and the lower part — the strip of meanings — of the signified. The doodles belong to a context, and among them they establish a mechanism whose operation is closure. The lines and connections relate the supposed colour chart, items or simple pictogrammes of the same scale as my small paintings below, with the tangle of kinetic lines, doodles and feed-back mechanisms in the conversation (above) that are grouped with a sort of sandwich or cloud in which they are contained. However, a painting is a painting, and does not necessarily need so much explanation. The explanations help me better understand my motivations and processes, but it is not crucial that they accompany the work during the evaluation process. We are not talking about representation, but rather about painting. This painting refers to painting from the perspective of painting and/or via painting. Hence the title "Mecanismo". The lower strip or base is a colour chart that identifies an artist, but it also contains images of my own paintings, from 1991 or 1992, although the viewer or spectator might also see it as a control table for activating the mechanism.

Q. Do you work out of series concept, or do you allow the development of a natural sequence which you try to avoid having recourse to?

A. I try to avoid a fixed series: when the idea of the series is too closely related to the idea of the representation or identification, I find that something dries up. As to the rest, I know that it is difficult that each painting be unrelated to the last, although in fact that is what I would like.

Q. Concerning your pictorial preferences, I suppose that you will have made your own collection of symbolic images, and that your silent dialogue with the history of painting should have some sort of formal effect on your work.

A. In discussing preferences, I cannot avoid the "classics" such as Don Diego Vermier and a long list of etc's. The extreme pictoriality of Matisse and the sharpened blade of forms of Picasso, De Kooning, Guston....the last white paintings of De Kooning, lacking in body, quite interesting, I refer to them in "Yonkers Imperator". Also Polke, Richter, but there is no single way of seeing things, and the world of painting is more circular than linear; the styles and "isms" have lost their redeeming importance. Today a painter can freely move about the territories of painting, and in a single painting like "Mi-món" I try to superimpose Mondrian's structural rationalism on the oneiric and liquid world of Miró. That was in '92, and I was interested in a "territory" with the boldness and self-confidence of an anthropologist, but also with respect.

Q. And with which of your contemporaries do you align yourself?

A. Among contemporary Spaniards who predate me, I was initially fascinated by Tápies for his expressiveness. Later, as the years went by, I felt the void of a "great generation" that in Spain would correspond to the German model: Polke-Richter. Now, with the passage of time, I am pleased to see pleasurable and youthful developments, as well as the exactitude of late Palazuelo. I also respect Luis Gordillo, who is constantly making an effort to do something new, with an attitude that absorbs everything acerbically. Both of them should have more recognition.

Q. Are you concerned about the survival of painting, or do you think that it is unquestionable? What stance do you take concerning the controversy between those who reject painting as anachronistic, in favour of other forms of representation, and those who defend it, arguing that it will never perish?

A. In my own way, I believe in painting. Without complexes as far as limits and possibilities are concerned, but I don't have blind faith either. There is something substantial, but there is also a lot of superficiality and worthlessness. But I paint and I venture on, because I need to feel that I am in the middle of the hundred thousand labyrinths and diversity that exist with in the process of painting. My faith is based on an instinctive relationship and the conviction that I still hold it to be a medium capable of expression in a specific way; that is, in a way that other

media are not. To stand before a painting is a unique experience. That does not mean that I think painting is better or worse than photography or video; painting informs of different places and modulations.

Q. Nonetheless, you have yielded to the temptation of photography, although you present it discreetly and with a degree of modesty in a defined space. Your photographs are those of a painter, they belong to an unmistakable eye. They are almost paintings, wouldn't you agree?

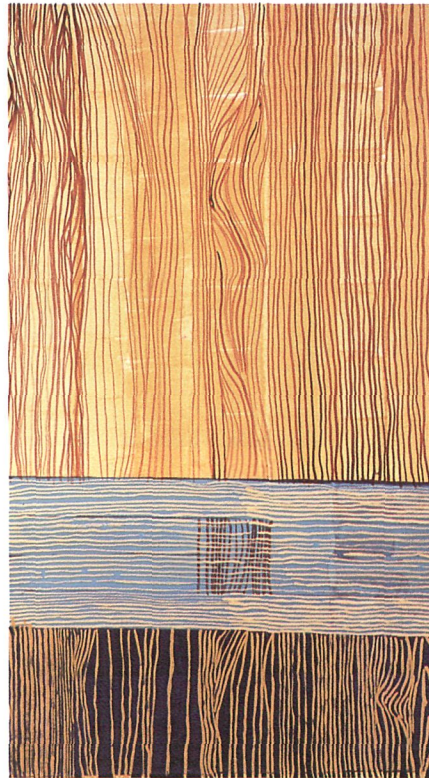
A. No, no. I have always taken photographs. The temptation to exhibit them was what was missing for you to see them, since for many years I was afraid that they would become something more pretentious. It is normal to see how a painter takes photographs. It becomes a cliché. It is an instrument of our age that anyone can use. When I was a student I used to think that if Velázquez had lived in our era, he would have made films. In my opinion, painting can say something, but it is stuck to the canvas; it can silently change people and is obviously a medium that in some ways cannot challenge film. A film can make people cry with unthinkable rapidity. For that to happen with a painting is much more difficult. The emotions that can be felt before cinematographic images or before a pictorial image are of a completely different character, and are also channeled and transmitted in different ways. All this affects the nature of the emotion. In opposition to the agility and efficiency of the cinematic image,

painting offers its permanence, its existence in “0” time, where the communicative experience, once produced, can be very profound. The difference might be seen as equivalent to that between flying on the “Concorde” and travelling in a canoe. In films, time is easily manipulated: a second is year, without damage to the pleasure or the tension. But an instant of intense emotion in painting is or tends to be a quasi-religious experience. Sequences in films always follow upon each other and never stand alone. Painting, on the other hand, is an ideal medium for a reflection on man’s solitude.

Q. The relationship between titles and works seems to attempt to reveal the existence of a subject or narrative so that the spectator might reconstruct the archeology of the painting. Your experiences, according to this principle, will always inhabit it.

A. There is a painting that was not included in the IVAM show that is very symptomatic of my attitude toward painting. Its title is “Habitación ciega”, and in this sort of symbiosis between painting and life, whose content is summarised here in an attempt to represent my doubts about abstraction as a closed genre on the formal level. As I was creating the painting, I was thinking incessantly about Reinhardt and his nearly chromatic paintings, blacks and blues, based on rectangles, either within other rectangles or arranged into crosses. He takes the possibilities of non-representation to the extreme, the pictorial experience and the contemplative experience, in an almost

religious fashion. What I did in this painting, intentionally and almost religiously, was to represent an underlying chaos, to uncover all those creatures that are found in this room, which is a time of our lives, of which we



Juan Uslé, “Me enredo en tu cabello”. 1993.
198 x 112 cm.

become conscious when we are born. Given the title we might imagine a black or Prussian blue painting, a darkened room. What happens to this painting if someone opens the door and turns on the light? The surface of the painting is divided into two parts: the left is hierarchic, since there is no single stylistic reference. For me, the canvas turns into a site of exploration, where different stories and different ways of approaching them coexist. If nothing

else, our paintings today are mirrors of our multiple displacements, doubts, cross-breedings and contradictions.

Q. Why isn’t there any work earlier than 1986 in a such a broad retrospective? 10 years of painting is clearly a considerable amount of time for significantly reconstructing your career. But perhaps it would have been interesting to show some earlier examples. Did you debate frequently between figuration and abstraction before choosing a definitive option?

A. There is no earlier work in this exhibition because it would have become too broad, almost an historical retrospective. We would have needed more space, and it would have involved different planning. Finally, in these exhibition spaces it would have been too scattered. In fact, we left a number of pieces out of the exhibition, since the “tone” of the spaces became too intensified. I have never considered myself a figurative painter, strictly speaking, and neither do I feel completely comfortable being classified as abstract, despite the fact that my output has been “predominately” abstract. I would prefer for the intermediate spaces to be recognised, the spaces between the lines, where you can skirt and cross the frontiers. Moreover, those terms are too “dry”. I am a painter of a language and production that is “rather abstract” but which “moves”, as can be seen in this exhibition, and beneath these signs, which are articulated as abstract, will always be found an impulse motivated by specific experience.