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I N T E R N A T I O N A L

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NAPLES

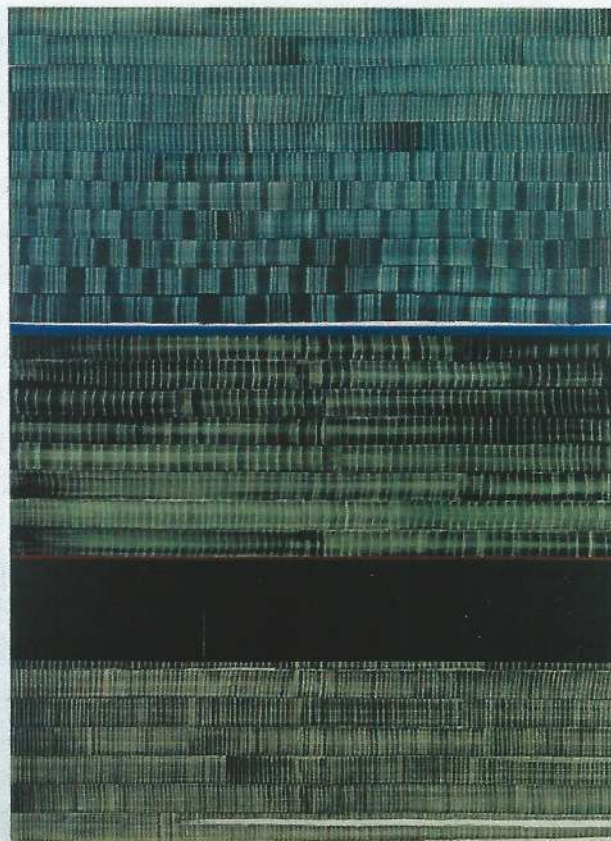
Juan Uslé

ALFONSO ARTIACO

Since the late 1980s, the painter Juan Uslé has divided his time between New York and Spain, so it is probably inevitable that what might be called a “pendular” mode is inscribed in the work of this bilingual and bicultural artist. Perhaps more surprising is that it takes the form of a synesthetic investigation of rhythm. In the fourteen paintings (all works 2018), in his recent exhibition “Pedramala” (whose title refers to an area in the south of Spain, near Valencia, where Uslé has a house), color, forms, and marks were regulated by a continuous movement, giving the sense of an apparently rigorous structure within which the artist allows himself a great deal of unruliness, with variations, fractures, pauses, and cancellations. The production of these geometric grids involves a process similar to that of weaving on a loom: Uslé accumulates vertical, horizontal, or diagonal signs one by one.

Uslé paints at night, because he wants to be surrounded by silence, which allows him to perceive the “heartbeat” of time. But I would be curious to know what it was within that silence he was listening to while he executed *Soñé que revelabas (Narmada)* (Dreams That Reveal [Narmada]), a stupendous work, as vibrant and complex as a symphony, with three large painted fields of subtle gray marks, vertical or undulating, against a black ground. Evoking the same obsessive impetus that characterizes Minimalist musical works by Brian Eno or Philip Glass, the three fields seem furrowed by a rapid succession of sound waves and separated by an equal number of moments of pause: a blue horizontal line from which a white light arises; a series of three opaque rectangles that change color from gray to black, like a long, mute interval; and, finally, at the bottom, after a rapid progression of closely arrayed signs, a white horizontal line that slides to the right, dragging the sound along and precipitating silence within. The insistent pace of the work is articulated by the oscillation of slow or rapid motions, and by the

Juan Uslé, *Soñé que revelabas (Narmada)* (Dreams That Reveal [Narmada]), 2018, vinyl, dispersion, and dry pigment on canvas, 107 $\frac{7}{8}$ × 79 $\frac{7}{8}$ ”.



REVIEWS

alternation of the acute or grave accent. We cannot avoid its tempo, its mobile, fluid musical form. But we also remain actively suspended in the pauses and aware of the spaces of silence, just as we do with John Cage's 4' 33" (1952).

In the divergent philosophical concepts of Gaston Bachelard and Henri Bergson, time is understood either as a continuous duration, an uninterrupted flow, full of vitality; or as discontinuous, divided into discrete instants, events, or intervals. Uslé seems to stay in fluid time; his marks could continue infinitely. And yet they are also immediate recordings of individual moments, of the uniqueness of every heartbeat of time and its possible turbulences, and they require pausing and focusing. If we tune in to their vibration, the eye and breath harmonize with the artist's gesture and let us follow all his different trajectories, to feel the fluidity or suspension of the rhythm, and sink with him into a vertigo of sequences.

In eight small paintings, the horizontal bands followed one another in tight concentration, with paint that was sometimes transparent, sometimes opaque. But in the spaces between them, some free horizontal splashes unexpectedly opened rifts and offered a glimpse of incongruous landscapes, from small to large: blades of grass in the wind, water, hills, clouds. With their ability to sketch out places or fleeting sensations with just a few essential gestures, these paintings had the quality of haiku, a rhythm that is both poetic and concise. *Nortesur* (North-South), by contrast, was like a window that opened wide onto the light; in this work, Uslé immerses us in the same enveloping and warm Mediterranean intensity as Matisse's *Landscape Viewed from a Window*, painted in Tangier, Morocco, in 1912–13. Rapid horizontal signs of a sparkling pink pierce an indigo-blue ground interwoven with diagonal lines, with a vibrant chromatic contrast and unexpected changes in the direction of the brushstroke. In *Nortesur*, repetition and variation, order and chaos, openly reveal themselves as foundational to the method of his work, simultaneously recalling artists as different as Alighiero Boetti and Agnes Martin. But the pleasure of painting and the surprise of the gesture are entirely Uslé's.

—*Ida Panicelli*

Translated from Italian by Marguerite Shore.