

LOS ANGELES

Juan Uslé

L.A. LOUVER

Juan Uslé's recent outing at L.A. Louver—his first at the gallery since 2008—set his small-scale abstractions under the dreamy and evocative title “*Entre Dos Lunas*” (Between Two Moons). It was named for a dark blue painting (not included here) that the artist made shortly after moving from Spain to New York in 1987, when he would walk the Williamsburg Bridge at night, sky-gazing, habituating himself to the city. In a text printed for the occasion, Uslé describes his feeling of displacement when watching the lunar reflection on the East River: “I felt good there, between the two moons, and the bridge was perhaps a metaphor, a ‘non-place,’ a waystation that explained quite well how I was feeling.” This framework for Uslé's show called attention not only to the peregrinations of his life but to his paintings' formal language of visibility and occlusion, enacted through shifting planes of layers, colors, textures, and overlapping pictorial motifs. (A cosmological synchronicity: The supermoon, which appears once a year on the night when the moon is closest to our planet, happened to arrive during the show's run.)

The artist's statement that accompanied the show was undated, which left one to wonder how total Uslé's assimilation has been in the intervening years, much less how to read such factors in relation to the stubbornly nonobjective paintings. Most of the nineteen panels that were on view are the same size—twenty-four by eighteen inches—though the gorgeous “In Kayak” works, 2012–, are even smaller. (They looked positively diminutive next to *DESPLAZADO [Las Moscas]* [DISPLACED (The Flies)], 2013, the one large canvas in the group, and also one of only two turned on a horizontal axis.) Uslé's paintings are site-responsive, made in reaction to personal experience, yet he maintains a regular container for the wildly variable incident within. Their very titles, alternately in Spanish or English, signify the artist's straddling different continents, and the five “In Kayak” paintings with Spanish subtitles are, as it were, bilingual. These five panels, comprising bands of dark, narrow strokes laid down side by side in quiet accumulations and bounded by thin, colored borders, reference the evening rowing trips Uslé takes along a river near his childhood home in northern Spain. The artist has long applied paint in pulsing brushstrokes that he regulates according to his heartbeat, and here his technique also registers the repetitive movement of oars, thereby achieving an equivalence between method and theme. Though this connection may be more readily admitted in the “In Kayak” paintings than in others, the correlation underlies Uslé's work at large—a meditative fusion of process and illusion, memory and place, pervades his paintings.

Indications of location somatically registered or remembered years later structure canvases from without, as in *1987 Tompkins Square*, 2012–13, a garish red homage to its namesake. Elsewhere, color is equally atmospheric and emotive; only in *The Ice Storm*, 2012–13, does it seem to be mimetically motivated, the canvas's dappled white passages recalling frost. More commonly, the chromatic intensity

of the pigments, which Uslé mixes himself, are very much the point, and he manipulates them with little regard for describing environment; instead, he uses color to conjure form. Uslé sometimes extends these forms to the physical edges of the supports, as in the dense ribbons and underlying architecture of *Nudo Abierto* (Open Knot) and *Urban S*, both 2013, or the stepped, Op-wallpaper-like covering of *Nemo Encerrado* (Nemo Surrounded), 2012–13, producing a tension that belies the painting's actual size. In other cases, as with *Las Bidas* (The Bridles) and *Ageda's dream*, both 2013, passages are held apart from one another, like items on the page of a sketchbook that bear only uncanny associations when thought together. Such evident pleasures in composition attest to the intimacy of the material exercise that constitutes Uslé's project, in which contingencies inherent to making and determinants related to geography survive intact.

—Suzanne Hudson

Juan Uslé, *In Kayak (Lento)*, 2013, vinyl, acrylic, and pigment on canvas, 18 x 12". From the series “In Kayak,” 2012–.

