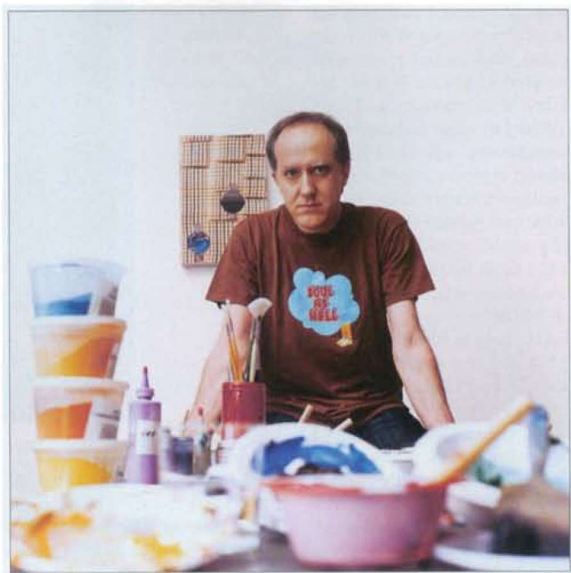


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OUTSIDE

THINKING



THE GRID

Abstract painter Juan Uslé

brings an unexpected

sensuousness and translucency

to dense, chaotic geometry

'Abstraction is a blind room, but everything is there. You need only press a button and everything will appear," says Juan Uslé. "Many of my paintings, in one way or another, talk about these things." Since moving to New York in 1987, Uslé, who was born in the small city of Santander, Spain, has pursued his deeply personal mode of abstraction, to great acclaim. "I'm very interested in the language of painting, but to me it's extremely necessary to put in something else. It's my way of dealing with experience. What I read, what I see, what I think—all these things are in there," says the artist, sitting in the studio and home he shares with his wife, painter Victoria Civera, high above a noisy corner of Broadway near SoHo.

Uslé, who knew no English when he moved to the city, now speaks a fluent but heavily accented version. He discusses his paintings with a mixture of humility and intensity. Turning 50 this month, the artist, dressed in a T-shirt and jeans, has a boy-

ish and unassuming demeanor. He keeps a studio near the small village of Saro, in northern Spain, where he returns for several months each year as an antidote to the fast pace of New York.

"We came to New York and lived under the train in Williamsburg, and my world was that thing—zoom, zoom, zoom, zoom," he laughs. "I thought it was magic. I was discovering life again—taxi drivers, crazy people, these meetings I had. I didn't really understand what was happening, but who cares? I felt that it was my city already. It was so dirty and ugly but also so totally sophisticated."

Uslé's paintings, which had been atmospheric and tactile with thickly applied paint, soon began to take on a new energy and dynamism. The artist began to experiment with all types of grids, often crossing them with deviant lines or baroque curlicues, as he tried to articulate on canvas his relationship

BY HILARIE M. SHEETS



***Wrong Transfer*, 1992, was inspired by Uslé's misadventures on the New York subway.**

with New York. A 1992 painting, *Wrong Transfer*, features densely woven rectangular blocks spliced with a kind of colorful, chaotic circuitry that evokes a subway map connecting the boroughs as well as synapses firing in the brain.

"Going on the subway was an adventure," says Uslé, pointing out *Wrong Transfer* in the catalogue from his museum retrospective, "Open Rooms," which debuted at the Palacio de Velázquez in Madrid last fall and recently finished touring through Ghent, Santander, and Dublin. "I remember trying to go to Pearl Paint in Manhattan from Williamsburg and realizing we went nine stops in the wrong direction. It felt like they wanted to send us to the wrong place, to kill us with a crazy kind of order."

Erased Center (1996–97) has a patchwork of gridded shapes and streaks of white, resembling the headlights of cars in motion, painted around a rectangular void in deep blue. "It's about searching for the center, knowing it's there but its not being



***Engo o amor*, 1980, shows Uslé's style before he was exposed to the geometry and freneticism of New York City.**

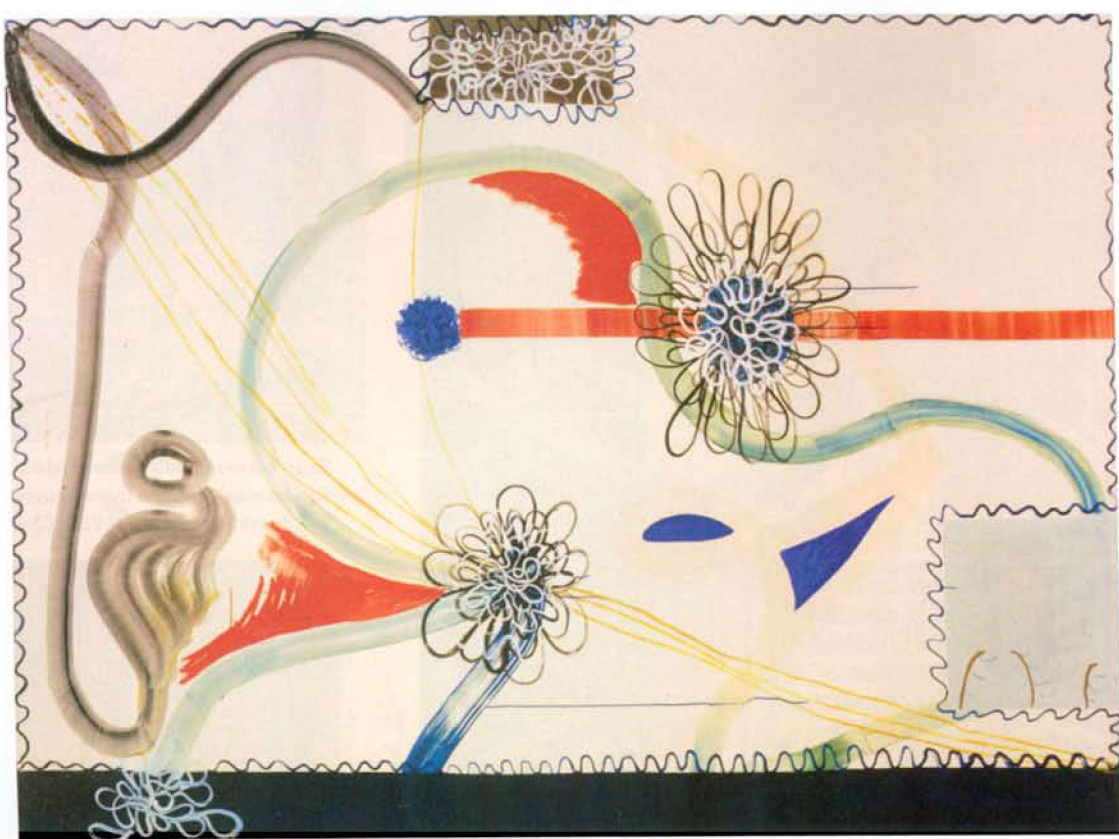


Uslé often adds texture through light, as in *Escenario Belga (A Reve)*, 2004.

clear," Uslé says, pointing out that, thanks to myriad focal points, the center of the painting becomes a shifting target. "In New York you can only really see what is crossing right in front of you. Some of that visual experience obviously penetrates you."

Listening to Uslé's stories of his early childhood, which he spent in the countryside outside Saro, where he roamed the grounds of a convent that his parents tended, is akin to watching a Luis Buñuel film, the images are so vivid and almost surreal. He describes being five years old and seeing a painting for the first time. He peered into a private chamber at the convent, which was protected by a latticework of iron bars. "I put my head against the bars and had this fantastic moment with the coldness of the metal holding me and suddenly seeing this painting of a nun dressed completely in black and looking at me—but honestly, really looking at me," he recalls. "I moved

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**Mosqueteros: Ó mira como me mira Miró, 1995, which translates as
"Musketeers: Look at How Miró Is Looking at Me."**

one way slowly, and she was still looking at me; and I came the other way, and she was still looking at me; and I went to the corner, and she was still looking at me; and I went out of that room and never came back.

"Always when I look at a painting, I have this feeling of seeing eyes," he continues. "I have the impression I am looking at the person who made it, and that he or she is looking at me." This kind of conversation plays out overtly in a painting such as *Mosqueteros* (1995), which has a Spanish subtitle that translates as "Look at How Miró Is Looking at Me." The free-spirited, organic shapes looping across a creamy ground playfully relate to the visual language of Miró.

Another event that had a profound impact on Uslé's early paintings was a shipwreck on a river near the convent. Everyone on board was killed, including many people from nearby villages. "We went to see the accident, and pictures of the sailors who died were in the newspaper," says the artist. "It was the first time I saw a newspaper, and the inky black pictures on the off-white paper were impressed in my mind." These images were a source for paintings loosely referencing murky seascapes, which he made as a young adult in Spain and, later, when he first moved to Williamsburg. "The idea was that every painting was for a sailor who felt the destination of the boat in the storm," he explains.

For the most part, however, Uslé and his brother led a fairly carefree life around the convent. Then, when the artist was nine, on the recommendation of a tutor, the family returned to Santander, where the boys could obtain formal schooling.

There Uslé took drawing classes in addition to the regular school curriculum.

As a teenager he moved to San Carlos, Valencia, where he put himself through the Escuela Superior de Bellas Artes. "It was 1973, and I discovered this fantastic city where people dressed totally differently. It was the same feeling I had when I first came to New York," he says. "I was alone, with no family, no money. But who cares?" It was there that he met Civera. He also started taking photographs then, although he never considered the medium a stand-alone enterprise.

After several years in Valencia, Uslé was offered a job teaching art in Santander, so he and Civera moved there. He taught for a few years and then began showing his paintings in group exhibitions. Enter Dan Cameron, now senior curator at New York's New Museum of Contemporary Art, then a freelance critic and curator, who was traveling in Spain and was advised by two different gallery people "to check out this painter." He decided to call Uslé.

"It was a very funny situation. I didn't really know who I was calling, and Juan certainly didn't know who was calling him," laughs Cameron. "My Spanish was pretty bad, but I was determined to spit it out." On the other end of the line, the artist couldn't fathom that a critic from New York wanted to come to his studio. "The first time he called, we thought maybe someone was kidding us," says Uslé. He shouts into an imaginary receiver, "Who are you? Are you my wife's father? Who are you?!"

The two met in Santander, and Cameron saw Uslé's work in Madrid, at Galería Montenegro. "I thought, 'This painter

Listening to Uslé's stories of his early childhood is akin to watching



Uslé made *Soñé que revelabas XI (Airport)*, 2002, by applying the brushstrokes in sync with his pulse.



Otrojo, cuagulos y mentiras, 2003-4, shows Uslé's interest in redefining the grid.

knows everything there is to know about light and texture and color and touch," says Cameron. "The completeness of the package bowled me over."

At the urging of Cameron and others, including Uslé's Madrid dealer at the time, Manolo Montenegro, Uslé moved to New York. He began showing almost immediately, first at Farideh Cadot Gallery and then at the John Good gallery. Since 1997 he has shown at New York's Cheim & Read, where he will have an exhibition next fall and where his paintings are priced between \$15,000 and \$65,000. (In Madrid he is represented by Galería Soledad Lorenzo.) Upon moving to New York he began experimenting with the grid structure and the arrangements of lines and shapes that continue to intrigue him. He prioritizes composition and form but also pays close attention to texture and touch, often building geometric patterns with a free hand and a soft brush. He is also interested in the differences between the natural and artificial light of the city.

Lately, dealers and curators have been especially keen to show his deep-toned photographs, which often lift the patterns and textures of artificial lights or blinds or nubby carpeting out of context. At first glance some of the images could be mistaken for paintings.

"Taking pictures is just a kind of game to me, something I need to do. I never use the photos to make a painting," says Uslé, although he will at times be surprised to find some connection between a painting and a photograph taken years earlier. "To me the roll of film is like flypaper. With the camera I can shoot and catch things, trick myself with the idea that I can touch reality. It's the need to identify and recognize my lan-

guage in real life."

Uslé relates his ongoing series of black paintings to the "magical moment in the darkroom when you put the photographic paper into the liquids and the image begins to grow." These paintings are composed of row upon row of short, inky brushstrokes applied in sync with his heartbeat as he senses it pulsing through his hand. The works have a surprising range in their translucency, despite the similarity of their formats. The title of the series, "*Soñé que revelabas*," translates as "I Dreamt You Were Developing"—as in a photograph developing—recalling Uslé's idea of abstraction as a room full of things that you can't see.

These days in his studio, Uslé has several recent black paintings and an unfinished canvas showing geometric shapes radiating toward a central, nuggetlike form. He says the imagery has something to do with the notion of weapons of mass destruction. He recently began incorporating elements from past paintings, and another work-in-progress features a small tangle of curving lines resembling a motif that covers an earlier canvas.

When he's not in his studio, Uslé can usually be found at the movies. He believes his passion for film helps feed his work. He has also recently taken up the hobby of being an "imaginary good golf player," watching the sport on TV and swinging some secondhand clubs in his studio but never playing on a real course. "What I like about golf is that it takes me in my mind to the opposite of New York," says Uslé, "walking in the mountains or looking at the clouds, imagining all those images that I did when I was a child." ■

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