

Introduction

Juan Uslé (Santander, 1954) belongs to a generation of international painters which includes Sean Scully, Terry Winters, Philip Taaffe, Helmut Federle, Helmut Dorner, Fiona Rae and Bernard Frize – who brought abstraction back to critical attention at the end of the eighties. Prior to the interest shown in this generation, abstract painting – associated by many with the final phase of Modernism – was presumed dead. These artists, however, decided to exploit syntactically and semantically all forms of abstraction: expressionist, organic, geometric, etc. in order to explore multiple metaphorical possibilities. Thus, they abandoned the utopian ideal of a pure art as demanded by the abstract artists of the previous avant-garde, emphasising not the search for a new language but rather what could be said with this language. These painters not only continue to reflect on the meta-linguistic possibilities of painting, but add ideas emerging from new philosophical and scientific theories.

In 1991, after having lived in New York for a couple of years, Juan Uslé's work changed. All romantic references to landscape and traces of Expressionism disappeared completely from his work, giving way to a highly personal language of simultaneous styles. In effect, his painting now began to develop along a 'spiral' path – not a linear progression, but one in which themes and forms are continuously added and reused. His works from this period are characterised by the bold application of intense, non-naturalistic colours and the alternating use of gesture and geometry, austerity and profuse ornamentation, dynamism and stillness; an endless series of contrary pairings. Every one of these characteristics may appear on its own or in conjunction with its opposite in all possible proportions.

Whilst remaining conceptual in appearance, the multiple spaces Juan Uslé creates are based, in many instances, in reality. This has been clear ever since Uslé's photographs were presented to the public. In the same way that Willem de Kooning described his desire to paint glimpses of reality (to quote one of his more well-known phrases), Uslé's imagery succeeds in representing in some way the shimmering effects of light we might glimpse from a speeding car, or when trying to establish a sort of geometry from superimposing various planes, including their shadows or reflections. However, not everything is a product of a rational process; memory, emotions, chance and dreams all have their place. One of the greatest achievements of Juan Uslé is his ability to convert this extremely rigorous and intellectually stimulating examination of phenomena into a glorious feast for the senses.

This exhibition, curated by Enrique Juncosa, Director, IMMA, was first shown at Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid. It travelled to Fundación Marcelino Botín, Santander, Spain, and Stedelijk Museum Voor Actuele Kunst, Ghent, S.M.A.K., Belgium, before coming to IMMA. The exhibition is supported by the Directorate General for Cultural and Scientific Relations of the Spanish Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the State Corporation for Spanish Cultural Action Abroad (SEACEX) in cooperation with the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía (MNCARS).

The Museum would like to thank Juan Uslé for his enthusiasm and commitment to this project. We are grateful to the numerous institutions and private lenders who generously lent their works for inclusion in this exhibition.

Enrique Juncosa

Director: Irish Museum of Modern Art

A beautifully illustrated, full colour, 186-page catalogue in English and Spanish, with texts by Enrique Juncosa, Jan Hoet, David Carrier and Eva Wittocx has been published to accompany this exhibition. The catalogue is available from the Museum bookshop.

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