

Exhibition November 26, 2025–April 20, 2026

Nouvel Building, Floor 1

Juan Uslé

That Ship on the Mountain



1960 *Boat at Sea*, 1986. Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía.

On loan from the Colección Soledad Lorenzo, 2014

In the final months of 1986, Juan Uslé (Santander, 1954) painted a canvas that he titled *1960*, alluding to the year that the ship *Elorrio* sunk off the coast of Langre (Cantabria) as it was returning from Baltimore loaded with grain. That tragedy, which took place a mere five kilometers from the painter's family home in Suesa, near the Monasterio de las Monjas Trinitarias (Convent of Trinitarian Nuns), is one of the childhood memories that the artist most frequently evokes. In January 1987, Uslé and his partner, the artist Vicky Civera, crossed the Atlantic in the opposite direction of the returning *Elorrio* and settled in New York; since then, they have divided their time between their home in the city and Cantabria. In his new setting, initially near the Williamsburg Bridge, the painter's first impulse was to replicate *1960*, "but in this second version it [the ship] didn't continue on toward land but was instead the center of an island. I clung to my last image like the ship clung to land."

Juan Uslé: That Ship on the Mountain is the artist's second anthological exhibition at the Museo Reina Sofía after *Open Rooms*, which was hosted in the Palacio de Velázquez in 2003. This new look at Uslé's career is built out around the *Elorrio* tragedy and simultaneously addresses childhood memory, uncertainty in the face of the future, and the weight of the present, topics that, in Uslé's painting, have often been interpreted through a lens of irony and sorrow.

That view of the landscape, filtered through the stories and outlook of his childhood, would transform little by little, becoming a perspective that completely engulfed him. "Later, I would dare to sail from New York to northern Spain. I placed my eyes within a sailor, taking on a possible identity—part of the crew of that ship that so many years before had crossed the blue in the opposite direction that I was going now—until crashing right there before us, near our village." In 1989, during a trip to Nepal, Uslé encountered the concept of *namaste*, a greeting that, far from being trivial, would ground him when his work began to branch



Untitled, 1987. Colección Uslé-Civera

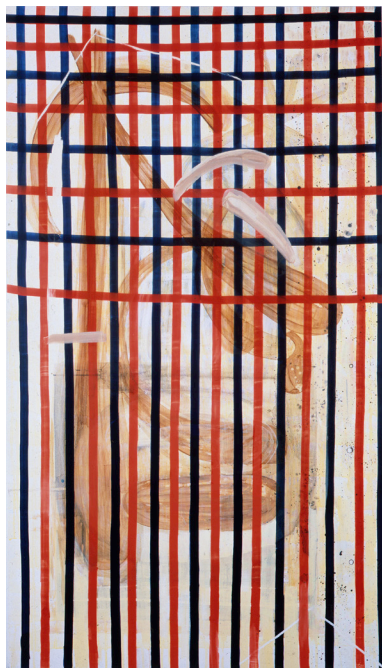
off in different directions. With this concept, he worked to give shape to a multiplicitous identity, or rather to understand multiplicity itself as it exists intrinsically, with no need to construct it but instead to accept and ally oneself with it. His idea was to incorporate the possibility of forgetting, almost like a game, which would allow him not only to ask himself *Who am I?* but also to oblige others to ask that same question and to remain in a permanent state of doubt. The influence of New York began to affect Uslé, and his previous artistic flow—the one he had developed in Spain and the one from New York emulating that earlier flow—was followed by a series of revelations not limited to



Negro Williamsburg (Black Williamsburg), 1987. Colección Uslé-Civera

approaches to form. The effect of daily life in New York on Uslé, his observation of a hectic, chaotic, and yet structured way of living, began to manifest itself in paintings that appear less transcendental in theme, more coloristic and ironic. The effect of absence, of longing for what has been left behind, gave way to the pleasure of the present, to full awareness of that new reality that Uslé was diving into.

In 1992, the Belgian curator Jan Hoet decided to include Uslé in his list of artists for *documenta IX*, at which nine of the artist's paintings were exhibited, among them *Engo-Engo* (1990–1991), *Guess-Who* (1992), and *Pio-Peo* (1992), which would later be held in deposit at the Museo Reina Sofía. The works from this period stand out for how they combine what Uslé had already done with what was about to reveal itself in his work. The verticality he had been using for a while in his compositions and the liquidness seen earlier in his transitional paintings are joined by a spectrum of colors that at times begins to short-circuit: from a dark



Mí-Mon, 1992. Colección Uslé-Civera

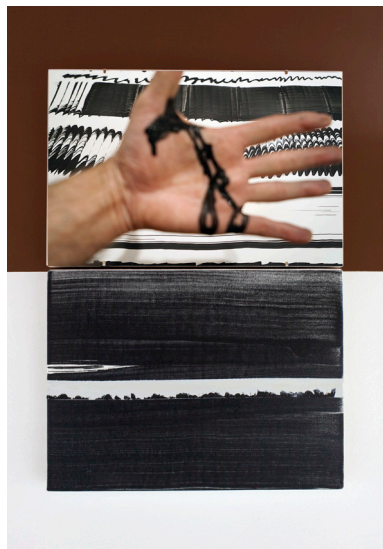
palette of blues and browns—recalling the hills of *Casita del norte* (Cottage in the North, 1986), the ship in *1960*, and other paintings such as *Veneno* (Poison, 1990–1991)—to another range of more lively blues, yellows, reds, pinks, and whites, as in *Paint-Point* (1991), *Seven Thirty* (1992), *Feed-Back* (1992–1993), and *Fragmentos ibéricos* (Iberian fragments, 1992–1993). On top of this, we begin to observe grids that, as such, do not go beyond concrete painting but do, however, mark an ever-more-frequent rhythm of repetition and boundary marking in his painting. We see this in *Mí-Mon* and in *Red Works* (1992), pieces already probing in a direction that would open the door to the completely hallucinatory period of the *Célibataire* paintings. Uslé had already set out on



Mal de sol (Sunstroke), 1994. Colección Uslé-Civera

this path with *Nemasté*, based on the concept that would bring on a new positioning, a new exercise in immersion, which would open up the syntax of his work.

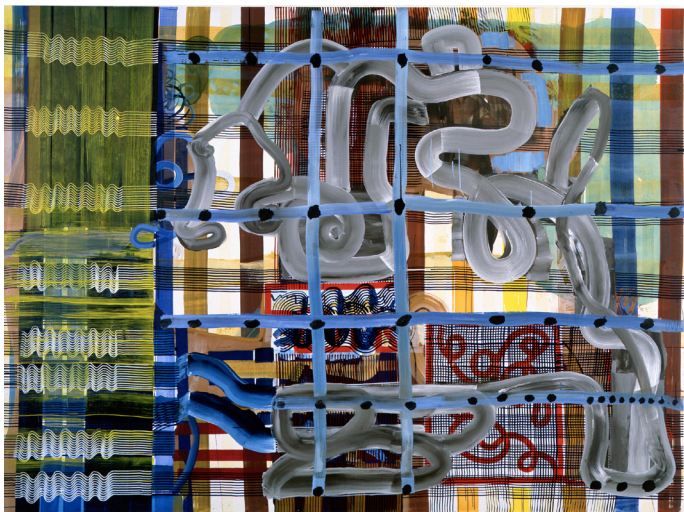
In 1995, on the occasion of his exhibition *Mal de sol* (Sunstroke) in Madrid, Uslé reflected on an episode from his childhood. At the age of nine, he was shut in a silent, dark room to recover from sunstroke. There, any crack, however small, would allow images from before his illness to slip in. *Mal de sol* was also a crack—not a door or a window, just a crack—through which isolated images slipped in, as though it were a camera obscura. Suddenly he began to explore photography—ever-present in his life since childhood and the images of the *Elorrio* sinking—as a medium through which to think about painting. “It is extraordinary,” Kevin Power notes, “to see how his photos, taken some years back, relate so intensely to some of the works being produced now in his New York studio—photos of the sky taken through the window of an airplane, or of train tracks taken from the platform, or photos of simple architectural elements.” A good example of the important role photography has had in his process of working on and cap-



Línea Dolca (Dolca line), 2008–2018.
Grimminger collection

turing his paintings is *Línea Dolca* (Dolca line, 2008–2018), a set of images taken over the course of a decade, resulting from the emergence of digital photography and succinctly demonstrating how Uslé's gaze functions. That gaze has repeatedly been transferred to painting but also observes the world and locates in it fragments that could just as well be from many of his works.

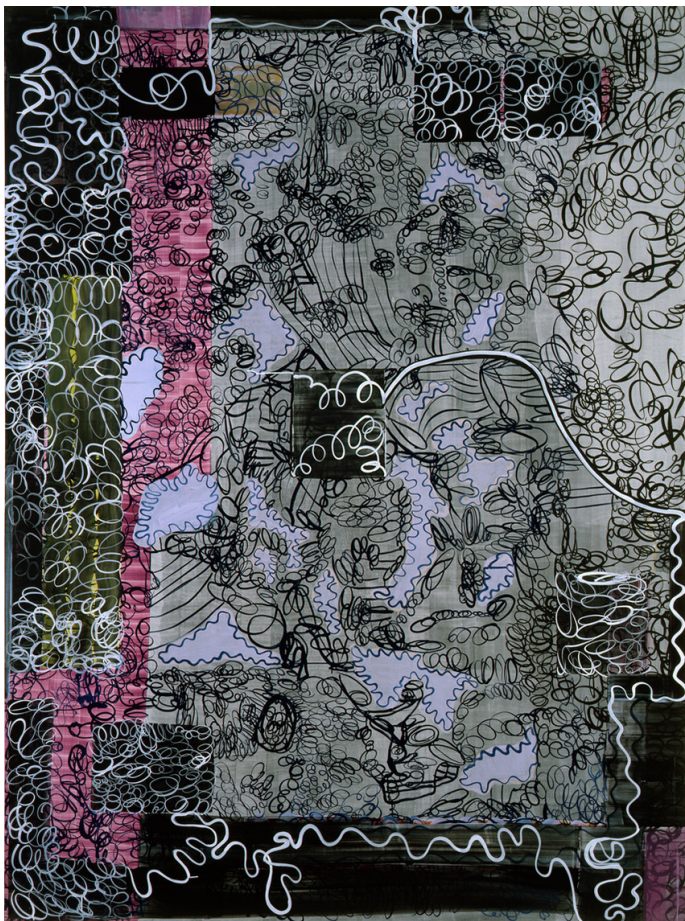
In 1998, on the occasion of *Vanishing Lines*, Uslé presented a painting titled *Soñé que revelabas I* (I dreamed you were revealing I) at the Soledad Lorenzo gallery in Madrid, dated the previous year. This piece opened the door to a body of work that would not only infuse how he painted but also how he positioned himself with respect to the photographic image and his internal self. The following year, for the exhibition *Blind Entrance* at the New York gallery Cheim & Read, *Soñé que revelabas II* appeared. Both



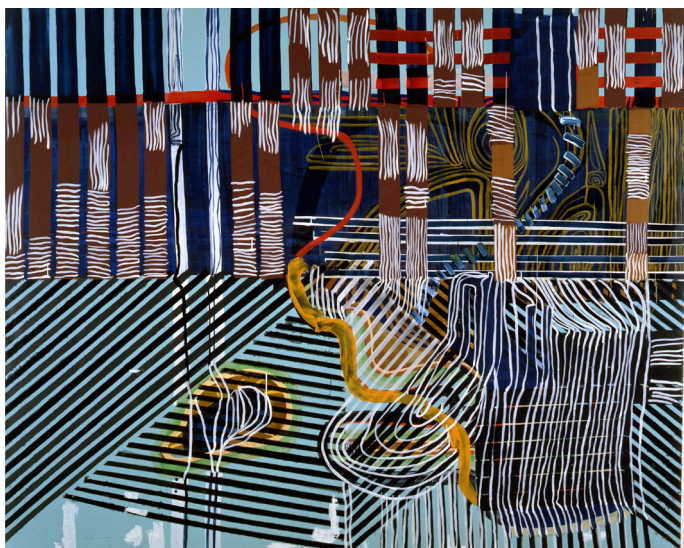
Mantis, 1998–1999. Museo Helga de Alvear, Cáceres

SQR works seemed at the time like just another couple paintings, perhaps two outliers in the artist's production. That same exhibition included *Encerrados (amnesia)* (Shut in [amnesia], 1997), another painting that is formally similar to *SQR* and in the tradition of his earlier *Amnesia* (1992) and smaller pieces like *1935: Horizonte* (1935: Horizon, 1994), *Repleto de sueños (amnesia)* (Full of dreams [amnesia], 1996), and *Un poco de ti* (A little of you, 1995). Now—in hindsight and with the image in mind of the large sets of *SQR* laid out in the various anthological exhibitions featuring Uslé to date—we can discover the dialogues that the earlier *SQR* works established with pieces like *Mantis*, *Bilingual*, *Rizoma mayor* (Greater rhizome, 1998–1999), *Rizoma's* (Rhizome's, 1997), and *Casita del norte III* (Cottage in the north III, 1997) in the two exhibitions mentioned above.

At the time, *SQR* was still a fledgling series that had not yet become a consolidated body of work whose structure contains many of the



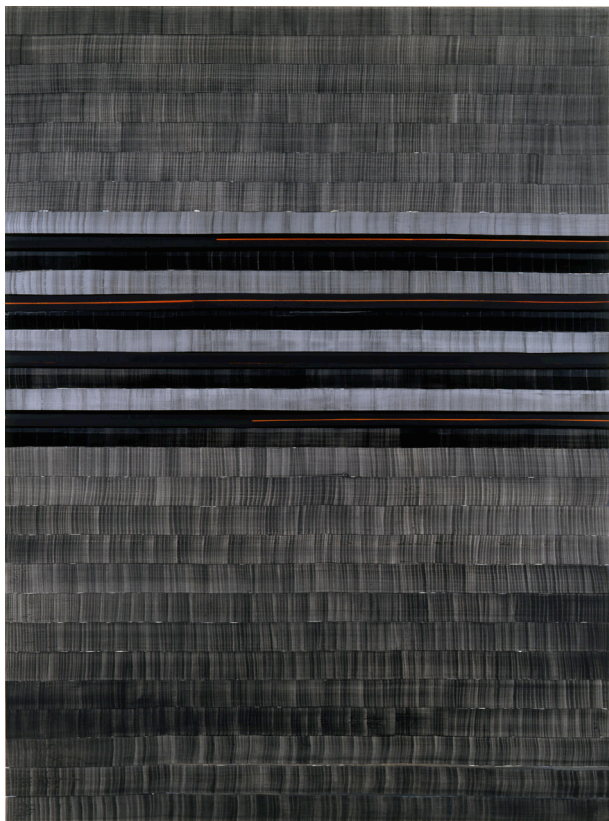
Bilingual, 1998–1999. Tate Modern, London



Rizoma mayor (Greater rhizome), 1998–1999. Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía. On loan from the Colección Soledad Lorenzo

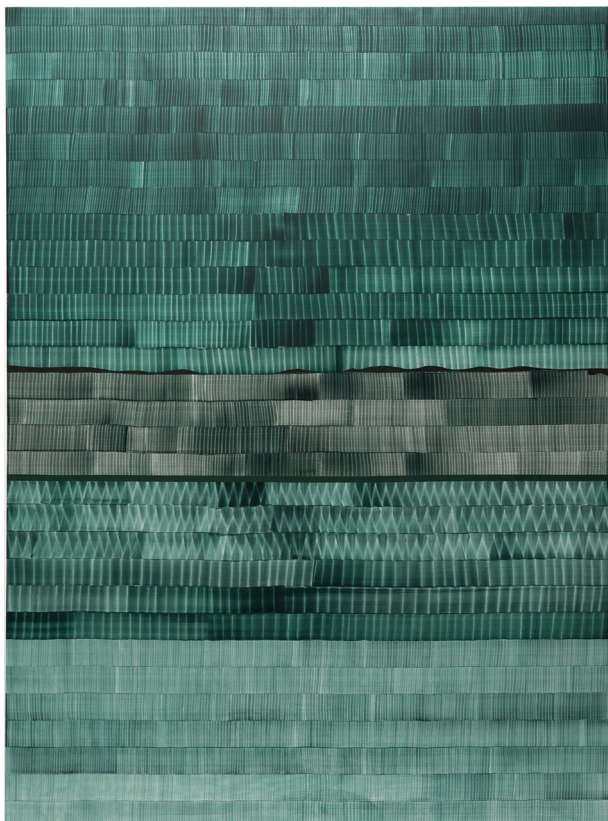
gestures that have populated Uslé's painting over the past four decades. But the carpentry of *SQR* also gives us some information about the rhythm of his brushstroke, which sheds mystical/mythical light on this series: "Yes, they are discontinuous brushstrokes produced by intermittent contact: I move the brush and press down until the next heartbeat occurs. I try to follow a sequential rhythm, marked by the beating of my pulse, and that's why I almost always work on these paintings at night, especially here in New York, because it takes concentration and silence in order to feel it. The result varies from work to work and from day to day, depending on how calm or rapid my pulse is (blood is not always pumped at the same rate)."

SQR will consistently coexist alongside other families of works. Thus a significant number of Uslé's exhibitions over the years



Soñé que revelabas XI (Airport) (I dreamed you were revealing [airport]),
2002. Museo Guggenheim Bilbao

establish extended dialogues between this series and others, such as *Manthis*, at a moment when the coexistence of families of works begins to align all of them, regardless of format, with the *SQR* pattern and reduces to a minimum the divergences in form that would associate him with another style of painting. Luk Lambrecht said of Usle's painting that it was recognizable but not predictable. The same could be said of Usle's present-day work, where, in



Soñé que revelabas (Shinano), (I dreamed you were revealing [Shinano]),
2024. Galería Elvira González, Madrid

a pictorial universe that often alludes to *SQR*, slight gestures surface, picking up a sliver of landscape and inserting it in a small central line, as though *1960* were asking to be let in once again.

The exhibition *Juan Uslé: That Ship on the Mountain* brings together forty years of the artist's work, placing us midway between full consciousness and dreamlike delirium, both tied to painting

that has evolved and taken on very disparate forms. The show is mostly organized by a chronological thread that discursively ties together the artist's various families of works, as well as the events that have marked the course of his life and his international artistic career. In this way the show sends viewers on a journey that draws clear connections between the paintings of the Atlantic crossing and the far-reaching series *Soñé que revelabas*, which has defined Uslé's way of working for nearly the last three decades.

Ángel Calvo Ulloa

Exhibition curator

Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía

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Opening hours

Monday to Saturday and public
holidays

from 10 a.m. to 9 p.m.

Sunday from 10 a.m. to 2:30 p.m.

Closed on Tuesdays

The exhibition galleries will
be cleared 15 minutes before
closing time.

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