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Lighten our darkness: Juan Usle's abstract work can be brilliant, but it's incoherent, writes Cristin Leach

When Juan Usle was nine years old he got sunstroke. It was 1964 and the recommended cure was silence and time spent in a darkened room. The condition transformed light and sound into instruments of torture for him. Forty years on he is an artist who associates black with loss of memory and paints canvases in which the play between darkness and chinks of light is central.

For those who like a story to go with their abstract art, it's a useful one to consider while standing before the striped surface of Encerrados (Amnesia) at Usle's first show at the Irish Museum of Modern Art. In this painting from 1997, bands of pigment form a wall of black broken only by the shimmer of white that occurs where one fat brushstroke ends and the next does not quite begin.

It is typical of Usle's output, but where Encerrados (Amnesia) differs from the rest of the works on show at IMMA is in the glow cast by the edges of the canvas onto the gallery walls.

It's impossible to see in reproduction, but the sides of this canvas have been painted luminous orange on the left and bottom and luminous green on the right and top.

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allowed himself to focus on pursuing a particular visual effect.

Although many of his paintings take their impulse from fabric, these are most like weaving: large rugs of paint hanging on the gallery wall. They reveal that, although Usle's invitation to viewers is a sensual one (in that what's on offer is a predominantly visual experience) it is also conceptual.

His works have the appearance of spontaneity but their layered finish suggest otherwise. His abstraction is based on real environments, moods and experiences, but they often remain obtuse.

Operating on impulse, he has no system, no rules. He appears to be working out the problems inherent in this method in Mechanismo Gramatical 1995-96, one of the visually less successful works on show, in which he effectively parses a speech bubble of chaotic shapes and swirls into contained blocks of colour below, in mustard and browns. It's like a battle between the swirl and the line.

There is, though, method in his madness. But it is nigh on impossible to trace his progression in a show that swaps chronology for grouping into series, the titles of which (Eolo, Rizomas, In Urbania, Celebataires and Sone que Revelabas) do little to help orientate the viewer. It is hard to get a sense of where he is going, particularly because the show does not contain any of his photographs.

‘Operating on impulse, he has no system, no rules. It is hard to get a sense of where he is going’

Glow on: Juan Usle, left, has created eye-catching works, from Voice, far left, and Fisuras con Vertigo, bottom left, to Fragmentos de Felipe IV, above

There are, though, two sections on them in the catalogue, providing a valuable insight into his visual sources. A photograph of an electric cord running across a red wooden floor with yellow skirting board and white wall looks just like one of his simpler paintings. Elsewhere he turns his camera on blinds, windows and repeated structural grid forms in architecture.

Usle is something of a poet in terms of his visual language, but the work suffers from his scatter-gun approach. The smaller pieces, such as I Love You Too 2002 or Lady Bug 1999-2000, operate like sonnets, perfectly formed and to the point. The bigger ones such as Manthis 1998-99 or Mosqueteros, O Mira Como me Mira Miro Desde la Ventana que Mira a su Jardin 1995, are more like meandering epics.

There are moments of brilliance, but there are also times when Usle can be frustratingly incoherent.

He has spoken about his desire to paint the "hidden dialogue between sensation and reason". In a substantial show of 30 paintings at IMMA, it is on this ephemeral ground that his argument is played out. ❑

Open Rooms by Juan Usle is at IMMA until January 3

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The effect is startling, almost as though neon tubes have been embedded in the canvas edges. It makes the painting appear to jump off the wall.

Although stripes and lines repeat throughout Usle's work, he is an artist who has avoided developing a signature style. His paintings are recognisably his, but not immediately identifiable.

He is sometimes put in the company of Sean Scully, the Irish-born painter who went to work in New York in the 1970s, but the two are infinitely different.

While Scully confines himself to formal guidelines — stripes and chequerboards — Usle is like a happy explorer constantly pushing the boundaries of his imagination and vision. His show is entitled Open Rooms: with him there are no limits.

There are times when he is inspired by the urban architecture of New York, to which he relocated in 1987; Septiembre (Twins) 2001 features criss-crossing layers of tubes, grids and lines. Others seem to stem from a dream-like state of imagination. In Jugadores del Pais del Queso 1996, blue bands of pigment form a backdrop to swirling ropes on a landscape of honeycomb red and yellow. There are two boot-like shapes in the foreground, but no clues as to the subject in either the title (Players in the Country of Cheese) or visual content.

Rizoma Mayor is of a scale — approximately 8ft by 10ft — that renders the experience of looking at it almost three-dimensional. Confronted by this canvas, the eye and brain conspire to form a sun-striped interior from the mass of alternating stripes, and it seems that it's almost possible to enter this pulsating realm of light and form.

Abstract art tends to fight the viewer's innate desire for narrative. In the absence of pictorial reality we reach instinctively for clues to some sort of story.

If none is forthcoming, viewers often turn away. This is the tightrope abstract painters must walk.

With Usle there is often no story, no singular narrative. The works, if they are to succeed, must operate on a personal level with viewers encountering shape and line, considering the juxtaposition of colours and seeing where that takes them. As a result there is a definite moment of acceptance or rejection when looking at his canvases, a frisson that comes from that split second of indecision where the choice is made to plunge in or walk away.

One of his strongest calling cards is the physical vibrancy of the work. The surface of Fisuras con Vertigo 2001-2002 is so green it reflects on the viewer, casting a hue of ill-health onto clothes and skin.

Usle paints in vinyl on canvases that range from 11 inches to 10ft wide. His paintings have the quality of screen prints at times: flat blockiness competes with spongy washes and the enticing effect of dry pigment dragged across a surface. Regardless of scale there is a consistent luminosity to his output, even when he concentrates mostly on greys and black as in the Sone que Revelabas series.

It is in these vast banks of grey — ranging from near monochrome in early versions (1997-1999) to stripes with some added colour from 2000 onwards — that Usle has

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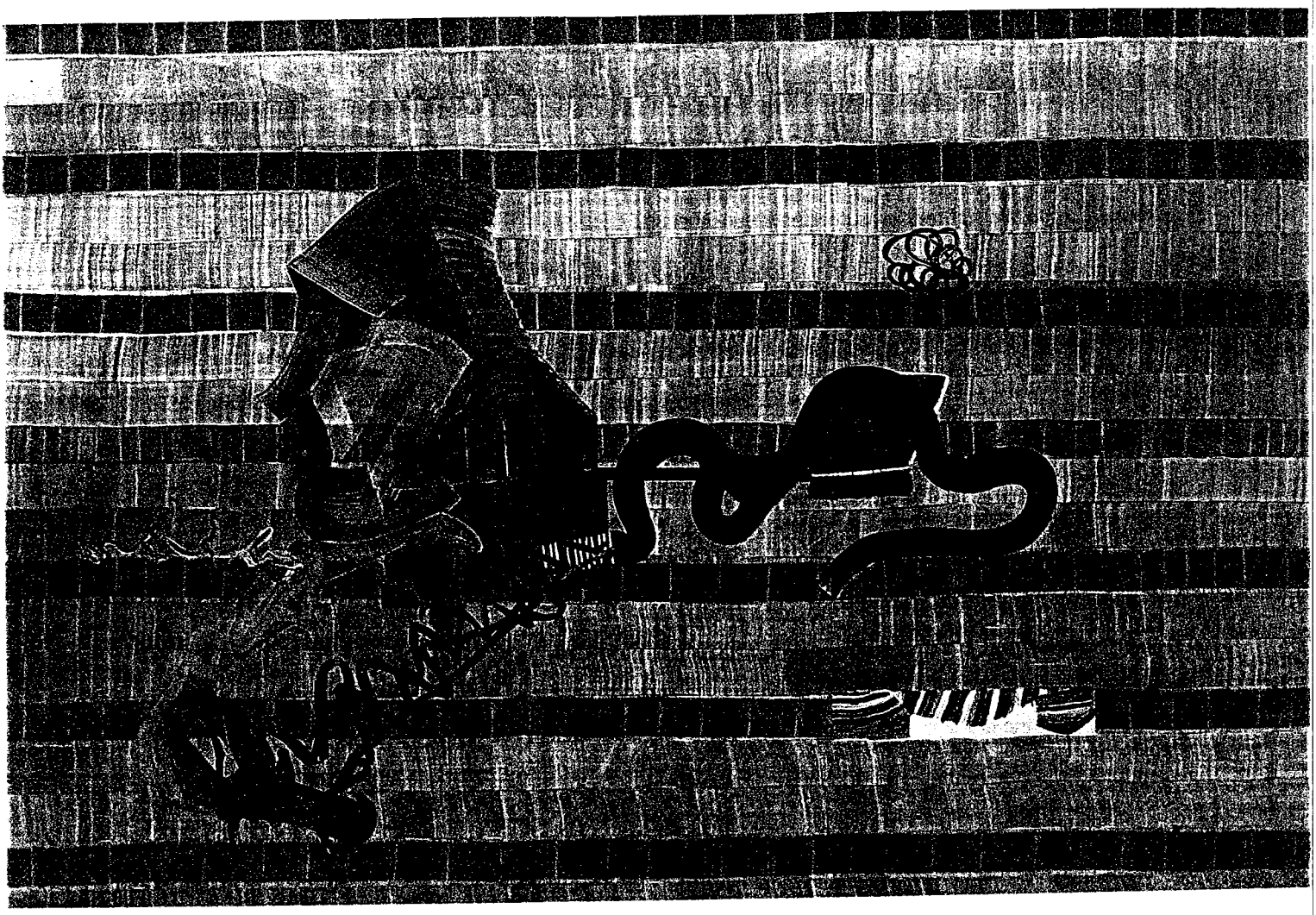

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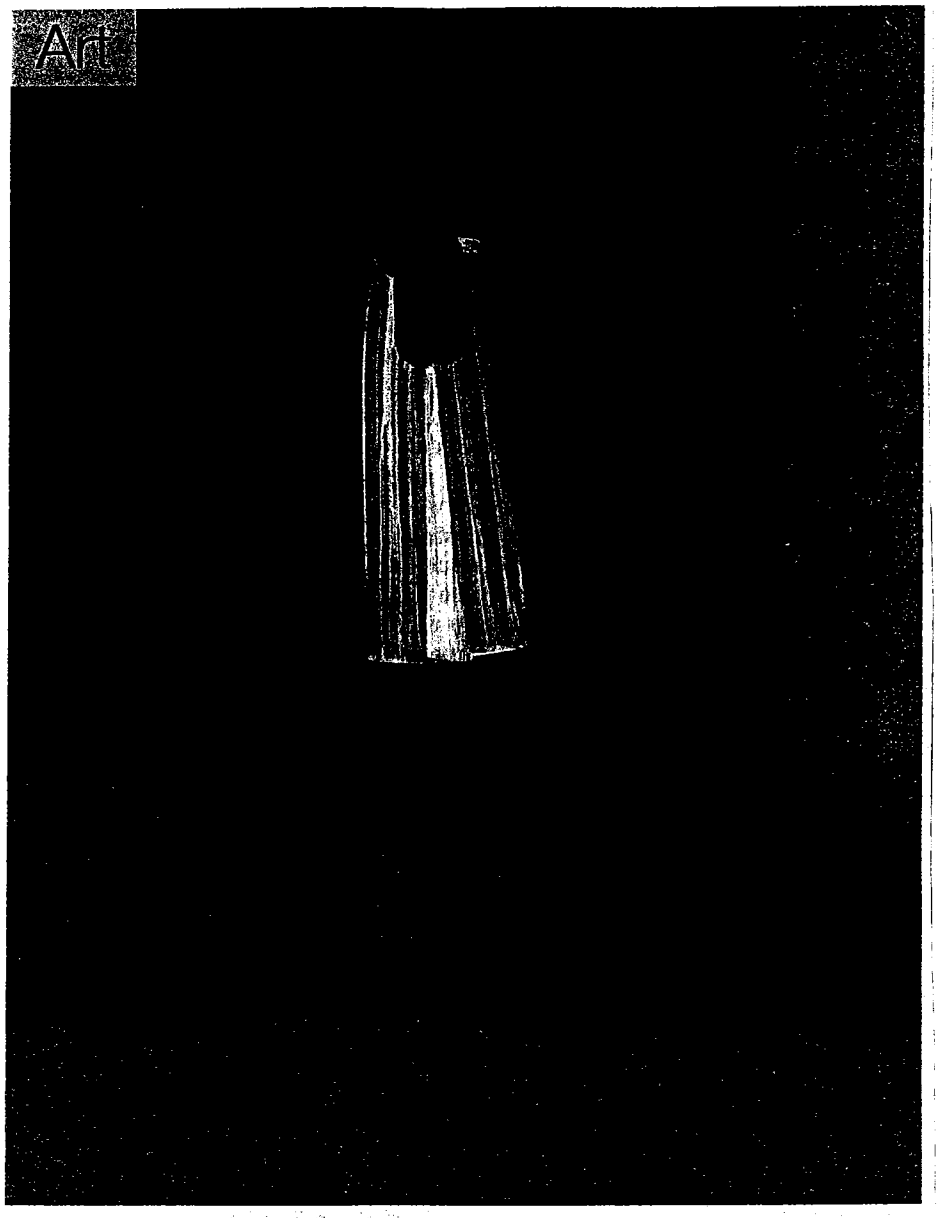

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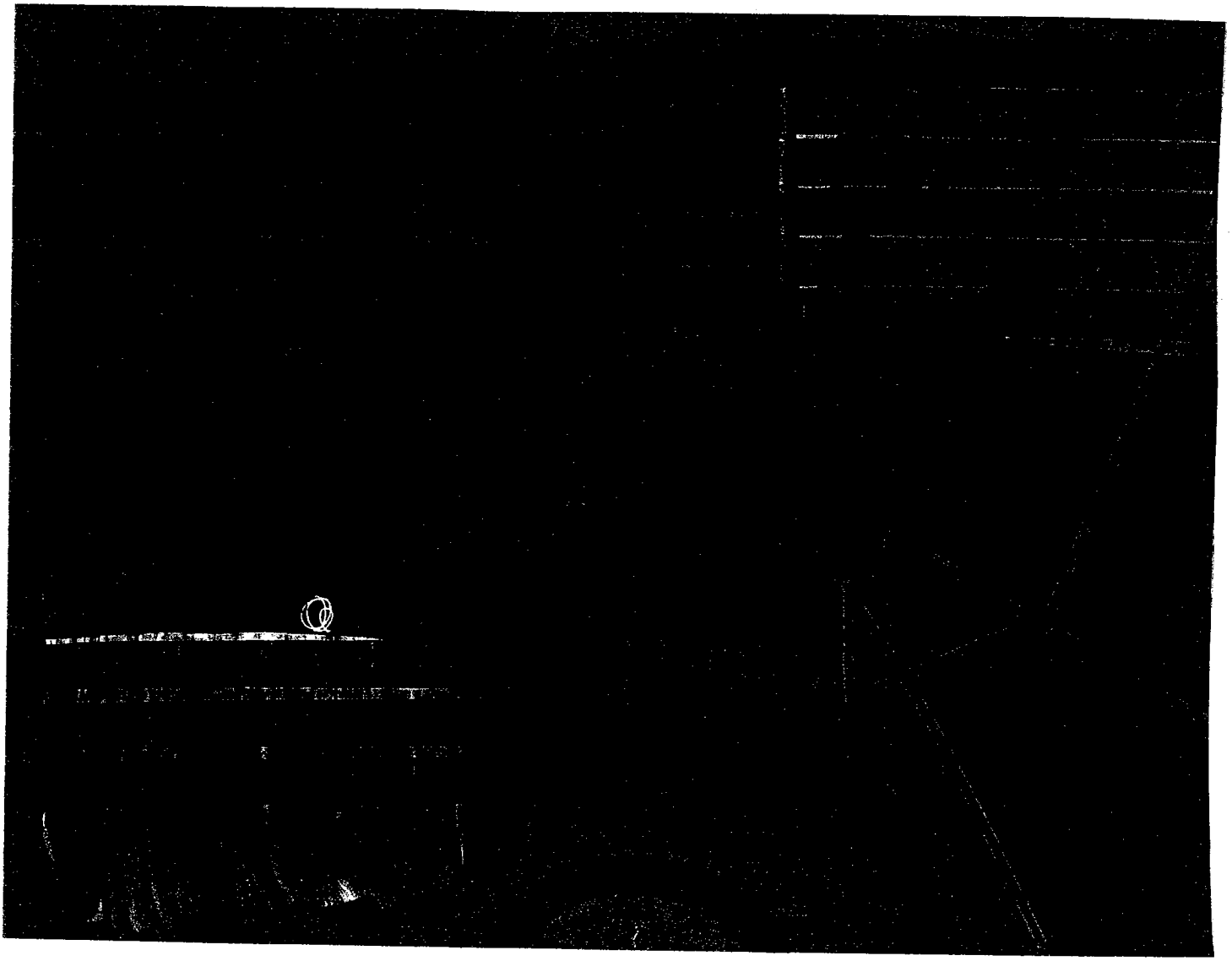

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