CHEIM & READ

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Juan Uslé

"I have always been seduced by the flesh, the bodily density, and the illusory film of paint"

1 **Ojos de Fallujah** *[Eyes of Fallujah] (2003–04), vinyl, dispersion and dry pigment on canvas, 61 x 46cm*

2 **Alegre con Fragmento** *[Bright with Fragment] (2005), vinyl, dispersion and dry pigment on canvas, 61 x 46cm*

3 **Learning Love** *(2005) vinyl, dispersion and dry pigment on canvas, 56 x 41cm*

JUAN USLÉ, the Spanish painter, divides his time between his Cantabrian homeland and New York. With both Spain and the US having rich traditions in abstraction, it is fitting that Uslé's work should be among the most lyrical and fluent contributions to the genre in recent years. Two strands dominate his current work; large black, rhythmic paintings called Soñé Que Revelabas (I Dreamed You Were Revealed), and smaller, energetically painted and highly coloured canvases. Both show an artist at the height of his powers. INTERVIEW: *Ben Luke*

Spaniards have two surnames, so what is yours, after Uslé?
My official Spanish name is Juan Uslé Oceja.

You divide your time between the northern Spanish region of Cantabria and New York City. What do the two places bring to your work?
It's funny, but both places bring me solitude and a unique context, ideal for working and thinking. From the urban net of Manhattan I see Saro (my village in the northern Spain) as a small paradise surrounded by calm nature, but when I'm living in the Spanish countryside for more that three months I begin to feel a sense of loss: I miss the crossing energies, the grids, the poison, the speed and the active pulse of the city.

Your choice of media – "vinyl, dispersion and pigment on canvas" – sounds quite unusual. Can you talk a little about your materials and application?
"Cada maestrillo con su librillo", as we say in Spain (approximately "each little master has his recipe"). For years I have been using media that I learned, basically, through need. When I was a student I couldn't afford commercial paint, so I needed to learn how to create my own colours. I studied in Valencia where there's a rich crafts tradition and it was not difficult to find a varied spectrum of pigments, oils, latex and so on. Also, the course had a special focus on techniques and pictorial process, and so we tried different methods and media used by historic masters. In my case, the necessity became a pleasure, and since then I have always created my own colours using dry pigments, vinyls or acrylics as a base, although I also use colour dispersions and, if I need it, oil.

Your work makes powerful use of paint's opacity, transparency and reflectivity. What led you to these seductive effects?
I have always been seduced by the flesh, the bodily density, and the illusory film of paint. This is what I love in Goya and Rembrandt. This may come from having been raised in the countryside, in contact with such a variety and richness of texture and elements. I don't attempt to make my paintings full of special effects and I don't like fireworks or extravagance. But the simple use of a greater or smaller amount of agglutinant – or the presence, by contrast, of areas more opaque with pigment – produces a more intense dynamism in the brushstrokes, and brings a powerful expressiveness to the intertwining spaces in my paintings.

What is your attitude towards colour?
You always have a number of favourite colours, but I use a very wide spectrum. Before, I had clearer preferences, and would surround myself with large quantities of pigments that I was interested in. But, with time, one changes, and my work has become more open and disparate. In using colours, I am searching, and because of that I test new pigments and new associations between colours. As a painter, you try not to repeat yourself, so you try new combinations, but not necessarily in a scientific way. My use of colour is intuitive.

You have been working on the Soñé Que Revelabas paintings for some years now. Do you envisage the series continuing for some time into the future?
I don't produce paintings in the form of series. I'm quite unpredictable when I work. Instead of making plans I try to be quite open, and rediscover myself in the studio. For years I followed the idea of treating each painting as an individual entity, using the same canvas sizes, but searching inside them for as many differences as possible. The first painting which I called Soñé Que Revelabas was made in 1997, when I was in the middle of a coloured group of paintings. I needed to make a big amnesiac painting, where the images were hidden, or just forgotten. The second, I made two years later and during its making I realised that I was following a bodily rhythm – I applied and stopped the brush according to my own pulse. After that I planned a new strategy, which led to a new family of paintings: why not try repetition? I have spent so many years searching for difference; why not try the contrary now? Over the years, I have made black paintings sporadically, but recently, before and after the death of my father, there have been shorter intervals between them. But I have no idea until when they will be continued.

Your titles are evocative, and often suggest specific moments, or feelings. How important are they in how you wish the viewer to engage with the paintings?
I title paintings for very subjective, almost personal, reasons. I generally take notes, and write down ideas, phrases, or names that the paintings suggest during the process. I tend to revisit them when the paintings tell me enough and from those notes the title usually appears. The title can sometimes be clear from the beginning and at other times it takes a while to emerge, but I need it. I feel it adds one more ingredient to the process and I couldn't just give the work a title that is an impersonal number. It may not be important and it may confuse, but in the end it is the painting and its own power of evocation that we have, and if the title doesn't work for the viewer, well, I'll keep it for myself.

Finally, if you could live with any work of art ever made, what would it be?
I would like to wake up every morning and see the small Vermeer painting Woman Reading a Letter, or his work The Little Street. Also, I could survive with a still life by Zurbarán or his little lamb, Agnus Dei. I would like to own the Black Square by Malevich, or why not the small painting Ola VII by Strindberg. The Garden of Earthly Delights by Bosch and Winter by Friedrich would help me too, but the latter was destroyed. Velázquez is too much.

Exhibitions: CAC Málaga, Spain, ends 6 Jan; Cheim & Read, New York, from 7 Feb

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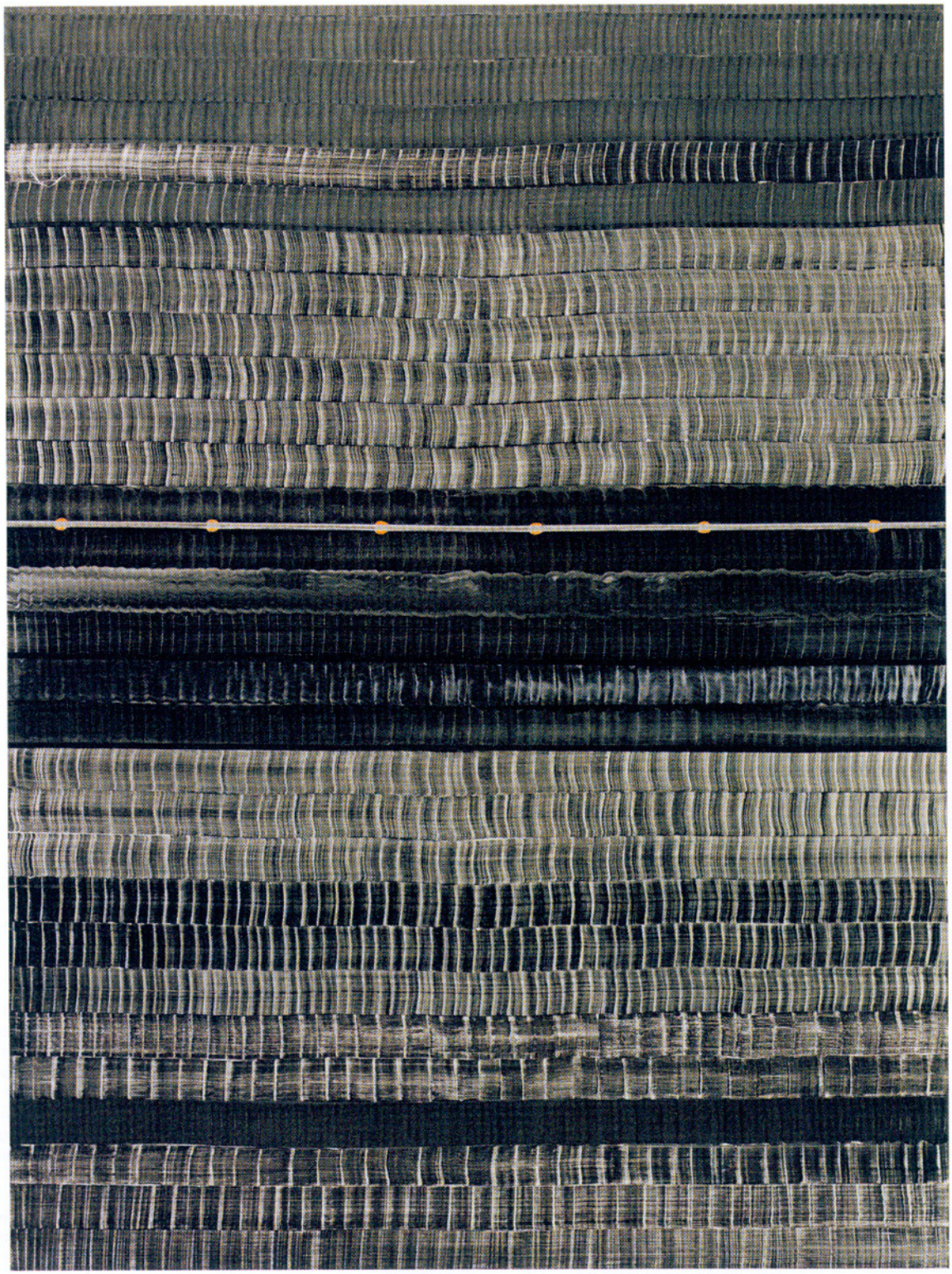

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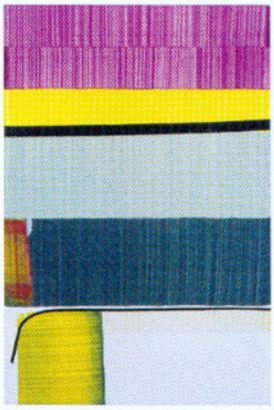

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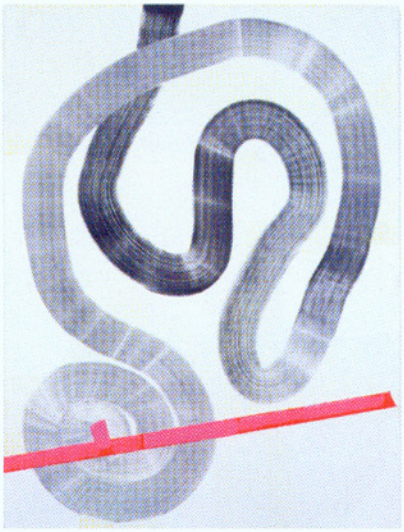

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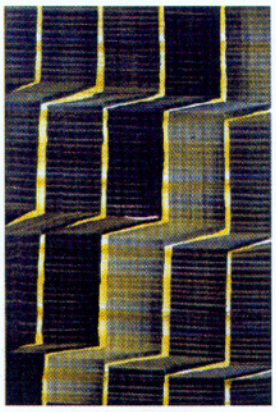


All works on this spread shown in proportion

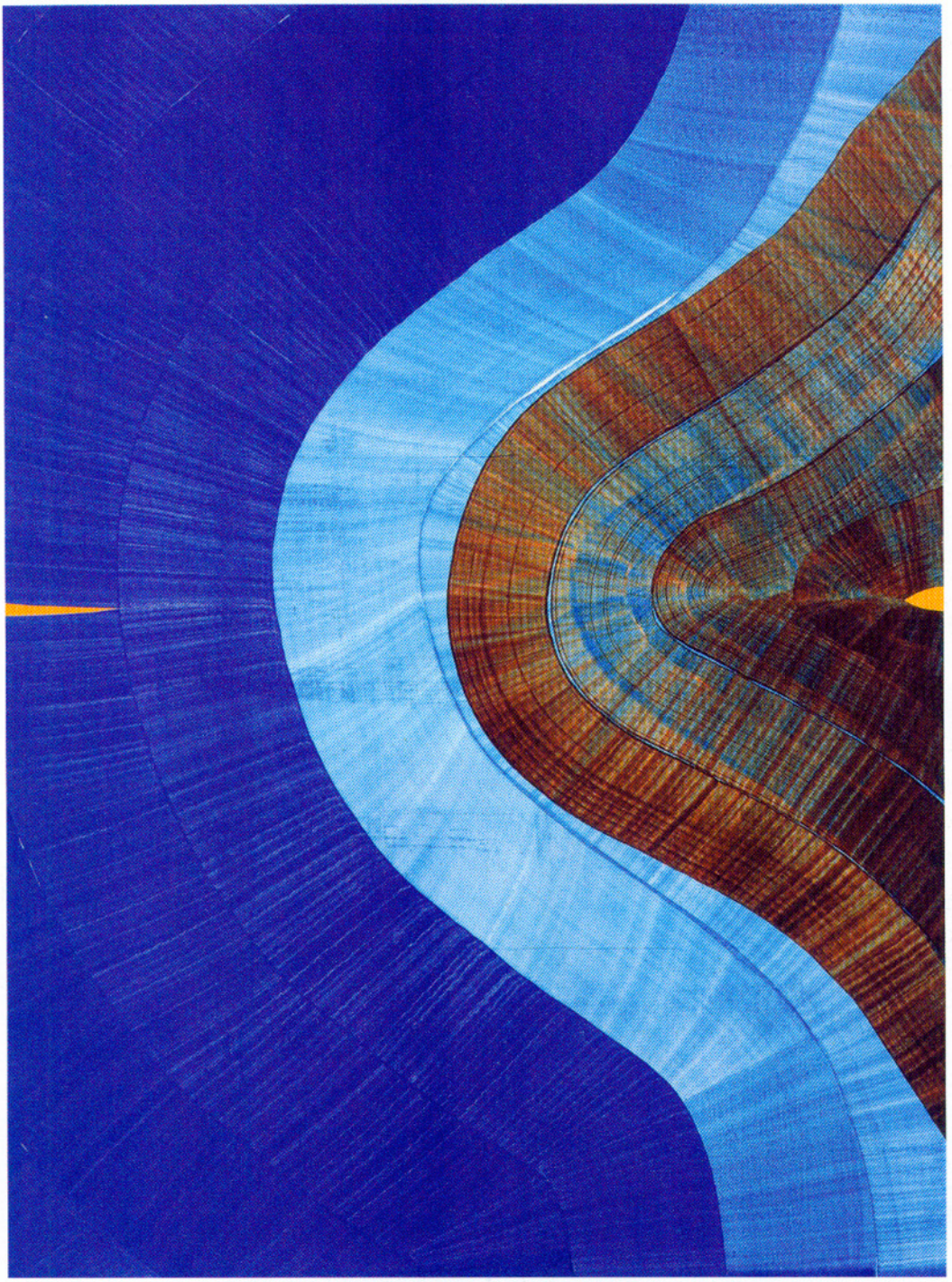
1 **Desacuerdo** *[Disagreement] (2007), vinyl, dispersion and dry pigment on canvas, 46 x 31cm*

2 **Elán** *(2007), vinyl, dispersion and dry pigment on canvas, 61 x 46cm*

3 **Deshilando Recuerdos** *[Unravelling Memories] (2006), vinyl, dispersion and dry pigment on canvas, 56 x 41cm*

4 **Identidad Revelada** *[Revealed Identity] (2006), vinyl, dispersion and dry pigment on canvas, 46 x 31cm*

Opposite: **Soñé Que Revelabas (Inquieto)** *[I Dreamed You Were Revealed (Worried)] (2006), vinyl, dispersion and dry pigment on canvas, 274 x 203cm*



Cada Vez Más Cerca *[Closer and Closer] (2006–07), vinyl, dispersion and dry pigment on canvas, 61 x 46cm*