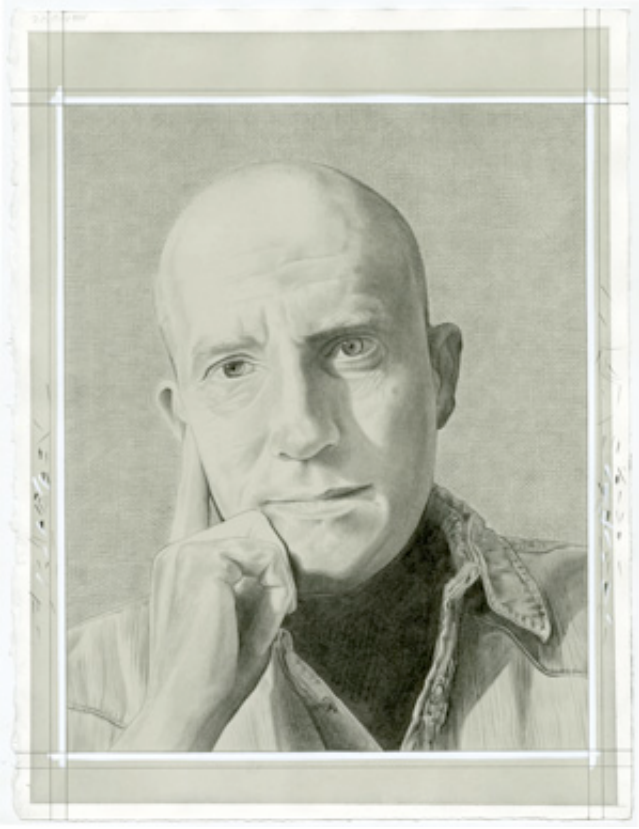
THE BROOKLYN RAIL
CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE

INCONVERSATION

JUAN USLÉ with John Yau

by John Yau

This interview was conducted via e-mail in Spanish. It began after a series of conversations, in which Juan Uslé and I decided that this would allow him to feel most at ease in language. I would like to thank Rose Vekony, who translated my questions into Spanish as well as Uslé's answers into English, including all citations of poetry that he made.



Portrait of the artist. Pencil on paper by Phong Bui.

John Yau (Rail): I want to begin by asking you about a particular brushstroke that you make. You have said a number of times that you equate the time that you press the brush against the canvas to the time of your heartbeat. Could you tell me more about this?

Juan Uslé: I think you're referring to the brushstrokes arranged in sequence, like large rulers, which at once occupy and construct the space of the black (dark) paintings that I call "Soñé que Revelabas" ("I Dreamed That You Revealed"). 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), and in general it turns into a sequential field or territory of marks and routes reminiscent of the sea, a landscape, or a pentagram. Perhaps it has something of a cardiogram as well, each stroke being systematic and mechanical but also organic, biologically or physically motivated: the echo of one's heartbeats, the pounding of waves on sand.

Rail: It seems to me that with this particular brushstroke you feel your way across the surface. The painting or surface you are working on is open or blank when you begin with a small movement of the brush. This seems to me to be the opposite of what we think of as Abstract Expressionism, which we

associate with impulsiveness and quickness of the body's movements. Why does the discontinuity of the brushstroke speak to you?

Uslé: Yes, of course there is a relation, emotional as well as physical, an attitude and a work method that is quite different from that of pure action.
When John Cage visited the anechoic chamber at Harvard to listen to silence, he found that inside it two clearly differentiated sounds could be heard: one high-pitched, which was the sound of his nervous system, and the other low, the pumping of his blood.

Rail: Yes, Cage realized that there was no such thing as silence. I am interested in this connection that you made to Cage. What do you mean?

Uslé: I think that I begin these paintings looking for silence. And the mechanism, this form of making them, speaks to me from pure necessity. I feel a necessity to make these paintings, as if it were a ritual, the reciting of a prayer: fusing calm and action, trying not to think, listening to my body. Making them is like filling the world with silence, from the void, in order also to signify at least one sufficiently large, generous space, chosen for that purpose. It's like a cleansing exercise, to seek emptiness, guided by a biological reference point. Perhaps I make them because we see too impurely, and we are sometimes tormented by images. We are so overloaded with images that we breathe, we live more and more inside a neural Times Square.

Rail: At the same time, the paintings with the discontinuous brushstroke exist within a body of work in which there is very little continuity in terms of style and motif.

The discontinuous brushstroke, especially when it is black and fills, or nearly fills, the painting fuses, as you say, calm and action. It breaks down a painting into a series of actions without any obvious direction.

Uslé: Before starting this group—the paintings that I've grouped under the general title "*Soñé que Revelabas*"—I made several medium-sized paintings in the early and mid '90s. These were characterized by an absolute absence of reference images on the pictorial level, but their syntax, their execution, was in itself generative of a unique space. Paintings such as "Amnesia," "Mojante (Wetting Agent)," or "Encerrados (Shut In)," though executed in an almost impersonal manner, were latent with the variation, the seismic shock generated by the simple action of extending the painting by sliding the brush over the canvas in a single gesture, the brushstroke going as far as the arm could reach. Between stops and starts, that encounter would produce a mark, a link that was generally sufficient to further this progressive construction of space. There's an element of prayer here, of being swept away. Also of fusion and emptiness, loss of the ego. Perhaps, ultimately, these were paintings executed through a rather anti-pictorial method, but I believe they are paintings.

Rail: Okay, what about the paintings collectively titled "Soñé que Revelabas"?

Uslé: I made the first "Soñé que Revelabas" painting in 1997 and didn't do the second one till the following year. In the beginning it was always like that; I was always trying to make the same painting, and I would make them only when I needed to. They arose in a completely atemporal manner, which is why I don't really consider them a series, but rather a family. I've done quite a lot of them now, and one day I'll try to look at them all together, but for now I just need to keep making them; they're still necessary for me, and it's exciting for me to see them grow. In the beginning I was trying to do the same thing each time: to press down and lift up—and keep going, with my pulse as the clock, the metronome, and nothing more. Now, in this process it's also become tempting for me to separate myself from them and observe them at a distance, and then they begin to suggest, to ask me to add something more, and so I feel I'm close to the point where the pictorial conversation begins anew. With the passing years, and seeing pictures of some of these paintings together, I'm also aware of their differences, and how difficult it was to repeat a painting. Even following the same method, the same path and ritual, we find that the result is like us ourselves—we are not always the same.

Rail: In a simple way one could divide your work into two groups, though there are overlaps and exceptions. One group is "Soñé que Revelabas," made up of discontinuous brushstrokes, while the other group has no title and uses color. The ruler-like brushstroke can appear in both groups, but is always found in the "black" paintings.

Uslé: Shortly after I came to New York, someone—I think it was Kevin Power or Octavio Zaya—on seeing a new group of small works that I painted here, very materially present, but basically black, said of them that in New York, Juan has forgotten images.

Rail: Had you forgotten images?

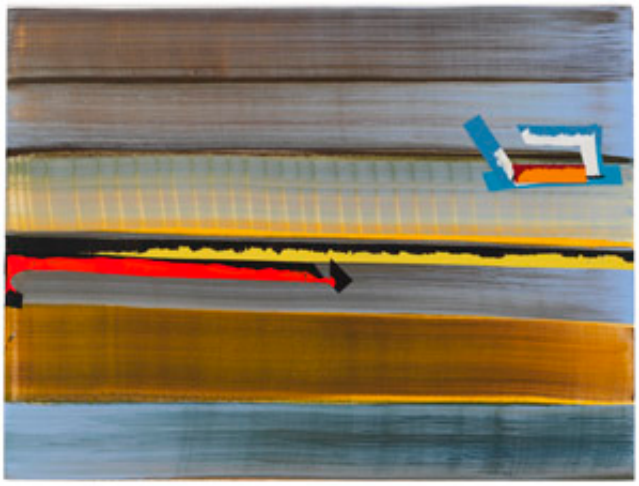
Uslé: I was telling you earlier, that even in the '90s, submerged in the anti-stylistic attempt to make each new painting an experience and a syntactic reality completely different from the previous one, every once in a while a black sheep would crop up, a monochromatic painting that I logically took to be one more part of that Duchampian kaleidoscope in which I was working. At that time it was clear to me that the important thing was not to repeat myself, even to the extent that the works could not be recognized as being by the same artist—although, on the other hand, I had chosen a common format, identical for all of them. They formed a unit only by virtue of their identical format, but when I exhibited a group of them together it was always very difficult to make them cohabit, because their imaginary vocation was to be single: *Peintures Célibataires* (*Unmarried Paintings*).

That stylistic "difference" made me feel good, because I didn't want to become a slave to one way of doing things, one formula or style, and it rather bored me to think that my colleagues of the previous generation always did the same thing; they painted themselves. Although this, shall we say, realization —the sense of being liberated from a sterile manner of doing things—also had its downside in that people generally didn't get it. They didn't understand that a solo exhibition could be made up of such

different works, though at least I had given all of them the same format. But in spite of these critical readings and opinions, I kept at it, since I had voluntarily chosen to abandon the formal idea of style. And that was therefore my style: to seek difference.

Rail: So the poles in your work are sameness and difference.

Uslé: When I later revisited my first "Soñé que Revelabas" paintings I clearly realized that I was now using the opposite strategy. I wasn't seeking difference now, but sameness. And so, standing in front of two or three of these paintings shown in a semi-retrospective around the year 2000, I thought, why not start a new project that would be based on this idea, that would investigate the idea and the possibilities of repetition? And here I am, following, from time to time, my previous steps, that ever-repeating pulse.



Juan Uslé, "Solaris (Vacio)" (2010). Vinyl, dispersion, and dry pigment on canvas. 18 × 24 inches.

Rail: Am I right in thinking that the "Soñé que Revelabas" paintings are among the largest ones you do?

Uslé: The format of these dark paintings could, of course, be much larger. In the beginning I used the largest format that the dimensions of my studio here in New York would allow while still being able to get them out through the door. Sometimes, when I was in my studio in Saro (Spain), I thought about making them bigger, broadening the scale, but I finally decided to continue with the same format, thinking that that identity would help reinforce their meaning and intentionality.

Rail: Given its history in art, why black?

Uslé: I've always been attracted to the night, and I tend to feel very good in the studio when it's quieter and the world is asleep. Even as a child, whether alone or with my brother, I would enjoy this "enormous" moment, this zone of time generated by and spreading with the sunset. I had the good fortune of growing up in the country and almost always being "free," playing pranks out by the enclosed convent that we lived next to. My parents took care of the nuns' cattle and worked their fields, and although we sometimes spoke with them through the service hatch or in the parlor, we almost never saw them. Well, sometimes we'd see them run or hide when we'd climb over the wall, using ropes. But generally we went about on our own, waiting for our parents to return from the day's labor and have dinner, which would usually be quite late, after sundown. In the meantime, accompanied only by the song of some crickets, we'd sit around in the pasture gazing out at the river, that marvel of silvery, red reflections—and the murmuring water, the rise or fall of the tide.

Rail: It sounds idyllic and in some sense remote, separate.

Uslé: I've gone back there the past two summers, but now I go kayaking on the water; I usually travel

upriver from the estuary to above the convent. I get out of my kayak as night falls, and once again I enjoy the great spectacle, the cooling moisture, the meanders, the silvery curves of the river, and I see myself sitting there like a small shadow in the distance, asking myself or my brother about the fate of that lost fisherman. Back then, amid those questions, the night was a mixture of magic, mystery, and fear.

Rail: Repetition and difference has to do with one's passage through time, doesn't it?

Uslé: Borges, in his magnificent story "Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quixote,*" masterfully convinces us of the impossibility of the copy. Thus, even as we read Pierre's *Quixote,* supposedly written using the same words and identical punctuation, it is, he tells us, a different, original work. And perhaps that's true, or at least we as well, over time, have conceptually redesigned both concepts: original and copy. I don't purport to reach such a radical thesis, but my journey continues.

Sometimes I wonder how far I'll go with "Soñé que Revelabas" and how many of these paintings will be necessary to complete the family. Once I determined a number, which I hid behind a wall of the studio where I paint, but I haven't found it since. Many times I've imagined what it would be like to contemplate, in a large space, all (or many) of these paintings together. A very large space, of course, perhaps one that would also allow a circular tour. Or a spiral, but also guided by Borges's image-idea in "The Library of Babel" that lets us read or, in my case, experience a painting, and continue the tour, the view, at a slower pace, so that when we want to go back to one of the ones we'd seen before, it's impossible for us to find it, to recognize it.

Rail: We have spoken about sameness (or repetition) and difference as recurring preoccupations. As you know, Heraclitus famously said, "You can't step in the same river twice." But, I would add, chances are it will still be a river when you stick your foot into it again. Why the interest in these two, seemingly opposite experiences? Is it philosophical?

Uslé: Yes, it seems unlikely that a donkey would step twice in the same spot, but with us humans it happens all the time *[laughs].* Heraclitus seems to me a very apt example also in terms of the mutability of matter: change, fire, plasticity. But change and energy are mutually dependent and fuse together, and physics has persuaded us that everything, in some way, endures in the end. Thus we're also talking about transformation and permanence. Instincts or preoccupations (sameness and difference) seem to me constant, even common, I would say, to the

Juan Uslé, "Solitaires" (2011). Vinyl, dispersion, and dry pigment on canvas. 24 × 18 inches.

concept of "humanity," and perhaps they still really are. I have always felt at once trapped and protected between the two poles, and I zigzag between them in my use of painting. And therein exists a dual interest, I would say—volitional and dependent—one doubtlessly philosophical and cultural, and the other visceral, vitalist, and empirical, both more or less genetic.

Before coming to New York in the late '80s, I worked on an extensive series of paintings based on memories and experiences from my childhood, a series called *Río Cubas*. In order to produce it I had to move away from the place, gain a certain distance, a change of scene. Now, many years later, I revisit this river of my childhood from time to time, time and again, in painting. And I also revisit it in a kayak, which I use to travel, in the summer or autumn evenings, upstream beyond the place where I played as a child, returning downstream as night falls, weaving my way through the undulating threads of color that sinuously move toward me, as if they too are gliding on the surface laminated in calm. I don't really know why I do it; perhaps it has to do with the saying, "The artist is born with the child who suffers."

It would seem that on the one hand our life can be characterized as a constant striving to leave home (the secure, the known), while on the other it also seems possible that having swerved from the riskiest, most dangerous curve, we find ourselves caught in it once more.

Rail: Let's return to the collective title, "Soñé que Revelabas." Doesn't it also evoke photography, the image appearing out of the darkness?

Uslé: Yes, it refers to dreams and darkness, sleep, and silence, but also to the darkroom *(el cuarto de revelar)* and magic—that magic moment filled with expectation, when the images begin to appear. Also to their disappearance and to the beating, the pumping of blood that we always feel in the moments prior to sleep, to repose, when the images disappear and are replaced by the flowing of fluids, their calm to and fro, in the darkroom or in our own bodies.

For years I had a small darkroom at home. I was a student, and that is where I developed not only the photos from which I made a living but also more experimental works. I was enchanted by that exciting moment when the images began to take shape and grow, and I often played with light, exposing them so that they would fade away, transforming into residual images, drifting from their own nature as in dream. I tried to take hold of them, to make them mine, but without fixing them in any way, trying to fuse and transform their idiosyncrasy, reflecting in them the transformational force of the fluids.

Thump, thump—that's the rhythm, the sole strategy that produces these paintings, something akin to what Octavio Paz masterfully explains in his magnificent "Poem IV" in *The Poet's Works:* the silence that resonates. In his own words: "The silence [that] is filled with sounds—I tell myself—and what you hear, you don't really hear. You hear silence."

I also find a photographic quality in these works; I often call them “Amnesiacs,” paintings without apparent images but that doubtless contain them: images and sounds. And they are also in some way images of painting, both after painting and from within it; commentaries and reflections on Malevich’s most recent painting, on the black painting and all black paintings, from Goya to Ad Reinhardt, Stella, and so on.

I have always felt a special fascination with very dark, or black, paintings—an ancestral attraction—even if they are not necessarily beautiful or explicit. A fascination of the sort that one sometimes feels for those people who have something special, something that compels you to watch and listen to them, whether in real life or on screen—people who seem simply to be themselves, but with that powerfully distinctive, indefinable, and hypnotic quality (not necessarily beauty).

Rail: You have titled your forthcoming exhibition at Cheim and Read, *Desplazado (Out of Place)*. For it, you sent me an epigraph followed by a statement:

“I’ve had fun, worked hard, and discovered the world, but I’ve never felt the whole sense of a place. Maybe that is what I look for.” J.U.

I’ve always felt something strange, “displaced,” in the various places I’ve lived. When we would go to my grandparents’ town, I would watch the other children of my age and wonder: why do we—my family and me—not live there, too? Later, when I lived in the city, I’d get a similar feeling, and later still, as an adult, I’ve always stumbled from place to place. And even though I’ve had different studios in various places, that same feeling is always there—the feeling that we’re not completely from any specific place, or perhaps rather that we belong to all places at once.

I like and disdain New York. I always thought it was a “threshold,” open to many other places, situations, and possibilities. And over the years I’m still here for much of the time, continuing to feel the same anxiety, “displacement,” and mismatch that I have had since my childhood. This feeling is fundamental for my work. It nourishes it and keeps it hungry. It encourages me to be curious, to investigate new possibilities and territories, both in life and in the pictorial.

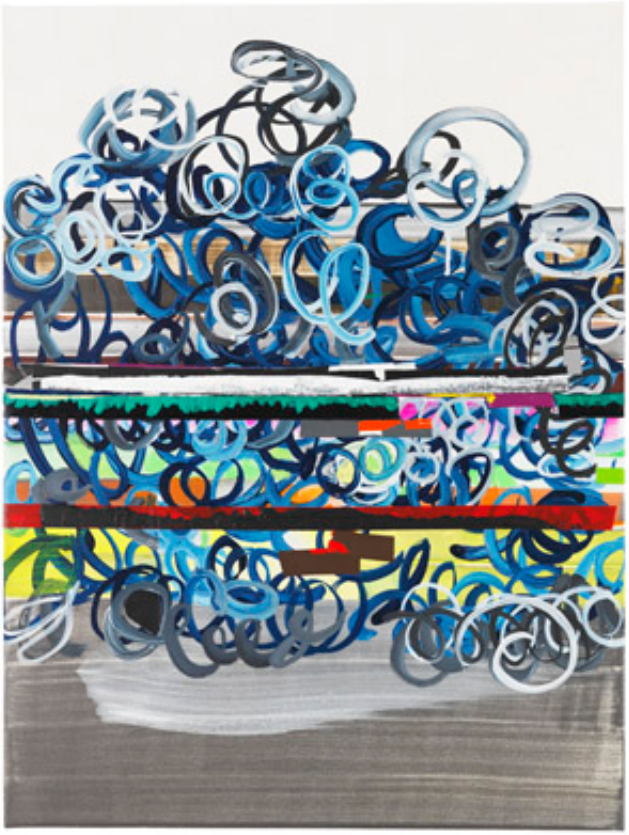
While your statement is autobiographical, I feel that it attains a degree of unexpected openness. After all, isn’t this feeling of displacement a recognition that one isn’t waiting for a catastrophe to happen, but that it has already happened with the Big Bang? Aren’t we born into its aftermath, continuation, and reoccurrence?

Uslé: Two images from Pasolini’s film *Oedipus Rex* come to mind: the beginning, with the sequence of Oedipus’s birth; and the image, or rather the last line of the film, where Oedipus, now blind, says, "Life ends where it begins."

You mention the Big Bang, and I think that birth as well, human and in general, might in some way be a cyclical explosion. In Spanish, “to give birth” is *dar a luz* (literally, to give or bring to light),

which is how we might also represent the idea of creation. Indeed, I think that all birth implies not only fusion, effort, maturation, gestation, but also the notion of "friction," as a result of abandoning the place of, let's say, protection—the capsule or container that seemed safe and/or pleasurable *(placentero):* the womb, the placenta. *Placenta* is what we call the sac that breaks and expels at childbirth, together with the newborn, which it protects; and in painting is what we might call the transit, the creative trance. Perhaps birth, being born, is man's first traumatic experience—the beginning of that likewise traumatic and sustained Rubicon that is the experience of living, so many times misguided, submitting to this tremendous stupidity that some gurus, and the powers that be, call the "search for happiness" or salvation. With no pretensions to transcendence or other grandiose notions, without speaking now about the universe or even the cosmos, the sensation of immensity and emptiness, the sense of abandonment that we often experience in the studio must not be too far from the friction and the actual experience of birth, of delivery. Birth and creation as a marvelous and traumatic experience—links perhaps, as you suggest, to the great explosion.

Rail: In some way, one could say that in your paintings you register time as a passage of intense feelings, memories, and desires that you leave yourself open to, in order to endure, and experience. Is that one of the possibilities or states you seek in painting?



Juan Uslé, "Ruedo Iberico" (2011). Vinyl, dispersion, and dry pigment on canvas. 24 × 18 inches.

Uslé: There's something funny about all this. When we look at the history of painting, in some sense we're also looking at the history of humanity. And if we consider the different phases and periods, the accidents and deaths, the demises that painting has gone through, we not only find that the old medium has always been there, but also, especially in the last 50 years, we vividly perceive in its scars the frenzy and acceleration with which we've been wringing out all the values and beliefs that supposedly held up our society, to the point of shattering them. We build up and tear down almost nonstop, since we are at once creators and oppressors. But what used to take centuries to mature to the point of breaking off and transforming into a new way of thinking, feeling, or living, now takes only one or two decades; in that short time almost everything—in art, painting, or habits and lifestyles—explodes, rots, or devours itself. Everything consumes itself, gobbles itself up at heart-stopping speeds. It gets to be absurd. We build cars, personal vehicles that can go up to 150, 180 miles an hour, attractively symbolizing the realization of our freedom and individuality; then these cars sell massively under that banner, so we end up having to limit the freeway speed to 65 or 70 mph. What sort of game are we playing? What is the basis of our society today, besides the market? The self-devouring zeal that this model of savage capitalism incites in us and subjects us to becomes a satirical oxymoron,

something well conveyed in the image and concept of the stationary bicycle—these rows of stationary bicycles that I see through the windows when I walk by any of the 500,000 gyms in New York. That wheel-less bicycle that I climb on at home, in front of a screen, to supposedly "travel and sweat." Are we now perfect hamsters pedaling away side by side, all lined up by the dozen? It's an image straight from the best of Buñuel.

Painting fortunately has nothing to do with this image, nor, I think, with the one that Tom Wolfe sketched in *The Painted Word*, describing Fifth Avenue as a street packed with artists' studios. Besides, we can't see paintings in the gym, not even on a screen; it goes against their material nature, their substantiality.

Rail: At the same time, I know that you are not nostalgic, and that you grew up in Spain and experienced daily life before and after the death of Franco. In some sense one goes back (or remembers), even though there is nothing to go back to.

Uslé: No, I'm not disconnecting from my time or proposing a return to the caves, or to the 18th century, but I'm not going to swallow everything either. I'm not, for the sake of fashion or marketing, going to fall for the nonsense of denaturing, hollowing out a medium and its use, which, like music or poetry, helps us to feel and know ourselves, to understand and to enjoy—something that we choose because we need to do it from within ourselves, our interior, and not from the exterior marketing appeals to mask our ego with the latest model iPod.

Painting is an indispensable part, or area, of our natural and cultural park, an active genetic organism that travels with us in our becoming. And it's a protagonist of "actuality" and of the future, in the same way that trees, so disastrously treated in certain parts of the planet (today is International Arbor Day), are for our parks and in our lives. Today we finally realize how necessary it is to breathe, as well as to contemplate.

I keep painting because it helps me to understand, to see things grow, with distance and intensity. I consider it a valid medium because, as someone between Italo Calvino and a Buddhist monk would say, painting unites "immediacy and duration" like no other medium.

Rail: I have heard people speak of performance or video as a time-based medium, but they seldom speak about painting that way. Why do you think that is?

Uslé: George Kubler, in his marvelous book *The Shape of Time,* wrote that "actuality…is the void between events." Marshall McLuhan said that "the medium is the message," and now, more than three decades later, it's customary, in conversations relating to the pictorial medium, to ask ourselves: might there be any better temporal indication to act as a metaphor of this state of painting that continually plays at being referential and at heralding the deaths and resurrections of its own legacy? We live in a world that is stamped and classed by excessive consumption. Every month we're induced to buy a new model of iPod, cell phone, or laptop, supposedly faster, lighter, and more powerful, so

that we can supposedly enjoy more or communicate more rapidly with our friends and family, or perhaps also with our own emptiness. But it's supposedly sexy to buy, as Warhol might have said.

I always get the impression that the more messages we send, or the more we "chat," the less we say, and the more we fuel this form of disaster into which we're turning the use and transmission of our energy and our time: supra-superficial communication. I'm not against the selective use of these media; their efficacy has been overwhelmingly demonstrated in such transcendent circumstances and events as the revolutionary sociopolitical changes that took place a few weeks ago in Tunisia and Egypt. The cell phone, too, proved a highly efficient instrument in the days between the terrorist attacks that took place in Madrid on March 11, 2003, and the general elections in Spain on March 14. There's no doubt about that, but one cannot doubt the level of dependence that the supposed "free use" of certain addictive forms of communication generates, a new form of slavery. In the face of the excessive use of the *connect*, *inform*, and *delete* key, painting seems to speak to us from another interest, another place, another focus, and no doubt another time. Today we seem intent on quickly forgetting, and painting seems to tell us: "Stop right there; breathe and wait." The image, too, grows, and is created from another time. And, if you wish, it can be forgotten as well, or you can abandon it —not, however, to save memory, but rather to construct a chosen imagery, because even though you forget it, it persists, it remains there.

Rail: You believe the act of painting marks a different way of living in time. For one thing, it is a way for you to record your heartbeat.

Uslé: I'm aware of the difficulty, or questioning, of painting as a valid medium in today's world. It's almost become a sumptuous, superseded concept. I think that painting today is another planet; we painters are relegated to another zone. The languages of contemporaneity, wrapped up in the frenetic pace of life, accord little importance to painting. Given this disjunction, one inevitably feels that the speed with which one lives in the studio doesn't coincide with that of the street. Painting isn't the most suitable medium for producing fast-paced images that devour themselves. It belongs to another "time," in the sense not of an era but rather of speed, because it's a slow medium.

I began "Contraposto" in 1992 and finished it in 1999. It's so large that it's hard to move, if you try to shift its position without someone's help, because the paint drips. This accident highlighted something very important: the painting was taking on a certain pulse that I didn't hear. I made sketches, trying to figure out a formal solution but never finding one. Years later came a second accident. I had an electrocardiogram, and I took the image of the lines home with me. When I enlarged them, I realized their association with the drips of painting, and I decided to operate, fusing them with the dripping accident.

"Delf Night" leads me to look to the past, and that coincides with looking inward, now that we are so obsessed with winning the race against time. The experience of painting not only implies complicity, it also demands that we be ready to enter into a perception of the "time" that no longer belongs to us. In

the art world today, analysis has supplanted contemplation; the important thing is articulating languages that are more efficient and immediate.

There's no allusion to anything religious in what I'm saying, nor am I just talking about how you always have to experience whatever it is you're supposed to experience when you contemplate Rothko's paintings. What I demand is a "place" that painting needs in order to manifest itself, and that requires a pure gaze, stripped of all preconceptions.

Creation almost always comes about in solitude. The painter is isolated, moving his hand, the brush, carrying out a gesture at once physical and mental. In the same way, it's difficult to see the painting apart from this solitude—that nakedness of the gaze that I referred to. And that's why night is important, and the darkened room in which the viewer finds himself totally surrounded by paintings, in absolute solitude, without clothes or flesh—completely naked.