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CALENDAR

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Juan Uslé's miniatures make a big impression

By David Pagel

Special to the Times

Juan Uslé makes the biggest little paintings around. At the L.A. Louver Gallery, all but one of the Spanish artist's abstractions measure no more than 24 by 18 inches (and some are half that size). Yet each leaves viewers with so much room to maneuver – so much space to romp around in -- that they reawaken those great moments in life when everyday responsibilities fall away and freedom whooshes in: snow days away from school; watching traffic jams disappear in the rearview mirror as you hit the open road; all-day meetings that suddenly, unexpectedly, end at noon.

The size of Uslé's paintings suggests that he's a miniaturist, an artist with the skill and savvy to pack convincing illusions of the real world into very small spaces. But that's not the experience his deliciously idiosyncratic abstractions deliver. They do not function like keyholes, through which viewers peek into fantastic lands where otherworldly dramas unfold.

Instead, Uslé's paintings stick with the mundane space of everyday reality. Most even seem to meet you halfway – to float forward from the picture plane to occupy the same space as your body. It is as if they are glad to meet you.

To accomplish this, the 54-year-old artist lays translucent veils of paint atop one another, often loosely weaving together strands and swaths to form shaggy tapestries of airy light: silvery blues, shimmering blacks, untouchable turquoises and a dazzling gamut of sun-bleached whites. Uslé's touch is so delicate, and his hand-mixed paints so unique, that his paintings make a wide range of dirty, earthy browns look ethereal: more like cool breezes than viscous smears of tactile matter.

As he builds his compositions he hides nothing, although he covers up much. This accounts for the sense that his art is at once drop-dead sexy and utterly discreet, its hedonistic abandon balanced against Old World restraint.

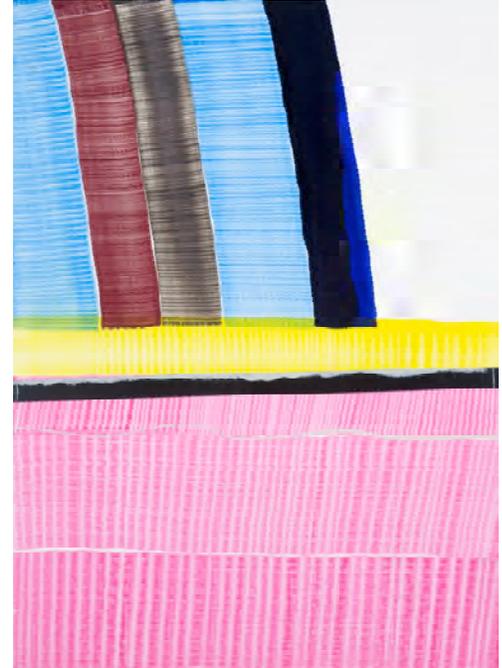
It also allows people curious about process – who wonder why things look the way they do – to mentally disassemble each canvas, to follow, in reverse, the simple moves Uslé made as each painting took shape. You don't need to be a painter, or even capable of reading the instructions that come with items that require assembly, to follow Uslé's step-by-step decisions – say, laying down a bright pink ground, interrupting it with a series of purple stripes, overlapping those with fatter yellow ones and then covering just about everything with gauzy washes of white.

The one big painting, at 9 feet tall and nearly 7 feet across, does not stick out like a sore thumb or dwarf the 13 little works. A masterpiece of grays, blacks and browns – of staccato rhythms, sensuous drifts and unpredictable undercurrents – it maintains the intimacy and expansiveness that are the heart and soul of Uslé's art.

Uslé is one of the only -- and one of the most talented -- abstract painters who is also a storyteller. Each of his works tells a tale of human willfulness, adaptation and discovery, in which tragedy and comedy share space with absurdity and incomprehension.

This distinguishes his canvases from much New York painting, which is limited by the conviction that there is no place for narrative in abstraction. In L.A., artists are not so uptight about such hidebound rules. That, combined with Uslé's seasoned appreciation of the bodily pleasures and perceptual thrills of Mediterranean light, makes his paintings feel right at home here.

L.A. Louver, 45 N. Venice Blvd., Venice, CA, (310) 822-4955, www.lalouver.com, Tuesday through Saturday, 10 a.m. to 6:00 p.m.



Escondido, 2008
vinyl, dispersion and dry pigment on canvas
22 x 16 in. (55.9 x 40.6 cm)