

THE SUNDAY TRIBUNE  
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# A convent education

Spanish artist Juan Uslé talks to **Marianne Hartigan** about staying true to a childhood vision

THINK kids are too young to appreciate art? You might be surprised at the impact it can make. For Juan Uslé, early encounters made a lasting impression.

Uslé, a prominent young Spanish artist making a name for himself in the US, has been described as "one of the best representatives of the vigour of Spanish contemporary art". His style is abstract but not easily categorised, because he paints distinct series, or "families" as he calls them – from the beautiful, dark, rhythmical 'Soné que revelabas', or the poetic, airy 'Eolo', with their references to other painters, to the colourful, action-packed 'Rizomas'.

Uslé explores subjects from why we are here, to the events of 11 September. He writes as he paints, delving further into the experience. Currently he has a major exhibition at IMMA.

"Even when I was a child," says Uslé, "I was always thinking, dreaming, and looking at

**'When I see a painting, even an abstract one, I get the sense that I'm not alone'**

reproductions of the Spanish masters and then, as soon as I had the opportunity, tried to see them in reality."

His family was not well off and his opportunities to see paintings were limited. The first painting he encountered was of the founder of a convent where his parents worked. "It was such a dramatic experience. It was in the place where outsiders meet the nuns and I looked through the bars of the grille." What he saw, an inky figure holding her heart in her hand, terrified him and had a profound effect.

"It was an almost black painting, and I tried to escape but I could not because her eyes followed me," he says.

"That was the first time I saw a real painting and always when I see a painting by someone else – even if it is abstract – I get the sense that I am not alone... that someone else is looking at me from the painting.

"Sometimes, say in the family of paintings entitled 'Celibataires', I play with the idea of eyes in the painting, and I still see a residual psychological link from that convent painting."

The next paintings he encountered were in a furniture store on a trip to the city: "Terrible commercial landscapes! I remember the sense of materiality, the oil impasto – they were in some way very attractive to the senses.

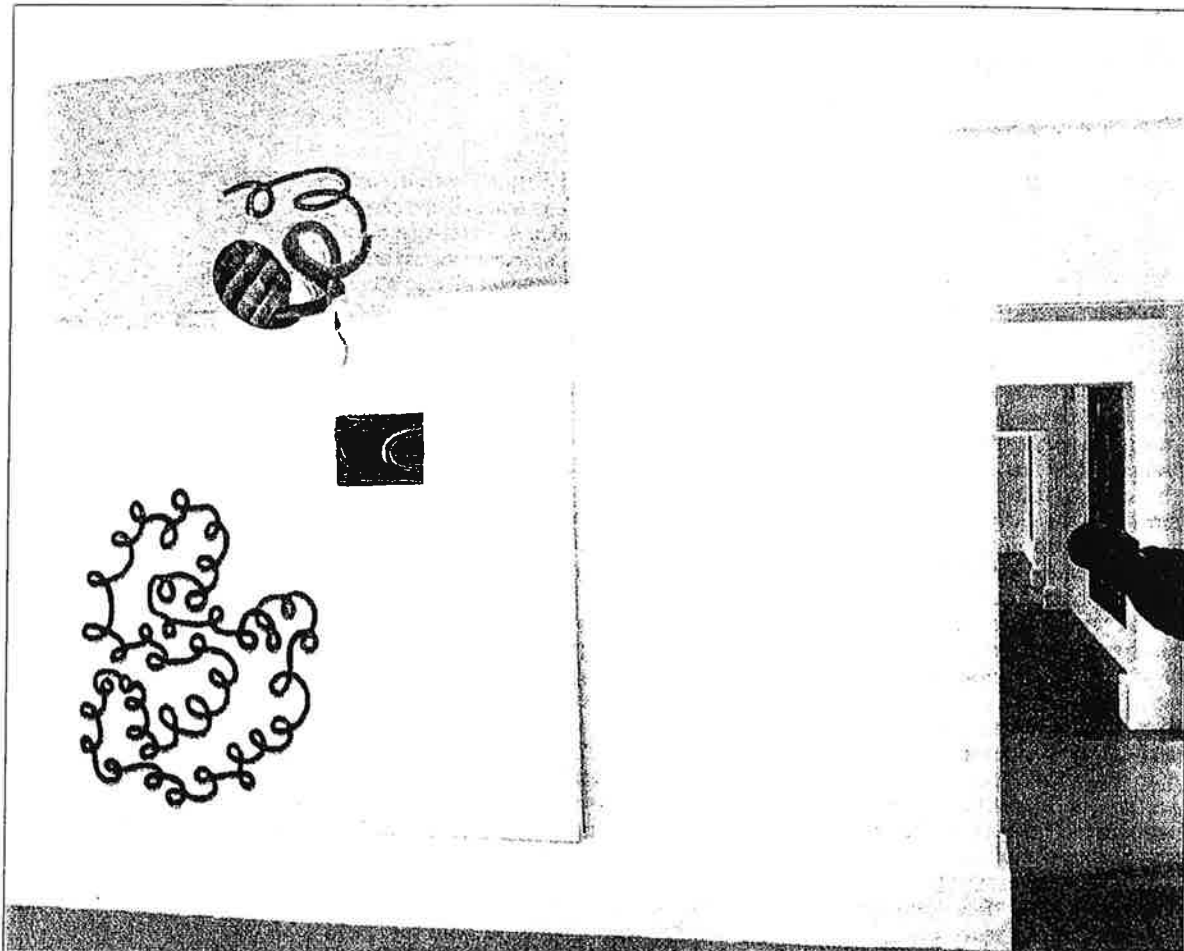
"We also bought comics, my brother and myself,

and the experience was of something really new, it opened windows."

Uslé and his brother showed great academic talent, and their parents moved to the city to give the children (then aged nine and 10), further educational opportunities. Uslé's art teacher, impressed by his artistic talent, told Uslé's parents that he should be studying fine arts in another part of the country.

To his parents, however,

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**Juan Uslé: vigorous young Spanish artist now on show at the IMMA**

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that meant another move and more expense, neither of which was on.

Frustrated, Uslé studied to be a national school teacher instead but, again, the art teacher persuaded him that he was wasting his talent.

Uslé was still only 16, but he felt compelled to act. "It was a moment where you make a move out of your family... Not very easy, you are afraid, but you want to do it, because you have been dreaming about it

always." Finally at art school, Uslé flourished. An initial show in Madrid led to the start of a successful artistic career.

He now divides his time between rural Spain and the US.

With recent paintings, Uslé has employed an improvisational approach. "The painting has a voice, and I try to listen. Sometimes the paintings are very complex, sometimes very natural." Mystery is important:

"Always, for it to be attractive; you need an element that you don't understand."

He cites Vermeer and Velasquez as painters whose work has this elusive element.

"If you are in the right attitude you will discover the eyes of the painter, and the experience he had - maybe not, maybe you are totally wrong - but you will get food for thought... because this is a fantastic experience."