

Atavism: Vicky Uslé's works on paper

By Brett Littman

*"I was a solitary plover
a pencil
for a wing-bone
From the secret notes
I must tilt*

*Upon the pressure
Execute and adjust"*

Excerpt from Paean to Place, by Lorine Niedecker¹

For many artists, drawing is a medium that is at once portable, meditative and a way to change one's own internal rhythms. It also is a medium that can be deeply affected by the natural world and one's own relationship to one's body.

Vicky Uslé began drawing again in earnest in 2017 during a major transitional time in her life. She and her husband had decided to spend more time in their house in Saro, Spain as way to get away and take a break from the psychic and physical toll of living in New York. She also had to prepare for two upcoming exhibitions in Europe, one in Berlin and one in Barcelona. Saro, which is about an hour from Bilbao in the north of the country, is an idyllic town located in the mountains. It has a total population of about 520 residents. From her window she can see her garden, watch the trees blow in the wind and see the mountains in the distance traversed by clouds and changing light conditions. As well, the simple tempo of country life which really only necessitates going from the house to the studio or garden, taking a hike and maybe going to town from time to time for food and supplies slows one's pulse and metabolism down and makes more time for pondering and looking.

Uslé chose to work with pastels as her drawing medium. This decision was more serendipitous than conscious. She encountered a small green box of old flat pastels on a shelf in her studio belonging to her mother. This was the same kind of box that she had brought to New York with her when she first came to live and study there in 1987. After replacing the mother's old pastels with new ones and developing a new selection of colors, Uslé began to work and experiment with them on small and large sheets of paper.

The first drawings Uslé made for the show in Barcelona were with vivid colors and combine hard geometric shapes with more fluid gestural passages. There is a lot of white space on the paper – leaving open for the viewer suggestions of other possible formal outcomes. These

¹ "The Granite Pail: The Selected Poems of Loraine Niedecker," ed by Cid Corman, North Point Press, San Francisco, 1985; p 73

works were hung in the gallery unglazed and by magnets at the top of the paper so they could move freely. The second series of drawings for the show in Berlin were made under more complicated circumstances. Uslé, learned she was carrying a child but unfortunately had a miscarriage. Her body and mind felt cut, open, and broken but she felt the need to push on and try and tap into more positive notions of transformation, renewal and presence. The drawn and collage elements in these works are more jagged and shear, often resolving themselves into rectangular shapes that look like mazes that hint at potential escapes from these closed forms. She describes their aesthetic as being about “void and absence as well as desire and need.”²

She also became acutely aware of her own body during this time and started to pay more attention to the haptic immediacy of overdrawing with pastels and constructing space with her cut collage fragments. The sheer physicality of the work was enervating, but also acted as traces of the experience her body had just been through.

In 2018, Uslé found herself back in New York and adjusting again to life there. She spent a lot of time looking out of her window at the 6BC Botanical Garden (on 6th Street between Avenues B and C in the East Village), one of the small pocket gardens that populate the urban landscape. Still processing her loss, it was difficult for Uslé to work. Being a flaneur in her neighborhood offered some respite and way to focus. She enjoyed encountering the murals and graffiti during her walks that covered the walls of the buildings and metal storefront gates. She began to think about color and how different shades can draw you in and envelop you. Inspired by these ideas, Uslé began to make a series of pastels on paper entitled “Between B and C”, with atmospheric radiating color bands. Drawings like *Between B and C* (1), (2) and (4) start from the left hand corner of the paper and stack up multi-colored arches one on top of the other growing out organically to fill the bottom quadrant. *Between B and C* (7) reminds me of the palimpsest of the streaky wash of rust, dirt and age that we see on old buildings, metal railings and the sidewalks of city and the tactile *Between B and C* (16) with its rubbed quality evokes the texture of a sewer grate or a pock marked concrete wall of a 1960s project building.

In the early summer of 2018, I visited Uslé in New York and we looked at her works on paper. I told her that her work made me think of windows or doors and that led to a discussion of the concept of the “borrowed landscape,” an essential feature of Japanese garden design. Uslé, has been thinking about Japan and Japanese aesthetics for a long time – but she had never visited the country. We looked at a book of Tsukioka Yoshitoshi’s woodblock prints that she had and I talked about my impressions of Japan, a place I have gone to quite a few times, even before I became Director of the Isamu Noguchi Foundation and Garden Museum. After our conversations I encouraged her to plan a trip there – I truly thought that it would be a place that would have an huge impact on her work and her thinking.

After our visit, Uslé went back to Saratoga by herself to prepare for another exhibition. She watched the dynamic landscape that surrounded her and tried to integrate the wistful feelings and emotions that summer slipping into fall brings. These works, grouped under the title

² From notes provided to the author by Vicky Uslé

Autumn Blaze, have a more muted palette and use reds, rust, greens, blacks and grays that remind us of the mutability of leaves changing color in autumn and falling onto the ground. *Autumn Blaze 3*, a jagged band of a drawing on the top third of large paper, looks like far off mountain ranges in dusk covered in clouds. The large black block which slides off into an open curve in *Autumn Blaze 5*, could be the shadow of the former drawing I mentioned, what our eyes see of the mountains in pure darkness.

Uslé, in the winter of 2018, decided to go to Japan to experience first-hand Japanese culture, architecture and the profound and wonderful gardens of Tokyo and Kyoto. She visited the Nezu Museum, designed by Kenzo Kuma, and it's amazing and garden in the middle of Tokyo, where one miraculously feels totally transported out of time and the city. At the Meiji Jingu's inner gardens, Uslé took in the scents of the blooming flowers and the camphor trees. In Kyoto, at the Heian Jingu and the Shin En, the experience of walking on and erasing with her footprints the meditative daily morning work of the monks who rake the gravel and earth brought a heightened sense of self-presence and a poetic understanding of the cycles of creation and destruction. During an early morning visit to Ryoan-ji, Uslé focused on the clay walls, which she described to me as velvet-like, the changing colors of the various areas as the sun passed over, the rock gardens and the aromas of the gardens themselves. Walking the Philosopher's Path, she was taken with Honen-In, a smaller temple that is full of subtle and unexpected details.

After Uslé's trip to Japan, she ruminated about how she might incorporate some of the elements that make up Japanese garden design (the major elements are: stone gathering, stone structures and groupings, stepping stones, gravel patterns, stone lanterns, plants, water elements, fences, hedges and walls, and the idea of incorporating "borrowed landscapes" to frame the other elements) into a new installation that incorporates both objects, video, photography and drawing. Uslé wanted to transmit the exchange of cultural ideas, the fluidity between history and the present, and a deep sensory experience. For her exhibition in Barcelona in 2019, she decided to create an interior garden path in the gallery to complement her large scale works on paper. Inspired by her own experience walking on raked gravel and earth in Japan, Uslé made a path out of gravel, earth and stones that led to three new paintings on paper on the far wall of the gallery as well as a video of a tree. This spare, experiential installation focused the viewer on the "walk" to these works which were stimulated by her memories, imagination and real experiences from her visits to the gardens in Tokyo and Kyoto.

Uslé has been also been printing photographs that she takes of subtle patterns and abstract moments that are embedded, but often not seen, in our everyday lives. These images, which she identifies with simple poetic titles like: *Lost Glance*, *Intermission*, *11th Floor*, *Next to You*, and *Chinatown* are of grass knolls leading the eye into hilly terrains, gray rocks jutting out into gray oceans, clouds, stone walls, sand in the desert, shadows on the ground or cast through windows, dendritic tree branches set against monochromatic skies and every once in a while images of people interacting with architecture. They act as a perfect complement to her works on paper and share the same kind of absorptive sensibility and openness to the outside world

as her drawings – always giving us just enough visual information for our mind to process the image without overdetermining anything.

Uslé and her family have been in Saro for most 2020 due to the Covid-19 pandemic. She has made a series of new large scale drawings on paper there. One in particular stands out, *Pond* (2020) a representative landscape showing reeds vibrating from the wind at the edge of a body of water. Its aesthetic is very Japanese and it reminds me almost of a Basho or Rumi haiku that captures a fleeting moment of perception and emotion without making it static, which in my mind is what great art aspires towards.