

Selfless Sensation: Ruth Pastine's Paintings

by Donald Kuspit

My first experience of a Ruth Pastine painting—one of the works in the Limitless series—was a bit of a surprise, a sort of “eureka” perceptual moment: at first glance, the work seemed to be a typical color field painting, meticulously executed, a placid and stationary if majestic surface, aesthetically engaging as pure color always is, but not deeply absorbing. But the light suddenly changed and the field changed with it, losing its uniformity and blossoming, as it were, into a variety of spontaneous color events. Undifferentiated shallow surface had become differentiated expressive depth, one narrow color note had expanded into a chamber music of colors, each distinct yet merging, playing off each other yet oddly harmonious: visibility had been refreshed, color was no longer routinely given but in uncanny process. Pastine’s seemingly matter of fact, deceptively simple color field had acquired numinous presence, and with that a sort of impassioned complexity. The abstract ideal of musical painting had achieved hermetic perfection—the charismatic, self-contained vibrancy that is the aesthetic goal of pure painting.

Pure painting seems to appeal to the eye alone, but it is made by hand, suggesting that it must appeal to touch as well: it must seem to purify touch, its unconscious basis, as it were, as well as sight, emblematic of consciousness. Pastine’s early paintings are consummately visual; she seems to eschew touch however dependent on it she is. As she develops, touch becomes more evident, making for a more intricate sensory experience, and one might add, a more intimate and intense one, for touching is more fundamental than seeing, which is in effect a form of it. Seeing is developed, discriminating, reflective touching, as it were, in contrast to touching as such, which is primal and unreflective, and indiscriminately responsive to every passing stimulus. As Freud wrote, “seeing...is ultimately derived from touching.” Seeing “encourages the development of a [sense of] beauty,” for it is “the most frequent pathway along which libidinal excitation is aroused.”(1) But beauty that does not appeal to touch is incomplete—aesthetically incomplete, as Bernard Berenson said. Unless one can sense the tactile in the visual, unconsciously informing

it and enriching one's consciousness of it, one cannot have a consummate aesthetic-sensory experience.

I will argue that in Pastine's early works the tactile is subsumed in—even inhibited by—the visual, however much her exquisite touch informs her discerning “vision.” In her later works tactility suddenly emerges,

with a certain urgency—a sort of spontaneous surge of energy, not wildly expressionistic but insistently abstract, suggesting that it remains under aesthetic control—adding intense feeling to her acute sensitivity. However much seeing is the preferred path

Thus, such early works as *Daunted Dawn* (page 21) and *Desert Time* (page 20), both 1995 and *Ray Painting #1 “Legacy”* and *Chance Rays #3 “Milestone,”* both 1997, seem to be, as their titles suggest, responses to sunlight as it is actually experienced at a certain place and time. *Ray Painting #6 “Mekong,”* 1997 (page 11) makes this very clear. In 1998, with *Red Green #5 “Sweet”* (page 22) and *Red Green #4 “Siren”* (page 12), Pastine begins to move away from experienced light and develop her “complementary color systems”—indicating she no longer needs an external stimulus to make art, suggesting she has

Relationality is reduced to the absolute minimum of complementarity in Pastine's pure painting. Driven by the desire for sense certainty—the absolute concreteness of the here-and-now—they eschew external reality completely, eradicating even the most mnemonic traces of it.

of libido, it also involves engaging the world beyond the self, becoming conscious of its reality as distinct from one's own, in contrast to touching, which remains rooted in the body, and is not specific to any one sense organ, and thus peculiarly selfless—all the

more so the more “oceanic” it becomes. The particular sensations aroused by touching seem inseparable from our being and unshareable, in contrast to the sensations aroused by seeing, which can be separated from our own being and shared, indicating they make “common sense.”

achieved a certain autonomy—in order to “invoke perceptual contrast” while exploring “subtleties of color, light, and temperature.” Colors, inwardly luminous, seem to merge—or at least converge—even as they remain distinct. The effect is uncannily “mystical;” the paintings seem to have numinous presence. Pastine seems to be refining her experience of natural color and light in what Malevich called the “desert of feeling” his Suprematist square symbolized. Thus the visionary transcendence isolation in a desert makes possible, as the Bible tells us.

But however famously “impalpable” Pastine's

Desert Time (Red Green)
1995, oil on canvas, 28" x 28"



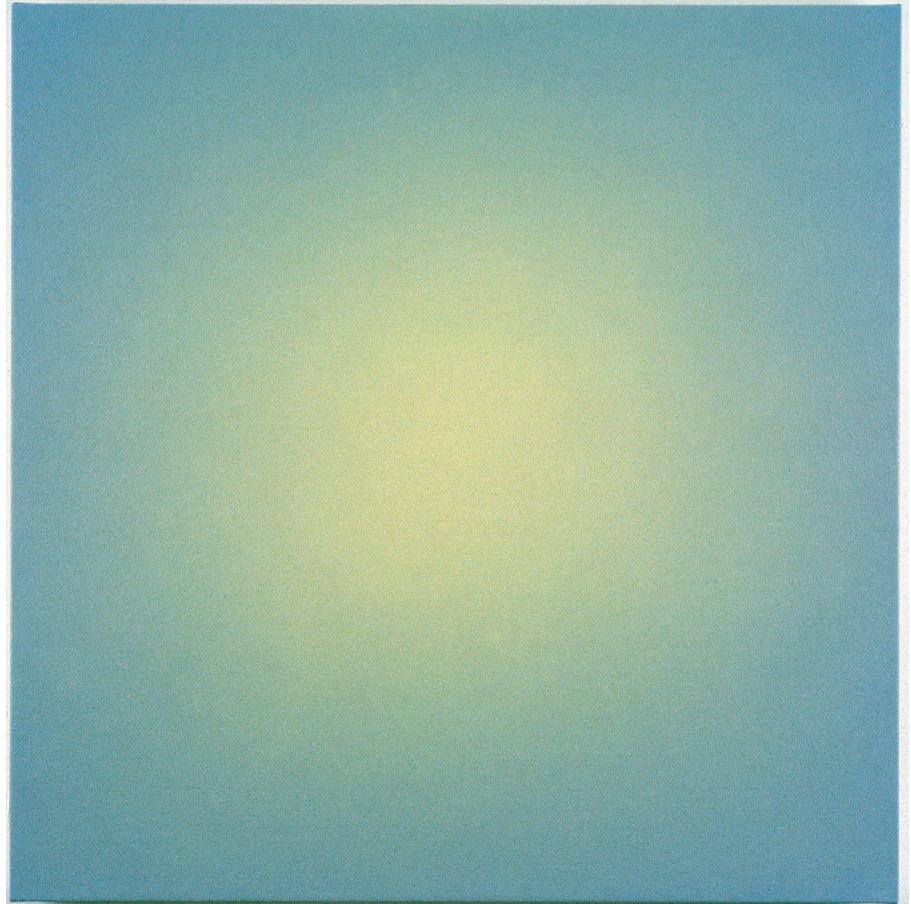
Ray Painting #1 “Legacy”
Blue Orange Violet Series
1997, oil on canvas, 30" x 30"

perfectionist paintings have been said to be—as though the complementary colors have been miraculously distilled into sublime unity, atmospherically diffusing them so that they become ungraspable—they are inherently contradictory. However much she integrates different colors and tonalities in such series as *Equivalence White, Gray, and Saturated Color, 2005* (the primary colors blue and red, the secondary colors yellow and orange, among others, page 31), and *Convergence, 2010-2012* (page 13), their difference, however “subtized,” is essential to their aesthetic effect. Their difference may be minimalized, but the tension between them works aesthetic magic. It subliminally—and sometimes self-evidently—remains, suggesting that their unity is in conceptual fact impossible however perceptually suggested.

Pastine works in series, as though to uncover every perceptual nuance of vision—“finite systems” which nonetheless suggest the seemingly infinite possibilities of color relationships the spectrum seems to contain—and generally uses the iconic Suprematist square to frame them. In the *Black Light Series: Blue-Orange, Red-Green, Yellow-Violet Series, 2007* (page 29) the opposites come together while remaining distinguishable. Pastine’s fascination with contradiction—*Sameness and Difference Series, 2003* (page 24-26), *Conquer Surrender Series, 2011* (page 44-45)—or the interplay of opposites, the differentiated and undifferentiated, indicate her dialectical sensibility. As in all good dialectical painting, the uncertainty inherent in the relationship of the colors paradoxically generates sense certainty. To play on Hegel’s account of sense certainty, each color mediates the other to

make for an over-all sense of immediacy.(2) Implicitly negating each other, each becomes explicitly positive in itself. Each color is peculiarly uncertain and indefinite by itself, but becomes self-certain and definite in relationship with the other color. This dialectic of sense

Chance Rays #3 “Milestone”
Blue Yellow Violet Series
1997, oil on canvas, 30" x 30"



certainty is the aesthetic core of Pastine’s painting. It is paradoxically responsible for their “noli me tangere” look. Indeed, there is nothing to touch—they are impalpable, intangible—pure, insubstantial aura.

The complementary color paintings seem obsessively controlled, meticulously executed, exquisitely nuanced, relentlessly perfect. They are, as has been said, a triumph of pure painting, or, as I would say, impersonal painting—absolute painting grounded in the tradition of pure abstraction advocated by the Abstraction-Creation group that appeared in Paris in 1931. Josef Albers, an acknowledged influence on Pastine, was loosely affiliated with the group. As H. H. Arnason writes,

more fraught with “feeling.” What has been called the “refined minimalism” of her earlier paintings becomes a kind of refined expressivity—feeling filtered through pure surface, giving it a sort of pulsing vibrancy, an inner vitality. Pastine’s touch remains refined—she is relentlessly perfectionist—but a little more urgent, insistent, if not “recklessly” used to self-dramatizing effect, “maximalized” in the uninhibited manner characteristic of “stressful” Expressionism. The freshly exquisite result is a deeply “touching” surface.

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It is as though the unconscious passion with which she made the unconditionally pure works—her paintings—has unexpectedly and “conditionally” emerged. The layers of surface of which the pastels are “built” suggest unconscious depth as distinct from the conscious sublimity of the paintings. Pastine’s pastels are peculiarly subjective, in contrast to the disciplined objectivity of her paintings. The repressed subjective has returned, if not with Sturm und Drang

“many aspects of Color Field painting, Systemic painting, and Op art”—Pastine’s paintings are related to all three, however indirectly—“stem from the international tradition of...Concrete Art.”(3)

But then, more recently, as though relaxing (almost), Pastine has made impure, personalized, “touching” pastels (page 46-47, 50-53). She makes “marks,” directly indicating the presence of her hand: the skin of the work becomes touchable, and with that

ferocity, then with unmistakable force.

The philosopher Alfred North Whitehead once wrote that style and power were dialectically at odds in art. The aesthetic issue is to strike a balance between them, giving each its due. Style rules in Pastine’s early paintings; power is permitted in the pastels, with no loss of style. The “sense of the ineffable” evident in the early paintings is the result of her remarkable ability to use “the painterly process...to transform the materiality

of the painted surface into an optically immaterial experience,” to use her words. In the pastels (page 50-53) the return of materiality by way of her marks suggest that all along she was unconsciously trying to find a way to express inexpressible emotion, to articulate what seems inherently inarticulate. The touching mark is the most basic way of doing so. Her polished surface has now become peculiarly dense and unfathomable, as beautiful as the surface of her paintings but now more openly libidinous.

I suggest that Pastine has been on a journey towards what the psychoanalyst Thomas Ogden famously called “the sensory floor of all experience”—the so-called autistic-contiguous position of the psyche, which is its most fundamental position.(4) Her pure painting can be understood as the final statement of this grand regression. Successful abstract art evokes and inhabits the autistic-contiguous position—a primitive emotional condition in which selfless sensation is dominant and pervasive, in which the “self” is nothing more than sensing, and thus only nominally exists, in which sense experience in and of the here-and-now is all there is to being, in which sensing is diffused through reality so that nothing seems real unless it is sensed in the certainty of the here-and-now. In contrast, successful representational art progressively increases our consciousness of the external world of physical objects and social selves, making us aware of their multidimensional relationships. To emphasize: abstract art regresses from representational art to the sensory fundamentals of art, as though purifying the temple of art of “irrelevances.” Instead of objects and selves

in changing and thus uncertain relationship, pure art is concerned with colors and forms that seem to exist with amazing sense certainty, that seem absolutely real because they are concretely here-and-now, rather than incorporated into some picture of nature or the social life world as a descriptive detail.

Relationality is reduced to the absolute minimum of complementarity in Pastine’s pure painting. Driven by the desire for sense certainty—the absolute concreteness of the here-and-now—they eschew external reality completely, eradicating even the most mnemonic traces of it. Thus her early color and light paintings erase her experience of external nature in the act of conveying it. In the complementary color systems there is no hint of it—no allusion to nature, however elusive. All pure seeing, epitomizing here-and-nowness, they evoke the unseeable. (Dare one say Pastine’s pure paintings are repeated revelations of what Kandinsky called the “spiritual in art”?) With the pastels, touching, repressed or hidden behind—even subverted by—seeing, converges with it, to new expressive effect. A subtle new rhythmicity enters Pastine’s works; it was already implicit in the subtitled contrast between the complementary colors. The “system” becomes a little “idiosyncratic,” and with that emotionally charged—suffused by unconscious feeling rather than self-consciously poised. Each mark is a sort of oasis of touch in the desert of feeling that the purely perceptual works are. However “warm” or “cool”

Ray Painting #6 “Mekong”
Blue Yellow Violet Series
1997, oil on canvas, 30” x 30”



Red Green #5 “Sweet”
1998, oil on canvas, 36” x 36”

her colors may be—whatever their “temperature,” to use her terms—one doesn’t exactly warm up to them or feel cooled down by them. They arouse neither empathy nor indifference, but a certain calm pleasure. One instantly perceives their universality, that is, their exquisitely “mediated simplicity,” which is what Hegel called the “universality” of the here-and-now. Their fine-tuned universality affords a sensation of sublimity. At the same time, the sense of the ineffably



Red Green #4 "Siren"
1998, oil on canvas, 36" x 36"

sublime that emanates from them is a sign of the suppression of ordinary feeling. With the pastels, Pastine arrives at a fresh new sensory elegance, the peculiar elegance of fundamental sensing when seeing and touching converge, allowing us to experience their libidinous interdependence through the palpable color. More simply, the “anxiety” that Albers repudiated in a letter to Harold Rosenberg

has returned to pure painting, suggesting that purity is no longer a defense against anxiety—the anxiety that always accompanies splitting or inner conflict, which is what we see in Pastine’s complementary colors, which never do exactly complement each other, which is why her paintings are finally humanly as well as aesthetically convincing.

Notes

(1)Sigmund Freud, “Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality” [1905], Standard Edition (London: Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-analysis, 1953), VII, 156

(2)Hegel’s dialectical account of sense certainty appears in *The Phenomenology of Spirit* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 61: “Pure being remains...as the essence of sense certainty, since sense certainty has demonstrated in its own self that the truth of its object is the universal. But this pure being is not an immediacy, but something to which negation and mediation are essential; consequently, it is what we mean by ‘being,’ but is being defined as an abstraction, or as the pure universal.”

(3)H. H. Arnason and Marla F. Prather, *History of Modern Art* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall and New York: Abrams, 1998; 4th ed.), 495

(4)Ogden, adding a third, more “elemental” position to the paranoid-schizoid and depressive positions described by Melanie Klein, writes: “The autistic-contiguous position is associated with a mode of generating experience that is of a sensation-dominated sort and is characterized by protosymbolic impressions of sensory experience that together help constitute an experience of bounded surface. Rhythmicity and experiences of sensory contiguity (especially at the skin surface) contribute to an elementary sense of being over time....These idiosyncratic, but organized and organizing uses of sensory experiences...represent facets of the process by which the sensory floor of all experience is generated. “The Dialectically Constituted/decentered Subject of Psychoanalysis: The Contributions of Klein and Winnicott,” *International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, 73 (1982):614 ■