

TOURNIQUET REVIEW

Feb 16 Ruth Pastine | Spectrum Depths | Gallery Sonja Roesch

John Ebersole

What happened to me when I looked *really hard* into Ruth Pastine's *Yellow 7* (part of the artist's new *Depth* series) is that I stopped thinking. Or I stopped hearing the sound of my thinking. And for someone like me, whose thoughts are sometimes too vivid to even process, I found this cognitive respite provided by Pastine's work liberating.



Yellow 7, Oil on paper, 30 x 22 inch. Courtesy Ruth Pastine & Gallery Sonja Roesch.

I

stash my

bicycle

in tall

grass



There was a point—I was probably standing less than a foot away from *Yellow 7*—when I became aware that I was hyperventilating, as if a panic attack was brewing inside me, so I took a few instinctive steps backwards and felt my breathing return to normal. To be engaged this way by an object hanging on a wall was exhilarating because although I was aroused, I had no desire to consume the source of the arousal.



I told an Instagram friend something very personal about myself and they dm'd me back: *good for you!*



Art grants us an experience of freedom; good art is recalled as such.



Ruth was my grandmother's name. As I bicycled through Montrose towards Midtown, where [Gallery Sonja Roesch](#) is located, I thought about her and how she was not an artist and how she never studied philosophy or read poetry, and I thought about how dead she was, and I thought about her son, my father, who I only started calling *father* after he died and how he was also not an artist and never studied philosophy or read poetry.





Blue 12, Oil on paper, 30 x 22 inch. Courtesy Ruth Pastine & Gallery Sonja Roesch.

With *Yellow 7*, I experienced sublime erasure; my stupid self expunged, Pastine's luminosity disinfecting me of *John* and replacing me with some sort of *this* and my interiority was made vast where nothing felt forbidden. *Blue 12*, on the other hand, threw me back on myself, like a video being reversed. Looking into *Blue 12*'s ominous surface, I remembered suddenly not only who I am, but of who I thought I ought to be, and I felt the terrifying presence of *law* and my interior shrank; it was as if *Blue 12*, the longer I looked into it, was censoring my blissful encounter with *Yellow 7*. To Pastine's credit, it was the opposite of what I thought color field paintings were supposed to do and I decided, out of some ridiculous fear of *Blue 12* finding me repugnant, to intentionally embrace the effect the painting was having on me and eventually my resentment and grief faded and I reluctantly accepted *Blue 12* on its own terms and experienced, to my astonishment, the sensation of being obedient.



It's confusing to love something that you also want dead, but that's how I feel about my dog, Titus, lately. He barks at just about everything (he's probably bored) and his bark is large and deep and head-splitting. He barks at people and he barks at other dogs and he barks at random sounds and sometimes he barks at nothing at all.



Air Pods

Air Pods

Air Pods

Air Pods

Air Pods

I stop at [Mercantile](#). I pull the key out of my bike lock. I have my coffee outside. I become oak trees.

Air Pods

Air Pods

Air Pods

Air Pods

Air Pods



I e-mail Sonja: I must take another look at the greens. That's how I put it: *I must take another look at the greens.*



This time on my bike ride from Montrose to Midtown, I do not think of my grandmother or my father, both dead, neither an artist or philosopher or reader of poetry. Instead, I think about the color green and Poe and elegy and the green shorts I'm wearing.



I stash my bicycle in tall grass.



I see Sonja for the second time. Like me, she wears a mask, as does Grace, her mute gallery assistant who sits at a computer and doesn't appear to be breathing.



Green 7, Oil on paper, 30 x 22 inch. Courtesy Ruth Pastine & Gallery Sonja Roesch.



I have to admit (like, *I just have to!*) I struggled to connect with *Green 7*. Or *Green 7* resisted me. (Non-rapport.) Out of desperation or pure greed, I put my face inches away from the painting, as if to bully it to fork over its aesthetic lunch money, but nothing came, nothing revealed, nothing given. I turned my back to it, hurt, then spun around, waited: nothing.



In a Target parking lot, in Cinco Ranch, I am sitting in my car watching a YouTube video titled *How To Tie A Tie*. I have wasted my life.

Alexa!

Four

Minute

Timer



Coffee

Coffee

Coffee

Coffee

Coffee

Coffee



Pastine's paintings are all color (light) color (light) color (light) and light's (color's) passage (gradations) into (or out of) the saturated margins of her rectangular canvases. One is never sure if Pastine's universe is expanding or contracting, but they are always pulsing, which does a good job combating the material imposition of the canvas's dimensional limits, what Judd critically referred to, in *Specific Objects*, as [life span](#), and this throbbing signals a surprising sense of pure-play that oddly complicates the contemplative gravity typical of color field works; there's a sense of the zany in Pastine that I think, according the artist's [website](#), is supposed to telegraph as "hope," which I completely missed.



Devoid of nouns, Pastine's paintings work hard to hide all evidence of human agency: hers is an egoless methodology; I couldn't locate a single brushstroke (and texture is nearly imperceptible), and although people and objects are prohibited from entering her surfaces, Pastine's project isn't an effort to repudiate narrative (color, after all, is a kind of plot), but to signal the metaphysical possibilities available to us when the hard tropes of narrative are absent. Ambient and visceral at the same time, Pastine accesses the beholder's body and doesn't let go; her paintings ravage the cone cells in our retinas to such a degree that, at least in the moment of apprehension, they escape critical scrutiny. In short, minimalism™.



Instead of *Depths*, Pastine might have titled her latest series *Cheer Up!*



I'm listening to Barbara and Evelyn talk on the sofa. [Rex Orange County](#) is also playing. Titus is barking. I'm listening to all of it. My stomach growls. In the fridge, there's a rotisserie chicken I bought at the [H-E-B](#) off Waugh. Everyone's talking about its impossible-to-navigate parking lot. A lady in line thinks someone is going to get hurt. Houston, our new home, is panicking; it's infrastructure has failed. We just got power back, but still no water. I've been reading Peter Gizzi's new book of poems, *Now It's Dark*, which is also the title of an Anthrax [song](#) inspired by *Blue Velvet*.



One of my professors at Columbia, Richard Howard, always wore brightly colored eyewear. It made him stand out; it made him playful and bold. He was already into his seventies then. Most people, as they age, want to blend in; not call attention to themselves. I admired his style.



In childhood, we are drowned in bright colors: birthday parties, holidays, toys, games, cartoons, fast food, commercials. We are blown to smithereens.



Pastine's paintings are titled with clinical élan, as if to offset accusations of color's triviality: color + number, and her compositional technique, which has been described to me as "mathematical" (whatever that means), only half-conforms to long established critical opinions about color field paintings: that they are non-expressive and solely about the beholder's experience. Pastine's art reflects these characteristics, but it's their strange luminous glowing that adds a twist to those more austere qualities often found in chromatic abstractions: here, we have canvas as talisman instead of drug; gallery as dream instead of dealer.



In the closet, after some digging, I find the only scarf I own. It's orange and was knitted by [022 Mary](#), who made it as part of an [exhibit](#) my [sister-in-law](#) organized back in 2010 in Brooklyn. Since there's snow on the ground this morning in Houston and the temps are in the teens, I decide to wear it outside (as I take Titus for a walk) and maybe, who knows, stand out a little.



[Ruth Pastine's](#) *Spectrum Depths* is on view until February 27, 2021 at [Gallery Sonja Roesch](#) in Houston, Texas.



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