Ruth Pastine: The Optical Sublime

by Peter Frank

Painterly practice today can be said to range along an "axis of accident," that is, a scale that might measure the degree of discovery and deliberation determining a painter's approach. This pertains for all painters, but abstractionists in particular, by and large free of any depictive goal, bring forth their work at differing levels, and interactions, of accident and design. Gestural painters, it is assumed, spring forth from haphazard initial strokes, while geometric painters operate from more- or-less entirely predetermined structures. Painters working with color can find themselves at various points along the aforementioned axis, but would logically exercise more control and premeditation the more they seek to exploit the perceptual effects of color (and concomitant form). Ruth Pastine's painting exploits these effects, and does so uniquely, achieving a quality, even condition, of appearance quite unlike any other in the realm of pure-color painting, whether monochrome (or "radical") or light-and-space (or "perceptual"). Pastine's approach, however, is one of on-site evolution: however much she may know what the overall perceptual presence of her paintings will be upon completion, she does not begin those paintings certain of what colors, or even necessarily what overall compositions, will present themselves. For Pastine, paintings evolve – towards a known kind of effect but to unknown effect.

Pastine's method of painting evolves color presences and relationships – especially relationships – built up out of countless small brushstrokes. This method, surprisingly enough, is grounded in an experimental approach, one that establishes conditions of light, conditions that generate color and dissolve at least any material appearance. Aware of various color theories, Pastine follows the dictates of none, allowing hues and chromas and values to find their way to one another through what might be called a process of optical induction, a stepwise edging of color fields towards and against but never away from one another. In a way, she paints by moving through light – the visible spectrum – the way we might move through dark, inching along, allowing her eyes (and thus ours) to adjust gradually to the phenomenological presence of colors, to the way they present themselves and to the way they react to one another. It is a highly

intuitive, and painterly, approach, one not normally applied to the focused realm of "pure" color painting. But it "unfolds" color, pure color, the way the human eye unfolds color, as an effect in itself but not a thing in itself, admitting to, even reliant on, where one color ends and the next begins – or even where the painting ends and the wall begins – while reminding us that colors can only be defined relative to one another and to the shapes (however neutral) containing them.

In fact, Pastine wants to free us from preconceptions about the nature of color(s); as she writes, "given that there is no outside reference, the paintings exist in the moment of perception." A picture exists independent of our seeing it, but can a color? A stoplight exists whether or not we see it, but do red and green? If you can describe a stoplight to someone blind from birth, can you describe its colors? If anything, Pastine's paintings – her current series most of all – suggest in their luminous self-containment that, like rainbows, they might stop existing the moment we stop looking at them, or the moment the fugitive circumstances that brought them about change again.

The optical sublime with which Pastine's works confront us represents a philosophical sublime, an embodiment of the dialectical process... and the exquisite existential balance that manifests; but also of the risks involved in making any kind, and especially this kind, of painting.

Even with pre-determined structures – neutral containers, really, for color "events" – and the orientation of her procedures towards fixed general goals, Pastine, in her own words, "strive[s] to remain in what Hegel called the 'universality' of the here-and-now... being in the present moment." The conditions of any given moment dictate what and how Pastine paints subsequently – just as they dictate what and how we see when presented with such entirely self-referential paintings (their self-referentiality reinforced by their reliance on the traditional, un-spectacular, even self-effacing support formats afforded by the square and the rectangle). Pastine has emptied the pictorial context of the pictorial; all that remains is color. Jules Olitski fancied painting in air, allowing veils of color to hang in our midst free of support. But this would make a spectacle of the color experience and, paradoxically, invest it with sculptural presence. Pastine wants to avoid such spectacularity and to allow color to behave extraordinarily by presenting it, framing it, ordinarily.

Pastine does not work with inherently brilliant hues, but with subdued tones, nuanced and saturated, allowed to fill spaces and to abut one another until they reach their own levels of brilliance – surprisingly high levels, achieved by allowing the colors to expand not inside the painting but inside the retina. Particularly in these new paintings, the colors retain this "depth charge" quality because Pastine neutralizes their containers. The color areas subtly charge one another within and across boundaries and arrangements – square formats, symmetric dispositions – we barely notice. They refer to nothing; only the colors themselves, and the perceptual questions they raise, are present. In

previous series Pastine complicated this presence by rendering the colors themselves elusive, hard not just to describe but to see. Now, those colors stand obdurately before us and work almost aggressively upon us, even as they still avoid being defined. The experiential difference between Pastine's earlier and current work is much like that between mist and rain; you are now certain you are being impacted even as you struggle to define what is impacting you.

Even as the condition of Pastine's painting moves towards the concrete, the painting itself retains its transcendent ideal. We see this in the warm, persistent glow of the paintings and, equally but differently, in the ethereality and delicate granularity of the pastels. Without advancing the materiality of her surfaces as an integral aesthetic consideration, Pastine deftly exploits their facture, putting them at the service of the colors and the optical experience the colors provide. Those subtle textures allow her colors to command, rather than merely tease, our perception.

Indeed, Pastine wants to redefine our perceptual field. Or, rather, she wants to trigger our own redefinition of that field. Her relational shifts, within each color area and between them, do not seek merely to bring us along with them, but to seem as if they are occurring in our eyes. In fact, they are. In Pastine's paintings and pastels these colors and their shifts are vibrations, light reflected off surfaces. They don't become "colors" until we see them – and it is the very certitude of this seeing that determines the rhetorical realm to which Pastine addresses herself. Color means nothing (beyond its myriad functional associations) until it reaches and stimulates our optic nerves. At that point, as Pastine notes, "color is a vehicle for experience... [for] engag[ing] in the present moment of discovery... for the sublime..." The sublime, according to Kant, requires the presence of something terrifying and beautiful; Pastine has found that color itself, in its infinite beauty, can instill an ecstatic fear, a fear of the void at once focused and mitigated by the color that doesn't simply fill, but constitutes, that void.

Ruth Pastine's is a rigorous method, both manually and mentally. She achieves a persuasive intensity in her paintings by approaching them with physical and intellectual fervor. The optical sublime with which Pastine's works confront us represents a philosophical sublime, an embodiment of the dialectical process – materiality and immateriality, presence and absence, visibility and invisibility, surface and depth, light and space, the timeless and the momentous – and the exquisite existential balance that manifests; but also of the risks involved in making any kind, and especially this kind, of painting. The work, after all, must seem to "happen" before the viewer's eyes even as it must seem to have always existed. Pastine cannot depend on the daily theater of the atelier to provide access to such transcendence; nor can she depend on given theories of color, or even of beauty, to provide such timeless immediacy. And yet these factors, too, figure in Pastine's discourse, necessary building blocks in the stairway to visual heaven. As immaterial as they are, her paintings are the realest things we can see. ■

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