The seeds of Ruth Pastine’s paintings—systems of color, structure, and perception—were planted in youth. Raised in New York City, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, MOMA, and the Guggenheim were her “backyard.” At the High School of Music and Art, Pastine painted seriously and knew then that she was an artist. Further studies at Cooper Union (BFA) and Hunter College (MFA), and countless impassioned Color Field explorations clarified and refined her artistic role. In 2001, just prior to September 11, Pastine moved to the West Coast, where her Color Field investigations found a resonance in the California Light and Space movement.

In Ojai, where she now lives with artist Gary Lang and their two children, Pastine works serially on several paintings simultaneously, focusing on the dialogue between the canvases, scrutinizing their interaction. Distinct systems emerge as she constructs each painting layer upon layer, “made of countless strokes of paint.” At first glance, these works resemble monochromes that shift vertically—and, less noticeably, horizontally—across the plane of the canvas (or pair of canvases), to become different colors, e.g., flowing from red to green, or from blue to orange. While her paintings look “easy,” colors flowing into one another, these systems provide the musculature that hold her art together and lend the work its strength.

Pastine’s latest series, a distillation of 25 years of profound investigations, has led to an impressive commission of painting installations for Ernst & Young Plaza in downtown Los Angeles. Selected through a rigorous process, Pastine embraced the assignment as “an opportunity to have a permanent installation of the complex perceptual interplay and intimate dialogue between paintings.” The commission consists of a series of eight oil-on-canvas paintings, entitled Limitless (2009), each measuring 8’ 6” x 4’ 6”. It includes four works from the Blue Orange Series and four from the Red Green Series, to be installed in January 2010, in the monumental East and West lobbies of Ernst & Young Plaza, at Figueroa and 7th.

Prior to painting the installation, Pastine let go of symmetry in her last two painting series to access balance and rhythmic oscillation. “In letting go of symmetry, and preconceived notions of predictability, the visual field was blown wide open,” she explains. “I surrendered to what the work demanded for itself, and consequently accessed limitless possibility within the process and ideals I strive for within the work.” Pastine engages bold, brilliant, saturated color relationships in concert with deceptively simple subtle color experiences that resonate and shimmer from the canvas surface. There is rigorous tension at play as the eye roams and ricochets across the resolve of the painting surfaces. The large scale of the architectural layout and complexity of visually linking the two adjoining lobbies of Ernst & Young was the impetus that inspired the dialoguing diptych configuration for each of the four immense walls in the two lobbies.

Working with perceptual installations of multiple systems, Pastine charts a new direction, and thus expands the territory of metaphysical painting. Her installations are nothing less than sacred: a contemporary altar that disarms us. Immersed in a pure painting experience, we realize that without traditional imagery and theme, we are in the presence of the holiness of art.

—ROBERTA CARASSO

Ruth Pastine will have exhibitions in 2010 at Brian Gross Fine Art, San Francisco and Gallery Sonja Roesch in Houston. Her solo exhibition, “Limitless” recently opened the 2009 fall season at Edward Cella Art & Architecture, in Los Angeles; from September 12 – October 31, 2009.

Photo of Ruth Pastine by Donna Granata
Courtesy: Brian Gross Fine Art

“ETHICS AND DESIRE & STRENGTH’S VULNERABILITY (RED GREEN),” 2009
OIL ON CANVAS, 80” X 40” (EACH)
PHOTO: COURTESY EDWARD CELLA ART + ARCHITECTURE