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 monolithic surface, esthetically 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 uncannily 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 esthetic goal of pure painting.
Abstraction has been said to be on the ropes, if Mark Rosenthal’s sad observation that, being “in the category of ‘high art,” it has “been discredited, or simply overwhelmed by popular culture,” like all “‘high’ manifestations” have been in our society—dismissed, on ideological grounds, as “elitest” or “privileged.” But, if Pastine’s paintings are any clue, such “exalted” manifestations, as Rosenthal also calls them, satisfy the need for esthetic transcendence innate to human beings, as many thinkers have argued. Rosenthal made his unhappy remarks at the end of the magisterial essay he wrote to accompany the exhibition of Abstraction in the Twentieth Century he curated for the Guggenheim Museum in 1996. He suggested that abstraction had become a “hidebound tradition” that had lost “its sense of conviction and its sense of risk.” It presumably had nothing more to say for itself or to anyone. But at its best, as in Pastine’s pure paintings, abstraction remains what it fundamentally is: a risky attempt to evoke numinous feeling, thus sustaining the sense of the sacred in a secular world. Pastine’s paintings are hallowed presences, cultivating numinosity, to use a thought of Erik Erikson.

They are richly sensuous, but Pastine’s sensuous color serves a spiritual purpose, as she herself implies when she writes that her “finite color and perceptual systems... paradoxically offer the essential parameters that access limitless possibility,” which is the realm of the spiritual. Similarly, her determination “to dematerialize the painted surface”—to suggest immateriality—is spiritually evocative. Using only the complementary colors red and green, Pastine creates an infinitely nuanced range of color experiences, each with its own “spiritual sound” or resonance, to use Kandinsky’s term. While Pastine is obsessed with “the convergence and reconciliation of opposition,” the changing light brings out the opposing colors, conveying the tension between them. Thus the esthetic pleasure they
give is excruciating, to refer to the title of one of her works, and sometimes desperately erotic however esthetically exacting, as *Ethics and Desire* and *Strength’s Vulnerability*, 2009 makes clear. The work reveals that red and green symbolize the tension between passion and control that informs Pastine’s paintings, even as they ingeniously complement each other, that is, dialectically integrate to spiritual effect. Thus Pastine esthetically transcends and transforms her intense emotions. Her works are emotional as well as spiritual epiphanies, making them all the more paradoxical—certainly much more meaningful than pure color paradoxes.

Above: *Caught Looking (Red Green)*, *Limitless Series*, 2009, oil on canvas, 48 x 48 inches