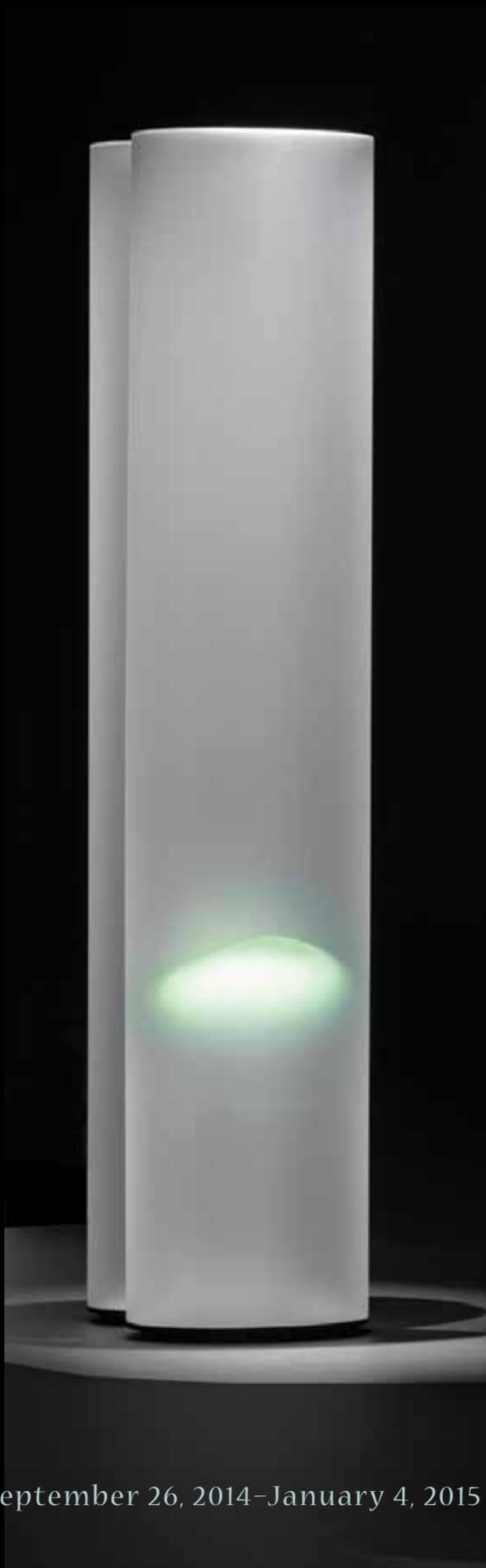


Helen Pashgian
LIGHT INVISIBLE



September 26, 2014-January 4, 2015



*... our eyes look upward
And see the light that fractures...
We see the light but see not whence
it comes.
O Light Invisible, we glorify Thee!*

—T. S. Eliot, Chorus from *The Rock*, 1934

Helen Pashgian: Light Invisible features sculptures made from such industrial materials as acrylic and cast resin, which interact with light to create optical paradoxes—tensions between observation and cognition. Helen Pashgian's experiments with technical formulas and the physics of perception are like science in their rigor, yet her intention is to express mystery more than to encapsulate empirical knowledge.

Born in 1934 and raised in Pasadena, California, Pashgian remembers from early childhood having the feeling that light reflecting on water was a palpable presence, an “alive thing.”¹ In the late 1950s, as an art history graduate student at Columbia University and then Boston University, she became intrigued by how artists such as Johannes Vermeer used light to define form and space. She decided to become a painter, and even in her early works was interested in learning how glazes and varnishes altered the effects of light on a painting’s surface.

After a few years on the east coast, Pashgian missed the sun and scents of her native environment and returned home in 1964. She abandoned painting for sculpture and began experimenting with the ways materials changed light’s character through absorption, reflection, and refraction. In the burgeoning gallery scene in 1960s Los Angeles, she met others who were exploring light as a medium for transforming perception. With such artists as Peter Alexander, Larry Bell, Mary Corse, Robert Irwin, James Turrell, and DeWain Valentine, Pashgian became one of the pioneers of the now-renowned Light and Space movement that blossomed in the 1960s and 1970s in Southern California.

The Light and Space artists focus on the shaping of sensory experiences. They create sculptures and environments in which natural or artificial light bounces off, plays over, or passes through fiberglass, glass, plastic, and polyester resin, the type of materials used in the high-tech manufacture of automobiles and surfboards, commercial products strongly identified with Southern California. Their work has associations with a wide range of sources, from the luminous atmospheres of Mark Rothko and the optical pleasures of the Color Field painters to the



Fig. 1

literalism and theatricality of Minimalism, even to Pop Art with its embrace of commercial products as a defining feature of American culture.

Pashgian describes the light of Southern California she finds so alluring: “a harsh, shimmering, white light that glints off cars and other metal surfaces.”² As when she was a child, she remains enthralled with “the space where air meets the water...the surface, and below the surface and below that.”³ This might inspire a comparison with the swimming pool paintings of David Hockney, who has lived in Los Angeles



Fig. 2

since the 1960s. These works capture the articulating quality of reflected light with flatness and graphic clarity (fig. 2). But as seen in the blurred aqueous blue of Pashgian's triptych on view in this exhibition (fig. 1), it is more the disintegrative impact of light on liquid that is her subject.

The use of light as a material that appears to dissolve other materials can invite a turning from the seen to the unknowable, from the physical to the psychological. Pashgian's fellow Light and Space artist James Turrell is known for using light to trigger such introspection: "My work has no object, no image and no focus. With no object, no image and no focus, what are you looking at? You are looking at you looking."⁴ Turrell was raised a Quaker, a religion that celebrates "inner light," a metaphor for Christ's spirit contained

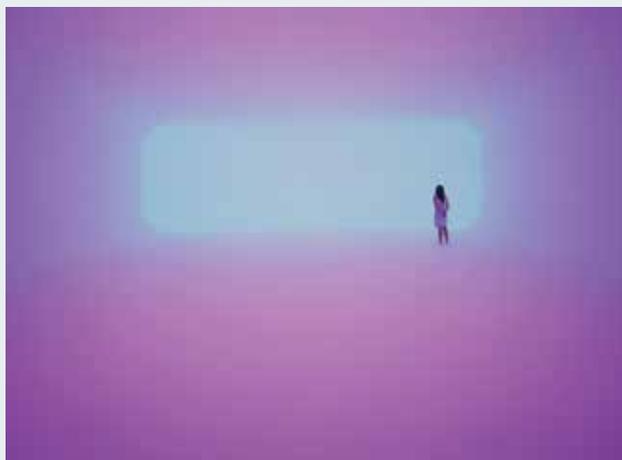


Fig. 3

within each person. While like Pashgian he is more interested in the psychological effects of light than in religion, Turrell acknowledges that the two are linked: "there are very few religious or spiritual experiences that people don't use the vocabulary of light to describe" (fig. 3).⁵

Indeed, comparing Pashgian's work to his own and to that of Robert Irwin, Turrell says "Helen was the one who as a sculptor spiritualized the material world."⁶

The notion of psychological illumination relates to Pashgian's untitled columns on view in this exhibition, which she says disclose the truth "in



Fig. 4

a way that isn't quite revealed" (fig. 4).⁷ Made of molded acrylic sheets, these conjoined oblong tubes constitute a translucent monolith. A single light source is projected into each tube from above that makes it glow from within. Aligned in ghostly



Figs. 5–6

promenade in the dark gallery, the columns seem to hover slightly over the floor, paradoxically countering their monumentality with a sense of weightlessness. Pashgian thinks of the columns more as presences than inert things; slightly over human scale, they seem to have a life of their own, metaphorically breathed into them

by the light. Within each, the artist has placed elements made from copper and acrylic, which reflect and refract the incoming light, yielding effects that seem magical. Like will-o'-the-wisps, these mysterious floating configurations appear to change in relation to viewers' perceptions as they circle each column. The process of seeing is thus linked to the movement of the body in space.

This physical involvement takes place with Pashgian's other works, as well. Her transparent cast-resin spheres and epoxy wall pieces can be seen anew by looking from a variety of angles and distances. The spheres in particular capture the relativity of perception. They are embedded with convex and concave forms, which modify each other through magnification, anamorphic elongation, and compression (figs. 5–6). Pashgian says of the spheres that "when something is solid, everything internal to it begins to dissolve, begins to change size, begins to distort in bizarre ways."⁸ However precise Pashgian's experiments in optics may be, it is pointless for viewers to try to locate a single, ideal position from which to view the spheres. Just as we think we understand what we are seeing, a slight shift to the left or right, closer or further changes everything we thought we perceived.

Remembering that cast resin starts as a liquid, we return to Pashgian's early observation of light as an entity that elucidates water's constantly shifting configurations. Light alternately reveals and conceals, magnifies, breaks, and distorts the surface and things beneath. It does not so much dispel mystery as embody it.

Mark Scala,
chief curator

Notes

1. Carol Eliel, "A Matter of Refinement: Conversations with Helen Pashgian," in *Helen Pashgian*, exh. cat. (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 2014), p. 18.
2. Ibid, p. 17.
3. Deborah Vankin, "Artist Helen Pashgian brings her love of light to LACMA's space." *Los Angeles Times*, March 29, 2014. <http://articles.latimes.com/2014/mar/29/entertainment/la-et-cm-ca-helen-pashgian-light-invisible-20140330>.
4. Elaine King, "Into the Light: A Conversation with James Turrell." *Sculpture Magazine*, November 2002. <http://www.sculpture.org/documents/scmag02/nov02/turrell/turrell.shtml>.
5. Ibid.
6. Vankin, *Los Angeles Times*.
7. Eliel, "A Matter of Refinement: Conversations with Helen Pashgian," p. 18.
8. Helen Pashgian, Pacific Standard Time at the Getty Center, April 2010. <http://blogs.getty.edu/pacificstandardtime/explore-the-era/archives/v21/>.

Illustrations

Cover: Helen Pashgian. Installation view of *Untitled* [column], 2012–14, at Los Angeles County Museum of Art. Formed acrylic. Los Angeles County Museum of Art, purchased with funds provided by Carole Bayer Sager on the occasion of the 2014 Collectors Committee. © Helen Pashgian. Photograph by Josh Morton

End pages: Helen Pashgian. *Untitled* [column] (detail), 2012–14. Formed acrylic. Los Angeles County Museum of Art, purchased with funds provided by Carole Bayer Sager on the occasion of the 2014 Collectors Committee. © Helen Pashgian. Photograph by Josh Morton

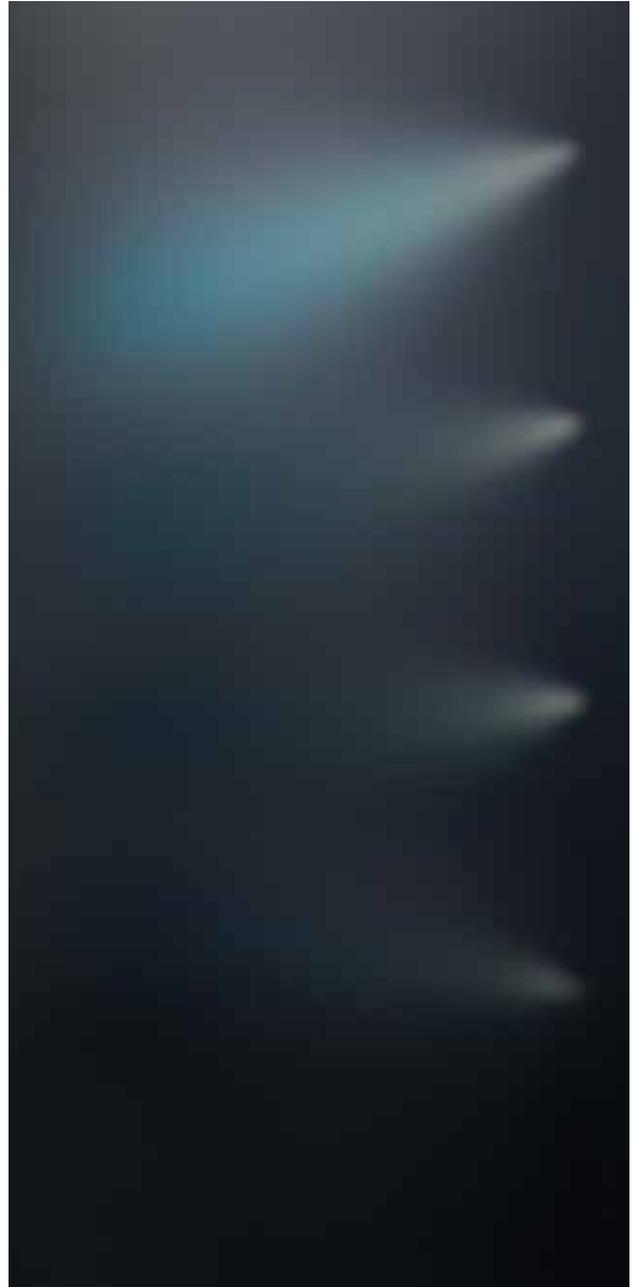
Figure 1: Helen Pashgian. *Untitled* [blue triptych], 1990. Cast industrial epoxy. Private collection. © Helen Pashgian

Figure 2: David Hockney (b. 1937). *A Bigger Splash*, 1967. Acrylic on canvas, 96 x 96 in. Tate, purchased 1981. © David Hockney. Image © Tate, London 2014

Figure 3: James Turrell. *Breathing Light*, 2013. LED light into space, dimensions variable. Los Angeles County Museum of Art, purchased with funds provided by Kayne Griffin Corcoran and the Kayne Foundation, M.2013.1. © James Turrell. Photo © Florian Holzherr

Figure 4: Helen Pashgian. Installation view of *Helen Pashgian: Light Invisible* at Los Angeles County Museum of Art. Formed acrylic. Los Angeles County Museum of Art, purchased with funds provided by Carole Bayer Sager on the occasion of the 2014 Collectors Committee. © Helen Pashgian. Photograph by Josh Morton

Figure 5–6: Helen Pashgian. *Untitled* [sphere], 2013–14. Resin and acrylic. Courtesy of the artist and Ace Gallery Los Angeles. © Helen Pashgian



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Gordon Contemporary Artists
Project Gallery

This exhibition is adapted from a 2014 exhibition
of the same title organized at the
Los Angeles County Museum of Art
by Carol S. Eliel, curator of modern art.


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