THE BROOKLYN RAIL

Helen Pashgian with Michael Straus
"So the basic question is: Why am I interested in things that either have no edges, or have images that appear, distort, and disappear? It perhaps has to do with the ephemeral quality of life."

by Michael Straus
February 2020

Portrait of Helen Pashgian, pencil on paper by Phong H. Bui.

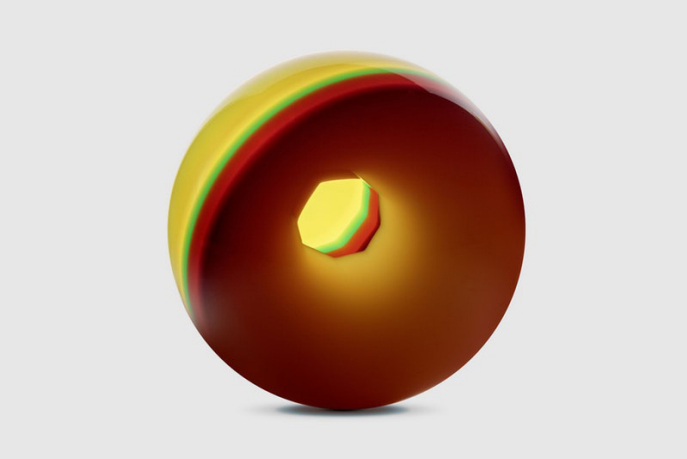
Seoul, Korea
Lehmann Maupin
November 14, 2019 – February 8, 2020

Helen Pashgian is a pioneering member of the Light & Space group of artists, exploring since the early '60s the ways in which light is transmitted and transmuted through such materials as polyester resin, epoxy, acrylic, and other plastics that became available once declassified after World War II. Her work was featured in the Getty's comprehensive exploration of West Coast artists, entitled *Pacific Standard Time*, where it was shown in California as well as Germany alongside that of her contemporaries such as Larry Bell, James Turrell, Mary Corse, Ron Cooper, Laddie John Dill, Peter Alexander, DeWain Valentine, and others.

Helen is represented by Lehmann Maupin, which recently showed her work at their New York gallery and currently has exhibitions on view in China and South Korea. Helen's work was also notably shown at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, where 12 of her molded acrylic columns filled an entire gallery, and were then acquired for LACMA's permanent collection.

I spoke with Helen at her studio in Pasadena, California, where we were seated in the midst of various examples of her most recent work, called "lenses," all in various stages of fabrication and experimentation. Helen likes to think of

her sculptures as *presences* and so they are, provoking and indeed requiring one's movement around and interaction with them, changing as they do under varied light conditions and perspectives. We covered a range of topics, including her childhood in a now-lost rural Southern California; her experimentation with non-traditional materials; differences between sight and imagination; and, more generally, some of the ways in which her work conveys ephemeral as well as transcendent qualities of light.



Helen Pashgian, *Untitled*, 2019. Cast epoxy with resin, 6 inches (diameter). Courtesy the artist and Lehmann Maupin, New York, Hong

Michael Straus (Rail): We're visiting today with Helen Pashgian at her studio in Pasadena, California. So Helen, how long have you had this studio?
Helen Pashgian: This studio has gone through many iterations and I've had it about 25 years. It's a 100 year old warehouse — it was used to house large instruments like organs, pianos, harpsichords, and then it became a car detailer's. Then it was a storage warehouse and finally I got it. First I had just one small space, 20 feet by 20 feet, and now I have the whole 3,000 feet. So I've been here a long time.

Rail: Okay [*Laughs*]. There are a number of works I see in progress. The last time I was here some months ago I think there were maybe eight or ten of your lenses — you prefer to call them lenses not discs, right?
Pashgian: Yes, *small lenses*, which have now all gone out to shows.

Rail: We'll talk about the lenses generally, but let's start by focusing on one that you have installed now on an acrylic pedestal in the middle of the room. I've been here on and off over the past several years on various occasions, and each time it seems that you've tinkered again with the lighting, changed the form of the pedestals and so on. You're constantly experimenting with how the light interplays with the work. Now, people are going to be reading about, but not actually seeing these light phenomena (although there will be some images). Even so, we should try to give them a sense of what a lens is in your work, what a pedestal is, how the two interrelate — more generally, what is it about light and perception that you are trying to accomplish?
Pashgian: Well you're absolutely correct that I keep messing with them, playing with them all the time to register subtle changes. But to start with, the earlier lenses were made of cast epoxy; the newest ones are again changed to a very clear urethane. And it's very thin, shaped in many ways just like the round, thin lens in your eye. The smaller ones are 25 or 26 inches in diameter; the larger ones are around five feet in diameter. The small lenses have a width of about an inch and a half and the larger ones a bit more. But both taper to a very sharp edge at the perimeter. The lenses have one or two colors embedded, or cast, into the urethane; and the colors radiate out evenly from the center. The idea is that the color goes to nothing at the ultra-thin perimeter edge. And if the lens is formed correctly, you should see just the color in space, with the edge essentially disappearing so that you can't determine where the work ends and where the space around it begins, as it were.

Rail: You don't want to see any edge to the work at all.
Pashgian: You don't want to see any edge and you also don't want to see any pedestal. However, in order to place it at a good viewing distance, it's on a pedestal. I've tried other possibilities, but the pedestal seems to be the best. The reason I like the pedestal is because it does delineate the work in the sense that it's holding up something that we are looking at. That "something" is an object, but the object becomes dematerialized. And that's what I want: *an object that becomes a non-object as we look at it*. So as the ambient light increases or decreases on a dimmer, your perception of the object changes and becomes slightly different.

Rail: You mean your perception of what you see —
Pashgian: Of what you see. As the light diminishes on the piece, the color contracts and becomes sufficiently dim as to almost totally disappear.

Rail: And when you say the light diminishes, so people understand, you control it with a rheostat.
Pashgian: Yes, yes, so it's on a dimmer and it decreases or increases in intensity—you can go in either direction — although I like starting with little or no light and gradually increasing the strength. So as I said, if the piece has been made correctly you'll see no edge and your brain begins to have a little battle with the eye. It's an exchange that's uncomfortable, because the brain only feels comfortable if it knows where it is.

Helen Pashgian, *Untitled (white)*, 2009. Formed white acrylic with acrylic elements, 87 x 17 1/2 x 20 inches. Courtesy the artist and Lehmann Maupin, New York, Hong Kong, and Seoul. Photo: Joshua White.

Helen Pashgian, *Untitled (orange),* 2009. Formed orange acrylic with acrylic elements, 91 x 17 1/2 x 20 inches. Courtesy the artist and Lehmann Maupin, New York, Hong Kong, and Seoul. Photo: Matthew Herrmann.

Rail: You were talking about perimeters.
Pashgian: Yes, your brain wants to find a perimeter, it wants to find an edge, so that it feels secure. And in this case, I would like to think the brain and the eye are not so much fighting, but that the eye is just able to see what it sees and not worry about what it sees. What's interesting about this is that everyone brings something different to the experience. Some people see the color expand and fill the entire wall.

Rail: Really, they see it go beyond the edges of the lens?
Pashgian: Way beyond the edges.

Rail: But isn't that just their imagination? Or what would you call that particular perception?
Pashgian: Well, that's what they say they're seeing.

Rail: But now you're suggesting that the work raises the question of what's sight and what's imagination.
Pashgian: That's exactly right. Some viewers see shoots of color going off in one area or another area.

Rail: Like sunrays or lightning?
Pashgian: Yes. Others see other colors coming *into* the work. Now, they know in their mind that those colors don't physically exist in the work. Even so, they say they see other colors — either a complementary color or one adjacent on the color wheel. And some people have no feelings about the work. Other people project what their feelings are onto it.

Rail: You mean "the work feels happy"? or "serene"?
Pashgian: Yes, two or three people have said nothing for a long time and then they begin to cry. It's — everyone has a different reaction.

Rail: So all of this is being elicited with an epoxy lens cast from a mold, with color embedded?
Pashgian: That's right, the color is embedded in the casting, it's not superimposed on the surface in any way whatsoever. I made a test with a painter. He took a clear lens and painted the surface in an attempt to emulate the cast pieces. It did not work.

Rail: Because it's not translucent?
Pashgian: Because it's not an integral part of the piece itself. It was on the surface and it *looked* like it was on the surface — there was no way to imagine that it inhabited the piece. The way the works are fabricated is that color is poured in a series of layers—and I don't want to get into the technical parts of it—but the color is in every layer as the work is formed. So part of the complexity of the piece is to get the color right, to get the right amount of color per layer so that it radiates evenly out from the center and ultimately dissolves into nothing at the edge.

Rail: Well, given that complexity, how many of these end up in the dumpster that's outside the door here?
Pashgian: 60 or 70 so far. That's a lot of rejects; but there are fewer in the dumpster now because I'm getting better!

Rail: Well, Helen, it's never too soon to start. [*Laughter*]
Pashgian: That's right. I made a lot of the little ones; and of the little ones, 60 or 70 have gone into the dumpster, usually because the color was too powerful and too strong, and there was no way it could diminish properly at the edge.

Rail: Well, we're not going to tell people exactly where we are because then people would start to hang around the dumpster to try and get them.
Pashgian: They would! And some people have in fact tried to take them out of the dumpster, but usually they don't know quite what to do with them.

Rail: Well people can see a number of these works currently at shows with Lehmann Maupin Gallery, but let's just back up a bit. You talked about what some people see. Now, when I look, I see what I think of as a smudge of color, or the remains of an image that somehow glows as the light either brightens or dims. For me, in either case, the edge disappears. I don't see anything beyond the edge.
Pashgian: Neither do I. I don't see anything beyond the edge and maybe that's because I'm too close to it. Most people don't, but some people, when it's on a very low light, a number of people think that there's nothing there at all, that it's just their memory speaking to them. And somehow they're offended if there's actually nothing there.

Rail: So the sizes that you're fabricating range from around 2 feet in diameter to –
Pashgian: 5 feet. The hope is to go larger eventually, but technically they're quite demanding, so we're not there yet.

Rail: And what drove the determination of those two initial diameters?
Pashgian: In 1970, when I was a resident artist at Caltech, I did a 5 foot diameter piece, just for no particular reason. I liked the size of the circle. And in those days, I didn't know how to make a mold. I just taped something on the floor as a kind of base and made a pancake that was around 5 feet in diameter.

Rail: So it didn't have the lens-like curvature that these do?
Pashgian: Not initially. And that was using polyester resin, which was extremely dangerous and which many Light & Space artists used in the '60s and '70s. Very few, if anyone, uses it today. But then I got a heavy duty sander, with two handles, a very large heavy duty sander, and I stood on top of the piece on the floor and sanded the edges down to nothing. So I created a lens, just physically by going all the way around. It was very crude. Then I sanded it further. Then I had a fabricator, who's become quite famous, Jack Brogan, do the final sanding and polishing and get it to the show in time. And then that piece existed in the show for a week,

Helen Pashgian, *Untitled*, 2019. Cast epoxy with resin, 6 inches (diameter). Courtesy the artist and Lehmann Maupin, New York, Hong

until it was stolen.

Rail: And has never been recovered?
Pashgian: Never. Caltech mounted a search, but it was never recovered.

Rail: Wow, someday, someplace...
Pashgian: Somebody is using it as a coffee table or something.

Rail: Well I hope it's not a coffee table. [*Laughter*]
Pashgian: Anyway, maybe that's where the original idea came from of a 5 foot diameter.

Rail: You said earlier that the object becomes not an object. That's an interesting phrase.
Pashgian: That's the way I think of it.

Rail: But something non-objective remains.
Pashgian: Something remains, yes. That's also why I would like to get the pedestal as invisible as possible so that the more and more you look at it, the lens does begin to be floating as it becomes very non-objective. And then what remains is just color, color floating in space. Our mutual friend Michael Govan has said: "You know, artists have been struggling for hundreds of years, if not more, to make color float in space".

Rail: And with painting, light is projected on to an object and you get whatever the effects are from that, which of course can include the appearance, as with the Hudson River Luminists perhaps, that light is emerging from the painting. But here the light doesn't just *seem* to emerge but genuinely emerges from the object, even though that perception arises from projected light as well.
Pashgian: That's what – that's part of it, yes. And it's very

important to have about 4 feet behind the lens of very pure wall, preferably an off-white, so that no shadows will be created by the light source. It needs to be completely shadow-free in order to make the edge disappear as it does.

Helen Pashgian, *Untitled*, c. 2000. Formed acrylic, 56 x 36 x 19 inches. Courtesy the artist and Lehmann Maupin, New York, Hong Kong, and Seoul. Photo: Matthew Herrmann.

Rail: And is it that some things end up in the dumpster because there's a scratch or a flaw in the process, not just a problem with the strength of the color?
Pashgian: Yes, and the colors that work best for this art are very subtle colors.

Rail: You use yellow I know that.
Pashgian: I actually use two yellows.

Rail: And green.
Pashgian: And also a very slight greenish yellow.

Rail: And indigo.
Pashgian: And I've done a blue-orange. I've tried many, many colors — including red — but the best ones are the palest colors, those that become very subtle. But I'm skipping to another subject.

Rail: Don't worry, there's no order to this interview.
Pashgian: Right. What I was starting to talk about is the simplicity of this work. I've realized as I went along that part of what I've always been interested in is that this work has no discernable culture in which it arises, nor any discernible time.

Helen Pashgian, *Untitled*, 2019. Cast epoxy with artist made pedestal, 26 inches (diameter, 51 1/2 x 5 1/8 inches, (pedestal). Courtesy the artist and Lehmann Maupin, New York, Hong Kong, and Seoul. Photo: Joshua White.

Rail: Elaborate on that.
Pashgian: If the particular material had been available 5,000 years ago, who knows whether someone in another part of the world would have experimented with it in this way and made something similar. But the particular transparent materials I've been using were never available for any kind of artistic use, sculptural or otherwise, until after World War II, when the materials themselves became declassified. And I'm sure DeWain Valentine has talked about this. What I realize is that what I am very much interested in is taking away any cultural aspect or time.

Rail: and yet —
Pashgian: And yet it exists now, in these pieces, and not before, because a lot of things have come together: my own sensibility; the materials; the colors that interest me; decades of work in the past — different experiments. Somehow it's all coalesced in this body of work. But I like the fact that people come in from other parts of the world to see these in my studio and say: *Oh this could have been done — this could have been done anywhere, could it not?*

Rail: Why do you think that is? Is it because the forms are universal, almost like sun discs?
Pashgian: Probably because the works are simple geometric forms.

Rail: Yet isn't there still a reference to some archaic form?
Pashgian: There may be, or there may not be. But I think

the obvious answer is that the Light and Space group started here in California in the middle '60s and it had to do with the entire terrain, the light, the ocean, the sky, the desert — all of that is a part of it.

Rail: Are you saying that the materials as well as the atmosphere just don't exist elsewhere?
Pashgian: Well I don't think that they do, or at least the combination doesn't. It's also relevant that the whole aerospace industry was here at that time, with all the materials that were just becoming declassified. I have always said that in my view the light in Southern California is a very cold, bluish light. Part of it looks that way because there are so many buildings that are white and then there's so much metal, hundreds of thousands of cars on the freeways — metal glinting. It's a cultural thing. And it's the case that many of us grew up by the ocean. That was also part of it. Now when I say cold light, I'm contrasting that with what I think of as warm light. It's true that California is always called the Golden State and people talk about the golden light of the Golden State, but actually this golden light is found in places like the south of France and on the Côte D'Azur. The earth is a different color and almost all the buildings are earth colored, so the light seems very warm. Yes, that part of France is also on the ocean as is Southern California, but there even the ocean seems to be different from here. More than that, the light in California as it curves from western exposure to southern exposure changes—the south facing beaches have a different quality of light than the western facing beaches.

Rail: Classically painters look for northern light for their studios, right?
Pashgian: Yes, to achieve an even light.

Rail: But that's not what you're describing, you're talking about an intangible quality —
Pashgian: I'm talking about what it is like if you're standing on a jetty with the ocean around you and the beach in the background — or you're standing in the desert at sunrise and you're looking at the light. California light, just as Californians like to think of themselves, is cool.

Rail: [Laughs] And you are saying that the light's different in different parts even within Los Angeles?
Pashgian: Yes, and particularly at the coast. For example, the western facing beaches like Malibu and up north towards Oxnard, they're very windy beaches. And the wind has something to do with that light, particularly in late afternoon. The atmosphere is different. Many of the south facing beaches have less wind, because the prevailing wind is slightly different. That doesn't mean that when we have Santa Ana winds like we're having right now, that those places aren't windy. They are. But I'm talking about most of the time. So everything from sunrise to midday to sunset at the south facing beaches where I spent great chunks of my life is different.

Helen Pashgian, *Untitled*, 2019. Cast epoxy with artist made pedestal, 26 inches (diameter, 51 1/2 x 5 1/8 inches, (pedestal). Courtesy the artist and Lehmann Maupin, New York, Hong Kong, and Seoul. Photo: Joshua White.

Rail: Which south facing beaches?
Pashgian: Well around the ones in Orange County like Newport and Laguna Beach and some of those coves, which are very much south facing as opposed to west facing, although they do angle and undulate in and out. The differences are very, very subtle. And I'm sure that many people who spend lots of time there would totally disagree with me.

Rail: But did you grow up near the coast?
Pashgian: Partly.

Rail: Probably quicker to drive there when you were younger?
Pashgian: No, much slower! Three hours, no freeways. Little two lane roads, shortcuts. Driving through the orange groves to the dairy country, to the beanfields. I've spoken in the past about taking an imaginary trip from here in Pasadena to the beach, about going through the orange groves. You would make this imaginary trip along little two lane roads lined on both sides with enormous eucalyptus trees, behind which would be lemon groves or orange groves as far as the eye could see. And then you'd come to the flat country, which was where the dairy farms were, and then you'd come to lima bean fields. And then you would come to a slightly hilly area where there'd be more farms, and then you'd come to the coast, where there would be more farms. So that would

be the trip. But the Southern California of today stretches now from the mountains to the sea; and from Santa Barbara to Mexico is one enormous city. It's very exciting because demographically it's forever changing all the time; a place in flux that is culturally very rich. And yet, I mourn the lost California of my youth. I'm mentioning this because I've become aware that even though this artwork springs from Southern California it is so minimal that it can exist within any culture at any time. I like that because it speaks to everyone, no one feels excluded from it. It's not political and it's not temporary.

Rail: Well that also relates to what we were saying about the forms being essential forms —
Pashgian: Geometrical forms. They're very pure —

Rail: — circles, ovals, ellipses. You might even describe or define an ellipse as a circle moving through time.
Pashgian: I hadn't thought of it like that.

Rail: Let's go back to talking about ovals, or ovoid forms, and ellipses, because you have another whole series of works in the form of columns, which showed at LACMA and elsewhere and then were acquired by LACMA.
Pashgian: These are ovals but with a double ellipse.

Rail: Plus you have a large body of works in purely spherical form, but with other shapes cast or embedded within them that alter how light is transmitted through the spheres.
Pashgian: I also cast a number of spheres like this way back in the early or mid '60s.

Rail: And you made a few ovoid pieces in the mid '60s.
Pashgian: Very few, but yes.

Rail: So this is not you just stumbling upon a new form. These are your essential forms, the circles, ellipses, spheres, ovals?
Pashgian: When I thought of these forms—the ovals and the spheres — I thought of them initially as containers. And in the columns, the double ellipse, there are images inside. As you look at the column you feel you want to walk around it. It compels you to walk around the edge thinking you will see something more. But in fact you see less because of the distortion.

Rail: Well, in one of the double ellipse columns of yours that I happen to have there are colors embedded inside. But as you move around the column one color at first disappears and then continuing on around a different color emerges.
Pashgian: The column continually distorts both the color and the light because of its elliptical shape and also because of the way that the color, or image, is placed within it. It's placed that way precisely in order to dissolve. Without going into the technical details, it has a lot to do with how close the colors come to the edge or how far they are from the edge.

Rail: So much of you work is about appearance and disappearance.
Pashgian: That's right, because my work is all about this ephemeral thing — light, and its ephemeral qualities. And the fact is, the geometric forms I use have been around since the pyramids and before; they transcend time. That's what I meant when I said they could have existed thousands of years ago, because humankind has been playing with these forms and been fascinated with them for a long time, as have scientists. Just look at Leonardo's *Vitruvian Man* (c. 1490). All artists are continually fascinated by these basic forms.

Rail: Perhaps it's too obvious to say they're physiologically driven, but there is a relationship in your work to the way the body is constructed. I'm thinking of the 5 feet diameter reach.
Pashgian: You've probably seen the picture of me in Flaunt Magazine, standing behind a large yellow disc — your piece actually — and I'm dressed in black standing in such a way that only my hands and feet extend past the edge of the work. The center of the work appears to be opaque, so you really just see the limbs. It's very funny. Anyway, as I was saying, I think of the columns as containers. The double elliptical shape is continually mysterious because as you move around it whatever you see inside distorts, dissolves, and reappears. So the basic question is: Why am I interested in things that either have no edges, or have images that appear, distort, and disappear? It perhaps has to do with the ephemeral quality of life.

Rail: Well you talked about the loss of the California you had known in your early years. You're evoking not just perceptual appearance and disappearance, but memory itself.
Pashgian: Memory, perhaps; and as time passes we change. I had a wonderful professor at Pomona College who had us read Henry James's *The Ambassadors* (1903), which he considered at the time to be the greatest piece of writing of the 20th century. He said at the very end of the class: You can leave this great novel cut and bleeding on the floor at the age of 20, which you are now. But if in fact it is a great novel, you can pick it up at 40, 60, or even 80 years old, and reread it. It will be a different novel because you're a different person and because it is a great, organic whole. It will come together as an organic whole, but you yourself will have changed. These are literary ideas that Virginia Woolf also talked about, in a different way. She spoke about the passage of time and the writing of a novel. I do think that as time passes we change and the landscapes within which we live our lives change, all the while remembering who

we were before. Georgia O'Keeffe said, many times, when she was 90, about a year or two before she died: "I think that artists are fully formed by the time they're five years old. After that, it's a matter of refinement". And I too think that an artist's sensibility, though they're not practicing it yet, is fully formed then. There are certain images that are so indubitably powerful to a child who will later become a visual artist that they never forget them.

Rail: You've spoken about this being true for you, when as a child you were absorbed with seeing light passing through and glinting off pools of water by the sea.
Pashgian: I've always been interested in light as it passes through an object. I'm always interested in looking at a tree that is backlit, with the leaves, with the sun behind it, because it comes alive in a way that is unavailable to the human eye at any other moment. Georgia O'Keeffe again used to say she thought that's why artists in a way never grow up: "I think they are always in touch with that 5 year old".