



Helen Pashgian, California’s “Grand Dame of Light,” Unveils a New Series of Ethereal Sculptures

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Image courtesy of Peter Blake Gallery.

“New York light is clear and mild,” wrote the art critic Peter Schjeldahl. “Los Angeles light is soft and fierce. Edges stand out in New York. In L.A., they melt.”

Schjeldahl, writing for *The New Yorker* in 2010, was describing a specific exhibition of California minimalism, but his words could also be considered an introduction to the Light and Space movement in general. It was light—a particular quality of light, at once radiant and hazy, fragrant with the aromas of orange and eucalyptus and the ocean—that inspired a generation of California artists in the 1960s and ’70s to investigate the transformative power of light. They tried to capture and communicate that elusive texture as they experimented with geometric shapes, industrial materials, optical effects, and the essence of perception.



Helen Pashgian
Untitled (GR6), 2016
Peter Blake Gallery



Helen Pashgian
Untitled (GR9), 2016
Peter Blake Gallery

Among those artists were James Turrell, Robert Irwin, and Larry Bell—almost exclusively men, with an important exception. Sometimes referred to as “the leading lady of light” or “the grand dame of light,” Helen Pashgian (b. 1934) was the movement’s key female figure. Although she was just as much a pioneer as her contemporaries, her early work didn’t garner the same kind of attention—a fact Turrell himself has acknowledged. As he later wrote, Pashgian “was not initially accorded the position of her male colleagues.”



Helen Pashgian
Untitled (GR11), 2016
Peter Blake Gallery



Helen Pashgian
Untitled (GR4), 2016
Peter Blake Gallery

Later in life, however, Pashgian's practice has earned the recognition it deserves. Her sculptural works have been the focus of gallery exhibitions and museum shows, most recently with a solo show at Peter Blake Gallery in Laguna Beach. Amid the sea breeze and wintry sunshine, a stone's throw from the crashing waves, there could hardly be a more fitting venue for her ethereal work.



Helen Pashgian
Untitled (GR3), 2016
Peter Blake Gallery



Helen Pashgian
Untitled (GR13), 2016
Peter Blake Gallery

Though Pasadena-based Pashgian is best known for her small, translucent sculptures made of resin or glass, in recent years she has turned to larger-scale works. Indeed, some of her acrylic columns are larger than the people viewing them. As Pashgian once said, “I think of the columns as ‘presences’ in space—presences that do not reveal everything at once. One must move around to observe changes: coming and going, appearing and receding, visible and invisible—a phenomenon of constant movement. It touches on the mysterious, the place beyond which the eye cannot go.”



Image courtesy of Peter Blake Gallery.

Like her smaller sculptural works, the columns were inspired in part by the artist's vivid memories of her childhood in California. Glowing, mysterious, and meditative, her works have been described as Didion-esque love letters to the natural landscape of her home state. Now, decades after her sculptures were passed over for inclusion in Light and Space group exhibitions, it's immensely satisfying to see Pashgian's cutting-edge practice get its due.

—Bridget Gleeson

Helen Pashgian's solo show is on view at Peter Blake Gallery, Laguna Beach, California, Nov. 5–Dec. 18, 2016.