

Artist Helen Pashgian brings her love of light to LACMA's space

Before 'Helen Pashgian: Light Invisible' opens at LACMA, the Light and Space artist discusses her work and her fascination with light — but not her personal life.

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On this dark, drizzly afternoon, one could easily miss Helen Pashgian's Pasadena art studio, a converted piano warehouse nestled down an alleyway between a parking garage and a coffee house. Except that Pashgian's brick studio is painted sunny yellow and ocean blue, and it pops against the surrounding blur of concrete and gray sky — a spot of light and levity amid the heavy and the dreary.

The 79-year-old artist, a pioneer of Southern California's Light and Space movement of the '60s and '70s, also pops when she appears in the entrance. Tall and athletic-looking in jeans and a plain blue jersey, her platinum blond hair swept elegantly off her face, Pashgian swings open the door with exuberance.

"Come on inside!" she says brightly. "Let's get this started!"

She leads the way into her creative sanctuary, where she's tweaking a new installation that goes on view Sunday at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. At first glance, her studio looks like a carpenter's work space. Shelves of power tools, plastic safety goggles and coils of orange electrical cord line the walls. A disc-shaped industrial epoxy mold, roughly the size of a car hood, dries on a tabletop, beneath a sheath of white cardboard.

"Don't look under there! Not yet," Pashgian says in a deep voice, followed by a short chuckle that's both playful and a bit threatening. "Let's sit. C'mon."

Pashgian was one of the few women in a loose group of Southern California artists who coalesced in the late '60s, including James Turrell, Larry Bell, Peter Alexander, Robert Irwin and DeWain Valentine. After World War II, these so-called Light and Space artists experimented with materials previously used in the nearby engineering and aerospace industries, such as fiberglass, polyester resin and plastics. The artists bent and twisted these materials, also used to make surfboards and custom cars, into sculptural works that often played with light and perception.

Although Pashgian has shown her work, steadily, in solo and group gallery shows since the '60s — she's currently at L.A.'s Ace Gallery — she didn't achieve the same widespread recognition as her male contemporaries. She only recently inched into a brighter spotlight as part of the 2011-12 Pacific Standard Time program, where she was in two group exhibitions.

"She's someone who's been really overlooked from that period because women were overlooked in the art world then," Turrell says. "I worked with light and sort of materialized it. Bob Irwin worked with material and de-materialized it into light aspects. Helen was the one who as a sculptor spiritualized the material world. You can sort of materialize the spiritual, but she was coming from the other direction, and I thought that was really interesting and beautiful in her work."

"Helen Pashgian: Light Invisible" opens Sunday at LACMA as Pashgian's first solo show at a major museum. The large-scale installation consists of 12 towering acrylic columns, milky white and translucent, that stand 8 feet high and will run for 120 feet when lined up in the museum's Art of the Americas Building. The columns illuminate varied shapes inside of them — a floating, jellyfish-like disc, a glowing cube or elongated triangle. They're elegant and austere, dramatic and sensual — and oddly nuanced, morphing as viewers move around them.

Don't get personal

Pashgian is equally nuanced. Settled into a folding chair in another room of her studio, she expresses an exuberance for her artwork that is matched only by fleeting bouts of guardedness. She tries to lay down ground rules for the interview: no personal questions. Nothing about her private life — kids, marriage or lack thereof — shall be discussed.

"I'm just private," she says, shrugging her shoulders. Eventually she confirms she grew up as a third-generation Pasadenan and studied art history at Pomona College. But she won't talk about family; friends and associates interviewed for this story say they know of no spouses or children. "This interview, it's about the work," Pashgian insists.

The artist says she mulled over how to execute the new installation for about 10 years. The columns, not unlike Pashgian herself, are deceptively simple on the outside but house a complex infrastructure. They contain a web of invisible clamps and glue, among other things, to position the interior shapes just so, to cast shards of light and shadows.

To create the columns themselves, Pashgian worked with an industrial fabricator, heating enormous sheets of acrylic into almost fabric-like fluidity, then molding them into two-part columns joined by a fold at the center. She's shown early incarnations of the design at Ace Gallery and at Pomona College, but the entire installation has never been seen publicly.