

# Helen Pashgian

GLENN PHILLIPS

The experience of viewing Helen Pashgian's *Untitled (Lens)* can begin as one of confusion. Here is a luminous orange disk, vibrant at its center and gradually fading to yellow at the edge. The edge itself, however, seems more difficult to discern than it should be: Where does Pashgian's artwork end and the surrounding room begin? Careful concentration should provide an answer but instead yields a new phenomenon: the eyes begin to form afterimages (in this case a foggy aqua) that create a halo around the work—an auratic presence not coming from the object but evoked by the human retina. It feels wrong to look away and barely right to blink: that afterimage belongs on top of the disk just so, yet it still feels as if there might be movement happening around the piece. As the lights in the room slowly dim and grow (they are on a programmed cycle), the effects only intensify. After extended concentration by the viewer, the lens's thin acrylic pedestal, and indeed everything else in the room, may even seem to fall away completely, leaving only the experience of a hovering, halo-encircled light. If ancient and medieval scientists were not yet sure whether vision occurred via the eye's receiving or transmitting information, it may be perceptual effects akin to these that left room for debate. The experience of Pashgian's work involves a communion between the artist's precisely tuned objects and the viewer's physiological response to those objects, with each producing only one portion of the overall physical experience.

Pashgian, together with Robert Irwin and James Turrell, among others, was part of a group of Southern California artists whose work in the 1960s and 1970s came to be known as the Light and Space movement. These artists used high-tech materials and a sophisticated understanding of human perception to create objects and environments that were often so spare in their presentation as to push vision to the edge of malfunction. By challenging depth and edge perception and using new materials to capture rarely depicted effects of light, these artists created works that could evoke an awe and wonder in their audiences that may be our closest equivalent today to the perceptual effects of sacred spaces on a medieval viewer. While it may seem counterintuitive to compare these radically minimal artworks to magnificently ornate medieval spaces, they are united in the degree of effort and control that their creators have expended to produce environments that are utterly beyond the outside world, energized and transformed by light, and worthy of pilgrimage. It is spaces like these that invite us to slow down, to focus attention, and to contemplate vision, the self, and perhaps the beyond.

125

**Helen Pashgian** (American, b. 1934)

*Untitled (Lens)*, 2023

Cast urethane