

“Helen Pashgian and Brian Wills”  
Suzanne Hudson / October 2017



Brian Wills, *Untitled*, 2013, Oil and rayon thread on wood , 36 x 36 inches

A two-person show of Helen Pashgian and Brian Wills, “Transient” modeled the visual volatility characteristic of many 1960s Southland art practices. Despite its moorings in a Los Angeles vernacular of Light and Space—that likewise conjures a very specific horizon of military and commercial development and the coincident artistic appropriation of such technologies—this occasion eschewed historical specificity in favor of a formal, phenomenological dilation of temporality licensed by the same origins. (The press release casts “light” as atemporal, “as old as the universe itself,” and also as site-specific cosmology: “Both artists’ subject is the proto-light of the West, that blue, harsh light . . . reflecting and refracting off surfaces, smog, mist, casting shadows, and at times flashing brilliant diamond white, bright as an atom bomb.”) This critical regionalism presented with a contemporary orientation meant the privileging of recent works by Pashgian, some fourteen of which were collected with only two earlier polyester resin exemplars, *Untitled*, 1968, and *Untitled*, 1969–70, made just before her stint as artist-in-residence at the California Institute of Technology from 1970 to 1971. It also proposed the continuity of centered concerns of craft and refined surfaces, strategies that find their expression in Wills’s new gossamer-covered panels.

With pieces by Pashgian and Wills interspersed throughout the two main galleries, Totah insisted that the two artists be considered jointly. The first space offered some of Wills's vibrating constructions, wooden supports across which he stretched thousands of infinitely hued rayon threads in an array of intervals, patterns, and densities; Pashgian's adjacent contribution comprised her signature, comparatively diminutive spheres, here perched atop pedestals mounted to the wall, where they assumed the look of orphic marbles or agents of something like a solar corona. She began these in 1968 using cast polyester resin; by the following year, she began inserting acrylic rods into the centers of her orbs to exaggerate the refractive possibilities of the translucent materials. Getty conservator Rachel Rivenc has written about Pashgian's intricate and labor-intensive molding, dyeing, sanding, curing, and pouring, describing the results as the consequence of a method "more akin to home cooking than dehumanized industrial processes." While a comparably gendered reading might have been obtained at Totah, the emphasis on reception mitigated such concerns, proposing still another emphasis, on the here and now.

Pashgian's glassy, continuous surfaces quite literally reflect it. The artist's flatter, cast-epoxy squares that encircled the second room similarly responded to ambient fluctuations in atmosphere and solicited the physical movement of the viewer before them. Almost holographic, they shift from deep, opalescent blackness to nebular bursts: a shaft of emerald light in one, an aqueous square of chartreuse in another, and cruciform shafts of icy white, teal, and leaf in still more (all *Untitled*, 2009–11). Where Pashgian continues to mine spectral qualities, forcing not just an optical but a bodily response, Wills similarly conjures works that appear wholly different from themselves when seen from straight on, or obliquely from the sides, much less up close or farther back. From a distance of even a few feet, the constitutive threads dissolve into bands of dematerialized color, which obdurately reassert themselves only at a nearer range. This effect was produced in two examples: one where the grain is preserved and another where it is willfully overwhelmed by a fiery crimson. *Untitled* (Wood poly), 2007, and *Untitled* (fire red poly), 2016, featured ligneous grounds and embedded rayon threads within an overall coat of polyurethane, whereas others, including *Untitled* (yellow on walnut hovering thread), 2017, maintain a gap between fiber and background and leave the former untreated. Like the Pashgians, they are simultaneously portals and closed surfaces. But first and foremost, they are built, manifestly made things. They admit a human aspect that cosmic framing obscures, perhaps suggesting a scale of response that is appropriately contingent.