Lumen: Helen Pashgian

The experience of viewing Helen Pashgian’s Untitled (Lens) may begin with confusion. Here is a luminous orange disk, vibrant at its center and gradually fading to yellow at the perimeter. The edge itself seems more difficult to discern than it should be. Where does Pashgian’s artwork end and the surrounding space begin? Careful concentration should solve this dilemma but instead yields a new phenomenon: our eyes begin to form afterimages (a foggy aura) that create a halo around the work—an aural presence that does not arise from the object but is evoked by the human retina. It feels wrong to look away and barely right to blink. The afterimage belongs on top of the disk just so, yet it still feels as if there might be movement happening around the image. As the lights in the room slowly, cyclically grow and dim, the effects only intensify. After extended looking, the thin acrylic pedestal—in fact, everything in the room—may seem to fall away, leaving only a hovering, halo-encircled light.

These sensations help us understand the debate among ancient and medieval scientists over whether vision occurs via the eye receiving information or transmitting it. Engagement with 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.
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