

MIGUEL ABREU GALLERY

TISHAN HSU

selected texts & press

TISHAN HSU

Since the mid-1980s, Tishan Hsu's prescient artistic practice has been probing the cognitive as well as physical effects of transformative technological advances on our lives. Through the use of unusual materials, software tools, and innovative fabrication techniques, his enigmatic paintings and sculptures explore and manifest poetic new ways to engage and reimagine the human body.

After studying Environmental Design and Architecture at MIT in the 1970s, Hsu rose to prominence during New York's East Village era with a quick series of exhibitions at the Pat Hearn Gallery and a 1987 show with Leo Castelli.

"Looking back," Hsu notes, "the evolution of imaging software, printing technologies, new materials, sensor technology, video and sound have enabled the work to unfold in clearer and more radical ways. The sensibility needed the technology. There has been a synchronicity that I did not expect."

From early on Hsu's work began to reflect his "assessment that technology was becoming an extension of the human body," as Julie Belcove writes, which is "a condition he concluded was destined to intensify over time. Modular tiles in his sculptures echoed bits of digital data; three-dimensional objects hinted at contraptions yet to come. Paintings evoked computer monitors but also blood cells or flesh." The body, Hsu came to realize, could no longer be represented the way it had been for centuries. He was seeing the future.

Following a two-year move to Cologne in 1988, Hsu took a job teaching at Sarah Lawrence College, from which he recently retired. An artist-intellectual ahead of his time, Hsu worked quietly for many years, largely overlooked or forgotten by the art world – until now.

After his mother's death in 2013, Hsu turned his longstanding interest in the social and technological constitution of bodies to the more personal consideration of race, history, and heritage. Traveling to China for the first time, Hsu discovered among his mother's possessions an archive of family letters and photographs documenting life in the years immediately following the 1949 revolution, when his family was separated and his parents unable to return to their Shanghai home. Elements of the archive appear throughout this series, simply titled *The Shanghai Project*. Hsu deploys these personal artifacts using a variety of digital processing techniques as a way of navigating the gaps and traces of cultural memory and individual consciousness within the digital realm. Family photographs recur in varied states of opacity within fields of warping pixels. The images are manipulated digitally using photo editing software, scanning, and re-photographing, as well as through material interventions. After being printed onto aluminum sheets, Hsu builds up the surfaces of the works with drips and protrusions of pigmented silicone. These works occupy the site of the mind and body striated by the flux of information. As the artist notes, *The Shanghai Project* engages "how the personal registers through technology; what is coded, stored, and what is not."

Hsu has been making the majority of his paintings on canvas since the late 1980s using a silkscreen process to juxtapose images of his close-up pastel drawings of flesh with appropriated biomedical images of orifices and body parts. The scale of these works is such that the dot matrix of the silkscreens is markedly legible. His most recent paintings, further, almost announce their techno-mediation through an evident digital reproducibility. Various re-engaged motifs from his visual vocabulary are now warped and morphing into hardware and screens and become part of a larger corporeal entity. "The appearance of white noise, glitches and dislodged body parts adrift in the grid," writes Jeppe Ugelvig, "is reminiscent of the 'cyberpunk' aesthetics of the early 1990s, which similarly worked to articulate anxieties and fantasies about an uncertain digital future. But while much cybernetic thinking from this era imagined the web as a form of life privileging the immaterial mind (and thus doing away with the body), Hsu's work insists on the fundamental corporeality of our encounter with such virtual systems. The body figures not as some disposable prosthetic, but as a kind of interface, a place that connects various systems of reality." As our lives increasingly expand into the unleashed digital domain, Hsu locates the human body amid different forms and velocities floating in the data stream.

Tishan Hsu (b. 1951, Boston) lives and works in New York. He studied environmental design and architecture at MIT and received his BSAD in 1973 and M.Arch in 1975. His first exhibition in New York was at Pat Hearn Gallery, and in 1987, he had a one-person show at Leo Castelli. Hsu's survey exhibition, Liquid Circuit, opened at SculptureCenter in 2020, following its first iteration at the Hammer Museum, Los Angeles. In 2022, his work was included in the 59th Venice Biennale, The Milk of Dreams, and in the 58th Carnegie International, Pittsburgh, Is it morning for you yet? Tishan Hsu: recent work was on view at the Secession, Vienna earlier this year; and his first European survey exhibition opened at MAMCO, Geneva in March, 2024. In 2019, DELETE, was held at Empty Gallery, Hong Kong. Hsu's first New York gallery exhibition in 32 years, skin-screen-grass, took place at Miguel Abreu Gallery in October 2021. Hsu's work has also been featured in major group exhibitions, including Between pixel and pigment: Hybrid painting in post-digital times at both Museum Marta Herford and the Kunsthalle Bielefeld, Germany (2024); the 13th Gwangju Biennale, Minds Rising, Spirits Tuning (2021); TECHNO at Museion, Bolzano, Italy (2021); and The Poet-Engineers at Miguel Abreu Gallery, New York (2021), among others.

Hsu's solo exhibition, Interface Remix is currently on view at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Toronto. His work is included in The Living End: Painting and Other Technologies 1970 – 2020, curated by Jamillah Jones at the MCA, Chicago through March 16, 2025.

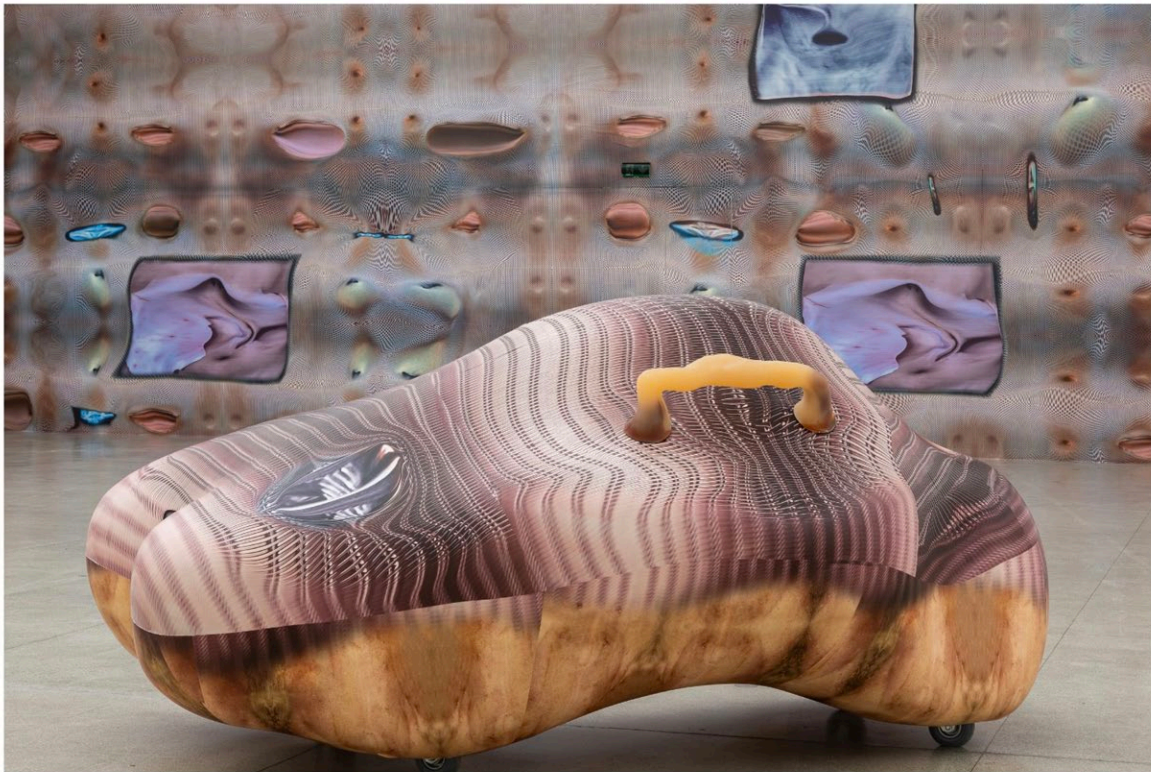
Tishan Hsu's work is held in the collections of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; The Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles; Dallas Museum of Art; Centre Pompidou, Paris; Tate Modern, London; Museum für Moderne Kunst (MMK), Frankfurt; MAMCO Geneva, Switzerland; M+, Hong Kong; Pinault Collection; High Museum, Atlanta; The Weisman Art Museum, Minneapolis; Terra Museum, Mexico City; Museum of Contemporary Art, North Miami; X Museum, Beijing; and The Rubell Family Collection, Miami, among others.

Flash Art

•REVIEWS

Tishan Hsu *MAMCO / Genève* by Marilena Borriello

April 9, 2024



① 2 3 4 5 6 7

Tishan Hsu, *mammal-screen*, 2023. EPS foam, polyester resin, epoxy, paint, vinyl wrap, stainless steel and casters. 165 x 180,35 x 307,34 cm. Photography by Oliver Ottensschläger, Secession, Wien. Courtesy of the artist, Miguel Abreu Gallery, New York; and Empty Gallery, Hong Kong.

“Cyberspace involves a reversal of the current mode of interaction with computerized information. At present, such information is external to us. The idea of cyberspace subverts that relation: we are now within information.” With these words in 1991, Marcos Novak, a pioneer in virtual architecture, portrayed cyberspace as a fluid and weightless environment, a realm where Euclidean laws lose their significance. His conception of liquid architecture is a space that exists, pulsates, and breathes. It is a nexus of interconnectedness and a journey into the realm of imagination, where linear thinking dissolves before a poetic perspective.

Novak's depiction of liquid architecture offers a captivating lens for looking into Tishan Hsu's originality. Defying categorization and embodying a unique presence in contemporary art, Hsu has cultivated a body of work spanning more than four decades. Often seen as reflections on the implications of technology and artificial intelligence, his pieces transcend mere futuristic evaluation, revealing fragments of a broader, more intricate intuition. Hsu's creations form a dynamic cybernetic landscape, merging human and nonhuman elements, akin to Novak's poetic fluidity. His first European retrospective, curated by MAMCO in collaboration with Vienna Secession, offers valuable insights into his evolving artistic journey.

The exhibition unfolds in chronological order, showcasing some of Hsu's early works, including previously unseen pieces such as *Edsel* (1983), *The Cross Product of Madame X* (1984), and *No Name* (1986), alongside the latest creations crafted for this occasion, like *grass-screen-skin/object 3* (2023) and *mammal-screen* (2023). Additionally, it features other works like *screen-skin-ears with casts* (2023–24), a site-specific wallpaper conceived for MAMCO, as well as drawings produced during the exhibition setup (*gray-zone-9*, *gray-zone-10*, and *gray-zone-11*, all 2024). The chronological sequence of the exhibition provides a comprehensive overview of Hsu's linguistic and expressive evolution, highlighted primarily by his progressive adoption of increasingly larger dimensions and diversified materials, thus transforming these objects into seemingly ever-changing hybrid entities. A consistent feature in Hsu's early works involves the utilization of industrial materials commonly associated with architecture, such as vinyl cement, which the artist employs to generate optical effects. Through the coarse texture and protrusions facilitated by this material, Hsu approaches the surfaces of his works not merely as paintings but as evolving entities, hinting at the presence of something beneath their surface, striving to come forth. An emblematic example is *Blue Blood* (1984): what initially appear to be cellular bodies are, upon closer inspection, a series of fissures akin to surface lacerations, through which an amorphous entity seeks to emerge. The progressively imposing scale of Hsu's metonymic objects increases as one progresses along the path, serving as an ideal boundary between tangible, concrete reality and an uncertain, perhaps digital dimension.

The illusionary rupture of this boundary is subtly hinted at through the integration of three-dimensional elements. In pieces like *grass-screen-skin/object 3* (2023) and *skin-screen: emergence (quadriptych)* (2023), the rigidity of cement gives way to silicone, a sinuous and flexible material reminiscent of human flesh. This

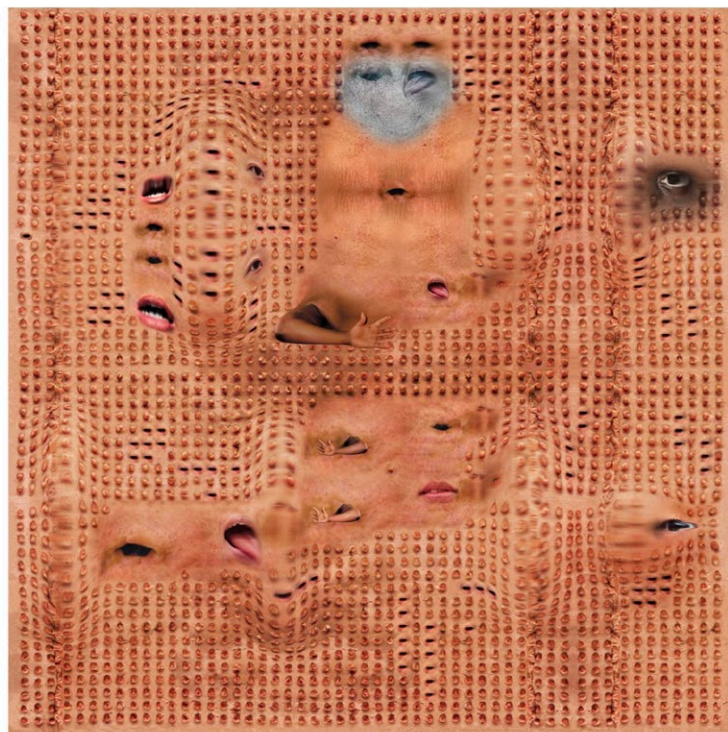


1 2 3 ④ 5 6 7

Tishan Hsu, *laptop-skin-1*, 2023. Powder coated steel, acrylic and acrylic casting. 266 × 600 × 380 cm. Photography by Annie Wetter. Courtesy of the artist; Miguel Abreu Gallery, New York; and Empty Gallery, Hong Kong. © Tishan Hsu / Pro Litteris, 2022.

transformation highlights a fundamental paradox that pervades both Hsu's artistic production and the exhibition itself. While his works present themselves as tangible physical entities, they simultaneously serve as vehicles of illusion, emerging from the wall to interact with space. This interplay between concreteness and illusion underscores the evolving relationship between the virtual and material worlds.

An intriguing aspect of Hsu's MAMCO retrospective is how these works are integrated within the exhibition space. Actively participating in the installation, Hsu meticulously sewed together his artistic objects, creating a sense of fluctuation through precise perspectives. From a specific vantage point, the observer perceives an illusion of continuity between different works. For instance, from the position of the sinuous object-sculpture *mammal-screen* (2023), one can perceive a connection with *interface Wall 5.0: Geneva Gallery* (2002/2024), a carefully adapted wall sticker for the museum's walls, featuring distorted compositions of lips, mouths, and eyes, along with *Interface Remix* (2001) and *screen-skin-ears with casts* (2023–24), wallpapers specially created for this space. This sinuous ensemble suggests a sense of momentum and fusion with the rest of the space, in harmony with the fluid lines of *mammal-screen*.



1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Tishan Hsu, *Interface Remix*, 2001. Archival inkjet on canvas. 243.80 x 241.30 cm. Photography by Annie Wetter. Courtesy of the artist, Miguel Abreu Gallery, New York; and Empty Gallery, Hong Kong. © Tishan Hsu / Pro Litteris, 2022.

Tishan Hsu's first European retrospective offers the observer an opportunity for a hybrid experience, in which the illusory aspect of the artwork merges with its physical presence. For this to occur, one must detach oneself from the monolithic narrative of the world, opening up instead to new perspectives and multifaceted realities. Thus, the exhibition corpus invites us to shift our focus beyond the limits of the self, envisioning a territory where relationships between human and nonhuman intertwine deeply and dynamically, like a symphony in space. It is, as Novak envisioned in his liquid architecture, an incessant, reflective flow in constant evolution.

Art in America

Tishan Hsu's New Works Ask: Which Orifice Is This?

By *Emily Watlington*

January 5, 2024 6:37am



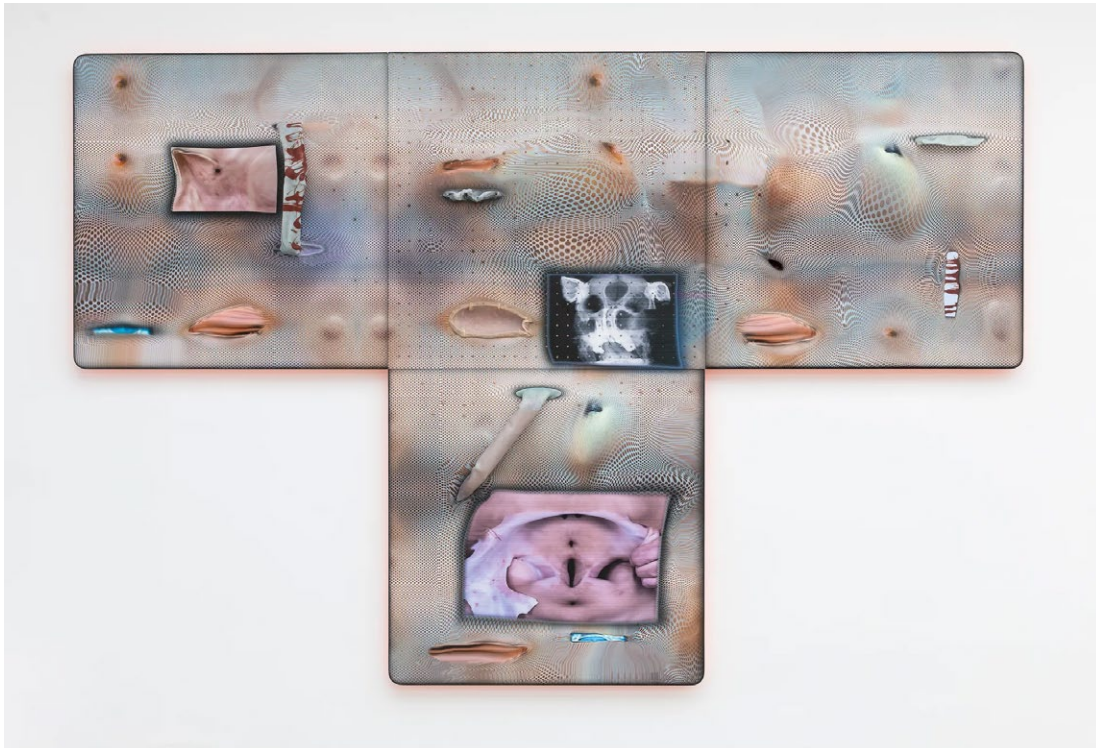
View of Tishan Hsu's exhibition "recent work 2023" at Vienna Secession.
PHOTO OLIVER OTTENSCHLÄGER

"Which orifice am I looking at?" is a question you'll likely find yourself asking as you explore Tishan Hsu's latest show at Vienna Secession. It's a curious query to mull as you're unable to look away from labial-looking mouths and anus-appearing belly buttons, all recurring throughout the exhibition's dozen sculptures and wall works.

A most intriguing orifice can be seen in a photograph that Hsu affixed to the end of an abstract, lumpy, supine sculpture, right between two leglike mounds that appear to be spread apart. There, a black hole punctures through a distended mound of flesh. The print, with its black edges and rounded corners, might be mistaken for an iPad—even a moving image. For a moment, you may expect full-on body horror in the form of a video of a prolapsed anus. (Nearby, Hsu shows an actual video work in which bodily bits lurk behind a meshy surface, moving so slowly that you're primed to question whether the things on-screen are moving or still.) Step closer to this mysterious orifice and you'll see an innocent picture of an ear that—shot from an unusual angle, its attendant head blurred out—Hsu has rendered utterly uncanny.

Hsu wants viewers to attend to the changing ways that technology encourages us to relate—or not—to our own bodies. He shows us how we can now see ourselves from more angles than ever before, and yet this often breeds alienation instead of intimacy.

This exhibition in Austria debuts new works by a septuagenarian artist who's been exploring ever-weirder relationships between bodies and technology since the 1980s. He worked largely under the radar until a 2020 traveling survey at SculptureCenter in New York and the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles. His next stop was the 2022 Venice Biennale; amid all this, he retired from teaching at Sarah Lawrence College. Now, he's debuting new works that are his best yet.



Hsu's art is sleek and clean, but leakage seeps beneath the surface. In his new work, he's nailed the push-pull in ways that both mesmerize and disgust. Though his works are regularly described as sci-fi, you'll be hard pressed to declare them either dystopic or utopic. Instead, Hsu evokes the twinned ways that technology both estranges and enlivens our bodies. It's work clearly born of an era in which cyborgian devices—pacemakers, nebulizers, insulin pumps—are enabling longer lives. How miraculous, and how bizarre.

Hsu's works are the quintessence of abjection, which, per the philosopher Julia Kristeva, refers to that which has been cast off, or to that which does not respect boundaries. In her 1980 book *Powers of Horror*, Kristeva memorably describes how long hair is often beautiful when attached to a woman's head, but then disgusting once disembodied. Hsu's abject forms include orifices isolated from bodies, and edges that seep subtly, quietly threatening to contaminate the pristine white cube in which they're set. Some fleshy frames ooze beyond their rectangular confines—gently, as if viscous. Other paintings with neon-hued backs are mounted inches from the wall, their florescence bouncing behind.

Hsu's isn't art that tells you what to think but, instead, leaves you with an unsettling feeling that you can't quite resolve, that can make you look at something ordinary like you've never seen it before. Something you thought you knew—like an ear.

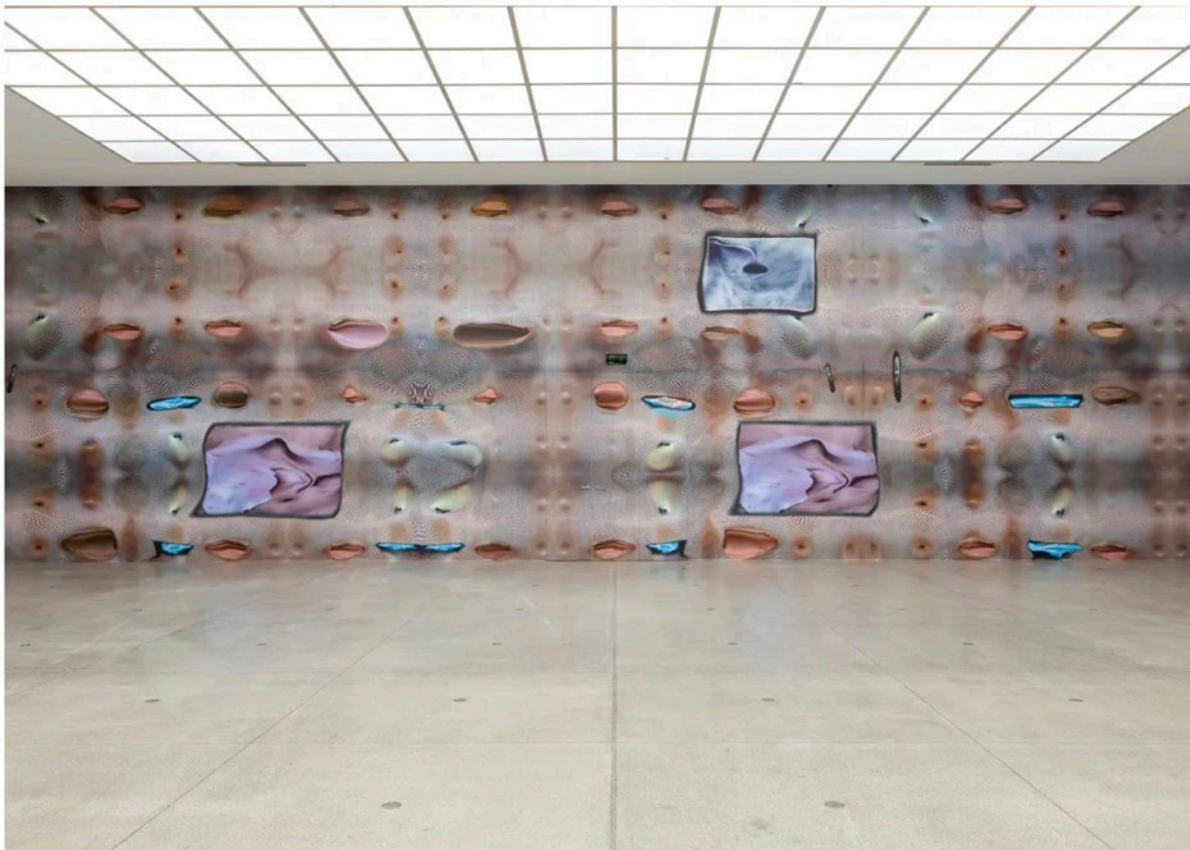
SPIKE

By **Ramona Heinlein**

23 January 2024

Tishan Hsu, Secession, Vienna

Tishan Hsu at Secession

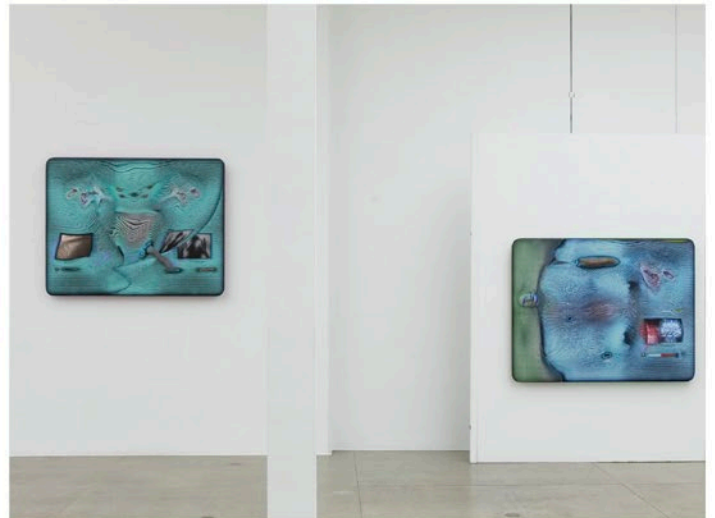


View of "recent work 2023," Secession, Vienna, 2023. All photos: Oliver Ottenschläger

Deliriously vibrating between wonder and unease, an exhibition in Vienna deepens the artist's probe into the fusion of bodies and machines.

Experiencing Tishan Hsu's exhibition "recent work 2023" feels like a rollercoaster ride: You get the rush of dissolving reality, the near weightlessness at the top, but also the nasty contraction of the viscera and the slight nausea that sits in the throat on the way back down. This is surprising as, except for one LED panel with an animated video and sound (*grass-screen-skin: zoom 2*, all works 2023), there is no actual movement involved in this show. Hsu manages to shake you up with static renderings of creature-like grids and mechanical nudes that combine abject carnality with dizzying digital illusion.

Hsu's recent rediscovery and his introduction as a late-understood visionary, first by a major survey at the Hammer Museum and the SculptureCenter in 2020, followed by his appearance at the 2022 Venice Biennale, continues at Secession, where a selection of new works is shown. Hsu's oeuvre has always been marked by an astonishing stringency, while consistently being infused with the latest technological developments, from digital images and photoshop to 3D printing and AI (the latter used by Hsu for the first time in producing the exhibited works). His engagement with the entanglement of body and technology dates back to the early 1980s, when the artist moved from Boston, where he grew up and studied architecture at MIT, to New York, where he took up a job as word processor at a Wall Street law firm. These forward-looking environments informed his practice around cyborg-like hybridity, which, at that time, was largely a trope in sci-fi literature and film rather than in the visual arts.



In Vienna, one of the most striking pieces, *skin-screen: emergence (quadriptych)*, consists of four rounded panels that, attached to the wall at a distance, leave a neon orange radiation behind them. Here, hyperreal evocations of skin are fused with a distorted grid. A shimmering, heart-shaped form with numerous, fragile wrinkles seems to push outwards, while skin clothed with goosebumps, simultaneously formless and razor-sharp, floats in a stream of blurred dots – receding materiality meeting stirring physicality. As though this were not visually and viscerally bewildering enough, there are also silicon forms growing out of the panels, whether as tiny messy blobs that seem to be squeezed out of the grid or as some kind of limb breaking out of and repenetrating its surface. In between, there are juicy nipples and screen-like recesses that show an X-ray of an animal and slightly fuzzy images of flesh and orifices.

Every surface in the exhibition, encompassing further wall works and two sculptures, is like a battlefield of different realities, textures, and modes – and even of the body itself, albeit never in its “natural” wholeness. Destabilizing essentialist categories like “gender,” “subject,” “nature,” or “technology,” the body is only shown from a clinical, factual perspective in total fragmentation and depersonalization, as a locus of surveillance and control by techno-rationality. At times, the artist chooses quite stale images to make his point – for example, a person behind a screen touches it as if being captured (*double-breath-green-2*), or a masked human overwritten with the slogan “Erase all data? [Y/N]” (*screen-bodydata*) – while still managing to maintain an uncanny atmosphere.



Simultaneously, the exhibition space is surreally filled with the innocent chirping of crickets and the singing of birds – a nature soundtrack reminiscent of sleep sounds meant to relieve insomnia. The moment is immersive, just like the striking work *ears-screen-skin: Vienna*, a printed wallpaper that covers the whole front wall in different motifs derived from the panel works. Even though the ornamental structure contains repetition and seriality, the forms in this body-tech landscape are inexactly mirrored, lending it an affective liveliness that tosses back and forth between discomfort and marveling.

“recent work 2023”

Secession, Vienna

1 Dec 2023 – 11 Feb 2024

RAMONA HEINLEIN is an art historian, editor and writer living in Vienna.

X—TRA

REVIEW Laura Brown

Continuous Surface

Tishan Hsu: Liquid Circuit

SculptureCenter, Long Island City, New York
September 4, 2020–January 25, 2021



Tishan Hsu, *Heading Through*, 1984. Vinyl cement compound, ceramic tile, acrylic, wood, Styrofoam, steel, 39 × 82 × 60 in. Collection of the artist. © 2021 Tishan Hsu / Artists Rights Society. Photo: Jeff McLane.

Upon entering *Tishan Hsu: Liquid Circuit*, the artist's first museum survey in the United States, one encounters *Autopsy* (1988). The sculpture resembles a broad corporate office building shrunk down to human scale. Dusty brown tiles wrap around its smooth volumes, which follow the vacuum-formed logic of a hot tub or fridge. With the artist's oversight, the sculpture's modular layers may be swiveled one way or another on its central vertical axis to achieve its temporary resting position.¹ A wide pink surface cuts open across the top plane and four pink columns protrude at each corner, with spherical stainless steel wheels dangling at their ends. Four more of these wheeled feet on the sculpture's underside connect with the floor below. I imagine the entire object could be flipped horizontally and land just the same. The title of Hsu's opener suggests that we consider the cause of death, presupposing that this being was once alive

or that it is something in between: living but inert, or changeable postmortem. If what we approach here is an (abandoned) autopsy in progress, the viewer doubles as the imagined medical examiner.

The gridded tile that stretches across *Autopsy* is one of Hsu's earliest materials, and it marks a bridge between his practice as an artist and his studies in architecture at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in the 1970s. (He moved to New York City at the end of the decade.) In Hsu's words: "Tile has a gridlike quality that has implications in art history and is also related to my interest in the technological. There was no digital at the time. The tiled grid defines a surface, but I could build tile into forms, so the work could become an object seamlessly, going from gridded surface to organic form . . ." ² Hsu's *Ooze* works demonstrate this shift. Turquoise tile spreads horizontally and vertically, suggesting a portion of the lining of a swimming pool (as with the sculpture *Ooze*, 1987); it also wraps and stacks (*Vertical Ooze*, 1987), and reappears in smaller, sunken squares on the wall (*Reflexive Ooze*, 1987). This physical shift between surface and volume is also a cerebral one, wherein the grid describes form as information. The grid provides the basis for computational mapping, including of the body in a space. Tile is also a furnishing—in other words, a mediating surface between one's body and architecture. These things converge in Hsu's works to describe our involvement with the technologies we produce as humans and which, in turn, produce us.



Tishan Hsu: Liquid Circuit, installation view, SculptureCenter, New York, September 24, 2020–January 25, 2021. Left to right: Tishan Hsu, *Closed Circuit II*, 1986, acrylic, alkyd, Styrofoam, and vinyl cement compound on wood, 59 × 59 × 4 in.; Tishan Hsu, *Vertical Ooze*, 1987, ceramic tile, urethane, vinyl cement compound, acrylic, and oil on wood, 61 7/8 × 70 15/16 × 24 1/4 in.; Tishan Hsu, *Ooze*, 1987, ceramic tile, urethane, vinyl cement compound, and acrylic on wood, 137 1/2 × 181 1/2 × 68 1/2 in.; Tishan Hsu, *Reflexive Ooze*, 1987, ceramic tile, vinyl cement compound, oil, acrylic, and alkyd on wood, 58 3/4 × 59 × 3 1/2 in. © 2021 Tishan Hsu / Artists Rights Society. Photo: Kyle Knodell.

If a survey show offers the opportunity to examine the progressions in an artist's work over time, this exhibition does so in a deliberately bracketed fashion. Of the more than forty works on view in *Liquid Circuit*, around three-quarters were made before 1990, weighting the presentation toward the early period of Hsu's output. His paintings made in the 1980s resemble bodies and faces pressing up against screens and bulging through them. One can imagine Hsu's experience of being enveloped by computer-screen light as he worked evenings during this time as a word processor.³ By the end of the 1980s, Hsu's art career reached a peak, with a succession of exhibitions at Pat Hearn Gallery and with Leo Castelli. In 1988, he moved to Cologne for two years, seeking a change of pace and place in which to focus on making art. Later works in the exhibition manifest his turn, at the onset of the 1990s, toward more flattened imagery that reflects the continued development of new screen technologies. The latest work on view, a video recording of custom software, was made in 2005. Hsu underwent a kidney transplant surgery in 2006, followed by a period of recovery and reorientation.

After the surgery, Hsu began referring to himself as a cyborg.⁴ But really, the cyborgian premise has always been present in his work. Software and machine learning evolved swiftly alongside Hsu's concerns about the ways in which the human body and brain would be formatted imminently by and through technology. As the two increasingly coincided, Hsu made use of these new digital tools.⁵ In his own words, "The sensibility needed the technology. There has been a synchronicity that I did not expect."⁶ Although the works in *Liquid Circuit* were made at least fifteen (and as long as forty) years ago, over and over I felt as if they had been made just this year, in response to the world they occupy today. A strange loop kept occurring in my mind, like I'd dropped off of the spacetime edge of *Vertical Ooze* only to land right back in front of it. Repeatedly, Hsu's work performs a series of doubles, flips, inversions, and feedback loops, by design and well ahead of itself.

Entering the main gallery of SculptureCenter, two paintings hang perpendicular to one another: *Couple* (1983) and *Portrait* (1982). The works are rectangular with curved corners, and they float a few inches away from the wall. Both attributes are characteristic of Hsu's paintings of the 1980s, which use supports like Styrofoam and cement compound on panel to build up their protruding surfaces, just as his sculptures do. (The sculptures hover above the floor like the paintings do from the wall.) To my eye, these curved forms read as descendants of the tarot card and precursors to the iPhone.⁷ *Portrait* displays the components of a face: two eyes and a mouth float disembodied within the frame. Between *Portrait* and *Couple*, Hsu's mode of abstraction slips into sudden figuration, then slumps back again. Other works become more body-like in their material fleshiness, as the more obvious markers of the figure or face disappear. A colored glow emanates from the rear of the wall works that Hsu made in the second half of the 1980s, suggesting the transillumination of a screen or the drop shadow form that was beginning to appear in computer graphics at the time. Throughout the exhibition, the freestanding walls are curved at their upper corners, echoing the rounded edges of the paintings they

display. The placement higher up on the walls of works like *Portrait* suggests a hidden or meta code for reading the work. In this configuration, the walls themselves act like screens upon which the works may be placed and continually rearranged, as if on a computer desktop. Hsu's work describes the human body as both a fleshy, glowing being and as an icon shifting inside the screen.



Tishan Hsu: Liquid Circuit, installation view, SculptureCenter, New York, September 24, 2020–January 25, 2021. Left: Tishan Hsu, *Couple*, 1983, oil stick, enamel, acrylic, and vinyl cement compound on wood, 66 × 48 in. Right: Tishan Hsu, *Portrait*, 1982, oil stick, enamel, acrylic, and vinyl cement compound on wood, 57 × 87 × 6 in. © 2021 Tishan Hsu / Artists Rights Society. Photo: Kyle Knodell.

At one end of the show, a grid of thirteen drawings, spanning 1980 to 1987, is hung in chronological order. Most are designated by their titles as studies for related works, including for *Portrait* and various others that appear in the exhibition. One drawing, *study – continuous surface* (1980), proposes a logically impossible object that stretches endlessly outward, over, and under itself, ricocheting in infinite lines that also make up a single form. Rather than serving as a sketch for a work to come, this drawing seems to diagram a broader concept (as indicated by its title) that plays out across Hsu's paintings and sculptures. Around the corner, perched about two feet from the ground on a frame of four metal legs, the perimeter of *Heading Through* (1984) is rendered by hand in a thick, putty compound that is tinted a sickly greenish blue. A field of tiles makes up the remaining horizontal plane of the work. At one edge, this surface rises up a level to curl over onto itself, and a strange lump, which turns into a face, appears to grow on the back of its new edge. The other edge drops toward the floor. The surface textures and hues of *Heading Through* appear to seep into the nearby wall works *Squared Nude* and *Plug* (both 1984). Perhaps, then, Hsu's "continuous surface" describes not only a structural device but also the activity that occurs both within and between Hsu's works, as well as that between the works and their viewers.



Tishan Hsu, *Heading Through*, 1984. Vinyl cement compound, ceramic tile, acrylic, wood, Styrofoam, steel, 39 × 82 × 60 in. Collection of the artist. © 2021 Tishan Hsu / Artists Rights Society. Photo: Jeff McLane.

Up close, Hsu's paintings consist of many ultrathin lines forming fields of texture like hair that sometimes break apart to reveal dark voids behind them. Hsu explains: "To make a screen, I painted the surface and scratched lines into it. . . . It wasn't a new technique, but it seemed to have the quality I wanted. I recalled making drawings by scratching lines onto a piece of paper through a layer of black crayon in grade school."⁸ The effect appears most pronounced in *R.E.M.* (1986), the undulating surface of which seems to be visually mapping a person's brainwaves during a sleep cycle (or two, as a second black space appears). But what is contained by these voids?

A 1983 Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) document describes what it calls the Gateway Process: essentially using methods of hypnosis, transcendental meditation, and binaural beats to interact with and potentially program consciousness between the brain's hemispheres. Following a great number of experiments (which find their foundation in the CIA's earlier MK-Ultra mind-control program⁹), the study describes parts of the brain as computer software and reality as a "universal hologram":¹⁰ "The universe is composed of interacting energy fields, some at rest and some in motion. It is, in and of itself, one gigantic hologram of unbelievable complexity. . . [T]he human mind is also a hologram which attunes itself to the universal hologram by the medium of energy exchanged thereby deducing meaning and achieving the state which we call consciousness."¹¹ By this description, the world as we know it is purely the result of information being received, processed, and delivered by the brain as image, heat, gravity, sound, and so on; thus all we really have access to or experience of

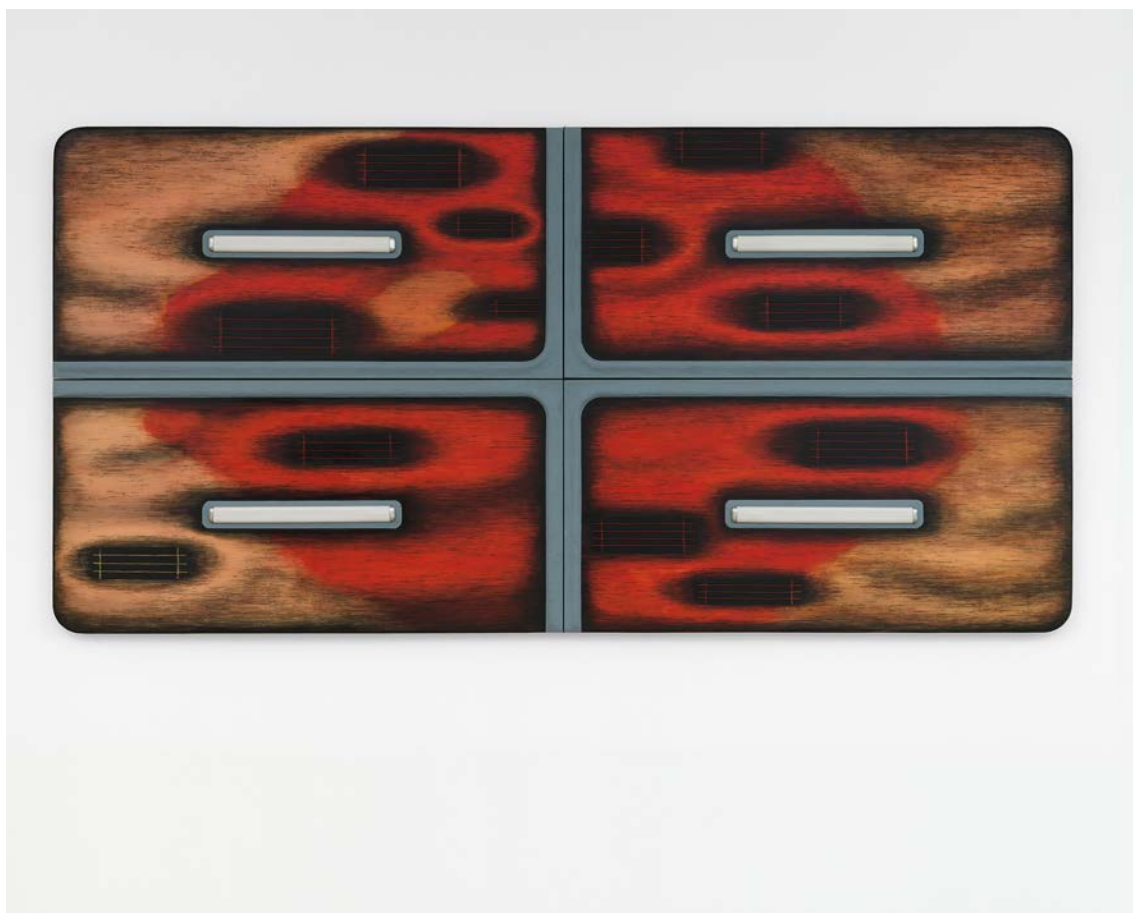
is a “scrim.” Looking into the shadow spaces that lie behind Hsu’s loosening lines, we might be looking at a depiction of this very scrim and glimpsing the vast nothingness that expands just behind it. At this point, a sense of scale all but drops away, in the same way it might when trying to comprehend the vastness of outer space (which, really, might be much the same thing).



Tishan Hsu, *Plasma*, 1986. Acrylic, alkyd, oil, and vinyl cement compound on wood, 16 × 93 1/2 × 4 in. Collection of Daniel Newburg. © 2021 Tishan Hsu / Artists Rights Society. Photo: Jeff McLane.

Throughout, Hsu’s choice of titles—which pun and double—act as keys for navigating this invisible terrain. High above *R.E.M.* is *Plasma* (1986). The work is short, almost six times as wide as it is tall, and it speeds across the top of the wall like a red-and-yellow pill, glowing red from behind. In physics terms, *plasma* is one of the four fundamental states of matter and possibly the most abundant in the universe.¹² It is associated with the sun and stars, both of which consist of plasma held together by its own gravity. It is basically a charged gas (although specifically not a gas) with strong electrostatic interactions. Lightning and neon lights are made of plasma, and plasma is used in manufacturing microchips and plasma TVs. Of course, *plasma* also refers to the liquid portion of blood, which constitutes more than half of its volume and is 92% water. The painting resembles all of the above: another continuous surface. The exhibition’s titular work, *Liquid Circuit* (1987), hangs at the heart of the space. At the center of its three conjoined yellow panels, three stainless steel grip bars stud the painting like the rungs of a swimming pool ladder, massive laces, or post-surgery staples.¹³ At either end, pushed apart from this center, an enlarged version of Hsu’s scratched-on screen motif reappears. At this scale, the lines that stretch across the voids could be those of sheet music, stitches, lasers, or the flickering lines of a CRT TV monitor. In these works from the latter part of the 1980s, the

colors become more primary. A massive patch of red seeps across the four panels of *Cell* (1987) which, like *Liquid Circuit*, approaches an industrial scale. Given its title, we might recognize this as a red blood cell, and yet the work and word also speak to its modularity. A raised horizontal strip running across the center of each quarter approximates fluorescent ceiling fixtures, and again a potential shift in orientation occurs. (What if the work were to be hung from the ceiling?)



Tishan Hsu, *Cell*, 1987. Acrylic, vinyl cement compound, oil, alkyd, vinyl, and aluminum on wood, 96 × 192 × 4 in. © 2021 Tishan Hsu / Artists Rights Society. Photo: Jeff McLane.

In a trio of grayscale drawings—*Dr. Hibbert screen module* (1990), *thermostat module* (1990), and *Dental screen module* (1994)—shaded surfaces rise around curved rectangles that display representational images: a television character, a familiar wall-mounted device, and medical imaging.¹⁴ The works indicate Hsu’s evolving approach to screen media and the photographic image, as he shifted into a flatter, more clinical aesthetic by the beginning of the 1990s. Applying the same treatment to medical imagery as cultural referent, these works also point toward Hsu’s concerns about the development of technology and media in terms of biometrics, in which the body becomes data. Alongside Hsu’s earlier textured paintings and sculptures from the 1980s, which were informed, as Jeannine Tang describes, by “shifts in industrial and product design toward more ergonomic, minimal and user-friendly aesthetics,” these later works, now flattened against

the wall, offer a doubled sense of the ergonomic as not only a question of industrial design but also as its own process of translation and transference of the body.¹⁵

In Hsu's words, "We're all in the same boat with this problem of information and security."¹⁶ The artist's return to New York was marked by his 1989 solo exhibition *Social Security* at Pat Hearn Gallery, which included *Cellular Automata* (1989; a version of which is on view in *Liquid Circuit*) and *Fingerprint* (1989; not in the show). In order to emigrate to Cologne, the artist had submitted his fingerprints and a "certificate of good behavior" from his German-citizen peers.¹⁷ The prints found their way into *Fingerprint*, which incorporates a Xerox copy behind a gridded safety glass. *Cellular Automata 2* (1989) is divided into nine squares that repeat or change, showing bodily elements broken apart through a fine mesh of screen-printed interference. An automaton is a "self-mover" (such as a machine) made in imitation of a human being, in whole or in part. For example, automata may be used to solve abstract problems (like a tic-tac-toe puzzle) by computationally mimicking the processes of the human brain. In another, billboard-like work, *Fingerpainting* (1994), photographic body parts repeat across a grid of fifteen silk-screened panes. An eye rolls back, a mouth is caught mid-speech, and smaller images of a mouth or toes appear within rounded rectangular modules. It's as if, as time progressed and the image became clearer and smoother, the body pressing out from its surface became ever more entrapped within it, serving to extend the neurological limits of this digital field by pushing at its bounds rather than to free itself.



Tishan Hsu, *Fingerpainting*, 1994. Silkscreen ink and acrylic on linen canvas, 71 × 177 in. © 2021 Tishan Hsu / Artists Rights Society. Photo: Jeff McLane.

If the automaton is a machine made to be human, the cyborg is a human-machine whose capacities are extended through the use of “external” devices. Although rooted in sci-fi fantasy, the concept of the cyborg applies to virtually all of us today. (Hsu: “Google is my memory.”¹⁸) When we find ourselves in a room looking at art, we almost certainly arrived here by relying on machine technology, which has come to rule the structure of our environments. And yet, the computational functions of these technologies cannot escape mimicking the processes of the human brains that created them. In this way, they are as much human as we are machine. The largest and most powerful algorithm in the world is one that you may have never heard of: Aladdin (Asset, Liability, Debt, and Derivative Investment Network). The algorithm functions through its massive computer server system to predict future world-changing events. Using this data, Aladdin is able to preemptively move trillions of dollars around so that those dollars, and the multinational corporate entities that own them, remain out of tragedy’s way by profiting from said oncoming tragedy. In doing so, the algorithm shelters the world’s macro structures from change in any fundamental sense. We now face the outperformance of the human brain by Artificial Intelligence (AI), which functions by machine learning, and beyond it lurks the encroaching problem of Artificial General Intelligence (AGI), which hypothetically could learn or understand not only the specific tasks it is programmed to do, but also any other cognitive task, just as a human might. Hsu’s work manifests this drastic sense of scale and creeping invisibility.

What makes us specifically human, then, when our consciousness can be altered by external forces and will likely be superseded? (If we are cyborgian, by definition this requires that we be human too.) Hsu’s work performs in parallel to this question. As art, it insists precisely upon the material interface as the means for describing the overwhelming relationship between the body and the invisible fields and flows that form it. A kind of doubling occurs, as if Hsu were the one trying to replicate the human through available means. The only moving image work in the exhibition, *Folds of Oil* (2005), gives a visual and sonic mirage of familiar animal textures within a dark non-space.¹⁹ Here, it’s as though sound has a weight, or like the hidden being in the image (and in all of Hsu’s works) might finally, suddenly turn to look you in the eye. Perhaps what is really human is that which lies beyond or behind consciousness and its illusions. This returns us to the unknowability of all things, human and “non-human”—including the malevolent algorithm.

A leap in time occurs between *Folds of Oil* and the work that appears on the gallery’s entrance wall: *Interface Wall 2.0 – NY* (2020), a vinyl surface of bodily protrusions and orifices distorted by magnification bubbles and resembling an early Microsoft Windows screensaver. The work is a continuation of the series *Interface Remix* (2002–ongoing), and the only one revised the year of the exhibition. It bears relation to *R.E.M revisited* (2002), made sixteen years after its precursor. The painting is a flat inkjet on canvas split in two, producing a subtle horizontal line of shadow just above the middle. A soft visual reflection occurs within the image as well, where flesh conjoins flesh. The double becomes a

mutation. One could consider the extent of machine learning as mutational as well, and so again Hsu not only intervenes but also mimics and alters from within the very processes that he addresses. In Hsu's work, the surface, screen, or scrim is the place where consciousness touches the world. But what of the dust that lies on top of the paint, which sits between the surface of each work and that of my body, in person? Perhaps what makes me human is that I notice this dust and its shadow, and that I believe it to be evidence of a longer material memory, one which I can press into.

X—

Laura Brown is a writer, editor, and curator living in New York.



Tishan Hsu: Liquid Circuit, installation view, SculptureCenter, New York, September 24, 2020–January 25, 2021.

Foreground: Tishan Hsu, *Autopsy*, 1988, plywood, ceramic tile, acrylic, vinyl cement compound, stainless steel, rubber,

55 × 49 × 94 in. Background: Tishan Hsu, *Interface Wall 2.0 – NY*, 2020, from the series *Interface Remix*, 2002–ongoing, inkjet on vinyl on sheetrock, dimensions variable. © 2021 Tishan Hsu / Artists Rights Society. Photo: Kyle Knodell.

Footnotes

1. Conversation with Nicholas Barlow, curatorial assistant at the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles. Documentation of various installations shows this change over time. ↩
2. Tishan Hsu quoted in “I’m a Cyborg: Tishan Hsu in Conversation with Sohrab Mohebbi,” in *Tishan Hsu: Liquid Circuit*, ed. Sohrab Mohebbi (New York: SculptureCenter, 2020), 37. ↩
3. The job title *word processor* (a person who handles correspondence and written documentation) still exists, often in legal and other corporate settings, although most jobs today inherently involve this administrative function to some degree. *Word processor* is also the name for the software used to perform these tasks. The first version of Microsoft Word was released in 1983; by 1990 it had eclipsed most others. At the turn of the 1980s, Hsu would have been using an earlier, pre-Word program. ↩
4. “I’m a Cyborg,” 51. ↩
5. Between 2000 and 2002, Hsu focused his energy almost entirely on learning Photoshop. By the year 2000, the software was emerging from its earlier days as a more specialized industry software, and Photoshop 6.0 was released to a broader public with a number of significant new features, including the Liquify filter, the ability to draw vector shapes, and new multilayer functions with blending options. By 2002, version 7.0 was released, introducing the Healing Brush and Patch tools, and the ability to create custom brushes. These tools performed tasks that Hsu was already executing in his art using other methods. ↩
12. Admittedly, we can’t confirm this due to the unknown properties of dark matter. ↩
13. This detail readily draws association with Donald Judd’s stacked forms and the broader lineage of minimalism. In Hsu’s own reflection on this work: “I felt that minimalism was a kind of beginning, though it felt like an end for a lot of people.” (“I’m a Cyborg,” 37–39.) ↩
14. Julius Michael Hibbert, MD, is the good-natured, highly competent family doctor on the animated TV series *The Simpsons*, which first aired in December 1989. Dr. Hibbert finds a reason to laugh in most any dark situation, and his presence in Hsu’s work points to an underlying deadpan humor in the artist’s artworks and titles. ↩
6. Hsu quoted in Gareth Harris, “Overlooked, but Not Forgotten: Tishan Hsu Presents First Solo Gallery Show in Over 20 Years,” *The Art Newspaper*, March 25, 2019, <https://www.theartnewspaper.com/preview/overlooked-but-not-forgotten-tishan-hsu-presents-first-solo-gallery-show-in-over-20-years>. ↩
7. Much like the tarot, Hsu’s works are more accurately described as projective than predictive. Interestingly, development of the first touch-screen iPhone began in 2005, where *Liquid Circuit* leaves off. ↩
8. “I’m a Cyborg,” 38. ↩
9. The CIA’s MK-Ultra project used doses of LSD and designed procedures on test subjects, including some who were unwitting. It officially ran from 1953 to 1973. See the CIA website: <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP96-00788R001700210016-5.pdf>. ↩
10. See <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIARDP96-00788R001700210016-5.pdf>, 11. ↩
11. See <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIARDP96-00788R001700210016-5.pdf>, 8. The study also quotes psychologist Keith Floyd: “Contrary to what everyone knows is so, it may not be the brain that produces consciousness—but rather, consciousness that creates the appearance of the brain. . .” (12). ↩
15. Jeannine Tang, “Simulation and Security,” in *Tishan Hsu: Liquid Circuit*, 57–58. ↩
16. “I’m a Cyborg,” 45. ↩
17. Tang, “Simulation and Security,” 63. ↩
18. “I’m a Cyborg,” 51. ↩
19. The work is a recording of software made in collaboration with Samuel T. Jackson. ↩

CULTURED

Tishan Hsu, Carol Bove, and More Celebrate their Confounding Medium at SculptureCenter's Gala

For the Long Island City, New York, museum's first gala in years, artists, curators, and patrons came together to honor pioneering artist Tishan Hsu.

WORDS

Kat Herriman

April 5, 2023



Photography by Jenna Bascom. All images courtesy of SculptureCenter.

The SculptureCenter Gala was a home game. The industrial red brick proportions of the museum used to be Long Island City standard issue, but now the building looks like a kid in the wrong grade among soaring, and possibly empty, residential towers that hold value for someone. SculptureCenter remains on this block, because of how pronounced its value has been for the neighborhood and the greater New York community. Artists return year after

year, decade after decade, to support its mission because they've seen the impact it's had on their own practices. It's a congregation that grows. There is something intrinsically church-like about the space with its large open nave, usually the stage for the museum's ceremonial solo shows. For yesterday evening's festivities, the institution's first gala in years, the place was kitted out by gala whisperer Erica Sarlo with tropical clippings and LED-strip centerpieces that changed colors as the evening elapsed. As familiar faces like Rafael Domenech, Diane Severin Nguyen, Korakrit Arunanondchai, Rindon Johnson and Rujeko Hockley retired from a drinks hour on the covered portico, the lights emitted a glowing green, sending a witchy flush over strangers and friends—an ice breaker for me and Rochelle Feinstein, a Long Island City artist of abstraction. She was also meeting someone new—Hadi Falapishi, whose wonderful show at Andrew Kreps has just recently come down.

Looking around, it felt like the crowd was majority artists, with a few curators peppered in here and there. I didn't want to question the details of such an idyll.



Aram Moshayedi and Tishan Hsu. Photography by Jenna Bascom.



The inimitable Carol Bove kicked off the night's sermons. The artist read a list that reaffirmed everything she loved about sculpture, addressing its confounding persistence as a genre and thereby SculptureCenter's own raison d'être. It was a kind of prayer with punchlines, a form Bove's work is often wont to take: "Sculpture can take up a lot of space for no discernable reason. It can also be invisible. It is very expensive. Some can recreate a category. Others can be impossible to distinguish from a normal object. It can get lost in your mind without you knowing it and come out much later. It can be inscrutable and obvious

at the same time. It can re-enchant everything. It can be something smarter than the person who made it. It can bring several traditions together even though they shouldn't be together. It can be a painting." Behind Bove, a new work by Tishan Hsu, the gala's honoree, pulsed with the same prescient recognition we've come to expect from the pioneering artist who reoriented our relationship to screens.



Photography by Brendan Cook/BFA.



SculptureCenter Director Sohrab Mohebbi introduced Hsu, whose 2020 retrospective he helped stage. In his speech, Hsu evoked the disappointment of arriving at his show double masked before quickly evacuating the city for safety. He recalled Mohebbi and Deputy Director Kyle Dancewicz's resilience in continuing to keep the show open and safe to the public in the face of a global catastrophe. Hsu spoke about all these things coming together to make this evening and this honor feel even more special and substantial for the artist. He thanked the three people he felt were responsible for his ascendance but also contributed to his resolve: Pat Hearn (the first gallerist to work with Hsu), Elaine King (who put him in a survey about the 1980s), and his late wife, who was instrumental in envisioning Hsu as an artist. He concluded by stating, "We are all interdependent." The LEDs flickered with a warm white light before spiraling out into an ombre dance.

artnet news

Tishan Hsu's Art Preceded Internet Aesthetics by Decades. Now, His Prescient Work Is Finally Getting Its Due

A digitally native generation has become captivated by the New York artist, who is in his 70s.

Louise Benson, March 22, 2023



Tishan Hsu, *phone-breath-bed 3*, 2023. Courtesy of the artist, Empty Gallery and Miguel Abreu Gallery. © Tishan Hsu/ Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

Tishan Hsu is an artist in search of his own vision of the future. His creative journey has unfolded over almost five decades as Hsu has refined and honed his visceral interrogation of the collapse between human and machine. Yet, following a handful of solo shows staged in New York during the 1980s, including one with famed dealer Leo Castelli, for over 30 years Hsu rarely exhibited his work publicly at all. Instead, he chose to privately focus on his relentless quest to capture a new kind of embodied technology that had not yet come into being.

In the end, it was the world that managed to catch up with him. In recent years Hsu, who was born in the 1950s to Chinese parents in Boston, has found his optically vivid silkscreen-printed canvases and eerie silicone sculptures suddenly at pace with the present and very much in-demand.

His prescient works have reached an audience that seems, finally, ready to understand them. In April, he will be honored at SculptureCenter's annual gala, following showings at the 2021 Gwangju Biennale and 'The Milk of Dreams' at the 59th Venice Biennale in 2022. Hsu opened his second solo exhibition with Hong Kong's Empty Gallery last week, in time for a revived Hong Kong Art Week and Art Basel Hong Kong.



Tishan Hsu, *screen-body-data*, (2023). Courtesy of the artist, Empty Gallery and Miguel Abreu Gallery. © Tishan Hsu and Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

Hsu's unique use of pigment recreates the flickering, familiar glow of screens; the rounded corners of his paintings foreshadowed the industrial design of the iPad and iPhone and the graphic representation of mobile app icons. *Closed Circuit* bears an uncanny resemblance to the Instagram logo: the painting was made in 1986, 24 years before the social media app launched. "There's a certain mystery to this whole thing," Hsu said, speaking over a video call from his studio in New York. "The work is resonating with things I see going on in the world now. I had no awareness at the time, but looking back to that early work, it's surprisingly synchronistic."

The artist's surfaces often feature parts of protruding faces, echoing our own embeddedness with technology, but, in a darker turn, it also comments on our surveillance society and its acceleration towards the use of biometrics and facial recognition technologies. "For the first time, I feel the work is able to address many of the issues that are most important to me all at once, without explanation," said Hsu. "I don't need any articulation. The work is speaking on its own."



Tishan Hsu, *grass-screen-skin / object 3*, 2023. Courtesy of the artist, Empty Gallery and Miguel Abreu Gallery. © Tishan Hsu/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

A Personal Perspective on Technology

Part of his interest in technology was informed by his academic roots as a student of architecture at MIT in the 1970s. Hsu recalled encountering “a whole way of thinking about the world that was very forward.” On campus, he encountered a community engaged not only in imagining the future but in making it a reality, through experimentation in everything from robotics to computing. He added that “it was deeply inspiring” and afforded him “a glimpse of where things might go.”

This gave him the confidence to begin his own creative exploration into how these new developments would impact modern life. “I could see the level of research going on, and it was very, very convincing,” he said. His studies in architecture merged with a new fascination in tech. This is apparent in the work: square ceramic tiles make a recurrent appearance in his sculptures over the decades, conjuring at once minimalist bathroom design and digital pixels.

Although Hsu began working on these far-reaching themes during a period of optimism about the networked virtual future, he has consistently infused his paintings and sculptures with an underlying anxiety about what this hybrid existence might look like. His skill lies not only in predicting the reality that we now live in, but in his readiness to muse at what the feelings of tech-embedded life; it’s an approach that has led many observers to liken his work to the imagined techno-landscapes of science fiction.



Tishan Hsu, *phone-breath-bed 3*, 2023. Courtesy of the artist, Empty Gallery and Miguel Abreu Gallery. © Tishan Hsu/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

Yet for Hsu, he has been seeking something much closer to the real. “Science fiction never interested me, and I remember it felt like a fantasy when I was growing up,” he said. “But we are moving so quickly now that recent science fiction isn’t far off from what we’re actually living.”

In the early 1980s, Hsu worked as a word processor inputting data on an early computer. This gave him an insight into how machines might act as an extension of the human brain, and greatly informed his artistic works. While experimenting in the studio rather privately, for 22 years Hsu worked as a professor of visual art at Sarah Lawrence College in New York, a role that he retired from in 2018 at the age of 67. From that vantage point, while he had had a steady career in academia, it would have been hard to predict that from then on, his career would spiral upward as it did.

In “Delete,” his first exhibition at Empty Gallery staged in 2019, Hsu reflected on data as a carrier of memory, a subject that he introduced from a personal perspective. There, he traced his own history, including the rediscovery of family photographs following his mother’s death while he was living in Shanghai in the early 2010s. The exhibition was the first time that Hsu directly confronted his own identity within his work.



Tishan Hsu. Courtesy of Tishan Hsu.

The artist does not speak Chinese, and explained that his parents did not emphasize their heritage while he was growing up. “There was a drive towards assimilation, like many immigrants in America,” he said. He considered how this early experience may have shaped his work: “I grew up in a culture where I was a racial other, and then I chose to explore the ‘otherness’ of technology, which itself was perceived as alien at the time.”

It was only in 2020 that Hsu had his first survey exhibition, “Liquid Circuit,” which was organized by curator Sohrab Mohebbi of SculptureCenter, New York, and first staged at UCLA’s Hammer Museum; it then traveled to SculptureCenter in 2021. The shows were a tipping point: “Liquid Circuit” introduced a generation of digital natives Hsu’s early 1980s work, created primarily during a decade in which most of them were born. Even later works like the painting *Interface Remix* (2001), where disembodied mouths, eyes, and limbs collapse together within a fleshy vortex, can readily resonate with digitally native millennial and Zoomers’ lingering sense of unease about the digital realm.



Installation view of “Tishan Hsu: Liquid Circuit”, 2020, Hammer Museum, Los Angeles. Photo: Jeff McLane.
Courtesy of the artist and Hammer Museum, Los Angeles.

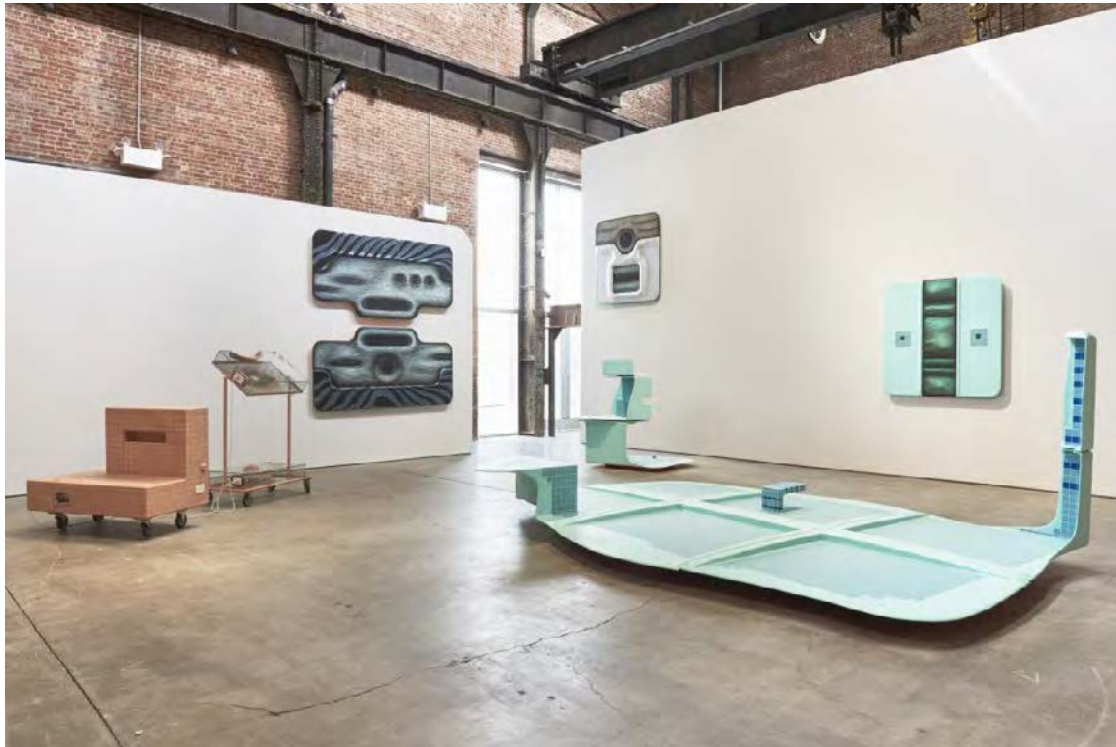
A Lifetime of Work Finds New Resonance Today

Hsu admitted that the newfound recognition has been a welcome surprise, if a little overwhelming. “I have always felt that the work will reveal itself,” he reflected. “But that emergence is a very long process.”

In an age of rapid gratification and fast fame, Hsu’s slow approach to his own artistic voice does not feel simply anomalous—it feels like a radical act of resistance. “I withdrew from exhibiting because I was involved in a lot of experimentation and exploration, and I never really felt that the work clicked, even though it sold,” he said. “Although people now see the work differently than I did at the time, for me, I was always in laboratory mode.”

Over the years, Hsu’s way of working has been intuitive—like feeling blindly towards another realm that hovers just out of reach. He described this process as “trying to capture some sense of a shift in this integration of technology into our organic life.” The challenge, he explained, has been introducing this paradox into the work over the years. The results are full of glitches and imperfections integrated into his pieces—the dot matrix of the silkscreen process within many of his paintings left deliberately visible.

When we met, Hsu was about to fly out from New York for the opening of his latest exhibition, “Screen-Skins,” at Empty Gallery in Hong Kong. The solo show continues his work begun during the 1980s, while responding directly to the new technologies available today. “I used to have to photograph a model in the studio and then process those photos. Now, because of the evolution of digital imaging, I can go online and have an infinite source of images,” he said.



Installation view of "Tishan Hsu: Liquid Circuit", 2020, SculptureCenter, New York. Photo: Kyle Knodell. Courtesy of the artist and SculptureCenter, New York.

His wavering ambiguity about technology has struck such a chord with today's disillusioned audiences, and this mood courses through the show. In the darkened spaces of Empty Gallery is one artwork that displays an image that reads, "Erase All Data." Hsu debated at first about including it in the context of the political shift currently taking place in Hong Kong, as mainland China continues to assert control of the territory. "Data can be both dangerous and a way of maintaining a presence in the digital age," he said.

His wariness also extends to machine learning, but not for the reasons one might expect. "With A.I. emerging, people now talk about the 'singularity', where we literally are going to be taken over by the technology, but that is a very long way off," he estimated. "I think the question of human agency is the question of our age. The problem is how will our organic bodies continue to exist? What will be the quality of that existence?"

Hsu continues to speculate on what may still be to come. He remains acutely aware of the limitations of the tools that have become so integrated in our lives, even as he unravels the existential implications of their rapid advancement. "Our technology is taking us into worlds we never imagined, but it is forcing us to also realize how we remain very organic," he said as our call came towards its end. It is the tension between the two that sits at the heart of Hsu's work. It is like the sudden sight of your own indistinct reflection upon a darkened digital screen, the body revealed in the afterglow when it is finally switched off.

franceinfo: culture

"Art et science-fiction, les portes du possible" au Centre Pompidou-Metz : l'art contemporain s'empare des mondes futurs

Exposition plus consacrée à l'art contemporain qu'à la science-fiction, elle met en lumière utopies, dystopies, robotiques ou voyages spatiaux, thèmes qui reflètent le regain d'intérêt que connaît aujourd'hui le genre en France et dans le monde.

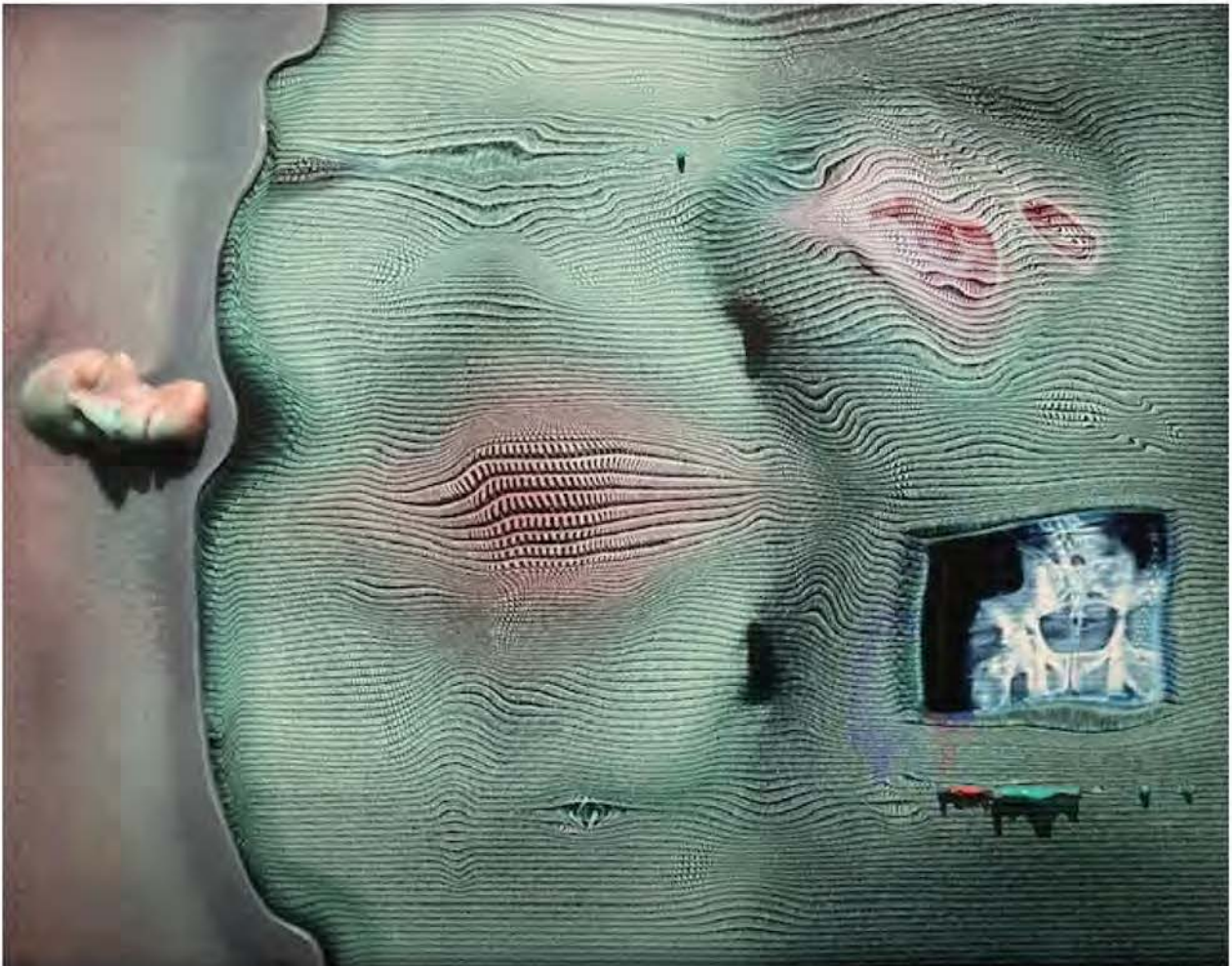


Jacky Bornet

France Télévisions • Rédaction Culture

Cyberworld

Avec *Neuromancien*, William Gibson inventait en 1984 le Cyberpunk, nouveau genre de la SF fondé sur la jonction technologique, politique, culturelle et sociétale née de la fusion entre l'informatique et l'humanité. Générateur d'une nouvelle médiation du monde par le foisonnement des informations et des moyens de communication, le digital a aussi engendré une esthétique propre.



Tishan HSU, *Breath4*, 2021, Fondation Carmignac. (STEPHEN FAUGHT, ADA GP, Paris 2022.)

Tishan Hsu capte l'"homocybernitus" dans *Breath 4*, dans la pixelisation graphique et la symbiose entre le biologique et l'électronique du sujet. Avec "l'algorithmisation" de nos vies, un autre dirigisme politique donne un nouveau visage à Big Brother. La SF contemporaine se situe justement du côté des hackers créatifs qui le contrent. Néo dans *Matrix* (1999) en est le fer de lance.

Flash Art

TISHAN HSU

ARTISTS AT RISK

DEMNA

LOUISA GAGLIARDI

MARGUERITE HUMEAU

RINDON JOHNSON

PAVLO MAKOV

BERENICE OLMEDO

JENNA SUTELA

WU TSANG

RAPHAELA VOGEL

DISPLACEMENT

NO. 339 VOL. 55 ● SUMMER 2022 ● ISSN 0394-1493

EU €15,00 UK £13,95 USA \$19,95

POSTE ITALIANE SPA SPEDIZIONE A.P. - D.L. 353/2003 (CONVERTITO IN LEGGE 27/02/2004 N° 46) ART. 1, COMMA 1 LO/MI



- 33 **Reviews**
- 58 *Cover Story* **Tishan Hsu: Body Currents**
by Franklin Melendez
- 74 *Cover Story* **When Your Smile Is So Wide and Your Heels Are So High:
The Paintings of Louisa Gagliardi**
by Louisa Elderton
- 88 *One to Watch* **Berenice Olmedo: The Myth of Autonomy**
by Jane Ursula Harris
- 96 *Profile* **A Forever Refugee: Demna**
by Charlie Robin Jones
- 98 **Beyond the Limits of Empirical Knowledge:
Marguerite Humeau's New Ways of Thinking and Making**
by Adriana Blidaru
- 113 *Visual essay* **Wet-on-Wet-on-Wet-on-Wet**
A collage of works by Jenna Sutela
- 134 **No Word Can Hold A Person**
Isabel Parkes in Conversation with Rindon Johnson
- 148 **Misalignment Identities: Raphaela Vogel**
by Eleonora Milani
- 162 **Stepping Towards Something Like an Experience: The Wu Tsang's Moby Dick**
A conversation with Noam Segal
- 176 *Letter from the City*
by Pavlo Makov
- 178 *Questionnaire* **Artists at Risk: A Conversation with Ivor Stodolsky and Marita Muukkonen**
by Frank Wasser
- Reviews**
"The Milk of Dreams": A Posthuman Revolution at the 59th Venice Biennale / Whitney Biennial 2022, "Quite as It's Kept" Whitney Museum of American Art, New York / Barbara Kruger, "THINKING OF YOU. I MEAN ME. I MEAN YOU" LACMA, Los Angeles / Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster, "Alienarium 5" Serpentine Galleries, London / Charles Ray, Centre Pompidou and Pinault Collection – Bourse de Commerce, Paris / Heidi Bucher, "Metamorphoses I" Kunstmuseum, Bern / Jackie Winsor, MAMCO, Genève / Zoe Leonard, "Al río / To the River" MUDAM, Luxembourg

Covers

Tishan Hsu, *Breath 7*, 2022. Detail. UV cured inkjet, acrylic, silicone, ink on wood. 121.9 × 157.5 × 14 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Miguel Abreu Gallery, New York. © 2022 Tishan Hsu / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

Louisa Gagliardi, *Hot Threads*, 2020. Gel Medium, enamel, ink on PVC. 60 × 105 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Eva Presenhuber, Zurich / New York / Vienna.

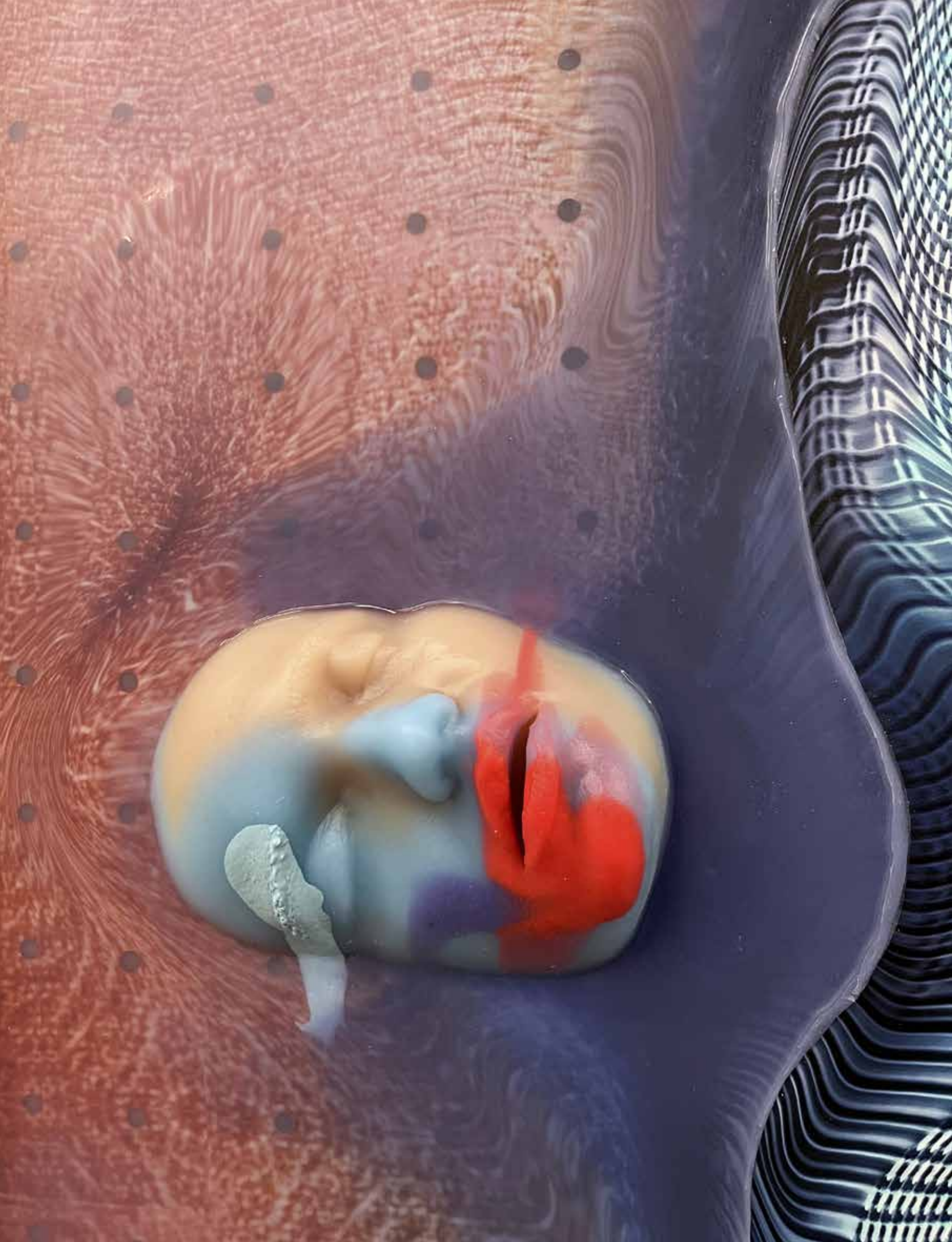


Cover Story

Tishan Hsu: Body Currents

by Franklin Melendez

grass-screen-skin / object 2, UV cured inkjet, silicone,
acrylic, stainless steel, ink on wood, 121.9 × 228.6 × 13.3 cm. Photography by Stephen
Faught. Courtesy of the artist and Miguel Abreu Gallery, New York.



As of late, “prescient” has become the preferred modifier for artist, Tishan Hsu. Indeed, as framed by the recent retrospective that traveled from UCLA’s Hammer Museum to New York’s Sculpture Center, his output since the mid-1980s has anticipated — and in many ways mapped with eerie accuracy — the convoluted interdependence between body and screen that now defines all aspects of our lived reality. His wall reliefs and sculptures are punctuated with fleshy openings and orifices — Cronenbergian mouth-eye hybrids adrift in ergonomically shaped vessels that seem to hover just off the wall (in reality recessed plywood panels with edges and backs painted in fluorescent tones to create the illusion of backlighting). This effect predates the touchscreen by decades, even as it aptly captures its distinctive *feel*. An often-cited work, *Closed Circuit* (1986), with its rounded corners and cyclops visage, even manages to conjure Instagram’s logo thirty years before the social network ever popped up in anyone’s app store. Over the years, his technique has evolved hand-in-glove with new photographic, imaging, and digital technologies to create increasingly complex fields and effects that modulate with the flux of our media landscape. More recently, he’s utilized these networked coordinates to address questions of lineage, familial connections, and geographic displacement, utilizing the vicissitudes of affect to expand unitary conceptions of “identity” and its politics while simultaneously rewiring the expectations of technologically geared art. In doing so he has laid down a rich and varied artistic groundwork that reverberates across a young generation of artists that continue to mine the bio-tech convergence (figures as diverse as Josh Kline, Anika Yi, Julia Phillips, and Max Hooper Schneider come to mind). Indeed, the overall impression, looking back, is less that we are witnessing a practice evolving as we are our own cultural evolution finally catching up with it.

Breath 8, 2022. Detail. UV cured inkjet, acrylic, silicone, ink on wood. 121.9 × 157.5 × 14 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Miguel Abreu Gallery, New York.



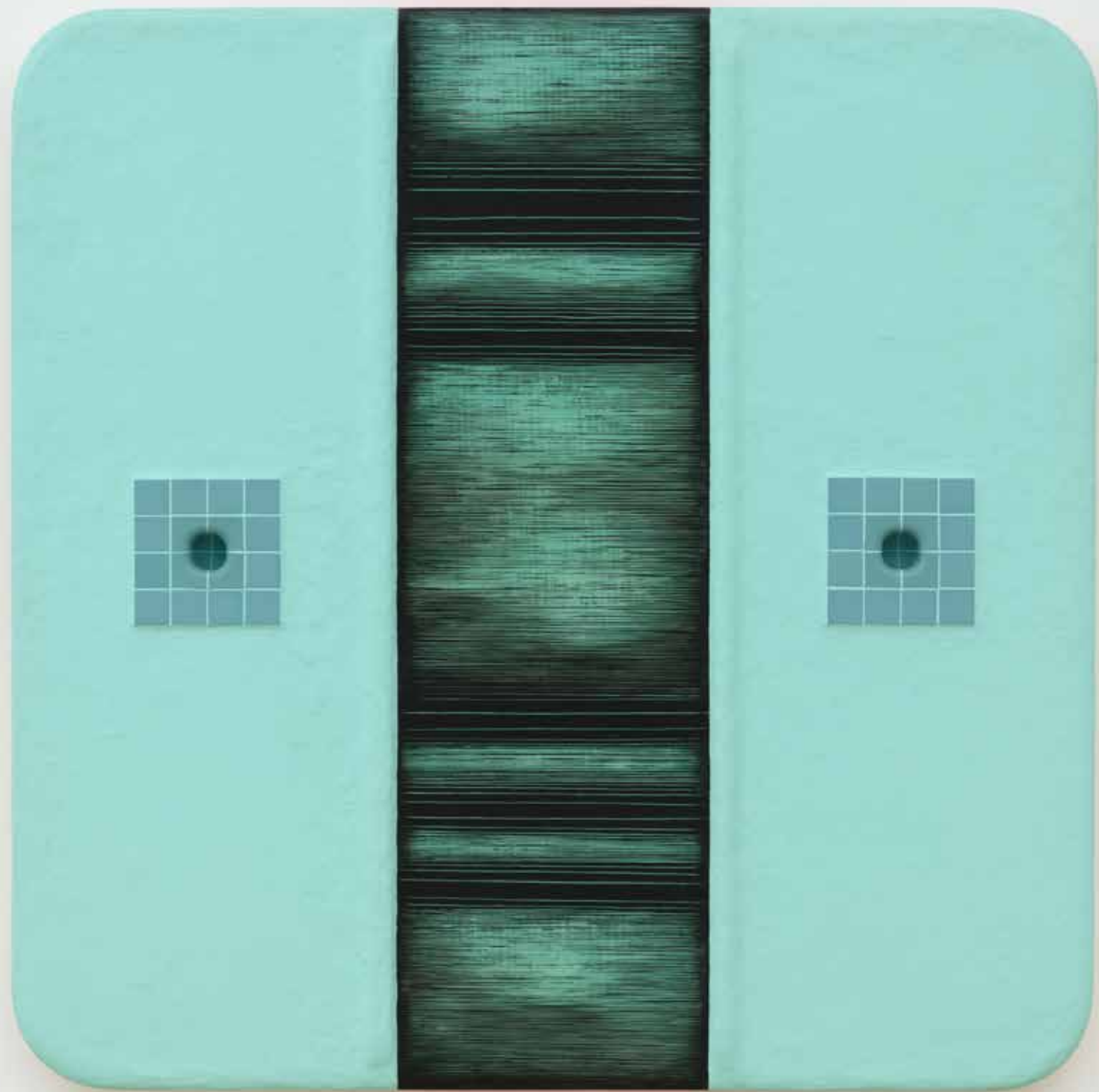
Fingerprinting, 1994. Silkscreen ink and acrylic on linen. 180.3 × 449.6 cm. Photography by Jeff McLane. Courtesy of the artist and Miguel Abreu Gallery, New York.

All of the above is perhaps even more remarkable for a practice that is arguably rooted in painting. Born in Boston to Shanghainese parents (displaced by the Cultural Revolution), Hsu embraced this most traditional of mediums from the onset, diving into classical techniques as early as elementary school and into his teens. Stints in wildly disparate places — from Switzerland to Wisconsin — are linked by this ongoing passion, and despite ultimately studying architecture and environmental design at MIT, his keen sense of form and color formed an unshakable foundation. Settling in New York in 1975, Hsu connected to Pat Hearn, the ex-punk-turned-emerging-gallerist who was to become one of the cornerstones of the then-burgeoning East Village scene. Her predilection for disruptive points of view challenging the codes of painting made for a natural fit, eventually yielding a series of seminal shows, beginning with his solo debut in 1985.

It is impossible to capture the strangeness of the early work, especially in its original context, but pieces like *Portrait (1)* (1982) or *Plasma* (1986), with their alien contours and bulbous protrusions, provide a good indication while attesting to Hsu's expert manipulation of unorthodox yet humble materials. Their fleshy expanses — hovering between base materiality and slick illusionism — certainly made an impression, but lacking any immediate points of reference or critical coordinates they were also largely misread. At the time, Hsu was lumped into the rubric of neo-geo, a term that gained some traction in the late '80s but is now mostly notable for its general vagueness — a portmanteau for a broad range of practices favoring a hard-edged approach that at times verged on (or deliberately embraced) kitsch. Fellow Hearn stablemates Philip Taaffe and Peter Schuyff were also shoved into this “next big thing,” which was sometimes referred to by the hipper postmodernist moniker “simulationism.”

If we're speaking about formal affinities alone, perhaps Peter Halley's early cell and conduit paintings might have been a more apt analogue. But the problem with any purely formalist reading was that it grasped only half of the equation, and in so doing missed the animating core of Hsu's practice. For in trying to invent a new syntax of painting for himself, Hsu was also brushing up against the massive technological shifts reorganizing everyday life in the 1980s. Rather than an accelerated fetishism of consumer objects, his was a concerted effort to grapple with an emergent material reality that was remapping our own experience of the body. And this was not just a theoretical pursuit; for Hsu it was also lived practice, having worked a night job at a word processing terminal on Wall Street during grad school, perhaps one of the earliest jobs involving prolonged stints with a computer monitor. It was an experience that left an indelible impression, as he notes in a recent interview: “I felt that there was this screen world that was very different than television because I was interacting with it...I'm sitting in front of this screened object for many hours, several days a week, and my bodily, physical, material presence was very much there. I felt there was this paradox between the illusionary world of the screen and the physical reality of my body, and that I wanted my work to account for both. I felt that my body in front of that screen still really counted.”

Striped Nude, 1984. Oil stick, enamel, Styrofoam, acrylic, and vinyl cement compound on wood. 228.6 × 121.9 × 17.8 cm. Photography by Stephen Faught. Courtesy of the artist and Miguel Abreu Gallery, New York.



Reflexive Ooze, 1987. Ceramic tile, vinyl cement compound, oil, acrylic, and alkyd on wood. 152.4 × 152.4 × 7.6 cm. Photography by Jeff McLane. Collection of High Museum of Art, Atlanta.



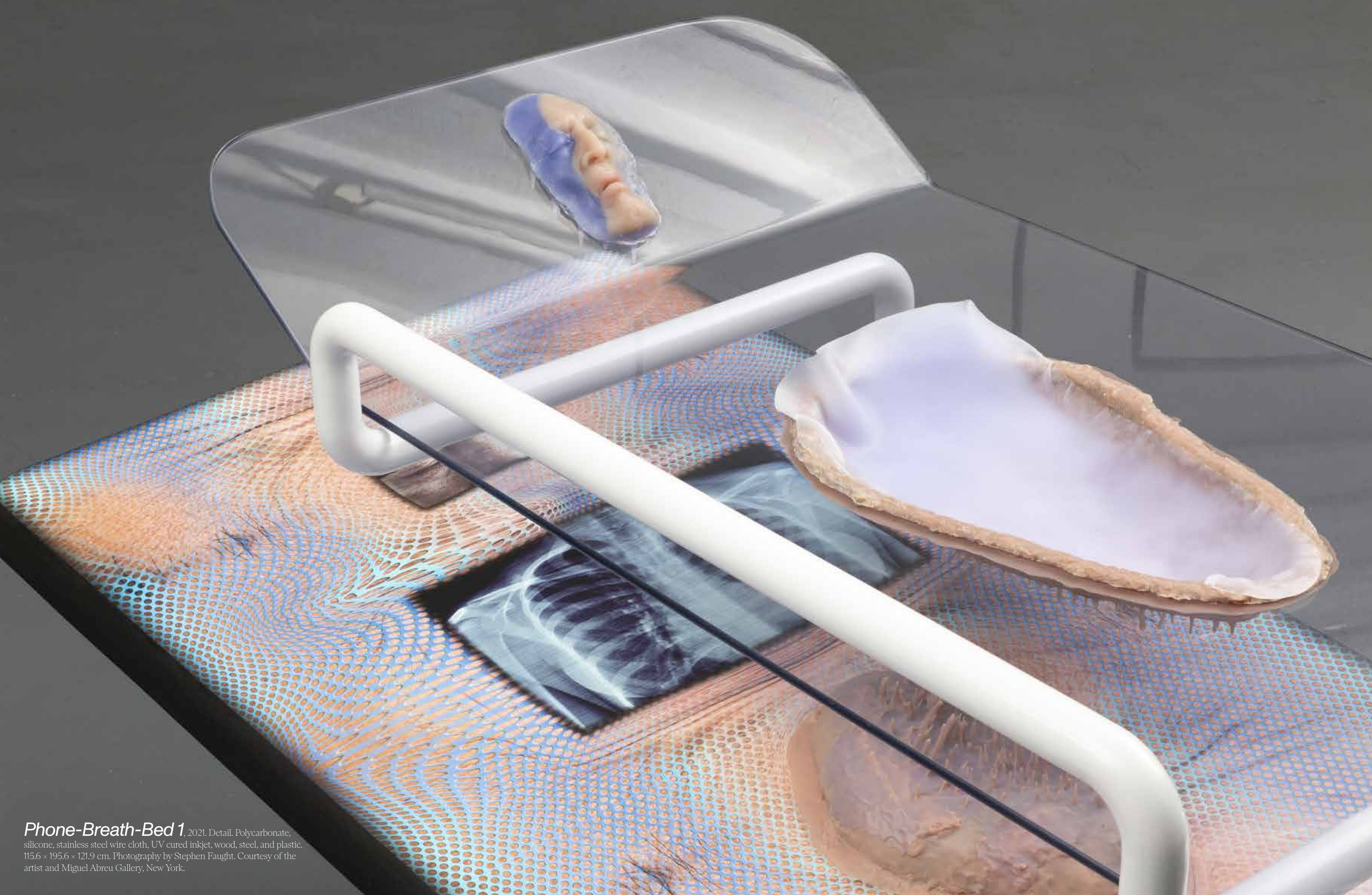
Vertical Ooze, 1987. Ceramic tile, urethane, vinyl cement compound, acrylic, and oil on wood. 132.1 × 180.3 × 61 cm. Photography by Jeff McLane. Collection of Centre Pompidou, Paris.

It is this insistence on the body and nuanced understanding of its communion with nascent technologies that differentiated Hsu from his peers and also placed him decades ahead of contemporaneous theorizations of digitalization and its far-reaching cultural impact. This was particularly the case as the 1980s transitioned into the 1990s, and strands of sci-fi, speculative fiction, and other paranoid, somewhat techno-phobic lines of thinking congealed into the slick, plugged-in aesthetic of cyberpunk. In stark contrast, Hsu committed to a far more sober approach: rather than the body's absorption into or effacement by the technological, he traced a complex co-presence facilitated by the very materiality of his objects. He notes: "There were physical properties of the world I was experiencing having to do with my body and the screen, and whether I could integrate those visual and physical properties, that drove the early work. I did not want the sensibility I was trying to convey to be dependent on one medium. Working in different material formats (2-D and 3-D) required I have a clearer understanding of what the work was trying to do and/or reveal to me."

This is the operating principle of a sculpture like *Vertical Ooze* (1986), a stack of three hospital-green tiers that evoke an architectural model, a fountain, or a trippy distortion of Anthony Caro's Euclidian arrangements. The interiors of each segment are lined with tiles that are as banal as any found in a public bathroom, yet maybe also nod to the elasticity of the pixel (this is how I read the nub-like protrusion on the bottom tier). This hybrid object — brushing up against the virtual, but also reveling in its own gravity — posits an encounter between two distinct but interrelated corporealities: viewer and object. In so doing, it opens up a line of thinking that is less interested in projecting visions of an anxious future than mapping the vicissitudes of an ever-shifting present. It is worth stressing the radicality of Hsu's position at this specific historical juncture. Art historically, he adapts the concerns of Minimalism and its virtual forms to elucidate the experience of our networked era; he also anticipates many of the critical threads taken up by what was to be called "new media" art of the 1990s and early aughts without succumbing to the spectacle of gadgetry. More generally, he offers a counternarrative to the posthumanist view of technology that would entrench itself in our cultural consciousness (and arguably retains much of its thrall even today). Here, the computer screen (now the phone) was seen as a portal into a new disembodied reality. The is the vestigial body as dramatized vividly in a number of cinematic works from the period, including David Cronenberg's *Videodrome* (1983), *Ghost in the Shell* (1995) (based on Masamune Shirow's 1989 manga of the same name), and, of course, the Wachowskis' *The Matrix* (1999). These drew heavily from or resonated with contemporaneous theoretical contributions, including Jean Baudrillard's work on *Simulacra and Simulation* (1981) as well as Fredrick Jameson's seminal 1991 tome on postmodernity. As critic N. Katherine Hales wrote in 2000, this tech worldview "presumes a conception of information as a (disembodied) entity that can flow between carbon-based organic components and silicon-based electronic components to make protein and silicon operate as a single system... In the posthuman, there are no essential differences or absolute demarcations between bodily existence and computer simulation, cybernetic mechanism and biological organism, robot teleology and human goals." Intuitively, Hsu understood the folly of this fallacy (and, it should be noted, years ahead of critical correctives such as Hales'). His philosophizing through the body recast the notion of "interface" as a function of *immanence* rather than *imminent transcendence*. This is dramatized in a work like *Fingerpainting* (1994), with its grid-like structure and fuzzy, static-charged ground against which hands are being pulled into or pushed through. Free-floating mouths are echoed by organ-like monitor insets. But the movement on the surface is also rife with humor, dramatizing our anxiety as much as poking fun at it, as underscored by the title itself, which references the technique of silk-screening used here to anticipate or mimic the effects of Photoshop (which, it's worth saying, would not become readily available until 1995).



Plasma, 1986. Acrylic, alkyd, oil and vinyl cement compound on wood. 40.6 × 237.5 × 10.2 cm. Photography by Jeff McLane. Collection of Daniel Newburg.



Phone-Breath-Bed 1, 2021. Detail. Polycarbonate, silicone, stainless steel wire cloth, UV cured inkjet, wood, steel, and plastic. 115.6 × 195.6 × 121.9 cm. Photography by Stephen Faught. Courtesy of the artist and Miguel Abreu Gallery, New York.

This synchronicity between technique and technology has defined Hsu's output from the 1990s to the present, unfolding in a way that almost approximates a seamless feedback loop. As he notes, "The congruence of technological media and the formal evolution has been a mystery to me as well. I never imagined digital imaging, Photoshop, 3-D printing, wide-format digital printing, the properties of silicone or bathroom tiles, as media, nor the iPhone or desktop computer. I developed them as a medium in pursuit of a sensibility I was intuitively seeking. Every technology seemed to provide an option I was looking for, in retrospect, but which I never imagined."

Prescience aside, this level of sync has freed up other avenues and registers for exploration, including fresh materials, like silicone, along with denser and more complex visual fields. It has also opened up space for the political — always an implicit subtext but not taken up directly, particularly post-2013, when the death of his mother led him to an archive of personal objects, among them family letters and photographs dating back to the 1950s. This trove of hard data filled in the emotional gap of displacement (his parents were prohibited from returning to China) as it registers on the individual level. Known simply as "The Shanghai Project," Hsu embarked on a focused mission, activating links, reconstructing family lineages, suturing connections truncated by geographies and ideologies. The result is a body of work that is extremely personal but no less engaged with the technological — in fact, it is made possible by it. Take for instance *Boating Scene Green* (2019), a pastoral snap of a family outing on a lake, overlaid with distorted sim cards. Neither nostalgic nor sentimental, the work attests to absence even as it documents the attempt to reconstruct it through available means, including emails, Skype, and WhatsApp exchanges. In it history becomes a diffused thing, with scattered components hinging the personal and the political and always as an incomplete picture.

Affect emerges as the dominant tonality in these works. In doing so, it brings into relief a more specified body — not a generalized abstraction but Hsu's very own, embedded in the particularities of his lived experience. This yielded the subtle poetry of his most recent solo exhibition, "skin-screen-grass," which combined work from "The Shanghai Project" alongside a number of pieces that advanced fresh avenues of inquiry. Among these, *Phone-Breath Bed 1*, (2021) — a gurney-like sculpture that incorporates a face cast, torso X-rays, and fleshy drippings of silicone that can't help but conjure the anxiousness of anyone living through 2020. There is also *Spa* (2021), a monumental multi-panel work memorializing the victims of the Gold Spa shooting. There is a radicality in the directness of the piece that also undercores the utility of affect as a vector into that which exceeds our understanding. As Hsu notes: "[affect] seems to be reaching for a kind of awareness of our emotional, psychological, and embodied processing, as an integrated response, which might help to identify, in some partial way, what is happening internally in this new interface we increasingly inhabit, between the body and technology." He adds with typical forward-looking candor: "I am reaching intuitively, and perhaps I use the term too loosely, partly because I feel we may not have an adequate vocabulary to describe what we, as a species, are undergoing at this time in history."

All images © 2022 Tishan Hsu / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

Cell, 1987. Acrylic, vinyl cement compound, oil, alkyd, vinyl, and aluminum on wood. Four parts. 243.8 × 487.7 × 10.2 cm. Photography by Jeff McLane. Collection of Ralph Wernicke / Hubertushoehe art + architecture, Berlin / Zürich.

Tishan Hsu was born in 1951 in Boston. He lives and works in New York. Since the mid-1980s, Hsu's artistic practice has probed the cognitive as well as physical effects of transformative technological advances on our lives. Through the use of unusual materials, software tools, and innovative fabrication techniques, his paintings and sculptures explore and manifest poetic reimaginings of the human body. Various motifs from his visual vocabulary are continually reengaged via hardware and screens to become part of a larger corporeal entity. Hsu's work is in the collections of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles; Centre Pompidou, Paris; and Tate Modern, London, among others. His works are included in the 59th Venice Biennale, "The Milk of Dreams," through November 27, 2022.

Franklin Melendez is a writer, art advisor, and independent curator based in New York. He is the co-founder of DM Office, which he currently runs in collaboration with Romain Dauriac.

The New York Times

What to See in N.Y.C. Galleries Right Now

LOWER EAST SIDE

Tishan Hsu

Through Jan. 15. Miguel Abreu, 88 Eldridge Street, Manhattan. 212-995-1774; miguelabreugallery.com.



Tishan Hsu's "Street Grass-Screen-Skin: New York" (2021), inkjet on Mylar, with QR code linked to video. Tishan Hsu/Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY; Stephen Faught

In a short span of time, digital technology has entered our bodies and transformed our consciousness. Few artists have created works that visualize this integration as skillfully as Tishan Hsu, which you can see in his first exhibition at Miguel Abreu, "Skin-Screen-Grass." The show includes works based in photographic imagery, but digitally tweaked or transformed into sculptures, wall reliefs and wallpaper.

"Watching" (2021) is an inkjet print whose composition mimics the layout of a smartphone screen. "Grass-Screen-Skin: New York" (2021) functions like an architectural skin: photographs of grass (and other objects) turned into inkjet-on-Mylar wallpaper. A QR code in the work links to a nearly three-minute video that features grass growing through a metal grid, humans touching their skin and eerie insect sounds. (It's one of the best works I've seen that uses this device.) "Phone-Breath-Bed" (2021) is a steel sculpture shaped like an institutional bed on wheels, mounted with photographic images and silicon body parts. The work is particularly uncanny in this moment, when I.C.U. Covid patients appear merged with medical equipment or new cars, like the Tesla, are described as "smartphones on wheels."

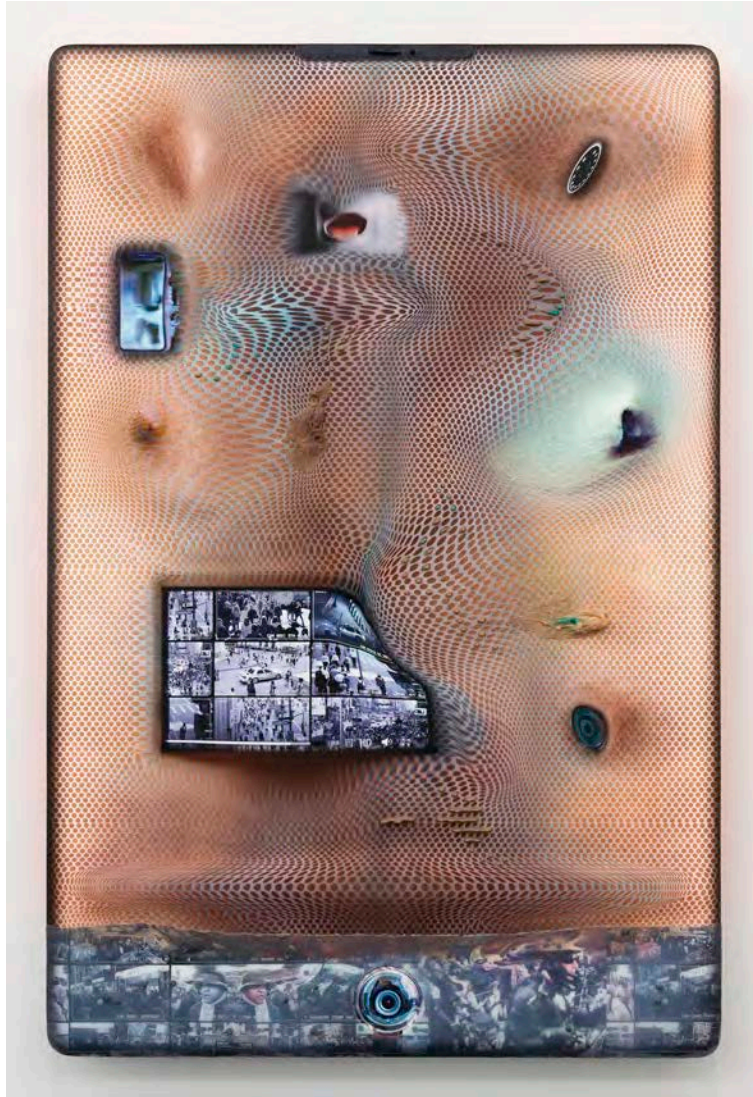
Hsu gained attention in the 1980s with a handful of exhibitions in the United States and Europe. Then he receded from view. The hackneyed adage of an artist being "ahead of his time" is, in his case, true. His art works in which the human body and technology are fused seemed like science fictions in the '80s; now they are science facts. *MARTHA SCHWENDENER*

BROOKLYN RAIL

Tishan Hsu: *skin-screen-grass*

DEC 21-JAN 22

By Cassie Packard

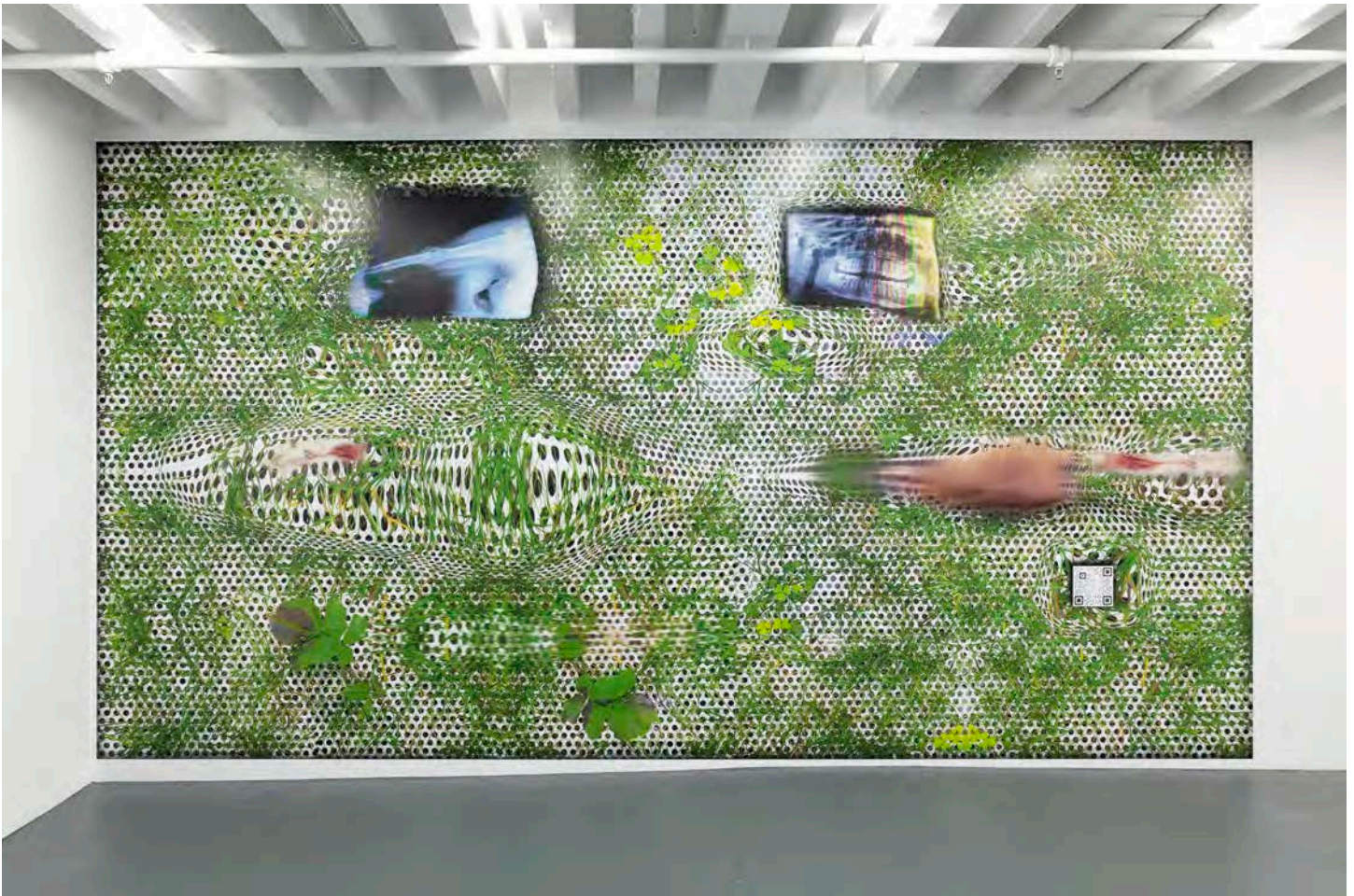


Tishan Hsu, *Watching 1*, 2021. UV cured inkjet, silicone on wood, 72 x 48 x 3 inches. Courtesy Miguel Abreu Gallery.

Tishan Hsu has been exploring the messy entanglement of bodies and technology for over three decades. Spanning painting, drawing, sculpture, photography, and video, his work is characterized by a slippery lexicon of biological and technological motifs—lingering on the *touch* in touchscreen and the *face* in interface—that probes the more visceral, affective, and lived aspects of our relationships to machines. A strong complement to *Liquid Circuit*, the artist's first American institutional show staged at the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles and SculptureCenter in New York, Hsu's first solo show at Miguel Abreu Gallery features 13 pieces made between 2019 and 2021, a pandemic period when, for many, physical isolation brought new manic intensity to our enmeshment with our devices.

A painting of a green expanse delicately incised with lines of static and partly sheathed in tactile silicone, *signal.noise/membrane* (2020) feels aligned with the artist's earlier abstract portrayals of screens, initiated in the 1980s before the advent of Photoshop (of which Hsu was an early adopter). Largely, however, the works on view incorporate multiple images mutated through digital reproduction, sometimes becoming distorted and warped beyond recognition. Here, longstanding touchstones for the artist, such as television screens, computer screens, and biomedical imagery and devices, meet newer reference points: phone screens, facial recognition software, fever detection cameras, and, more obliquely, digitized family photos, a memory prosthetic that Hsu began working with after his mother's death in 2013.

"I consider myself a cyborg. Google is my memory," Hsu has said, relatably. "I'm not the body we think of in the premodern sense of a figurative body." Rather than being discrete entities, the cyborg bodies that Hsu depicts are simultaneously excessive, distributed, fragmented, and riven in the space of a single work. His creations crawl with fields of gaping mouths, errant nipples and navels, and flesh enlarged to the point of abstraction. A woozy interface of porous skin and perforated metal—evoking the mesh panels that facilitate airflow for overworked hardware—reappears across works on view.



Tishan Hsu, *Grass-Screen-Skin: New York*, 2021. Inkjet on mylar, with QR code linked to video, 2:10 minutes, 122 1/2 x 229 3/4 inches, installation dimensions variable. Courtesy Miguel Abreu Gallery.

Material springs to life in *Grass-Screen-Skin: New York* (2021), a 19-foot-long inkjet print on Mylar that renders blades of grass pushing through a gleaming grille. By directing a cyborg eye(phone) at a QR code in the image, the viewer can play a video that portrays a slice of the same scene at exceedingly close range. In the video, the metal morphs into pale skin, and the turf into bodily orifices. The layered viewing experience unnervingly interpolates *skin* with *screen* and that vast network of which humans are only a small part, *grass*. The membrane that separates ontological categories is leaking. Who gets to lay claim to animacy in this scenario? Floating in the inkjet grass is a dental X-ray glitched with rainbow lines, the unruly—playful, even—imaging and printing technologies seemingly more alive than the segmented, compliant, and medicalized body they render.



Tishan Hsu, *signal.noise/membrane*, 2020. Oil, alkyd, silicone on wood, 60 x 60 x 4 inches. Courtesy Miguel Abreu Gallery.

In *Watching 2* (2021), mechanisms of gatekeeping, surveillance, and control are the obverse of technologies of health and protection. The work incorporates another skin-screen, this time made from UV cured inkjet on wood with silicone; the wood is shaped to resemble the freestanding temperature kiosks that became commonplace during the COVID-19 pandemic. In one small inset screen, a thermal image of a person is synecdochally labeled “fever,” while in another, facial recognition software scans a portion of a visage, logging it. Beneath a layer of encrusted silicone along the bottom edge of the work is a frieze-like surveillance image of a crowd of individuals tagged with green or red boxes that indicate whether they are “stressed” or “relaxed.” Their gender and race are also noted, alluding to the violent constructs that difference skins and bodies, and are deeply entrenched in and perpetuated by our algorithms. The work’s counterpart, *Watching 1* (2021), features surveillance images of Black Lives Matter protesters, who have been watched by police from the movement’s early days—and who have watched the police back. Both pieces contain depictions of anamorphic camera lenses, nodding to a technique historically used by painters to code subversive images into their work, glitching representational systems contrary to the desires of those in power. Small, fleshy silicone protrusions in a variety of skin tones poke through the two works’ sleek, flat surfaces, proclaiming the stubborn presence of the corporeal in technological territory.

Where a popular rhetoric of ease and lightness—Donna Haraway called it “sunshine”—seems to cleave machines from the realities of human bodies and human pain, Hsu’s visceral work asserts that such extrication is not true to lived experience on individual or algorithmic levels. Examining our affective, embodied relationship to technology, and taking that examination seriously, means rejecting some of the notions of neutrality and distance that serve the blinkered white imaginary. What could we build?

Contributor

Cassie Packard

Cassie Packard is a Brooklyn-based art writer.

THEGUIDE.ART



Tishan Hsu, *Gray Zone-5*, 2020. Graphite, acrylic on Duralar, 24 x 19 inches.

Tishan Hsu
skin-screen-grass

Miguel Abreu Gallery
88 Eldridge Street,
4th Floor

New York
Lower East Side

Remember the tuning knob? Not the electronic radio button that automatically seeks and lands when it finds solid form, but the manual knob you have to turn ever so slightly to exit static and enter language, music. Tishan Hsu's work at Miguel Abreu Gallery functions like that kind of emergence through attunement. Form is embedded somewhere in the opacity of abstraction.

Hsu's first museum survey exhibition at SculptureCenter last year solidified a narrative of the artist as one whose vision was out of step in 1980s New York. Undeterred by market and societal pressures, Hsu has pursued a consistent, unconventional body of work. Many reviews mention his uncanny prescience or how much his works from 40 years ago resemble iPhone screens and the Instagram logo. Like science fiction, what was strange has normalized.

But in this exhibition, works Hsu has made since 2019 speak to how strange that normal is. The works on view are mixed media and their flatness conflicts with their illusionism and silicone protrusions that invade the space. All are sickly screen-glow green, bright white, electric blue, blood red that drips and pink-white flesh tone. In *Watching 2* (2021), Hsu directly references the iPhone face—its format is narrow and vertical with beveled edges, and the speaker sits in its familiar position at the top. But the screen is uncannily like a torso, with a macro photograph of a nipple and five other nodes in mammalian formation speaking to some massive future litter. Where the “home” button should be, a circular camera stands in for the navel, the lifelong imprint of original physical connection.

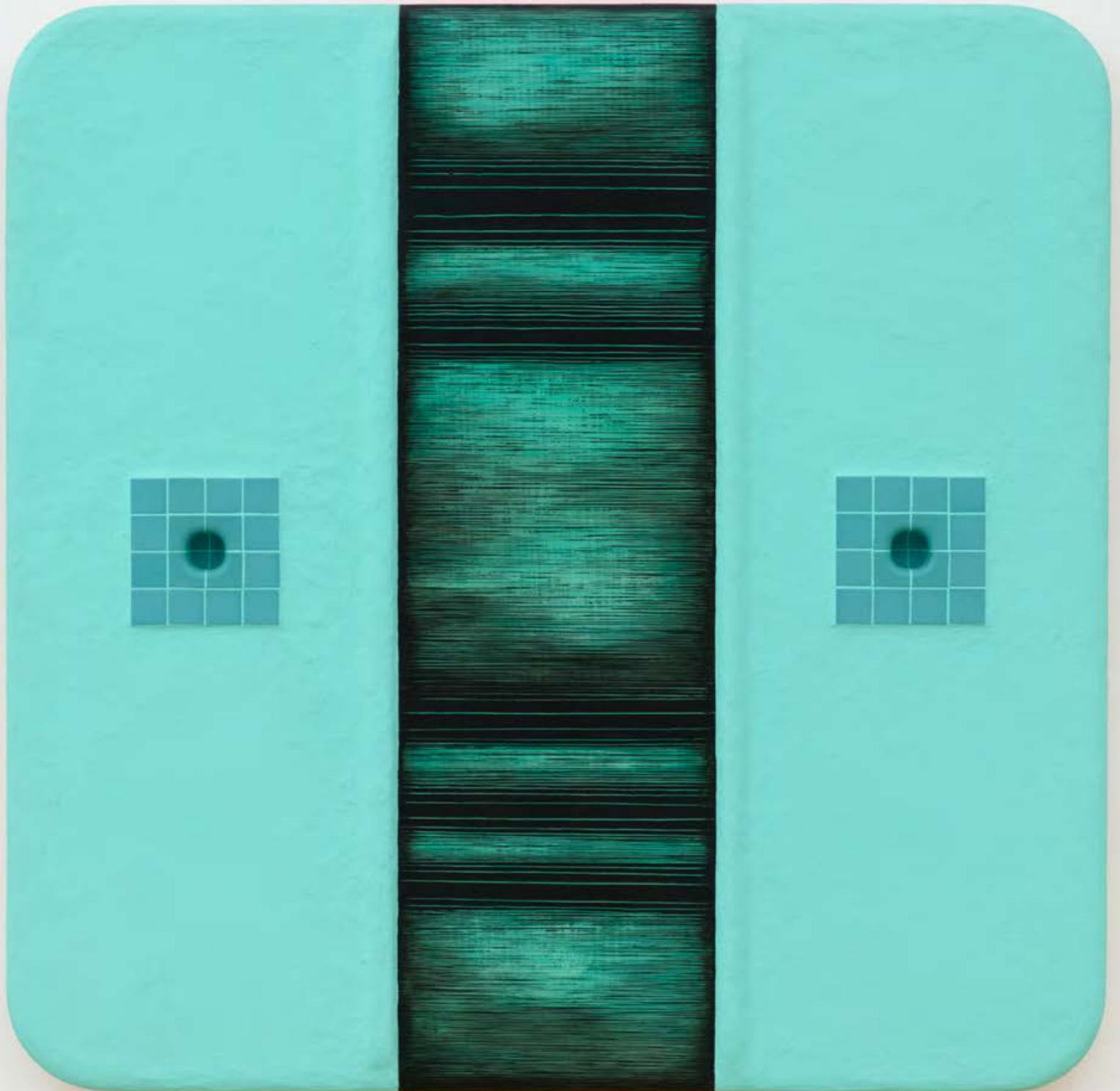
Each work references scanning in some way: x-rays, surveillance footage, thermometers, systems that identify individuals’ identity, mood and race, and even a QR code that leads to a video piece. In *Boating Scene 1.2.3* and *QMH 6.2.1* (both 2019), old family photographs stretch as if someone had eagerly opened a scanner too early.

Hsu is a self-described news junkie, and poignantly, *[SPA] – to be titled* (2021) contains an image credit for a photograph that appeared in *The New York Times* on March 25, 2021. The article it accompanied was an investigation into class divisions among Asian Americans and the precarity of spa workers Soon Chung Park, Hyun Jung Grant, Suncha Kim, Yong Ae Yue, Delaina Ashley Yaun, Xiaojie Tan and Daoyou Feng, who were murdered by a white gunman this year.

By this last room of the gallery, I realized that Hsu had included all the major horrors of recent years. Recently, I exchanged my radio alarm clock for my iPhone’s ringtone. The racism, Trumpism, police brutality and pandemic made the search through static almost unbearable—form itself had become chaos. The world has caught up with Hsu and the dystopian present requires no prescience. —
Sarah Cowan

BROOKLYN RAIL

FEBRUARY 2021 • CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE • INDEPENDENT AND FREE





Art In Conversation

TISHAN HSU with Martha Schwendener

"I wanted to break away from that paradigm of painting where we're looking into a window of a world that's an illusion, a kind of imagined world."



Portrait of Tishan Hsu, pencil on paper by Phong H. Bui

Tishan Hsu speaks with art historian and critic Martha Schwendener about his painting and sculpture practice, the relationship of the screen to the body, and Vilém Flusser's prescient theories of photography. This conversation was held on the occasion of Hsu's survey exhibition at SculptureCenter, *Tishan Hsu: Liquid Circuit* (September 25, 2020 – January 25, 2021), which was curated by Sohrab Mohebbi. It was originally recorded as a New Social Environment and has been edited for clarity, concision, and readerly pleasure.

Martha Schwendener (Rail): My real enthusiasm for your work comes not just from what's going on in the present but in the longer history of the art of technology, of bodies, of sculpture of object making and photography—a lot of other things! I first encountered your work at the SculptureCenter in Long Island City. I felt a little embarrassed, I have to say, that I hadn't known about your work beforehand. For me it was really encountering a new artist, but that's how art history works, and also historiography. I write about someone who was kind of forgotten from

the same period, a writer, philosopher named Vilém Flusser. Sometimes people aren't ready for certain images or ideas or objects, because the thinking seems either very future oriented or so strange in the present. I don't want to say that your work was ignored, it was highly celebrated, but then there was a quiet moment and people like me who came into the art world a little later, weren't aware of it. So Tishan, can you talk about your process in terms of your background in architecture? And I know you studied painting as well. How does it synthesize in your practice?

Tishan Hsu: Looking in retrospect at this body of work, which covers the 1980s into the '90s, I have a very different sense of it than I had when I was making it. This was a very intuitive process from the beginning. I did not have any kind of explanatory text to provide, and I think that made it difficult for people to understand the work. I emerged at a time when critical theory was being discussed at length in the contemporary art world. I was aware of the texts and of the discourse, and I could see lots of parallels to what I was concerned with. But at the same time, I felt a lot of things intuitively that the texts were not addressing. I think that's partly why the initial reception was strong but people didn't know what to do or where to go with it.

At the same time, as another context for this work—I could see that the market was really beginning to accelerate, as a driver in contemporary art in a way that it never had. I felt very much under pressure as I happened to emerge in a very visible gallery situation. I did not choose that. It just happened to be where I landed, and the pressure of the market was beginning to really interfere with the much slower internal process that I started out with. Artist friends and collectors were advising me and saying I had to be careful, because they could see the clash. That was one reason why I decided to work in Germany for a couple years.

My concerns in the work were about the body and technology; it was very simple. All of my work is really an effort to come up with something that would convey this paradigm that I felt would become very influential, that would have a huge impact on our reality, and that I was already seeing happening in much simpler ways.

Many people asked me if I was trying to imagine a future. I felt I was responding to what I saw in the present. But as has been said before, "the future is really the present." Historically, cultures often live in the past and understandably so, because it's easier. One of the things that distinguished American culture in much of the 20th century was a sense that it was looking at and inventing the future. But I was trying to address what I saw in the world. That was part of my academic training. I was surprised, coming into New York, that the context of the contemporary cultural world was to go into the past, in an appropriated way. I understood this approach, as many older cultures in the world have appropriated the past for centuries as a method of cultural production and often with wonderful results. The past for me was not something I could connect to as a driver for my work, and in retrospect there could be several different reasons, one of which was I felt the past couldn't address the issues that I was seeing in the present. Another factor may have been my experience as an "other," in that the American media and consumer culture I grew up in wasn't something that I connected to strongly enough to drive the work. That drove me to create something visual that I felt could address what I was seeing and experiencing. At the time in the '80s, I thought music and literature were in some ways ahead of what was going on in the art world, in trying to capture a sense of the present-future. Science fiction at that time had a lot of techno-body qualities to it, where the body was being infused or was being inserted into technology. So there were definitely active currents, but less so in visual art.

So with that in the background I was trying to figure out a way to infuse a technological consciousness with the body—that's all. I was somewhat single-minded about it. In retrospect, looking at all the work and thinking about the process of doing it—it felt scattered and nothing really cohered or made sense. I was doing this and doing that. I didn't really understand what the underlying sense was in the work, it just felt like lots of experiments. Every time I would do one body of work I would already see the next step and I didn't have a sense of things to focus on a coherent body of work for a show. I had a sense of how I wanted the work to feel, its affect, but it was vague and unclear, partly because I didn't yet have a vocabulary for it. In retrospect I see that it's really about an embodied technology. What is the affective state of this interaction?

In college I studied both photography and film, along with architecture, and I seriously considered being a filmmaker. I thought film was going to be the media of the future. After grad school, I experienced the culture beginning to adopt this screen modality in the workplace,

working a part-time job as a word processor in a Wall Street law firm. I felt there was a new kind of affect in the body's relating to a screen object. To me, it was compelling. And even though I wasn't working in a media that was technological like film or video, I felt that there was something perhaps more traditional media could address, that could grasp the kind of sensibility that is created when we're interacting with technological objects. I felt that this was going to be a new paradigm and I began reading writers who were discussing it in that way. This helped to confirm the intuitive sense that I had enough to pursue it. With that in mind, I began focusing on the work.

Rail: Can you tell us a little about your education and how it informed your early work?

Hsu: My background was in traditional Western painting, and I had a pretty rigorous training in studio art from very early on, driven by my love of making things as a kid. In elementary school, I was taught by someone who painted in the school of Thomas Cole and I was copying Edward Hopper paintings, as well as learning techniques of glazes and underpainting from Renaissance painting. Later I moved to Virginia and studied with the painter Maryann Harman, who was taught by a person who came from the French tradition of Impressionist painting, and that's where I learned everything I know about color. With both teachers, I learned how to see in a very focused way. These are traditional disciplines, but remained a part of the background of the early works, as a method. Although I studied architecture and film in college and grad school, and learned about media, form and design, the real impact was gaining a sense of a technological world that was being created all around me, and my response to it. In a way, I wanted to understand how this strange new world felt. What was the context like? This was at a time when the tech nerd was at the fringe of society and the farthest from the world of art and the humanistic tradition. Technology was also an "other," but one I felt was important to go towards rather than avoid, as I sensed the world was going to become technological whether we wanted it to or not.

Now, the dilemma I had with these early works on wood—like *R.E.M.* or *Plasma* (both 1986)—is that as I was sitting working in front of a word processor in the early days of the screen, I felt that there was this screen world that was very different than television because I was interacting with it. The interactivity was a jump from the passiveness of TV. So I'm sitting in front of this screened object for many hours, several days a week, and my bodily, physical, material presence was very much there. I felt there was this paradox between the illusionary world of the screen and the physical reality of my body, and that I wanted my work to account for both. I felt that my body in front of that screen still really counted. And I felt that also by somehow maintaining a sense of the body in the work, I would be able to address the political, while also addressing the technological, because it's the body and specifically the body in pain that really creates politics, on a sort of ontological level.



Tishan Hsu, *Plasma*, 1986. Acrylic, alkyd, oil, vinyl cement compound on wood 16 x 93.5 x 4 inches. Collection of Daniel Newburg. © 2021 Tishan Hsu / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

I'm saying this in retrospect. I had no awareness of this while I was doing it. I was trying to create a syntax for beginning to address issues in the world and my experience of it. And so all of this work that's in the SculptureCenter show is somewhat removed, and abstracted from the world, and I think that's one critique people had about the work. It seemed like a kind of fantasy. But I was trying to first change the syntax of painting, for myself, for what I needed. In that sense, I did not want a square image in the sense of the window of a canvas. I wanted to break away from that paradigm of painting where we're looking into a window of a world that's an illusion, a kind of imagined world. I wanted these things to be objects on the wall, coming from the issues that were raised with Minimalism and Post-Minimalism where contemporary art began to really be more in the room that we're in with no illusion. That sense also drove my interest in architecture, which I still have.

So, in that sense, I was trying to establish how I can get that object there and that's partly what drove the idea of the rounded corners, and that these flat boards are away from the wall so they appear to float on the wall. These are just three-eighths inch painted plywood. Now for those of you who haven't seen the work, all of the organic shapes are just completely flat. It's an illusion of some materiality, along with painted forms that maybe look like concrete or material that is actually projecting from this flatness. So, it was both maintaining an object and at the same time creating an illusionary affect but not a world, as in an imagined world. In a more formal sense of painting, I was looking at the history of pre-Modern painting in Western art and saying, "that's really interesting that they were also painting an illusionistic world." And much of it was religious iconography located in a world of space and time that imitated my experience.

There was a point in Western art history where you could only paint whatever feelings or emotions you had through biblical iconography. It was a kind of illusion, and it was a rendering of the formal illusion of perspectival space on a flat surface. There was another kind of illusion in Eastern ink painting but it was not so concerned with depicting a "realistic" illusion of space. It was a philosophical kind of space, but still referencing actual space. Similarly, in the culture of early African work, the works are more animistic in that the works embody the spiritual, physically. I was experiencing the screen as something illusionary, but it's not biblical or referential; it's the illusion of something organic and alive, if not the body itself. I wanted to try and convey this sense of illusion, but I didn't want the viewer to feel as though they were entering a fantasy world. In that sense, I was not interested in Surrealism. So there was a paradox, and that was key. I wanted something that was going to be paradoxical. And I think that's partly what contributed to the strangeness people felt looking at it. People were often surprised that the works were painted as an illusion, because it looked at first glance (or in reproduction) like it was just all made with materials in space. So on the one hand, the work is recognizing itself as this object and at the same time there is an illusionary aspect but that illusionary world is responding to the object, not another world. So if you'll note that in the forms and shapes, they're still within the shape of the object itself as though the illusionary forms could actually be three-dimensional. The two and three-dimensional create a kind of hybrid experience. And so it was this close responsiveness between the illusionary aspect and the physical object that is in front of you. And I think that relation is paradigmatic of the interactivity of digital media itself.

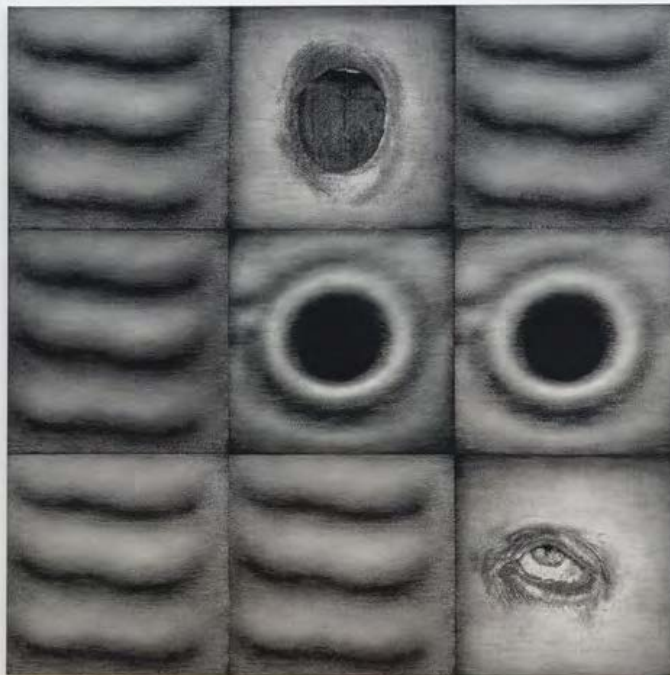
Rail: How about photography? Part of the reason I'm interested in that is because particularly—we could talk about *Cellular Automata 2* from 1989 or *Fingerpainting* from 1994—we're in this moment, and this is what's important about photography, in the '80s you had this movement from chemical to digital photography and now we're beginning to see that photography can be printed in three dimensions and that includes: organs, skin, weapons—those kind of things. So when I saw these works, particularly one like *R.E.M. revisited* (2002), I wanted to know how photographs are involved. How did you go about this?

Hsu: Photography became a key aspect of the evolution of the work. And that happened going from the '80s to the '90s, where the work I've just been talking about was executed in traditional media, oil on wood. I felt from the response to the work that people weren't getting it at all. They were going all over the place. I needed to really clarify that I was dealing with the body and dealing with technological affect. So I began working with silk screening, as an image that you printed, and so it's manufactured, and at the same time I could then use photographs of the body. That made things very clear.

Rail: Can you talk about *Cellular Automata 2*?



Tishan Hsu, *R.E.M. revisited*, 2002. Archival inkjet on canvas. 96 x 110 inches. Courtesy the artist and Empty Gallery, Hong Kong. © 2021 Tishan Hsu / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.



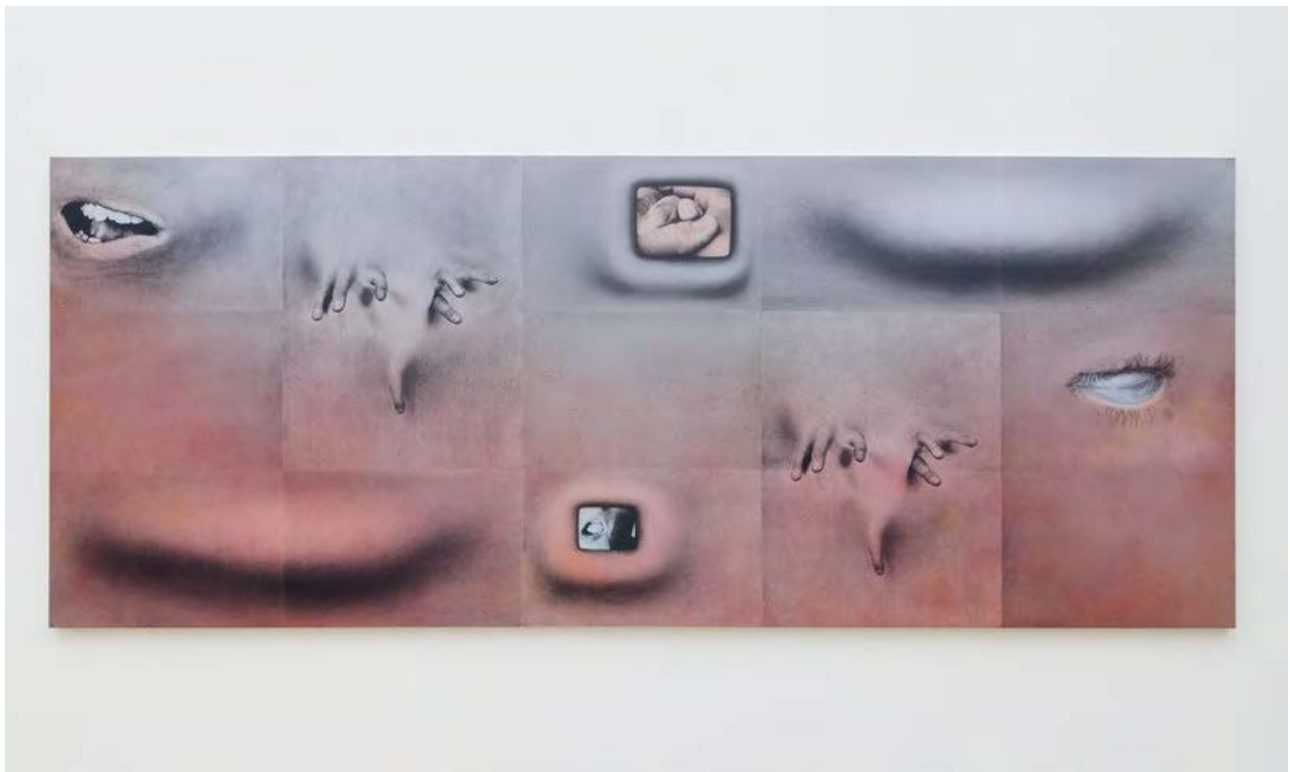
Tishan Hsu, *Cellular Automata 2*, 1989. Silkscreen ink on canvas. 82 x 82 inches. Collection of the artist. © 2021 Tishan Hsu / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

Hsu: Yes, so here I'm just experimenting with black and white silkscreen. The way this is made is modular which is a structural paradigm in all my work, in that technology is designed and produced modularly. So the square module was done by hand. It was just one module, and then I photographed that one square, and then had that image put into a dot screen matrix, and then printed that with silkscreen.

What I was trying to do is to take the dot aspect of silkscreen—if you look closer at this work the dots are very large—and bring in these images that are from medical textbooks and put those into dot screen matrix, and then print them so that the whole screen is just dots. And what it's trying to do is to fuse the hand painted with the technological photographic image into a hybrid entity. So, I could create the work by just duplicating one module. And then there's one other module with a round circle that was also hand painted, but at the same time, I also inserted two medical images that really pin this kind of painted illusionary organic body-like or tissue-skin-like image into something that we know right away is about the body.

So it's a technological process and then it's somehow about the body. But I also wanted to maintain the affect of more traditional, handmade media. The fact that I could hand make these ripples gives me a certain affect that was important to me. I'm fusing them with the clinical affect of medical images. Maintaining a continuum between the affect that happens with traditional handmade techniques of art making, and the more technological production of images was very important to me.

Rail: How about *Fingerpainting*? What changed?



Tishan Hsu, *Fingerpainting*, 1994. Silkscreen ink, acrylic, on linen canvas. 71 x 177 inches.
Courtesy the artist and Empty Gallery, Hong Kong. © 2021 Tishan Hsu / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

Hsu: So this is like five years later. I wanted to get rid of the grid and the modular, and to put things together in a very crude way. I wanted the modules to grow together into a whole, if you will. This was really just a technical and conceptual visual experiment about my sense of the body and the technological world. Could I create modular images with almost invisible lines so the affect you get is not this gridded modular flatness but this continuous surface in which these—whether they're actual images of body or created images emerge out of this continuous flatness—would go on and on, in sort of an infinite moving flatness of space. That for me was a metaphor of the web.

There was a lot of discussion about the web at that time, what it was going to be like, what it would do. Nicholas Negroponte's *Being Digital* was published, and I was imagining the sense of infinite space that was virtual, and that's what drove not just the imagery but also the scale. I was not trying to do a big painting to impress, but to see what would happen if these modules could just keep going and going and going in a continuous way. That was also the affect that drove the tile pieces like *Ooze* (1987).

Rail: When you mentioned the screen, which is just incredibly important, this quote bubbled to mind. In the mid-'90s Lev Manovich, the media theorist, said that we don't know whether we're the society of the spectacle or not but we're definitely the society of the screen. In my capacity as an art critic I'm constantly seeing painters in particular who have to respond to this idea when we're talking about two-dimensional surfaces of the screen and the fact that people are looking at screens all the time, so how do you shift over? I'm also interested in how the modernist idea of the grid gets moved over in the '80s and shifts into this notion of a matrix. There's this idea of the grid in the digital age becoming something else.

Another person that comes to mind is Thomas Bayrle who had a show at the New Museum in 2018. He's somebody whose work I've been close to and it's different from your work. It tends to be more technological, more industrial/technological things than the body, whereas your work is about this very intimate close relationship. I wanted to point this out because it becomes, for me at least—although I don't think it's too much of a stretch when we see the color here and knowing that you have this strong background in color relationships—this kind of flesh matrix, that the two-dimensional work becomes a kind of skin. So rather than the Renaissance window or the modernist grid, we have this thing that gives the illusion of a kind of breathing, kind of a warp and weft.

In one interview you gave you mentioned your interest in early Bakshaish rugs, which made me think of the relationship of the jacquard loom to the early computer, but also I think about how when you look at a rug and people will say, "hey, this can go on the wall or it can go on the floor," which reminds me of some of your work in terms of these objects that are sort of cascading—I wouldn't say from the wall to the floor but where they are sculpture and then all of a sudden they're floating or melting onto the floor particularly works like *Ooze* and *Reflexive Ooze* (1987).



Tishan Hsu, *Reflexive Ooze*, 1987. Ceramic tile, vinyl cement compound, oil, acrylic, alkyd on wood 58.75 x 59 x 3.5 inches. High Museum of Art, Atlanta. Gift of Hillman R. Holland through the 20th Century Art Acquisition Fund in memory of Dr. Robert H. Brown. © 2021 Tishan Hsu / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

Hsu: Martha, it's great you brought up the rugs. That has kind of been a private passion. It began more as a decorative thing. I never really knew about oriental rugs and then when I was a student I actually saw one for the first time, you know a good one and I was just amazed at the materiality. The fact that someone made this, it just blew my mind. And then later, after doing some of my early work I was looking at the rug more and you know I had a small one, and I realized they were sculptures to me. If you study them and look at the backing they're grids. I only came to look at rugs slowly over many years and began seeing unexpected connections, but the fact that you're seeing these connections is kind of amazing to me. The handmade rugs used a loom, which is an early technology. There is a hybrid production of the handmade with technology. The other worldly patterns are multi-dimensional. The way color is handled is extraordinary and almost digital. And then the sheer, almost technological flatness of the soft, fuzzy, material feels minimalist, so cool, as affect.

Rail: You mentioned this in an interview I read, I wish I could say I was that perceptive!

Hsu: Well, someone might know that I mentioned it but not see the connection. So anyway I think there is something perhaps unconscious going on there. One thing that struck me when I started doing the flat tile pieces on the floor is that I also was looking at a flatness in experiencing the rugs, and then as you get closer you see them two-dimensionally in these amazing organic patterns, so there's this paradox again of the screen, if you will, and the object. There's this illusionary world, but then as you move around the work, it's a physical thing in the world. For me these rugs are like a sculpture if you think of Carl Andre's steel plate pieces on the floor.

But to go back to the grid, for me it was beyond the kind of modernist grid of minimalist conceptual work—I'm thinking of works by Hanne Darboven or Sol LeWitt—for me it was the next step in how space would be defined. When I was a student at MIT, I happened to be working next to Nicholas Negroponte's architectural machine where he was inventing a 3D software. The computer that he needed to do that, which he was creating from scratch, was the size of a 10 by 10 room. I could observe the screen he was working with, and the way he was defining the space on that screen was a grid. The topology was a flatness that moved through space as a way of defining space. The flat grid was becoming organic, if not actually moving. If you use any 3D software, it places you in a three-dimensional gridded space as a way of even thinking about space. More recently, this underlying grid has become the conceptual visual basis for facial recognition and other data intensive applications that measure and define not only the world we live in but also our bodies in the world.

The flat tile pieces, like *Ooze* or *Vertical Ooze* (1987) really were about this kind of technological space of data, and that it would go on and on and I was trying to do it in what may seem a retro way, using actual physical materials, rather than just hopping onto the computer and going with it. The works also float. So if you see the work, it's off of the floor and there's no sense of base to it. That was an affect I wanted in all of the work, whether it's hanging on the wall, or eventually on wheels, like *Biocube* from 1988. What I liked about traditional media, versus technology itself, like film or media, was that it was slower, and thereby elicited a different kind of awareness of affect that only a slower meditation can elicit. That was important to me.

I wanted everything to feel contingent, that it could be here or it could be there, or anywhere. That was something I felt was another affect, and I'm using the word affect a lot because that is what drove the work here. It wasn't trying to declare we are now in a technological world. I was trying to get at some sense of what the feeling of all of this technology was/is. And so for me "contingency," or this continuous surface quality, or this sense of illusion—that's what I was going for. Why I wanted to do it is partly unconscious but there's also a sense that we really didn't and don't understand what this new interface was doing to us. In order to figure that out, we first had to figure out: what are we really feeling here, interacting with all this stuff? There's this kind of cognitive, emotional, psychological resonance going on between us as this organic body, and this screen, and it is affecting us and the culture, if not the world, in deeper and deeper ways. And so I felt the affect is important for us to become more conscious of in some way, if possible, just to stop a minute and ask, what is going on here? What is this? What we are going through is unprecedented in human history. And that's what was driving my interest in trying to visualize these physical attributes in the work.

Rail: My favorite book is *The Posthuman Glossary*, which I want to bring in terms of this idea of an affect and embodiment that we're seeing, and this is why your work from the '80s and the '90s looks just so incredibly canny. We are thinking in terms of questions like: What is the body in front of the screen? But also, what happens when you start to have the screen inside the body?

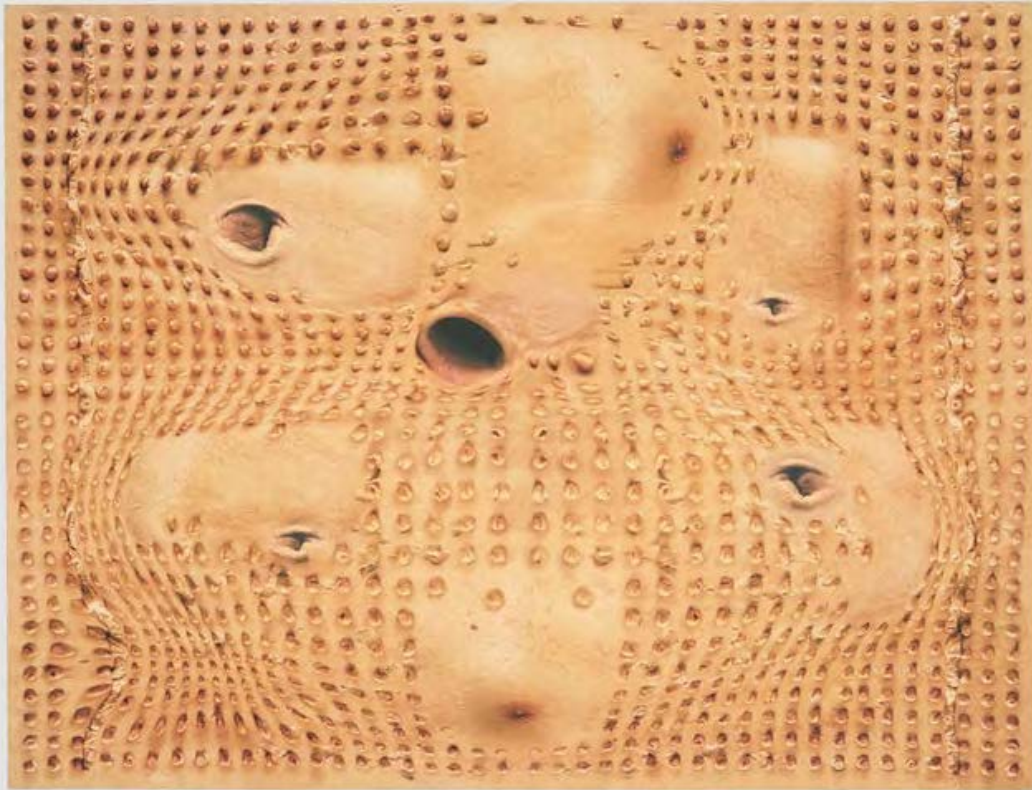
I was also looking at a catalog of your show at Pat Hearn from 1986 and it's very interesting some of the different sources you draw from, say for instance Derrida, and people who were thinking of philosophy. People have often described *Closed Circuit II* from 1986 as predating the Instagram logo. And, you know, some of the new geometries that you discuss. And one of the things I like very much in this catalog is that you have this poem, "When Science is in the Country," and it made me think of the Richard Brautigan poem, "All Watched Over by Machines of Loving Grace" which circles back to what you said earlier about how visual art was lagging behind things like literature and music in terms of thinking about these new worlds, whether they were technological or digital, or new forms of embodiment. The other thing I wanted to do is talk about your early Photoshop works.



Tishan Hsu, *Closed Circuit II*, 1986. Acrylic, alkyd, Styrofoam, vinyl cement compound on wood 59 x 59 x 4 inches. Rubell Family Collection, Miami. © 2021 Tishan Hsu / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

Hsu: When Photoshop appeared for the consumer and for the artists to work with, I took a year off from teaching just to learn Photoshop, just to see whether it was something I really felt like I could invest myself in as a new way of making an image. In the beginning I thought it wasn't going to work, but by the end of the year it was just so automatic. I felt a connection to that mouse like I do a pencil. I felt it was likely training in a sport, where I had to do it everyday where its functionality became automatic.

Rail: That's interesting. And how about more recent photographic work, like *Innies and Outies* or *Interface with Lips* (both 2002)?



Tishan Hsu, *Innies and Outies*, 2002. Archival inkjet on canvas. 44 x 57 inches. © 2021 Tishan Hsu / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

Hsu: In the late '80s, I explored photography because I wanted to get something more clinical in the work, as opposed to the hand created images. I was trying to get people to see I'm dealing with the body, and I felt the affect of the clinical was something technological in the way that it is so real, like an augmented eye.

At this point, the technological advance of photography has been startling. And it is an ontological change. Maybe it was Baudrillard who said the public will become private and the private will become public. That is our private lives are becoming so transparent and public. At the same time we know almost too much about the world, and it's coming right into our bedroom, so to speak. And so it's this kind of realness that photography offers of something very intimate, like skin, to whatever we see through the photograph more than we do even with our human eyes. And I think that's really apparent now with how our experience of the news is evolving.

And so the sense of this clinical microscopic focus is the affect that I really wanted to use and that's what drove me to continue to work with the Photoshop, which could use photographic images. However, what drove this is wanting to then go back and, in a way, invoke much of my experience of painting, frankly, and what the affect of painting has done through time, and to bring that into this technological medium.

And so in a way I see works like *Interface with Lips* as paintings, but then I'm also working purely digitally. I say this only because after the year I spent learning Photoshop, the "Interface" works in 2002 are my first experimental works with the digital. I should say digital imaging, but also printing on a wide format printer, which was important. I don't think I would have gone down this road had that not developed simultaneously. And I think Epson was seeing the demand for that. Soon after I started working on the canvas they announced that inks were going to be archival which was the other important component. At the time, I was imagining the further evolution onto a more expansive wall, which I was not able to realize until the SculptureCenter show.

But when I finished *Interface with Lips* I felt something was lacking because it was so controlled. I had all the control that technology allows, but I couldn't do anything more with it, once it was printed. Once it was done it was done. For me—there was something missing, the element of contingency, of risk, of chance, I really wanted back into the work. And it's not that I was only trying to examine whether this attribute was something that I just feel a personal connection to, but also does it somehow resonate with what I'm seeing in the world?

I felt that in spite of the control that we have with technology, the sense of accident and risk going on in the world continues and that's part of what the body is. And so that drove me to want to bring back a more traditional medium of some sort that could work with the technological. Now, I could not just paint on the printed canvas. I couldn't just invoke painting, because once I started painting I was bringing in the whole history of painting and that was kind of antithetical to this kind of technological sense that I was going for. So I spent a number of years trying to figure out a way of bringing back materiality, but having technological affect.

With photography, and the affect of clinical reality, I felt ready to move the work more into the real world and to address issues coming from that. In the '89 show with Pat, it was about surveillance and security, the medical environment, and the sense of how bodies are extracted through data. These are contexts in which the body is interfacing with technology in society. The use of photography enabled me to do that in a way. I could use the syntax of body and technology and address these more specific, real world contexts. And that's what drove the work after 2005.

Rail: You know, I do all my writing on a theorist named Vilém Flusser who was writing in the 1980s. Initially he became well known for his book *Towards a Philosophy of Photography* which came out in 1983. His idea was that we need to stop talking about images per se, and instead talk about apparatuses, which might mean the camera. Of course now everybody walks around with a camera all the time, and everybody is a photographer, and this is why Flusser's book is very forward looking. He was also and this is what I'm spending my time on right now is a chapter for a book that has to do with his book *Vampyroteuthis Infernalis* (1987) about a squid and using that squid as this way of thinking through philosophy with an underwater animal.

For Flusser this idea of photography in the digital realm and biotechnology were completely linked. So when you start talking about "skin" in photography, for Flusser that could be something like photographic paper, because it functions in a similar way in terms of being photosensitive and having color. He would treat skin as a technological interface. And what I see in your work as well is this convergence of how to talk about technology in the body, and not just as augmentation, or artificial intelligence, but what you stated initially, that you might have been working intuitively, or in a kind of science fiction sense. Flusser actually called his work "science fiction philosophy" because it was speculative instead of this idea that we know what we're talking about. No we don't always know what we're talking about, and this is particularly true in terms of art, in terms of bodies, in terms of technology and joining them all together.

Hsu: Flusser was so prescient. People always ask if I'm interested in science fiction and I always have to say I'm not in the sense that I'm not trying to create an imaginary world. For me, my process focuses on what I perceive as the real world not fictional, or the world that I experience as emerging. What's interesting to me is science fiction has really grown as a genre in writing. It's taking up much more space now as serious literature, and I think that's partly because the world is moving so fast that before you can even think about it, we're already there. The world we're living in right now is science fiction, it's more wacky than much of science fiction I've read.

And so I think Flusser's speculative writing is very accurate in terms of what's happening now, and about to happen in a much more obvious way perhaps. I think the sense of time and future-past is collapsing because things are moving so quickly. A lot driven by the speed of technology and the speed of capitalism, frankly. We can hardly keep up. I feel like the implications of Flusser's writing are providing directions on how to make sense of the world we are in right now, because I frankly cannot make sense of it anymore. I don't feel there's a present. There's a kind of anticipatory future that assists with speculating on what is going on right now, because all of my past ways of organizing the world are not working anymore.

Contributor

Martha Schwendener

is an art historian and critic living in Brooklyn.

T The New York Times Style Magazine

An Artist for the Dystopian Age

For decades, Tishan Hsu has explored the ever more salient relationship between technology and the human body.



Tishan Hsu lives above his Williamsburg, Brooklyn, studio, where an immense skylight keeps a Norfolk Island Pine alive. The miniature green chair was once the artist's son's but, these days, Hsu uses it to work on pieces on the floor, like the glassy tank just behind him — a cast-off component of a sculpture that grew in another direction. Flora Hanitijo

By Adriane Quinlan

Jan. 7, 2021

When Los Angeles's Hammer Museum was shut down last March, so was the first retrospective of the 69-year-old artist Tishan Hsu. Hanging from the gallery walls for no one to see was Hsu's immense "Cell" (1987), a 16-foot-wide raft of carved wood painted in fleshy tones and overlaid with rigid bars to recall the experience of staring down a microscope into a magnified view of human blood. In another gallery sat "Virtual Flow" (1990-2018), a suite of mock laboratory equipment in a sickening shade of millennial pink, built to "Pee-wee's Playhouse" proportions. Meanwhile, the recorded sounds of a hospital respirator emanated from the device playing the 2005 video work "Folds of Oil."

In addition to upending the schedule of his retrospective, which was organized by SculptureCenter in Long Island City, Queens, where it is now on view, the pandemic impeded Hsu's plans to start an ambitious work cycle, as well as the staffing of his studio, in the Williamsburg neighborhood of Brooklyn. But the coronavirus has also made the artist's longstanding interest in the relationship between the body and technology, the organic and the man-made, seem even more prescient. "I remember telling people in the '80s, 'I don't know what the work is about. I don't have a text here. The work will reveal itself,'" Hsu said on a recent video call. "It just validates the unconscious."



An early adopter of digital editing techniques, Hsu helped develop the studio for interactive art at Sarah Lawrence College, where he taught for more than 20 years before his retirement in 2018. Here, his large-scale printer sits next to "Blue Interface With Lego" (2019), a dye-sublimation print. Flora Hanitijo

Born in Boston and raised by an opera singer and an engineer, Hsu had a childhood that was scored by the warbles of humanity as much as by the orderly hum of machines. As a student at MIT, he studied architecture and began to experiment with sculpture, putting to use his knowledge of ergonomics and organic forms. To fund his art-making after graduation, he took a job temping as a word processor at various law firms; typing on a primitive computer, his thoughts would veer to what screens might do for memory and sense perception. In his off hours, he was reconsidering painting, working with plywood forms. He eventually developed a technique of scratching through layers of paint to reveal gooey, naturalistic shapes in the wood. Staring at these early works can be a bit like looking at an electrical outlet and seeing in its contours and openings a face in shock: eyes and lips sometimes appear to cohere, then fade back into abstraction.

When Hsu started showing his hand-wrought slabs in New York in the mid-80s, the work felt out of step with the decade's slick graphic art and loopy, graffiti-inspired paintings. But the subsequent decades revealed Hsu's anticipation of our current era of industrial design. Pull out an iPhone to take a picture of Hsu's "Squared Nude" (1984) or "Institutional Body" (1986) and you'll notice that the shape, orientation and proportions of the gadget are roughly the same as those of the painted wall hangings. When Hsu's show opened at the Hammer last January, a curator pointed out that "Closed Circuit II" (1986), a square wall hanging with a lenslike, circular form, resembles an early logo for Instagram. And when asked about "Portrait" (1982), a horizontal wooden slab whose rounded outer edges frame a rectangle scratched in the manic texture of a static-filled screen, Hsu insisted: "I was not thinking of the iPad at the time."

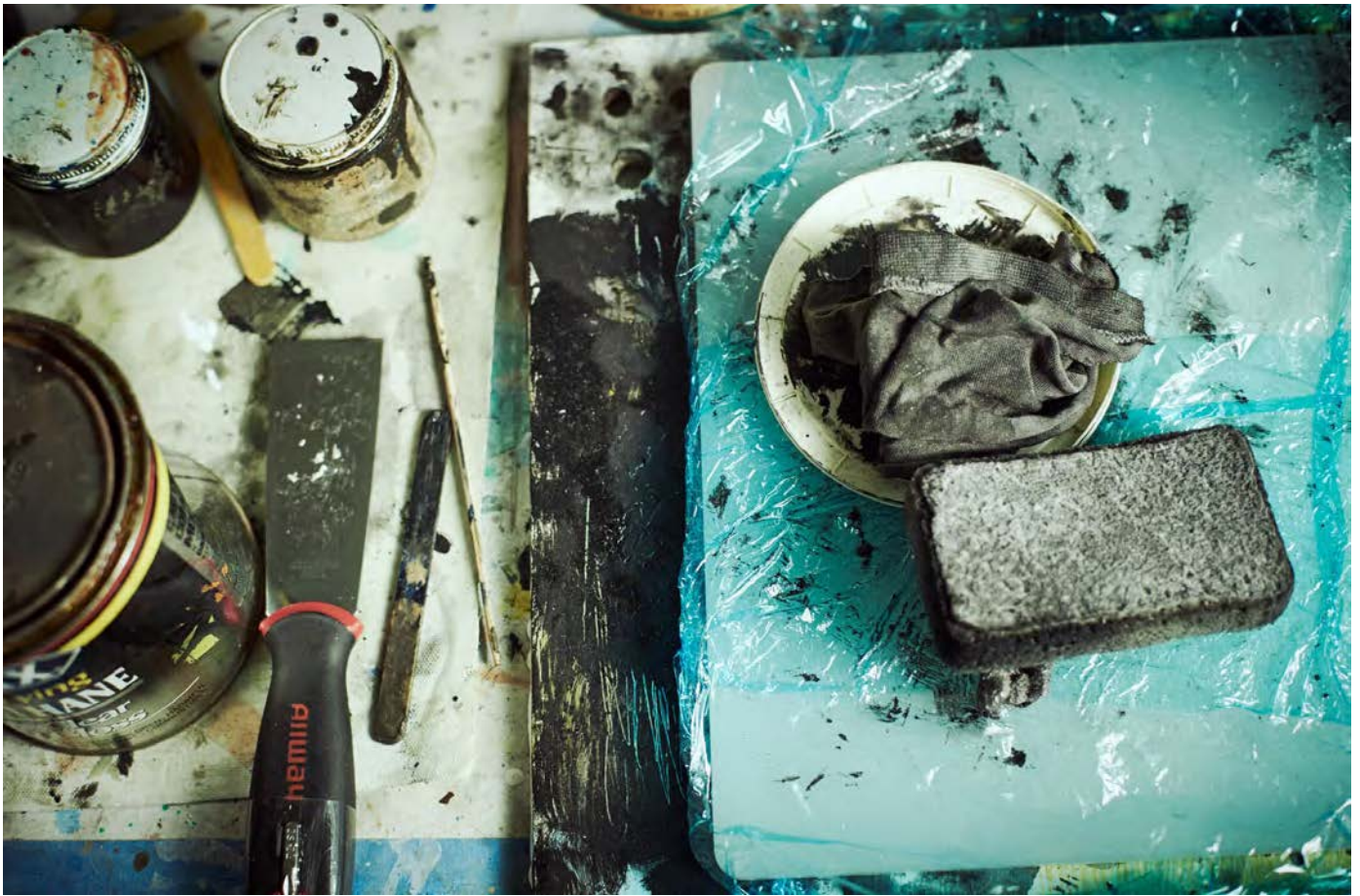


Yogurt containers are just one part of Hsu's system for organizing the substrates he uses to give his sculptures textures that are alternately scratchy and gooey, organic and shellacked. Flora Hanitijo

For a 1989 show at New York's Pat Hearn Gallery, Hsu focused on the idea of medical intervention. Doctors had told him that he would eventually need a kidney transplant, but that future technology would make the procedure less risky. "I had this idea that the hospital was the most radical site for what we're doing to our bodies," he said. "That some future people might look back on us, as we look back on very early cultures that do these things to the body, like impel them or scar them." The kidney transplant, which Hsu finally underwent in 2006, increased the likelihood of his having a severe response to Covid-19. And so, last spring, he let his staff go and joined his wife, who stays at their home in the Berkshires, where he lived out a version of Thomas Mann's "Magic Mountain" (1924). "After a month or two it started getting very weird psychologically; you lose track of the days," he said. At the same time, he spent more of those days scrolling through the news, thinking about how the headlines were designed to entice him to click. He started making drawings studded with eyes and lenses that "watch" the viewer, reversing the direction of the gaze and subverting the hierarchy of spectator and work: the surveyor becomes the surveyed.

Even in the mountains, then, the artist felt watched: by the sites he visited, by the phone he took to bed. "They actually have cognitive psychologists helping them design this software so that they know what will pull you in," Hsu said. "We need to stop and think about what it's doing to us and our bodies. So in a way that's what my work has been trying to grasp. I would say, whether people connect to my work — I think I'm really just trying to ask the question, 'What is really happening?'"

On display together for the first time, Hsu's sculptures ask more questions than they answer. Like props built for the Harkonnen den in a "Dune" remake, they seem designed to furnish a future we could not want to live in — a dystopia that may reflect aspects of our reality, but remains enigmatic enough to hide its politics, and grotesque enough to make more squeamish viewers turn away before they've had a chance, as Hsu said, to "stop and think."



A mix of alkyd resin and oil paint produces a thick, tarry black that Hsu began deploying in the 1980s to paint wooden forms that he'd scratch, forming networks of lines that seemed to buzz with electricity. Flora Hanitijo

Now back in Brooklyn (his apartment is above his studio), Hsu answered T's Artist's Questionnaire via Zoom, having chosen a virtual background of an oozy-looking stucco wall that could easily have been mistaken for the handworked surface of one of his sculptures.

What is your day like? How much do you sleep, and what's your work schedule?

I have to have eight hours of sleep. I work much of the day and evening. I live where I work, and I like being able to integrate everyday life with my work. I may go down in the evening for several hours, depending on what's going on. Phone and internet, doing my work, working with assistants and, you know, eating or socializing — it's all kind of mixed together. I feel like I'm always working mentally, if not actually in the studio. I don't keep a schedule.

How many hours of creative work do you think you do in a day?

Seven, 10, maybe.

What's the first piece of art you ever made?

Oh, I can't remember. In elementary school I was drawing all the time. I recall doing a landscape by looking out the window for the first time, and I remember doing a papier-mâché mask, a picture of which was published in the local paper. I drew an architectural rendering in elementary school, and the teacher brought people in to look at it.

What's the worst studio you ever had?

The worst one? I had a studio, I mean, I used the living room of a summer house that had no heat. I was taking a year off after grad school to decide whether I was going to be an artist and said, "I'll only allow myself to do art and nothing else, so if you're not going to do art, you're not going to do anything." And a friend offered this empty old house for the winter. I put down a piece of linoleum and just worked there. The ceiling, floors and walls were all dark brown wood. Small antique windows, a ceiling bulb and a space heater. It was 20 feet from the ocean, which can be pretty grim in the dead of a New England winter.



Hsu's techy, dystopian vision also includes powder pinks, swimming pool aquas and taxi cab yellow — all on view in his collection of acrylics. He credits his understanding of color to an early teacher of his, the painter Maryann Harman. *Flora Hanitijo*

What's the first work you ever sold? For how much?

A painting in high school, a landscape. I don't remember exactly what the price was — a few hundred dollars. I was painting from observation along the lines of the Impressionists, studying with the painter Maryann Harman, who taught me everything I know about color.

When you start a new piece, where do you begin?

My ideas for my work have always felt like steps in a long arc of an idea that is still being revealed through intuition. A new piece doesn't feel like a first step, but rather a step in an ongoing journey, where I am already in a context within the work, and am making the next step. Sometimes it has been difficult to stop at a given point and produce a body of work, enough for a show, when I am seeing the next step. And spending time on the last step feels frustrating and repetitive, like variations on a theme. A teacher once told me I jump too fast and need to get more out of each idea that emerges. I feel I finally have enough understanding of the work that I can retrieve ideas that emerged along the way and allow them to unfold more fully, more effectively, or recombine several in ways I hadn't imagined, thanks to the advance of technological tools available to artists. The steps, in a way, are already there. I just need to take them.

How do you know when you're done?

I don't feel there's anything more to do.

How many assistants do you have?

With Covid, one. Pre-Covid, between two and four.

Have you assisted other artists before? If so, whom?

No.



Before the pandemic, Hsu was planning to hire more help. Lately, he and his sole studio assistant have been using these panels to test a new process for printing. Flora Hanitijo

What music do you play when you're making art?

Generally, techno. I like a lot of the techno coming from — well, early on it was Germany, where a lot of musicians from around the world were working.

When did you first feel comfortable saying you're a professional artist?

When I moved to New York, after grad school, I called myself an artist. The term “professional” never meant much to me.

Is there a meal you eat on repeat when you're working?

I don't eat in the studio.

Are you bingeing on any shows right now?

I don't watch TV. There are some shows I would like to binge on but don't allow myself the time. I like film, where I can experience it in one sitting. And I'm a news addict, which is one of the big issues I'm wrestling with.

What's the weirdest object in your studio?

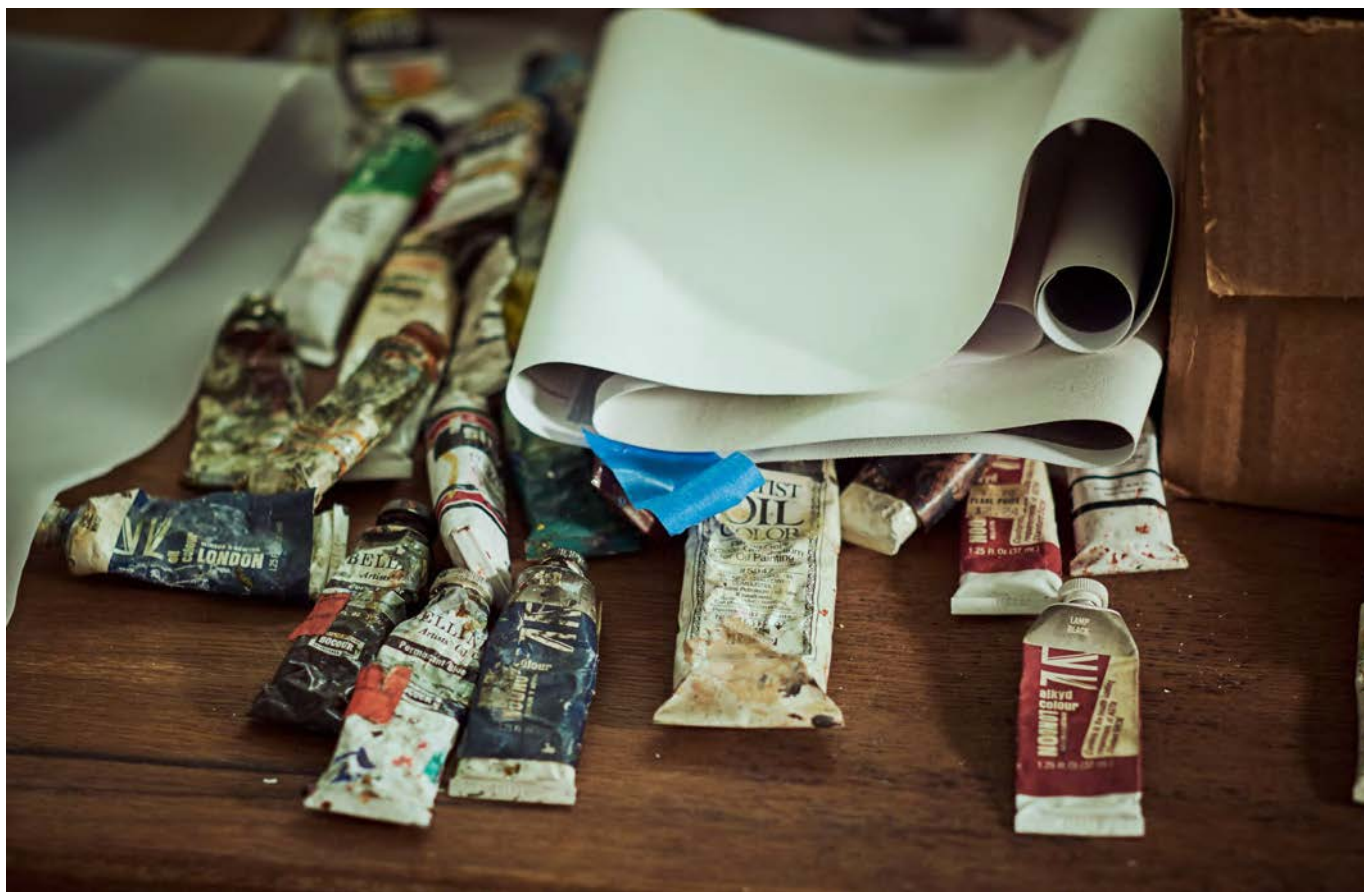
The skin of a stingray. It's very tough, and there's almost like an eye right in the middle that's part of the pattern of the skin. It looks like something out of sci-fi. At some point, I was looking for different kinds of skins. I've always been fascinated by how color and pattern manifest in nature and on living creatures.

How often do you talk to other artists?

Well, at this point, my assistants are generally artists, often younger. Occasionally I talk to artist friends closer to my generation.

What do you do when you're procrastinating?

I spend too much time following the news and commentary on the web. I sometimes think I may not be entirely procrastinating. What I feel is an addiction might not be entirely about my own impulses. I am thinking about the reality described in the recent documentary “The Social Dilemma” (2020).



Hsu barely touches oil paint these days — a degree in architecture at MIT and an interest in industrial design pulled him away from painting and toward sculpture — but the medium defined his early study of conventional landscape painting. Flora Hanitijo

What's the last thing that made you cry?

I can't remember the specifics but some things on the news last year made me cry.

What do you usually wear when you work?

Old clothes.

If you have windows, what do they look out on?

I don't have windows in the studio. There are only skylights, and I look at the sky.

What do you bulk buy with most frequency?

I order a lot of water. Five-gallon bottles of water. I lived through 9/11 downtown when we had to carry water up seven flights of stairs.

What embarrasses you?

Responses I often get when I'm asked my age.

Do you exercise?

Yes. I do martial arts, specifically action meditation and resistance training.

What are you reading?

"The Futurica Trilogy" by Alexander Bard and Jan Söderqvist. Also, "Critique of Black Reason" (2013) by Achille Mbembe.

What's your favorite artwork (by someone else)?

There are so many. One? Rosemarie Trockel's steel sofa with the plastic sheet on it ["Copy Me" (2013)]. A performance of Pope.L in which he buried himself vertically except for his head ["Sweet Desire a.k.a. Burial Piece" (1996)], which I witnessed; I will never forget it. Sun Yuan and Peng Yu's "Can't Help Myself" (2016), shown recently at the Guggenheim. William Kentridge's early animations. Early Bakshaish rugs.

sculpture



Tishan Hsu, installation view with (foreground) *Autopsy*, 1988, plywood, ceramic tile, acrylic, vinyl cement compound, stainless steel, and rubber, 55 x 49 x 94 in.; and (background) *Interface Wall 2.0 – NY*, 2020, from *Interface Remix*, 2002–ongoing, inkjet on vinyl on sheetrock, dimensions variable. Photo: Kyle Knodell

Tishan Hsu

January 4, 2021 by Elaine A. King

Long Island City, New York

SculptureCenter

“Tishan Hsu: *Liquid Circuit*,” on view at the SculptureCenter through January 25, 2021, makes a compelling and timely statement about our technologically driven age. Hsu trained as an architect in the 1970s at M.I.T., where the program emphasized a combination of traditional and late 20th-century approaches to building materials. During his studies, he became interested in film and video, which prompted him to question a society determined by media and information. These concerns led Hsu to invent a visual language capable of manifesting ideas about what he calls “a presence life.”

Hsu's work is not a theater of science fiction but an interpretation of the present imbued dimensional objects transcend Modernist formal values to reveal the eerie eccentricity of life in a post-industrial age. Multiplicity rather than singularity is paramount: pared-down forms meld with eccentric, brightly colored rhomboids and ovoids, assorted illusionistic gashes, holes, and glazed, scratched black surfaces reminiscent of silent electronic screens. Intended to evoke many things, these divergent elements coexist within carefully calculated, unconventional constructions that blend the sculptural and the painterly through clashing textures, high-tech materials, and bombastic surfaces. The metaphorical layering is at times disturbing, yet its bewitching novelty demands further examination. Wood, metal, acrylic, rubber, and aluminum seem to offer material familiarity, but their unusual juxtaposition within strange color planes, protrusions, and haunting light dissolves any sense of comfort.

The SculptureCenter, with its cracked concrete floors, industrial-height ceilings, and steel beams, provides the perfect setting for Hsu's work. Rather than the polished milieu of the Hammer Art Museum, where the exhibition debuted last year, the SculptureCenter expresses the DIY, garage aesthetic of 1980s tech start-ups. Many of the key sculptures, wall reliefs, drawings, and media works in "Liquid Circuit" were produced between 1980 and 1988 and thus predate Wi-Fi, iPhones, Facebook, Google, Twitter, and Netflix; yet they demonstrate Hsu's acute prescience about how technology was quickly becoming an extension of the human body—a foresight he shared with Tony Oursler. Both artists anticipated rapid advances in the production and transmission of signals, emanations, images, and codes—electronic, magnetic, mimetic, virtual. When asked about showing this work during Covid-19, Hsu said, "It has been uncanny how the pandemic and the reliance on the Internet for remote 'presence' have crystallized what the work was always about: the embodiment of the technological."

Walking Gray (1980), a seminal work, twists a bizarre sculptural form into a functional bench. An organic oozing compound interrupts the linear tile surface, suggesting some type of meltdown. In *Holey Cow* (1986), a dwarfish form with bright yellow and black spots scattered over a flowing, contoured surface, an isolated geometric grid of tiles ruptures the implied rhythm. This discordant architectural reference raises questions about its presence while stabilizing the organic shape. Hsu often takes a small element like this and uses it as a primary focus in subsequent pieces. This becomes clear in *Ooze*, *Reflective Ooze*, and *Vertical Ooze* (all 1987), which all magnify and transform the tile grid in *Holey Cow* into a dominant structural presence.

The wall construction *Liquid Circuit* (1987) consists of a large horizontal panel in vivid yellow with three chrome bars in the center, framed by two blue-black screens resembling ultrasound imagery. Its high-tech veneer asserts a commanding dignity in which the human and the mechanical collide. Other startling pieces include *Closed Circuit II* (1986), which eerily resembles an Instagram icon; *Squared Nude* (1984), evocative of an iPhone (first released in 2007); and *Outer Banks of Memory* (1984), in which wood, concrete, and Styrofoam recall unhealthy tissue observed under a microscope. Though these are wall-hung works, their unusual compositions depict deep, illusionistic space not unlike an



Tishan Hsu, *Walking Gray*, 1980. Vinyl cement compound, porcelain ceramic tile, acrylic, wood, and steel, 31.5 x 60.75 x 35.5 in. Photo: Tom Warren, © Tishan Hsu, Courtesy Miguel Abreu Gallery, New York and Empty Gallery, Hong Kong

electronic screen, imparting the impression that they are floating in space, perhaps portals to another reality.

The multi-sectional, freestanding *Autopsy* (1988), tiled in shades of rustic rose and brown, calls to mind operating rooms from old science-fiction and horror films. An enormous phantasmagoric inkjet print on PVC, *Interface Wall 2.0 – NY*, was created for this show from Hsu's ongoing *Interface Remix*, which has been evolving for more than 17 years. As installed here, *Interface Wall 2.0 – NY*, with its skin-like surface punctuated with distorted compositions of lips, mouths, and eyes, supplies a perfect backdrop to *Autopsy*. Using a Lego board as a mold, Hsu made a cast with skin-toned urethane rubber: "Using the tools of Photoshop, [I] 'cloned' skin images between all of the nodules, producing an image of actual skin in a continuous surface filled with emerging nodules. For me, it was a conceptual image of bio-technology." The piece is both compelling and disturbing, with echoes of Dante's *Inferno*. It's a radical distillation of Hsu's earlier work, harkening back to the core of his focus on the consumption of the body by technology.

Folds of Oil (2005), a video spanning 21 minutes, is filled with ominous, animal twittering synchronized with the sound of human breathing through a ventilator. Set to images of an eerie landscape, this very personal work was made one year after Hsu had a kidney transplant. Though it provides insight into his understanding of the relation between body and machine, it also serves as a foundation for newer works that grapple with the climate crisis.

There is only one difficulty with this exhibition—curator Sohrab Mohebbi's claim that "Liquid Circuit" is the "New York-based artist's first museum survey exhibition in the United States." This is incorrect. A survey of Hsu's work, which I curated, was presented at the Carnegie Mellon Art Gallery in 1987. Nonetheless, a second survey of Hsu's exceptional work has been long overdue, and this show, which brings his output up to the present, introduces a new generation of viewers to a unique and visionary artist.

ARTFORUM



MYRIAM BEN SALAH

MYRIAM BEN SALAH IS THE DIRECTOR AND CHIEF CURATOR OF THE RENAISSANCE SOCIETY IN CHICAGO. SHE RECENTLY ORGANIZED (WITH LAUREN MACKLER AND IKECHUKWU ONYEWUENYI) MADE IN L.A. 2020: "A VERSION," THE FIFTH EDITION OF THE HAMMER MUSEUM'S BIENNIAL IN LOS ANGELES.



2. View of "Tishan Hsu: Liquid Circuit," 2020, Hammer Museum, Los Angeles. Wall, from left: *It's Not the Bullet but the Hole 2*, 1991; *Fingerpainting*, 1994. Floor: *Virtual Flow*, 1990–2018.

2

TISHAN HSU (HAMMER MUSEUM, LOS ANGELES; CURATED BY SOHRAB MOHEBBI AND ARAM MOSHAYEDI WITH NICHOLAS BARLOW)

Usually, about once a year, I lose faith in contemporary art. Then I come across a practice that makes me start believing again. It happened to me with "Liquid Circuit," an overdue survey of Hsu's work that contended with a cyborgian trope: There is no alterity in the machine; in fact the machine is me, or part of me, a phantom limb of sorts. Through a formal and theoretical tour de force, Hsu bypasses the failures of language and representation to communicate the body's most quintessential feature: pain. His is an art of radical empathy.

Organized by SculptureCenter, New York.

Art in America

TECHNOLOGY AND THE FLESH

By *Dennis Zhou* December 1, 2020 11:45am



Tishan Hsu, *Liquid Circuit*, 1987, acrylic, vinyl cement compound, alkyd, oil, aluminum on wood, 90 by 143 by 9 inches; at SculptureCenter.

PHOTO KYLE KNODELL

In the early 1980s, the painter, sculptor, and all-around technological savant [Tishan Hsu](#) landed a night job as a “word processor” at a Wall Street law firm. Encountering early computers before they entered widespread use, Hsu spent his shifts engrossed in a now mundane task: staring at a screen. Entranced by the symbiosis between user and machine, Hsu has continued to probe the interstices between the virtual and the physical over the past four decades, blending elements of architecture, medicine, and computer processing into inimitable hybrid objects. Following a debut at the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles in January, “Tishan Hsu: Liquid Circuit,” his first museum survey, was scheduled to arrive at [SculptureCenter](#) in New York in May. Delayed due to the pandemic, the exhibition opened in September in an interlinked, computer-dependent world Hsu prophesied. Encompassing paintings, sculptures, drawings, and videos, the show traces an arc from the dawn of personal computing to the advent of social media.

Born in Boston to Chinese immigrants, Hsu studied architecture at MIT before moving to New York

in 1979. Briefly a fixture of the downtown art scene, exhibiting at the Pat Hearn and Leo Castelli galleries, he went on to become one of the first artists to experiment with Photoshop and digital manipulation, incorporating newfound computational techniques into analog art forms.

Hsu's first exploratory paintings are curious creations, straddling the border between two and three dimensions. *Couple* (1983) and *Squared Nude* (1984), vertical wooden panels composed of paint and mixed mediums, evoke Futurism reinvented for the digital age; instead of capturing a flurry of movement made newly visible by photography, they render human cells and orifices as if pixelated on a staticky screen. To create that effect, however, Hsu scratched and etched into his wooden surfaces. Later paintings continued to grapple with the "space" of a screen; to capture both material flatness and virtual depth, Hsu often thrust



View of the exhibition "Tishan Hsu: Liquid Circuit" at SculptureCenter.
PHOTO KYLE KNODELL

three-dimensional objects violently through the picture plane. In *Outer Banks of Memory* (1984), a miniature "screen" rests jauntily against a larger canvas; *Fingerpainting* (1994), a silkscreen print, juxtaposes Renaissance-esque depictions of outstretched hands with screen-mediated body parts. Despite his interests in technology, Hsu never relinquished a manual sensuousness. (Indeed, some of the main delights of the show are his drawings and smaller studies; delicate, finely lined, and whimsically colored, they are frequently jotted down on whatever Hsu had at hand—a scrap of paper, legal letterhead, an envelope.)



View of the exhibition "Tishan Hsu: Liquid Circuit" at SculptureCenter.
PHOTO KYLE KNODELL

Hsu's dazzling sculptural installations, composed of cellular tiles, exude something humanoid in their fragility, with their knobby bumps, growths, and cancerous protrusions, yet appear simultaneously pastoral, given their likeness to landscapes with hills, gorges, and valleys. In *Virtual Flow* (1990—2018), plugs, outlets, and wheels protrude from an eerily corporeal, fleshy mass. A wonderful series of aquatint structures—*Ooze* (1987), *Vertical Ooze* (1987), and *Reflexive Ooze* (1987)—resemble swimming pools in their use of lacquered, ceramic tiles, recalling the domestic simulation of nature. Their rounded edges and rippling surfaces only further the uncanny recognition of something commonplace made novel.

Hsu's works are so unique that it is difficult to imagine corresponding movements. Some pieces reveal the influence of Minimalism—Donald Judd's stacked aluminum boxes, Carl Andre's floor grids of metal or stone—yet Hsu's insistent bodily references evade those artists' impersonal abstraction. Hsu also worked in a different way than his contemporaries in the Pictures Generation. Whereas artists like Richard Prince, Laurie Simmons, and Cindy Sherman used photography to appropriate and critique the imagery of mass media, Hsu remained fixated on the infrastructure of technology. (His closest peer is probably Nam June Paik, less for his video works than for his towers of television monitors.) There are no pop culture

references in the exhibition, unless we count one 1986 painting with an eerie resemblance to the Instagram logo, or, curiously, a Xerox copy of Dr. Hibbert from “The Simpsons.” Not gaining traction amid the Neo-Geo and Conceptual movements, Hsu decamped to Cologne in 1988; after returning to the United States two years later, he taught at Sarah Lawrence College until 2019.

In hindsight, Hsu’s emphasis on the systems as well as the products of the information age appears remarkably prescient, as we come to realize how Silicon Valley has reshaped both the means and the content of our consumption. At the same time, however, Hsu’s works seem to accommodate the burgeoning tech industry’s ideal of a disembodied—deracialized, degendered—subject. The latest piece included in the show, *Folds of Oil* (2005), a video with a beeping, breathing soundtrack, implies an evolution of Hsu’s practice into newer forms of technology, focusing on immersive, multimedia installations. Yet this inclusion also belies a more personal, retrospective direction.

Between 2013 and 2016, Hsu maintained a studio in Shanghai; in 2019, he exhibited his work from that studio in Hong Kong.

(Unfortunately, there was not enough time to include any of it at SculptureCenter.) Repurposing photographs depicting family members during the Cultural Revolution, Hsu scanned, distorted, and reprinted the images onto aluminum panels adorned with silicone forms, suggesting that history can operate much like technology in embellishing and supplanting one’s memories. No longer an outlier in an art world that today includes artists like Paul Chan, Hito Steyerl, and Ian Cheng, Hsu presents works that bear little trace of “Asian futurism”—to borrow the critic Dawn Chan’s term for a techno-Orientalism that situates Asian agency solely in the future—but reflect instead the globally ubiquitous experience of the human subject being rendered into data points to be collected and processed. In the light of his “Shanghai Project,” we can recognize Hsu’s lifelong obsession with absence and embodiment as a reaction to the past as much as to the future, and his collected output as an act of reclamation.



View of the exhibition “Tishan Hsu: Liquid Circuit” at SculptureCenter.
PHOTO KYLE KNODELL

The New York Times

5 Art Gallery Shows to See Right Now

Published Nov. 25, 2020 Updated Nov. 27, 2020



Installation view of "Tishan Hsu: Liquid Circuit," an exhibition of about 30 sculptures, wall reliefs and other works that the artist made from 1980 to 2005. Tishan Hsu and Sculpture Center; Kyle Knodell

"Consciousness is constantly mutating, moving from one state to another, and possibly back again," the New York-based artist Tishan Hsu wrote in a catalog accompanying his exhibition at the Pat Hearn Gallery in 1986. How to represent these mutations in artistic form? Mr. Hsu did that with strange, gorgeous precision in about 30 sculptures, wall reliefs, drawings and other works made from 1980 to 2005 that you can see in ["Liquid Circuit"](#) at the Sculpture Center, the artist's first museum survey exhibition.

Mr. Hsu trained as an architect at M.I.T., but he was also interested in artificial intelligence. The builder's and technologist's approach is apparent in "Liquid Circuit" (1987), an electric yellow wall relief with industrial handles that has waving lines painted in a dark field suggesting a spooky digital screen. "Vertical Ooze" (1987) is a powder-blue object that straddles the divide between biomorphic sculpture and a tiled industrial space or a science-fiction film set.

Mr. Hsu's wall reliefs recall elements of Minimalism and '80s Neo-Geo, like Ashley Bickerton's sculptures. (Mr. Bickerton extended

the concerns of Pop Art, however, by including product logos and references.) Mr. Hsu's work is subtler, with flickers of surrealism, psychedelia and cybernetics. Mostly, however, they feel fresh and wildly prescient, predicting perfectly how consciousness has mutated even further in a digital and biotech age.

MARTHA SCHWENDENER

BROOKLYN RAIL

Tishan Hsu: *Liquid Circuit*

By **Simon Wu**



Installation view: *Tishan Hsu: Liquid Circuit*, SculptureCenter, New York, 2020. Photo: Kyle Knodell.

For the last four decades, Tishan Hsu has worked across sculpture, video, painting, and photography to consider the question: “How do we embody technology?” Hsu was born to Chinese parents in Boston, trained as an architect at MIT, and active in the NY art scene in the 1980s where he worked with gallerists like Leo Castelli and Pat Hearn.

Hsu’s work was prescient then, and still feels prescient now, although the context he found himself in during the ’80s was unable to synthesize disparate aspects of his work: its relation to Minimalism, the ongoing gentrification of New York, and his Asian-American identity. Hsu’s material references draw from sculptors like Robert Gober and Ashley Bickerton, but his imbrication of body and media feels like a conceptual precursor to contemporary art/tech practices like Sondra Perry and Juliana Huxtable, for whom any claims to an indivisibility between body and media are always laced with questions of race and gender. This conversation is part of the future that Hsu’s works anticipated.

ON VIEW
SculptureCenter
September 24,
2020 – January
15, 2021
Long Island City



Installation view: Tishan Hsu: *Liquid Circuit*, SculptureCenter, New York, 2020. Photo: Kyle Knodell.

Encountering the work in 2020, it seems to have accrued new references over the years—the rounded edges of *Closed Circuit II* (1986) look like the Instagram logo, *Squared Nude* (1985) resembles an iPhone, the “diseased” surfaces of *Outer Banks of Memory II* (1984) make one wary in a pandemic. These were not the initial references in his work, but feel uncannily relevant now. Hsu’s work combines traditional materials like paint, encaustic, and wax with more “technological” surfaces like stainless steel, glass, and TV screens to draw up rich material dramas that illustrate how our relationship to technology is at once symbiotic and parasitic.

Virtual Flow (1990–2018), a two-part sculpture featuring a squat, tiled TV set seemingly “plugged in” to a glass tray table sets up this dichotomy. *Virtual Flow* looks like a millennial set piece gone wrong: pastel pink and vaporwave grids are punctuated with sores and welts, sitting on wheels as if to be carried elsewhere. A goopy, waxy substance approximating skin grafts patches up sections of the glass. The sculptures are connected by cords that mutually draw energy from the outlets set in both the “human” and the “non-human” components of the sculptures. It is unclear who is drawing power from whom.



Installation view: Tishan Hsu: *Liquid Circuit*, SculptureCenter, New York, 2020. Photo: Kyle Knodell.

Hsu's surfaces recall both the slick, retro-feeling grids of '80s futurama (like vaporwave meets the Jetsons) but also degraded, or sickly, human flesh. In *Cellular Automata 2* (1989), nine quadrants show a range of isolated parts: two holes that look like round nostrils, perhaps, a mouth, an eye, and then several ambiguous folds of tissue. The openings are reminiscent of wounds, but the smooth edges around the holes suggest that they've healed, or that they were engineered in some way. Occasionally, the holes are the result of violence. *It's Not the Bullet but the Hole 2* (1991), is a silkscreen black-and-white image split into six quadrants, the top left of which appears to be a photograph of a bullet wound, complete with a small measuring tape. A red blush effect stands in for blood or inflammation, hinting at the violence of the interface between humans and technology. The remaining five quadrants have fleshy, rectangular protrusions with wrinkles and folds that look like skin. Other holes look more like computer parts. In *Manic Panic* (1987), two rectangular panels with oblong protuberances have various orifices with lines in front of them that make them look like grates, or the ventilation sections of computers, or in *Liquid Circuit* (1987), a large panel in Thunderbird yellow, a set of chrome ladders resemble ribs flanked by ventilator grates. In Hsu's work, the collision of machinic and human bodies is not always harmonious.



Installation view: Tishan Hsu: *Liquid Circuit*, SculptureCenter, New York, 2020. Photo: Kyle Knodell.

And what sort of bodies do Hsu's sculptures refer to? In what way are they raced, gendered, or abled, if at all? The sculptures in this show carry no recognizable markers of race or ethnicity, but they do carry a sense of difference that is hard to categorize. This difference has at times been ascribed to his Asian-American identity, but this feels like a red herring: Hsu only recently, in 2013, started making work that explicitly addresses his Chinese heritage. Rather, the difference in Hsu's work feels more ambiguous. "In a way, I had to create a different body in the world," Hsu said in a 2020 interview, "maybe I was just projecting all of this onto new technology: we'll have a different body." Hsu's "different body" could refer to many different things: his experience as an Asian-American person, with technology, or a shifting relationship to the natural world. The only video work in the show provides a hint at this. In *Folds of Oil* (2005), warped landscapes are synchronized to animal sounds. This is one of the only two works that references animals explicitly—*Holey Cow* (1986), a folded yellow cow skin, is the other one. Framing the human body's relationship to technology in relation to the natural world feels akin to contemporary experiments in identity like works by Jes Fan and Tiffany Jaeyeon Shin, for whom a critical engagement with biology is an escape route from the gridlock of identity politics. Through this lens, the difference of Hsu's work explores an internal sense of alienation, maybe the cosmologies of bacteria, fungi, and other organisms that constitute the natural "technologies" of the human body.

||| 4Columns

Visual Art

Tishan Hsu

10.16.20

Catherine Damman

SculptureCenter hosts an overview of the artist's compelling, unnerving work.



Tishan Hsu: Liquid Circuit, installation view. Image courtesy SculptureCenter. Photo: Kyle Knodell.
Pictured, left to right: *Couple*, 1983, and *Portrait*, 1982.

Tishan Hsu: *Liquid Circuit*, curated by Sohrab Mohebbi with
Kyle Dancewicz, SculptureCenter, 44-19 Purves Street, Long Island City, New York, through January
25, 2021

• • •

It is perhaps unfashionable to invoke Caravaggio. Yet I have become fixated on his *The Incredulity of Saint Thomas* (1601-02). That *finger* in that *wound*. The superlative work of Tishan Hsu conjures something like this: dark orifices and glaring eyes, wet cavities and lumpy protrusions—though in Hsu's work, as in much of technologically driven contemporary life, the establishment of veracity by the senses and the complete banishment of doubt both feel like possibilities long foreclosed.

Organized by SculptureCenter, and first on view at Los Angeles's Hammer Museum, *Liquid Circuit* is the New York-based artist's first major exhibition in the United States. This crisp overview of his practice—featuring forty-three works made from 1980 to 2005, including drawings and experiments in video—is a sign of the renewed interest in Hsu's work. Hsu was far from unknown when these works were made—many debuted at major galleries like Leo Castelli and Pat Hearn—but they were strangely timed, out of step with their surrounds. As Castelli warned Hsu, they “needed a context” in which they would make sense. But the extant context was, instead, the postmodernism heralded by Hsu's 1980s East Village milieu. Often lassoed by the slightly misleading term “neo-geo,” many artists were then presenting lush, bright geometries, dizzyingly repetitive patterns, and winking pastiches of corporate decor. Paging Dr. Baudrillard. Hsu's work was a world apart: it does not frolic in the proliferation of pixels nor in the indiscernibility of copies for which '80s postmodernism is best known, but rather calls forth the ever-tightening tether between body and interface so concerning today. Unbearably prescient in the early '80s, his work can perhaps only now be readily understood.



Tishan Hsu: Liquid Circuit, installation view. Image courtesy SculptureCenter. Photo: Kyle Knodell.
Pictured, left to right: *Virtual Flow*, 1990–2018, and *Manic Panic*, 1987.

Indeed, today's vantage gives one the ineluctable sense of Hsu as a premonitory model rescued from the past. The context Castelli said Hsu required would only come much later—Hsu's closest “peers” are perhaps found in a generation of artists working now: the plaiting of wry, surreal weirdness, technological savvy, and body horror in works by Kelly Akashi, Julia Phillips, Jesse Darling, Olga Balema, Elaine Cameron-Weir, Hanna Levy, and Kevin Beasley, to name too many, but also only a few. That Hsu's reception throws time askance seems appropriate to his subject matter: the data centers, screens, and medical devices to which his works can allude are themselves means of storage and transmission—after all, what is a computer if not a kind of time machine?



Tishan Hsu: *Liquid Circuit*, installation view. Image courtesy SculptureCenter. Photo: Kyle Knodell.
Pictured, foreground: *Ooze*, 1987.

Hsu's works comprise two major groups: quadrilateral wall-mounted "screen" works, edges rounded and soft, mostly done in industrial materials on wood panels, as in *Manic Panic* (1987), the twin teal and wavy-striped panels of which nearly kiss in their jutting centers; and sculptural floor works, at once conjuring medical and other institutional spaces, often incorporating ceramic tiles. Consider *Ooze* (1987), a gridded, architectural maquette that evokes a pool or arena to which it does not permit entry. Semblances of a floor, partial walls, and ledges connote sequestration and physical containment, while the object's edges, undulating and slicked over in urethane, suggest an unstable entity, seeping ominously outward. Tiles are partial readymades that invite, rather than thwart composition: their colors and sizes are preordained by the gods of industry, yet they are also modular "pieces," workably systematic. The interest in modularity and segmentation that drives Hsu's use of tile also often manifests as wood panels, which hug or approach one another in duos or trios. Their arrangements are like pieces fitting together as in a jigsaw puzzle, circuit board, or the articulation of a physiological joint: every penetration met by snug encapsulation.

Hsu's planar surfaces are held aloft by smaller, sharply rectangular supports that have them lurch and float into the gallery, or lift eerily off the floor, as if uncontained by gravity. Some of these mostly hidden wood supports are left raw; in others, Hsu paints their edges in such that the wall behind or ground beneath them seems aglow with color. This visual effect—startling in person—is nearly imperceptible in a jpeg (and perhaps as a consequence is infrequently mentioned in the literature). In *Liquid Circuit* (1987), three panels draw focus to a center furnished with metal grab bars. Behind them, the supports' sides are coated in a highlighter yellow paired to its striking front. *Plasma* (1986), also yellow, is mounted high like a blinking sentinel and backed by cadmium red. Beaming like a mutant HAL 9000, it summons the increasing role of surveillance and capture motoring much technological advance today.



Tishan Hsu, *Liquid Circuit*, 1987 (installation view). Acrylic, vinyl cement compound, alkyd, oil, aluminum on wood, 90 × 143 × 9 inches. Image courtesy SculptureCenter. Photo: Kyle Knodell.



Tishan Hsu: *Liquid Circuit*, installation view. Image courtesy SculptureCenter. Photo: Kyle Knodell. Pictured, left to right: *Plasma*, 1986, and *Holey Cow*, 1986.

At SculptureCenter, the industrial-lite architecture of which suits the work, the partition walls' corners are subtly rounded, hearkening to Hsu's preferred shape. I can't help but think, admittedly ungenerously, of Michael Fried's confession that besides revulsion, minimalist sculpture invoked in him a disquieting sense of something or someone in a dark room—a hulking form, waiting to pounce. Hsu takes that feeling and cranks up the dial.



Tishan Hsu: *Liquid Circuit*, installation view. Image courtesy SculptureCenter. Photo: Kyle Knodell.
Pictured, foreground: *Heading Through*, 1984.

For me, these works are by turns compelling and pleasantly queasy-making, but not without a welcome sense of humor, as in their *ba-dum* titles such as *Holey Cow* (1986), a drippy, wide bench in bright yellow shot through with apertures and Holstein-black splotches alike. In another macabre joke, *Heading Through*, of 1984, four welded steel legs support a tiled carapace, parallel to the floor; divots in the planar surface suggest orifices as much as VCR or ATM slots. The creature figured is as if Gregor Samsa were filtered through the lenses of David Cronenberg and, with its pastel aquamarine tiles, Wes Anderson. The humanoid face thrusts forward, like a heraldic ship's figurehead, but also like Rodin's wretched figures, which can seem to be writhing out of their abstracted bronze grounds. This sense of physiological imbrication with technological device is similarly present in *Virtual Flow* (1990–2018). Here, we see a low-slung monitor connected by outlet, plug, and cord to a futuristic medical cart (procedural use unclear), on which a set of vitrines encases fleshy silicone agglutinates.

Hsu has long eschewed articulations of his work through that choking diaphane called “identity.” This is true even in a recent project that draws from family photo albums found in Shanghai, a place he did not know in his youth, but where he has recently spent a few years living and working in the wake of his mother's death. When Hsu found the albums, many images were missing—a removal attributed to the Red Guards. In the resulting works, he elides these representations still further: warping and eroding them, covering faces with cells in the indelible green of early digital screens' phosphor type. These most

recent endeavors are not represented in *Liquid Circuit*, but their emergence perhaps elucidates how, for the last forty years, Hsu's interest has not been in the self, nor the individual's subsumption into technology, but rather in a larger political economy of visual culture, the digital forms of which are never —despite loud claims to the contrary—truly immaterial. From vast server farms to cobalt mining in the Congo to the manufacturing of chip boards and precision plastics in places like Malaysia and Shenzhen, the smooth interfaces of our digital lives are made possible by environmental degradation and mass immiseration at the hands of both corporate evil and our own complicity. It's a wound so big you don't have to stick your finger in it to believe.



Tishan Hsu: *Liquid Circuit*, installation view. Image courtesy SculptureCenter.
Photo: Kyle Knodell. Pictured, foreground: *Virtual Flow*, 1990–2018.

Catherine Damman is currently a Visiting Assistant Professor of Art History at Wesleyan University and a Core Lecturer at Columbia University. Her writing on experimental dance, theater, film, music, and the visual arts can be found in Artforum, Bookforum, Art in America, Art Journal, BOMB, and elsewhere. She is at work on her monograph, on the formation of “performance” in the 1970s, The Work of Art in the Age of Half-Hearted Reproducibility.

HYPERALLERGIC

Sculptural Paintings That Channel the Static Soup of Television

In Tishan Hsu's work, the canvas becomes a television, a platform of multiple channels, where what channel to tune into is the viewer's choice.



by Brock Lownes

October 27, 2020



Tishan Hsu, "Liquid Circuit" (1987), acrylic, vinyl cement compound, alkyd, oil, aluminum on wood, 90 x 143 x 9 inches (all images courtesy SculptureCenter, unless otherwise stated)

In 1965 Nam June Paik proclaimed, "The cathode-ray tube will replace the canvas." To some extent Paik's observation rings true, though the art historical pendulum swings both ways; in the 70s and 80s, television became so ubiquitous that it inspired some artists to strive towards materiality. Structuralist filmmakers experimented with celluloid. The Pictures Generation artists appropriated images from the screen, calling attention to the ideology concealed in images from everyday life. The early work of [Tishan Hsu](#) continued this fascination with the materiality of media, exploring how the two-dimensional screen could exist in three-dimensions.



Tishan Hsu, "R.E.M." (1986), acrylic, alkyd, vinyl cement compound on wood, 60 x 60 x 4 inches

His early paintings — wall reliefs may be a better term — on display at SculptureCenter in Long Island City, evoke the rounded squares of vintage television consoles. Using Styrofoam and cement, he builds up a topographic moon-like terrain onto the surface of his panels, later flooding it with either neon or flesh-tone acrylic paint, only to then scratch the paint away to reveal the stratum below. The scratches upon the rounded canvas recall white noise on a television screen; static made tangible. Some of these works, like "R.E.M" from 1986, take a more sculptural form, reminiscent of a

flattened **Barbara Hepworth**. At other times, works like "Liquid Circuit," from a year later, incorporate ready-made elements such as stainless-steel handles, calling to mind Robert Rauschenberg's *Combines*.

In *What Do Pictures Want?*, W.J.T. Mitchell claims a medium is "an in-between or go-between space or pathway that connects two things, a sender to a receiver, an artist to a beholder." In many ways, Mitchell is describing an interface, a point in which any two systems meet. Hsu's inter-media work complicates this one-to-one interface relationship between both technological objects and human, human and art objects. By combining the language of sculpture, painting, and technology, Hsu transforms the media interface into a platform or a circuit, where multiple multiple systems of meaning operate simultaneously.

In Hsu's representation of a television screen, viewers encounter neither a sculpture fully in the round, nor a painted screen depicting a human subject. Nevertheless, his undulating reliefs evoke the curves of the human body, and the tv-like shape of the canvases gesture to embodied rituals like sitting in front of the tv. In some cases, like in "Portrait" (1982), he even depicts facial features floating unmoored in the static soup of his scratched reliefs.



Tishan Hsu, "Portrait" (1982), oil stick, enamel, acrylic, vinyl cement compound on wood, 57 × 87 × 6 inches (image courtesy Empty Gallery, Hong Kong)

For Hsu television did not replace the canvas. In his work, the canvas becomes a television, a platform of multiple channels, where what channel to tune into is the viewer's choice.

Tishan Hsu: Liquid Circuit *continues through January 25, 2021 at SculptureCenter (44-19 Purves Street, Long Island City, Queens). The exhibition is curated by Sohrab Mohebbi, with Kyle Dancewicz.*

Public Parking

Tracing the affective flow of a new corporeality: a conversation with Tishan Hsu

Tuesday, May 5, 2020 | Mark Pieterston



For the last four decades, American artist Tishan Hsu has made a mark through his focused investigation into the embodiment of technology. His multimedia work exists in a terrain both familiar and unfamiliar, sublime yet accessible. From the early stages of his career in the 1980s, he's been interested in technology's impact on affect and its phenomenological implications. Making art was then an opportunity to respond to the accelerated changes of biological and digital infrastructure.

"I speculated that the world I would inhabit would be a technological one, for better or for worse. As a result, I wanted to get closer to technology, as a way of understanding it as a potential inspiration for creative production", Hsu describes.

It is this desire to trace the corporeal conditions of the then new normal that has sustained Hsu's unique visual language. From his choice of materials like tile, alkyd, ceramic, video and sound, he continually demonstrates an awareness of the rhizomatic trajectory of contemporary life. Much of this is heavily informed by his interdisciplinary education at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in the 70s. And while at MIT, his studies in environmental design led him to sought linkages between film and theories related to artificial intelligence and posthumanism.

For Hsu's first museum solo show, *Liquid Circuit*, at the Hammer Museum which recently closed, curator Sohrab Mohebbi presented a survey of 30 key works ranging from reliefs to drawings and sculptures from 1980 to 2005. Like many of Hsu's sculptures, the installation of the exhibition showcased a broad concern with the spatial dynamics of objects. It also focused on a prioritization of flow of concept as much as registering the technical aspect of Hsu's elaborate and vatic body of work into a different frame. The exhibition highlights broad trajectories of Hsu's career. This includes several drawings and works on paper that articulate a proximity to and a radical departure from the appropriation aesthetics of his contemporaries.

Hsu triangulates his interest in the formal yet idiosyncratic architectural techniques, cinematic, and spatial composition throughout the Hammer exhibition. Buoyed by the extra-dimensional sensorium of the brooding, harrowing breaths of the sound accompanying the roughly twenty-one minute video “Folds of Oil,” (2005), the physical space of the galleries were reconfigured to an almost augmented environment where visitors are characters in Hsu’s elaborate mise-en-scene. The vibrant, detailed and arresting color scheme of decadent yellow, deep red, teal blue, and blue streaks, resembling static transmission from CRT screens, resolves the palpable tension of wanting to view the installation as a constellation of grotesque forms as opposed to pleasantly fantastical and speculative objects.



Vertical Ooze, 1987, Ceramic tile, urethane, vinyl cement compound, acrylic, oil on wood 61.8 x 70.9 x 24.2 inches (157 x 180 x 121.5 cm).
Installation view at the Hammer Museum

Suggesting a personal and collective response to the shift in ontology engendered by introduction of a novel technopolitics, works like “Heading through,” (1984) and “Holey Cow,” (1986) voice an uncertain and acutely anxious disposition toward the velocity of progress. While “Ooze” and “Vertical Ooze” (both 1987) and similar ceramic tile platforms materialize chimeric, imaginative landscapes influenced by the fluidity and poetics of communication systems. The discrete quadrants of tile can then be viewed as units of data appropriated from the emanations of the screen’s surface. At the same time, alkyd, with its ability to hold color significantly better than other resins, now operates as a metaphorical substance for high fidelity images requiring ample processing power. Hsu obliges us to consider and imagine a world operating almost exclusively at the register of sensation.

With a background in environmental design, Hsu's interest in biological structures is best reflected in the paintings "Cellular Automata 2," (1989); "It's Not the Bullet but the Hole 2," (1991); and "Cell," (1987). They also show the artist's insight into just how deep our relationship to the hyper-accented networked culture permeates. Refreshingly, what Hsu excels in is his reluctance to embrace a reactionary criticality, instead opting to present the terms and conditions of a new reality through a personal, lived experience, free from contrived affects. In conversation, he admits that he "achieves meaning through the making of the work. And a lot of this is culled from an extremely personal place. It's always about deconstructing and reconstructing the personal."

Having studied art since the fourth grade, learning techniques of the American Realist, Impressionist and Abstract Expressionist style, the rigorous dedication to craft is excellently translated in Hsu's paintings. The amalgamation of painterly knowledge, prophetic and interdisciplinary ideas, and use of industrial materials like steel in the titular work "Liquid Circuit," (1987) images, we are reminded of the thresholds yet to be crossed and encountered in our digitally mediated life, even as much of his ideas unfurl in real time.

I never imagined I-Phone, I-Pad, or Instagram. I was focused on the changing nature of our relationship to the objects that surround us and that these objects would increasingly develop the affective qualities of our cognitive and haptic self. It was this transition that I wanted to capture.

With "Liquid Circuit" being your first museum survey in the United States, what was your process for the show?

Curator Sohrab Mohebbi wanted to focus on the earlier periods of my work ending around the mid-1990s. Because I had not shown for a long period, where many people have never seen the work of the 80s and 90s, there would be a tendency to assume the show to be a retrospective. In contrast, the approach was to present the work as a process of exploration that is still ongoing where the focus is on the beginning. There is no culminating statement. He felt it was important to bring together several earlier bodies of work that had never been shown together and that I, myself, had never seen together.

Interesting. There certainly was a sense of each room being its own conversation, a snapshot of ideas in time.

The work at each step felt like a deviation from the previous work when I was doing it, a tangent to what I thought I was doing. I had always felt there were multiple tangents and singular explorations over the years and often felt frustrated, if not discouraged, by the lack of coherence or understanding that I could refer to, in generating newer work. Everything felt partial and in need of further clarification, and still does. If there are any concepts or themes that deviate, I feel it is that the work actually comes together or coheres in a way I hadn't imagined. It was not about any one work or group of works, as I had thought or even intended, but rather the affective sense coming from seeing all of the work together.

The affective "sense" of the exhibition is something I could never have articulated in interviews like this and is only experienced by seeing the work, and particularly all together. The coherence has been the deviation from what I felt was a rather motley practice.

At what point did you begin to take an interest in the relationship between art and technology?

While applying to college, I speculated that the world I would inhabit would be a technological one, for better or for worse. As a result, I wanted to get closer to technology, as a way of understanding it as a potential inspiration for creative production, in whatever discipline that might be, in contrast to seeing it as alien, and opposed to a so-called humanistic position for cultural practice.

I thought the way in which technology was driving the world was new and would be unprecedented in its breadth and depth. This desire strongly influenced my decision to place myself in an environment that was involved in creating this technological future.

The sculptures make use of non-traditional materials (at least during its time). What marked this choice? Primarily, I'm interested in how these materials articulate your larger thematic ideas.

The choice of materials in much of the work derived from a desire for something organic and material-based, while simultaneously evoking, if not actually being of, the technological, including affects of the virtual, illusionary realm and the formal qualities of technology and the manufactured. I felt the affective quality of my experience was not going to be the end of the human and the dominance of the technological, but rather some kind of hybrid synthesis.

Part of the choice and handling of materials was finding a way of working that could seamlessly move between different realms of meaning and ontology. There was the object-filled, material world as one realm, the virtual, digital world as another realm and the bodily, organic realm as another. All of these seemed to be increasingly intertwined and inextricable, partly due to the digital nature of technology itself and how it was permeating and transforming everything. I could go into each material decision specifically, but that is a much longer discussion.



Liquid Circuit, Installation View at the Hammer Museum

I'm sure! Also interesting is the hanging method. Some of the works seemed as though they were floating screen icons. Was this your intention? To reproduce the experience of the screen into physical space?

Yes, this was intentional. In the earliest work, I did not have “screen” in mind, but rather the media generated world of early computers, televisions and telephones. I never imagined I-Phone, I-Pad, or Instagram. I was focused on the changing nature of our relationship to the objects that surround us and that these objects would increasingly develop the affective qualities of our cognitive and haptic self. It was this transition that I wanted to capture.

From that, I wanted to emphasize in the installation that I do not see these works as “paintings and sculpture” but as objects that can be anywhere, and that arbitrarily occupy architectural space. A sense of floating contingency and ephemerality are affective qualities that I wanted to evoke.

These all come together to draw in all parts of the senses, arresting and obliging a dive into the represented voids.

The reflective color in the early works, the evolution of wheels in the sculptures, the large continuous flat surfaces of the silkscreens, and the ephemeral quality of the media work, were all part of a sense of something continuous, fleeting and in motion. The continuousness of the “Interface” wall at the entrance, which is an image of an organic surface that is continuous and only arbitrarily bound by the four edges of the entrance wall, is affectively similar to the hanging of the earlier works where there is a sense of their floating in any space, in any format.

When I am in an airplane, I am continually amazed standing at the back, by the spectacle of the multitude of small, screens floating in this aluminum fuselage floating, and simultaneously speeding, above the planet and these human creatures cognitively immersed in a distinctly different illusionary realm within the screens. It strikes me as stranger than science fiction.

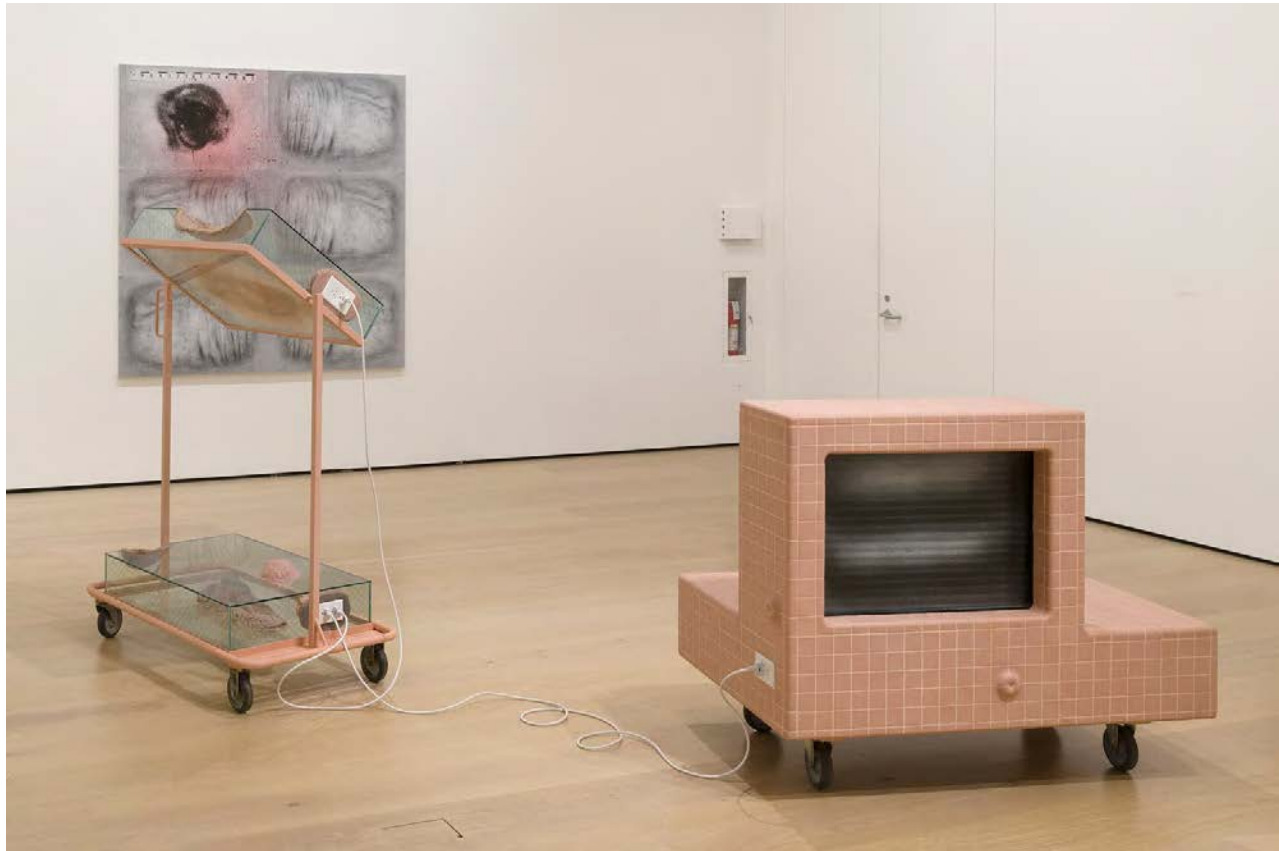
In a New York Times profile published last year, you described your works as “personal”. Have you always viewed your work in this way?

The “personal” can have many meanings, much dependent on the particular critical or academic discourse that one happens to be in. In much of the time that the work developed, there was a lot of discussion about the personal and the political, and the personal being political. There was also discussion about the commodity and the subjective, that in a commodified world, we were losing subjectivity completely, and that the power of media and the corporate was literally determining our subjectivity. In that context, my work evolved out of my own “personal” experience, if you will, of what was in front of me at the time – my body and the technological apparatus I was engaging with, sometimes to support my practice. In that sense, I was not compelled to use media images, or adopt direct political and historical positions as a driver of the work. This was not to diminish the importance and relevance of these other discourses, but rather that being who I was, the questions I addressed were the most compelling for me and ones I felt could sustain my practice regardless of whether they had currency in the market or the critical art discourse.

Have you always considered your work as predictive or just another body produced in shifting times?

Work that in hindsight looks predictive is often not felt as predictive when created. The predictive implies the future, and I see the future as the present, where much of the world lives in the past. In doing the work, I always felt I was dealing with the present, or my present, what I was living through. I was surprised that so many in the art world found the work so strange and alien. But in “imagining” something, I suppose there is an implied future, where certain connections I saw in the present would evolve into something that I wanted the work to be able to describe and address.





Virtual Flow, 1990-2018, Ceramic tile, silkscreen on glass, acrylic, plastic, silicone, photographic emulsion, enamel on steel cart Steel cart 50.4 x 50 x 23 inches (128 x 127 x 58 cm), Ceramic tile element 36 x 30 x 35 inches (91 x 76 x 89 cm) Installation view at the Hammer Museum

Tell me a bit more about the work “Virtual Flow” (1990)? It’s one of the few works that make use of disembodied figures.

In much of my work, there is an in-between sense of the body, which is the beginning of dis-embodiment. After the initial response to the work in the 80’s, I felt a need to be clearer in my focus on the human body and moved into photographic media to evoke a clinical, recorded body that removed any ambiguity that the work is about the body. In “Virtual Flow,” the sense of body feels more literal and explicit, perhaps due to sculpture itself, that allows the work to break the body apart in physical space and to use materials that literally have the texture and form of human body parts.

“Virtual Flow,” by its title, was an attempt to convey a continuous body that moves through separate objects. At the same time, I was trying to connect this embodied movement through the electrical, which is the foundation of the digital and the virtual.

I was trying to convey through more traditional sculptural language, a conceptual sense of our bodies becoming bits and data, moving through conduit and becoming an embodied object in a wholly different format. There are the body like, organic forms embedded in glass, referencing a clinical, bio-technological sense of the body. There are multiple manifestations of an embodied object that I am experimenting with in the work. There were several works done in this format.

Do you remember some of the earliest public and or private responses to your work?

The first studio visit was in high school, which I can’t recall. The early response to the work in the 1980s was perplexed, but very positive. A few people got the sense of what I was trying to do right away. I recall being asked if I was from another planet. The work struck most as very strange if not incomprehensible for the lack of reference, not only in the world but in art history. The response contributed to doubts about my ability to capture the sense of what I wanted in the work.

"The predictive implies the future, and I see the future as the present, where much of the world lives in the past."

How do you respond to critics and patrons who make the claim that the art world needs to catch up to your practice?

I never considered what I was doing as so far away as to be something needing to catch up to. I could not understand why everyone found the work so strange and alien. I don't feel that way in my everyday interactions. Even now, many still feel the work is very strange. I have also been surprised at how much of the recent interest has come from those who are much younger.

If I step back, which I rarely did, and which has happened partly as a result of this exhibition, I see that the sense that was driving the work is now more a part of the world that we live in. There is an emerging context. At this point, I give less weight to responses in general, now that I have experienced having no response for so long. I am trying to focus on insuring the work continues to evolve on its own trajectory and not let external responses interfere, which is not always so easy to do.

The current pandemic has exposed the porosity and weakness of the structures and systems we've taken for granted. Interesting enough, conversations about labor, the body, and networked culture have taken mainstream prominence outside of academic and art circles. Where do you envision the entanglement of the digital and corporeal as it relates to current events?

The confluence of the digital and the body as a result of the molecular in the sudden emergence of the pandemic has been striking. Having been isolating for several weeks now, it is strange how the molecular and the digital have been running parallel, driving our bodies' behaviours in ever more extreme ways. It is unprecedented. The 6' distancing creates a bizarre choreography of bodies in public spaces that is haunting and strange. That a molecular virus could force the body to connect almost exclusively through the digital on the one hand, and, at the same time, attack the vulnerability of our organic existence in such a deadly way, is extraordinary.

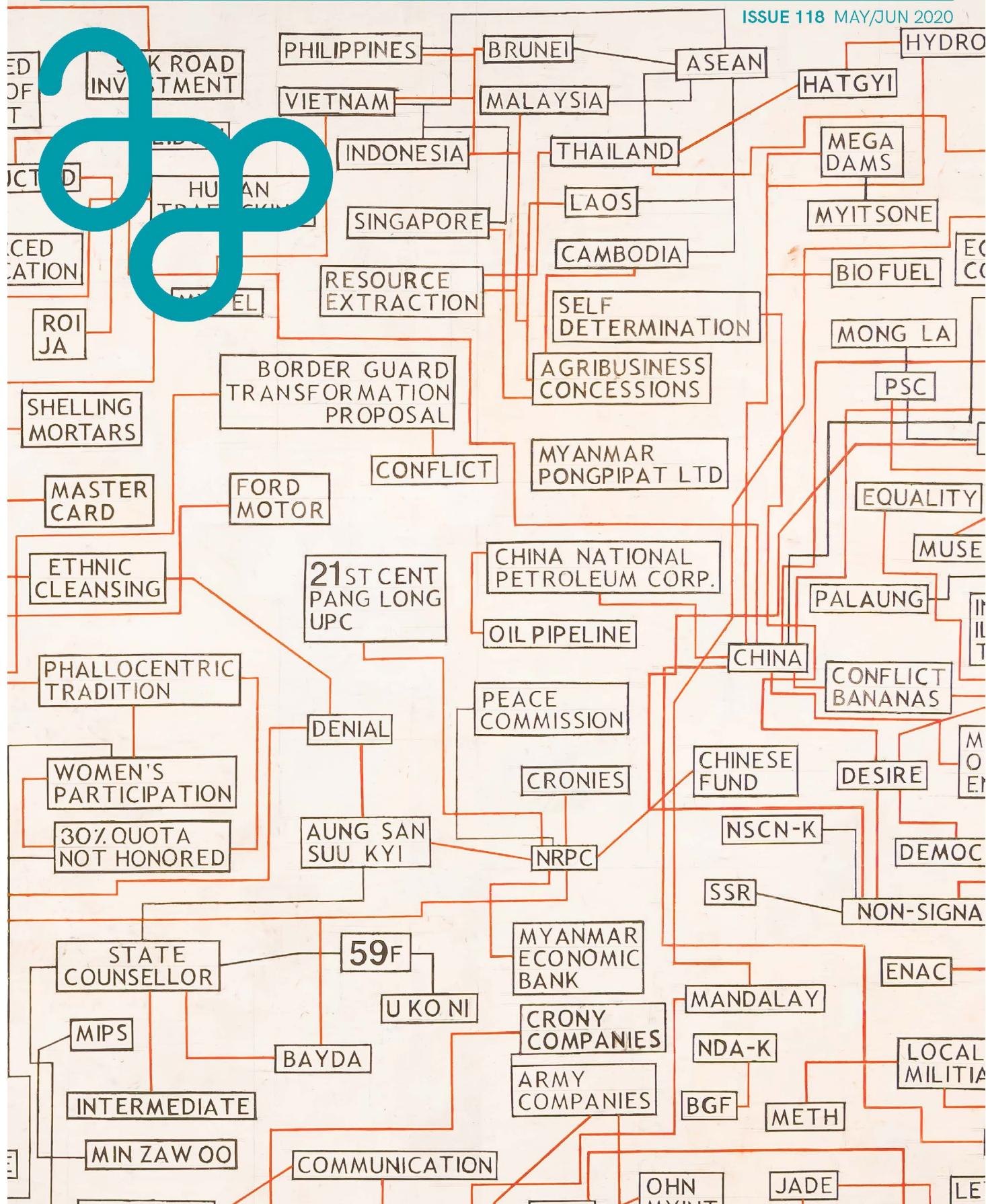
At the same time, the essential aspect of human labor in fighting that attack, reaffirms the battle of humans against "nature" even in the 21st century. The pandemic has illuminated to an alarming level the extent to which we are still at the level of food, shelter, care, and the vulnerability of our organic existence. Paradoxically, the virtual is enabling us to maintain our human connectedness at a time when extinction seems ever closer. Imagine what this would be without the digital and the virtual. Things could so easily and quickly become "primal."

What do you hope people take away from your show?

The work is asking a question about what is this change we are undergoing in which the technological is so deeply entering every aspect of human existence? What new affects are emerging as a result of this transformation? The work does not want to describe the external changes, but rather asks you to perhaps slow down, just to process how this change is feeling and to ask where are we in this change? How will we, as embodied humans, continue to be?

The above is a conversation conducted by Los Angeles-based writer/artist Mark Pieterston. Editorial support by Luther Konadu.

Frontis Image: Autopsy, 1988 Plywood, ceramic tile, acrylic, vinyl cement compound, stainless steel, rubber 55 x 49 x 94 inches (140 x 124 x 239 cm) Karin and Peter Haas Collection, Zurich



Tishan Hsu

Liquid Circuit



TISHAN HSU, *Portrait*, 1982, oil stick, enamel, acrylic, vinyl cement compound on wood, 145 × 221 × 15 cm. Collection of the artist. Photo by Jeff Lane. Copyright and courtesy the artist.

Contemporary art frequently expresses the zeitgeist, with artists taking on the role of truth-teller or even diviner. Chinese-American artist Tishan Hsu began making work that approximated present-day screen culture back in the 1980s—decades before smartphones became commonplace. His uncanny clairvoyance in picturing our current technological intertwinement was so avant-garde at the time that audiences and the art market were simply baffled by his acrylic and wood wall sculptures and expansive tiled installations. As a result, Hsu continued to work in

relative obscurity in the ensuing decades. His first institutional survey, “Liquid Circuit,” organized by SculptureCenter in New York, debuted in January at the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles. With pieces from the ’80s to the new millennium, the show introduced a new generation of viewers to Hsu’s prescient work.

Hanging high on the wall and evoking the all-seeing Dr. TJ Eckleburg billboard in F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* (1925), Hsu’s *Portrait* (1982) employs a Magritte-like surrealism to picture the jumbled components of a face and

body within a black contoured frame like that of an iPad—a visually apt but anachronistic comparison, since Hsu created this work 28 years before the device’s invention. Floating eyes and orifices, rendered in sketchy, fuzzy lines meant to mimic television static, gape at the viewer amid pink, fleshy, vinyl blobs. In its dissolution of the human form into the technological and vice versa, *Portrait* reminds us that while technology surveils us at every turn, we have become willing culprits as we adopt digital tools as mediators between us and the world. To this point, *Closed Circuit II* (1986) bears a strange resemblance to the Instagram logo, which in turn is based on a Polaroid camera. The surface of Hsu’s sculpture is subtly molded as in the curves of a body; the aperture evokes a Cyclopean gaze. As with a spouse or a beloved pet, technology and humanity begin to resemble one another.

Squared Nude (1985) again shows remarkable foresight in its resemblance to a giant iPhone hanging on the wall. Protruding shapes float across the work like cellular bodies or lesions. Three decades before we started inputting our personal and medical information into our devices, before we used our gadgets as our eyes and ears, Hsu predicted this human-tech symbiosis. There is something unsettlingly human and visceral about *Nessee* (1984), another iPhone-shaped sculpture, this time featuring tumor-like protuberances on which the

artist’s handprints are visible. Our devices are outgrowths of ourselves, Hsu implies.

Oddly modular, freestanding tiled sculptures painted in strange shades of seafoam green and pink, such as *Ooze* (1987), *Vertical Ooze* (1987), and *Autopsy* (1988), evoke the operating rooms of dated science-fiction movie sets. In *Virtual Flow* (1990–2018), a metal stand with an assortment of bodily blobs cast from fleshy silicone is plugged into a monitor encased in pink ceramic tile with sonogram-like blurs across its screen. It is unclear which is powering which; organic and synthetic are indistinguishable. A video in one room, *Folds of Oil* (2005), intermittently broadcasts foreboding sounds of beeping and breathing, like a medical ventilator, throughout the exhibition space. Here, the artist was prescient yet again, though in a more personal manner. A year after its creation, Hsu had a kidney transplant, an ordeal during which he felt as though his body was a machine, and his surgery the ultimate art installation.

In a recent interview, the artist stated: “I consider myself a cyborg. Google is my memory.” This pithy quote illustrates the manner in which Hsu himself has embraced technology as a natural component of the human body and mind. As Hsu sees it, integrating with the artificial, the technological, and the foreign is the most optimal way to be human.

JENNIFER S. LI

ARTFORUM

BODY HORROR

Matthew Ronay and Lane Relyea on the art of Tishan Hsu

TISHAN HSU's paintings and sculptures evoke nightmarish visions of the body's forced integration with its technological surrounds. After a spate of exhibitions in the 1980s at venues including Pat Hearn Gallery and Leo Castelli, the artist's work largely disappeared from public view. Now, New York's SculptureCenter has organized the survey "Tishan Hsu: Liquid Circuit." The show debuted at the Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, this past winter and was slated to open at SculptureCenter in May before being postponed in the wake of Covid-19. To mark this occasion, *Artforum* invited artist MATTHEW RONAY and art historian LANE RELYEA to reflect on Hsu's dark, prescient, and singularly weird oeuvre.



Tishan Hsu, *Vertical Ooze*, 1987, ceramic tile, urethane, vinyl cement compound, acrylic, and oil on wood, 61 3/4 × 70 7/8 × 24 1/4".

MATTHEW RONAY

I NEVER KNEW THAT I LOVED DRAINS. An algorithm on YouTube revealed this predilection to me. As a connoisseur of portals, orifices, and pores, I should have known that drains and the waste they imply, hidden beneath their sterile exteriors, would be in my pleasure zone. I look at most art in the same way I look at drains on YouTube: in reproduction, removed from reality. I came across Tishan Hsu at a similar remove, through books and the internet. The vents, screens, intakes, fantasy architectures, and fleshy degradations that pervade his work “clogged” me from my first impression.

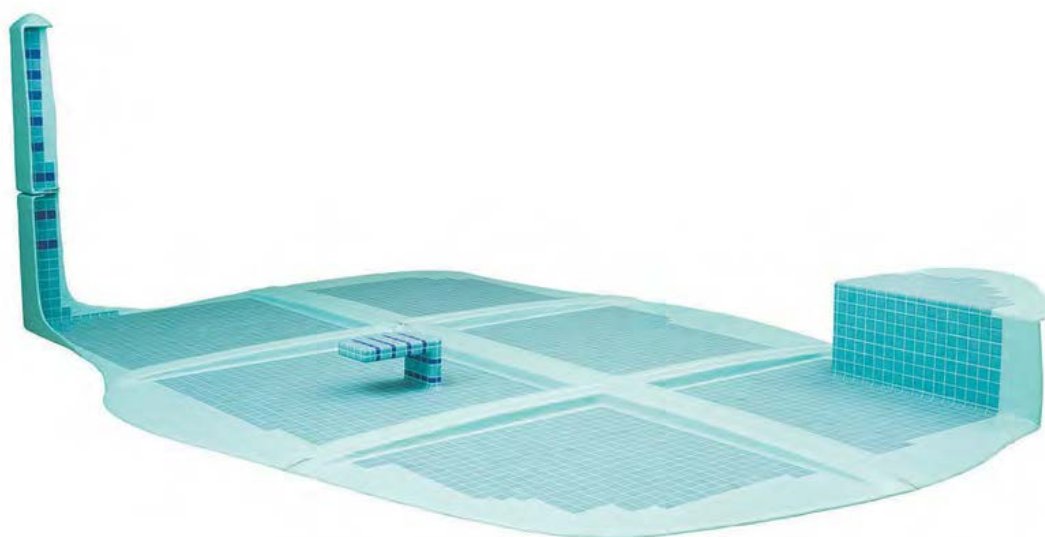


Tishan Hsu, *Closed Circuit II*, 1986, acrylic, alkyd, Styrofoam, and vinyl cement compound on wood, 59 × 59 × 4".

Some of Hsu's pristine Euclidean models, such as *Ooze*, 1987, resembling a barren sauna basin waiting to be filled with myriad fluids, arouse in me a love for the rational illusion that architecture brings to sculpture. Offsetting this order are feelings of confinement, abandonment, and disease. Are the works' patterns, punctured with holes, just some piebald markings, or are they lesions, viral cells, torture wounds? The world created by Hsu's reliefs feels stagnant, swampy; at the same time, it suggests the paradoxical experience of cosmic velocity, when things seen through a spaceship window appear still even though

they're careening through the universe. The ship's claustrophobic interiors will also appear in sharp contrast to the sublime infinity of outer space. Similarly, the louvers in Hsu's paintings like *Closed Circuit II*, 1986, which resemble dashboards or readouts—or interfaces for an AI assistant like the medicine cabinet in George Lucas's *THX 1138* (1971)—are hauntingly still, almost refrigerated, yet imply activity. The oscillators in the painting show nothing, or perhaps their sine waves are so long we cannot see them. *Has humanity flatlined?* the artist seems to ask. *Has technology paused evolution?*

Has humanity flatlined? the artist seems to ask. Has technology paused evolution?



Tishan Hsu, *Ooze*, 1987, ceramic tile, urethane, vinyl cement compound, and acrylic on wood, 11'5 1/2" × 15'1 1/2" × 5'8 1/2".

Undulating, sagging flesh is abundant in Hsu's work. Who among us hasn't noticed their own flabby bits or felt a shock run through them when confronted with the failing body of a loved one in a hospital? On one of the transparent vellum pages of a book filled with quotes and diagrams from eclectic sources Hsu made for a 1986 show at New York's Pat Hearn Gallery, I came across a citation of Elaine Scarry—*who?* Research. I was researching Tishan Hsu; now I'm reading Elaine Scarry's 1985 book, *The Body in Pain*. "Human beings project their bodily powers and frailties into external objects such as telephones, chairs, gods, poems, medicine, institutions, and political forms, and then those objects in turn become the object of perceptions that are taken back into the interior of human consciousness where they now reside as part of the mind or soul." It's all starting to flow. It doesn't make sense yet, thank goodness, but I'm beginning to grok. Scarry has much to say about the body and the room. How the body is like a room and vice versa. She also writes about how we don't have nuanced language to communicate pain and how we don't believe each other's pain. And now I'm thinking about the kind of pain that a body remembers. Looking at Hsu's work makes me feel like I am renting pain in the process.



Tishan Hsu, *Outer Banks of Memory*, 1984, acrylic, alkyd, Styrofoam, and vinyl cement compound on wood, 90 × 96 × 15".

Even his more rigid tile pieces—such as *Vertical Ooze*, 1987, and *Holey Cow*, 1986—sag or bulge, as if he had merged neural networks with isometric drawings, skin tags, and booths for intergalactic spa treatments. Are they models of nature? How is it that this work feels simultaneously organic and technological? Why can't I stop thinking about drains and what kinds of liquids ran through them even though there are none here? I also see bunkers, sites of decontamination or compartmentalization. When I look at pool pieces like *Heading Through*, 1984, I wonder if I'm in the shower scene from the 1983 nuclear drama *Silkwood*. Or perhaps a germ-free future? The tile works are idealized, fantasy architectures, very useful if your goal in creating shelter is to express yourself. The eighteenth-century Neoclassical architect Claude-Nicolas Ledoux realized all manner of civic solutions for essentials such as pumping stations without jettisoning his sense of humor or heightened aesthetics, and I wonder what necessity these snippets of space Hsu has created embody. Hsu's are sites of self-care—future hammams where liniments are applied and dermabrasion happens and dead cells disappear down holes into pipes. Sometimes I imagine his cropped rooms are bodies: In *Vertical Ooze*, they sure look pressed against each other polyamorously. They're often tumescent—from pleasure? Or pain? Neither, since the whole world Hsu has created is a simulation. Or is it?



David Cronenberg, *The Fly*, 1986, 35 mm, color, sound, 96 minutes. Seth Brundle (Jeff Goldblum).

I always see abs in the paintings, too. They may be something similar to the pharyngeal arches that appear just beneath the head of a human embryo. These outpouchings, which look like little fat rolls, develop into the facial muscles we use to express ourselves. They also become the muscles and bones of the neck, as well as important organs that help us speak, like the larynx. Hsu's are folds of expression. Although perhaps they're—yes—ribs? The painting *Outer Banks of Memory*, 1984, is sick. It has sores. I recognize this as the same language of falling apart I revel in every time I watch Jeff Goldblum in David Cronenberg's *The Fly* (1986). It, too, is a tale of aging, disease, entropy, and the winnowing of organic matter, an artwork made during the 1980s that seemingly reflects the horror of aids, even though the director insisted there was more to it. Is it possible that an artwork can insist when an artist does not? I hope so, for selfish reasons. (I usually grow bored of my own interpretations.) We currently find ourselves suffering the wrath of an elementary technology—the Covid-19 virus—and the sterility and the vulnerability of our bodies Hsu's works addressed in the '80s hold as true now as they did then. That Hsu's abstractions, almost forty years after they were made, can capture the cruelty and ethos of a similar moment suggests that abstraction's slipperiness is still useful and will remain so.

I encountered my first Hsu in the flesh in "Searching the Sky for Rain," a 2019 group show at New York's SculptureCenter: *Heading Through*, 1984, a tile work perched on tubular metal legs from which spouts a head made from grout. I was shocked to see emerging from one side of the "sculpture" (part sculpture, part furniture)—embedded in the rational geometry of its tiles—a clay demon. How bold! This is the suffering, untheoretical part of Hsu's art: A body falls apart, only to cybernate later.



View of "Tishan Hsu: Liquid Circuit," 2020, Hammer Museum, Los Angeles. Wall, from left: *Nessea*, 1984; *Closed Circuit II*, 1986; *Squared Nude*, 1984; *Couple*, 1983. Floor, foreground: *Heading Through*, 1984. Floor, background: *Ooze*, 1987. Photo: Jeff McLane.



Tishan Hsu, *Manic Panic*, 1987, acrylic, alkyd, oil, and vinyl cement compound on wood, overall 100 × 96 × 4".

When I'm looking at his work, I'm trying to find out if I identify with the Body or with the Mind. Certainly, the strict, geometric tile grids of shower works like *Autopsy*, 1988, encourage me to apply empirical knowledge to the forms, to read them in accordance with the languages of design, architecture, and science, as do the utilitarian qualities of control-panel works like *Manic Panic*, 1987—works with ordered holes covering or holding in some sort of smog or organs and wires. But their lumps, and their Möbius strip-like bending of space, keep me from classifying them as such. The works are skins, and skins protect. Scarry writes of how the rooms where torture takes place mimic the bodies being tortured: "In normal contexts, the room, the simplest form of shelter, expresses the most benign potential of human life. It is, on the one hand an enlargement of the body: it keeps warm and safe the individual it houses in the same way the body protects the individual within." I keep coming back to the sense that Hsu's work is made by an artificial intelligence that harvested all the information about life-forms so that it could build a virtual model, the walls of which articulate its observations. But by trying to isolate and understand their tendencies, it destroyed the Gaia-like properties of life-forms by dividing them up. Division leads to more division. What we're left with is prisons.

We, humans under the influence of technology, are desperately trying to recapture a feel for our skin, to be reembodyed, to prove that we are still *here*. But perhaps we aren't here any longer. We've dominated nature completely, and now we're running a simulation. There is a harmony between the body and the mind somewhere, but not in Hsu's works, which feel so accurate to me because harmony is so hard to find. His art is not pessimistic; it just offers a humbled perspective—a seductive warning.

Matthew Ronay is a sculptor living in New York.



Tishan Hsu, *Autopsy*, 1988, plywood, ceramic tile, acrylic, vinyl cement compound, stainless steel, rubber, 55 × 49 × 94".

LANE RELYEA

AT SIXTY-EIGHT, Tishan Hsu is enjoying belated recognition in the form of a retrospective, organized by Sohrab Mohebbi at SculptureCenter, New York, that surveys work from the early 1980s to the mid-2000s. Many say that it took the art world this long to catch up with Hsu because his paintings and sculptures were just too strange and ahead of their time when they first appeared. I don't remember it that way. Not that his shows at New York's Pat Hearn Gallery in the latter half of the '80s were run-of-the-mill; they were distinct but also plugged into all the talk back then about Baudrillard and simulation. His output begged comparison to the work of artists like Peter Halley and Ashley Bickerton, who likewise blurred the line between abstraction and representation. There was also a shared interest in how the seductions of the commodity dovetailed with the enigmatic power of emerging computerization and telecommunications. A high-tech look that conveyed dark glamour was the prevailing aesthetic (and not just in the art world; think of such concurrent pop-cultural offerings as David Cronenberg's 1988 *Dead Ringers*). Hsu was very much a participant in it.



David Cronenberg, *Dead Ringers*, 1988, 35 mm, color, sound, 116 minutes.

But again, there were differences. Like other neo-geo artists, Hsu paid homage to the sleek Minimalism of the '60s and seemed especially drawn to the work of Richard Artschwager. But for Hsu—unlike, say, his contemporary Haim Steinbach, who was also influenced by Artschwager—it wasn't the older artist's Pop tendencies that were of interest; rather, it was the surrealism of his material choices, how his preference for synthetics over metals, for concoctions like Formica and Celotex, seemed less about the hard facts of industry than about the hocus-pocus of chemistry. Like Artschwager, Hsu favored a dyspeptic palette of drab browns and grays unsettled by sudden flashes of more pungent hue. And like Artschwager's, his work confounded its own status as autonomous art by flirting with the

unassuming look of functional furniture and equipment, mere auxiliaries in a wider landscape of purposive activity.



Richard Artschwager, *Table and Chair*, 1963–64, melamine laminate on wood; table: 29 3/4 × 52 × 37 1/2", chair: 45 × 17 3/4 × 21". © Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

And then there was Hsu's interest in the corporeal. For him, the issue wasn't representation or reproduction but rather cellular mutation. His visual vocabulary relied heavily on rationalist geometry only to show how thoroughly integrated it had become with the organic huffing and sweat of the biomorphic. Indeed, what Hsu's art from the '80s anticipated was not so much our present techno-aesthetic moment as what was then only a few years around the corner—the turn to the body in the work of artists like Kiki Smith and Robert Gober, and, even more significantly, the fascination with biomedical engineering that characterized Matthew Barney's earliest exhibitions.

Hsu's visual vocabulary relied heavily on rationalist geometry only to show how thoroughly integrated it had become with the organic huffing and sweat of the biomorphic.

Take Hsu's *Autopsy* from 1988, a standout in the retrospective. The piece has a fresh gleam to it, albeit a contradictory one, befitting both showroom merchandise and sterile lab

equipment. Which makes the object initially suspicious: Is this about the allure of consumerist pleasure or the threat of hospital suffering? The work is all the more disturbing not despite but because it seems rather poker-faced, more pragmatic than symbolic. It appears functional, like it has a job to do. The fact that it sits on wheels reinforces the theme of utility: Not just a workstation, it's a movable one, which makes it all the more accommodating of contingencies. It's obviously a product of design thinking, whose goals are to maximize efficiency and multiply applications. The object seems to prophesize a whole spectrum of highly technical operations and procedures. But exactly what tasks it performs can't easily be pinned down.

And then there's that strange pink paste that crowns the work. Whatever it is (the checklist suggests cement compound coated in acrylic paint), it stands in stark contrast to the piece's otherwise smooth, disinfected surfaces, all that stainless steel and ceramic tile, which can be so easily mopped clean. Opposed to the regularity and sameness of the gridded brown tile work, the pink cement is all craggy irregularity. Maybe this is the object's function: to provide an appropriate theater for the sober, clinical inspection of such aberrations and eccentricities. Unlike the wheels at its bottom, the wheels at its top are out of commission, their usefulness suspended. They can't act, though they can be acted on. They recall the way cartoons depict dead animals, flat on their backs, with their legs sticking straight up in the air. Suddenly symbolism creeps back in; this could be some sort of high-tech funeral pyre. But that's not quite right, because the ritual performed here seems too convoluted, too self-absorbed. What we're looking at is an apparatus that has become preoccupied with its own lack of seamlessness and self-consistency, that has grown aware that it too possesses a soft underbelly. *Autopsy* comes across as an object that's about to dissect itself.

Lane Relyea is chair of the Department of Art Theory and Practice at Northwestern University.

Spike



LOS

ANGELES

DIGITAL DINOSAURS

TISHAN HSU
"LIQUID CIRCUIT"
HAMMER MUSEUM

26 JANUARY –
19 APRIL 2020

Tishan Hsu's exhibition "Liquid Circuit" puts on display a series of figures that look like they were made through highly sophisticated, machinic versions of the Surrealist game of chance known as exquisite corpse, in which a single piece of paper is folded into sections onto which each person involved draws a body part. What is robotic about these

sculptural and painted pieces, however, is that while they do resemble a composite body, they are also skilfully constructed – anything but the result of random choices. They exist as fully formed figures, often resembling a fusion of a furry animal, human flesh, and car parts.

After studying architecture at MIT Hsu dashed from the rigidity of New England to the rich artistic scene of downtown New York in the early 1980s, beginning to show with the infamous Pat Hearn gallery. "Liquid Circuit", the first museum survey of Hsu's paintings and sculptures in the United States, opens with a gallery of sketches like blueprints for the paintings and sculptures that populate the show. Many of the works, like *Cell* (1987), are covered with orifices, illusions of openings, of a void

continuing into a dimension behind the frame, threading through to the other side. Like vacuums, these forms look as if they could suck you in but just as easily spit you out. Hsu's compositions bring to mind American sculptor Lee Bontecou's works of the 60s, in which three dimensional wall-hanging forms jut out into the space of the viewer with a vacant opening in the centre. Oscillating between protrusion and retraction, there is something intimidating about the presence of Hsu's painted constructions, a feeling that if they could be turned on, they would overtake you in a heartbeat.

Many of Hsu's sculptures are like stagnant appliances, some looking like retired medical equipment, no longer functional. In *Virtual Flow* (1990–2018), two glass cases on a cart containing fleshy



© Tishan Hsu

Tishan Hsu, *Cell*, 1987

Acrylic, compound, oil, alkyd, vinyl, aluminum on wood, 244 x 488 x 10 cm

Photo: Jeff McLane



View of "Tishan Hsu: Liquid Circuit", Hammer Museum

forms are attached beneath what looks to be a medical monitor covered in fleshy pink 80s shower tiles, on wheels. The two objects, affixed with three-pronged outlets, are connected via a power cord. There is something almost clumsy about the deliberateness of this connection, tethered as it is to pervasive stillness of the objects it connects. There is no pulse or movement. What looks like grey static appears on the screen of the monitor, while decaying organs are preserved in the other. Making work in New York's East Village in the 80s and 90s, Hsu was a witness to the AIDS epidemic. This becomes apparent in works like *Virtual Flow* and *Autopsy* (both 1988) which evoke scenes of medical emergency, or a body in decline. The failure of medical professionals and government services to save those suffering from the disease, which in part defined this period of fear and anger, is suggested in these

medical-looking objects. Even the monitor has sores resembling a belly button or an anus. The surface of the glass cases appears to have melted. Hsu has said that he's interested in making work that gets at the feeling or affect of technology. Rather than achieve this through a digital medium, he illustrates the implications of technology on the human condition through traditional modes of artmaking – painting and sculpture – that share a "real" space with the viewer.

Made at the dawn of the contemporary digital age, this body of work, through its anthropomorphising of digital objects, seems prescient, foreshadowing the present reliance on technology, which Hsu appears to have been particularly attuned to. This is reflected in works like *Splits* (1992) and *Natural Languages* (1994) in which TV-screen shapes become another detached body part. The work, overall, registers a kind of indifference to technology

even as it could be seen as reflecting the optimism about its potential that was pervasive in the early 90s. Digital technology was seen as a form for adventure. It had potential to democratise the flow of information, to generate connection and community and traverse boundaries of time and space.

Hsu's works also express a more ambivalent attitude towards technology, however, raising questions about its effects on the human body and psyche. Rather than portals, they seem more like voids. One of the most striking motifs of Hsu's sculptures are these gaping black openings that appear again and again in different forms. Feathered around the edges, they give the illusion of depth, but they are, in fact, shallow. Are they a source of fear? Pleasure? Liberation? Hsu doesn't provide an answer, preferring to create a form that will suck you in.

Grace Hadland

PENTA

Contemporary Artists on Art and Society

By **Abby Schultz** March 23, 2020 8:00 am ET



Mika Rottenberg
Photograph by Grace Rivera

Penta brought together four New York-based artists—Tishan Hsu, Christopher Myers, Mika Rottenberg, and Tariku Shiferaw—for dinner at the Midtown Manhattan restaurant Butter to talk about the role art can play in society. The discussion began with an excerpt from W.H. Auden's poem "In Memory of W.B. Yeats":

You were silly like us; your gift survived it all:
The parish of rich women, physical decay,
Yourself. Mad Ireland hurt you into poetry.
Now Ireland has her madness and her weather still,
For poetry makes nothing happen: it survives
In the valley of its making where executives
Would never want to tamper, flows on south
From ranches of isolation and the busy griefs,
Raw towns that we believe and die in; it survives,
A way of happening, a mouth.

***Penta:* While poetry may not make anything happen, it does provide "a way of finding meaning," as the U.K.-based poet**

Tishan Hsu, 69, focused on the relationship between the body and technology long before technology infiltrated nearly every aspect of society. Hsu says his work may have some connection to being Asian-American, saying that "perhaps I couldn't find a way of being in my body in the world given the context I grew up in, in America."

Christopher Myers, 45, is a children's book author and illustrator, textile artist, and playwright who is "interested in cultural

Tamar Yoseloff has said. How do you think art—in the form of poetry, painting, sculpture, or anything else—helps society understand the social and political disruptions of our time?

Mika Rottenberg: In times of breakdown or war, sometimes art becomes more conservative. Maybe artists want to do stuff with color and texture and kind of retreat, to say, “I can’t deal with this.” Maybe art should just be about that—feelings and textures. What kind of art was made during real wars? Usually there was not that much, or something [emerges] like Dadaism that tries to find a new logic.



Tariku Shiferaw
Photograph by Grace Rivera

Tariku Shiferaw: When politically hard times happen, there are artists that have gone to abstraction. You could look at [African-American artist] Romare Bearden [1911-88], who retreated to abstraction during hard times. So did [African-American artist] Jack Whitten [1939-2018], who, after 1969, goes deep into abstraction and starts talking about the stars and science fiction, because it affords him something internal, something safe.

Christopher Myers: Jack Whitten notoriously had a body of sculpture that he didn’t show because he felt it was going to pigeonhole him as African-American—which tells you that in terms of social good and socially progressive thinking, with artists who are thinking about conflict and desperation, there’s always going to be a mask at the center. I don’t think of masking in the Western sense of concealment, but more masking in this pre-Western notion of telling another kind of truth. Sometimes the gift of older-generation artists like Jack Whitten is to make clear that there’s a separation between his mask and the work that he’s doing. All of that sculpture work, which for me is some of his most exciting work, is what he’s investigating. It’s not for public consumption.

collision” and how “the histories of our lives are intertwined with a panoply of peoples, places, and things.” Myers likes to tell stories in whatever form “is going to bring in a different audience than maybe was ready for it.”

Mika Rottenberg, 43, born in Argentina and raised in Israel, works in video installations, sculptures, and drawings, and says her art is “always a process of discovery or experimentation,” often centered on “extractive economies and manual labor and energy production.” Concerned with resource depletion in the world, she’s wrestling with the place of art “as being one of the million things that humans produce.”

Tariku Shiferaw, 37, who was born in Ethiopia and grew up in Los Angeles, is a painter and installation artist. Shiferaw’s series of paintings *One of These Black Boys* addresses “the black body within society,” with titles of works referencing African diaspora musical artists in R&B, jazz, hip hop, and reggae. “It’s all about marking a space, that I was here.”

We all have to deal with markets and we have to deal with sustenance. Romare Bearden worked as a social worker his entire career. What then is his political statement as an active social worker in New York City? That is as much a part of his content as is any kind of abstraction that he's looking at.



Photograph by Grace Rivera

Tishan Hsu: That's been the trajectory of a lot of what we would consider the paradigm of the modernist artist. Think of [Franz] Kafka, who worked for an insurance company and eked out writing that he never wanted anyone to read, including after his death. The idea that the artist has their true self and has to then wrestle with the external world but somehow manages to eke out this work, whether it's a painting or a book or whatever—that has been in the modernist paradigm. [Carl] Jung said you have to get to the very personal to get to the very collective.

Art has always been there, will always be here. There are always human beings who need to connect to something personal that ends up having some kind of meaning. You can see that in every culture. That's what we define as art, whether it's marketed or not.

Myers: One of the things that interests me about the [Auden] poem is that it's about Irish identity. Yeats, as an Irishman, is central to Yeats' practice...in that sense of being a colonized people who is resurrecting the kind of beauty, romance, and specificity of the Irish idiom within an overarching English idiom. What is contrasted in the piece is this sense of Irish literary storytelling, song, and culture as being loud and empty and without any kind of consequence. The fact that we are still talking about Yeats proves the lie to that. Everything from tap dancing to a certain kind of storytelling comes from that kind of early progenitor.

VIOLUSSE

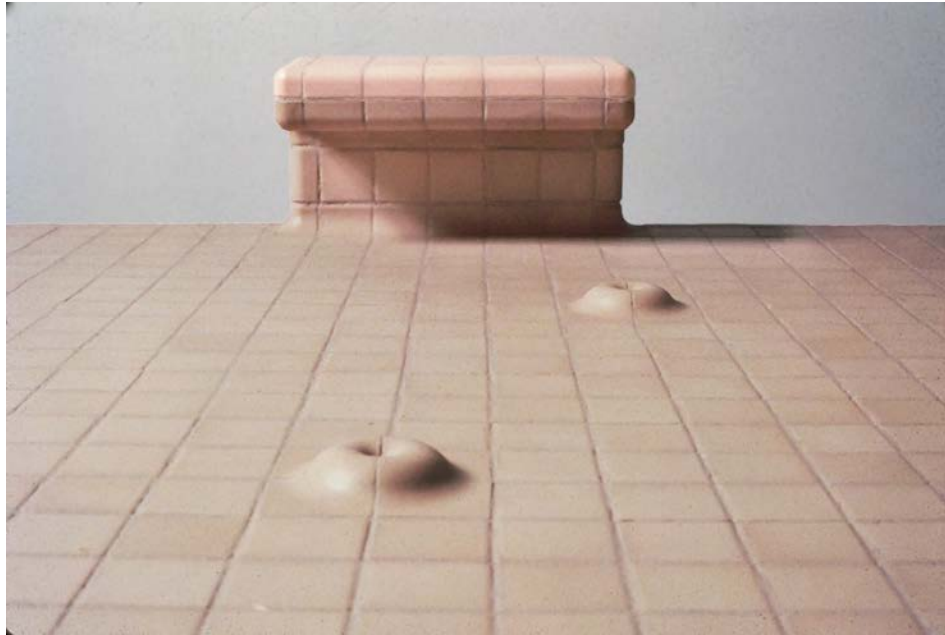


Tishan Hsu
Aaron Flint Jamison
Studio Formafantasma
Henrike Naumann
Patrick Staff
Tobias Spichtig
Berenice Olmedo
Gili Tal

Winter 2020
Issue 70

Mousse Magazine

Clinical Cosmology: Tishan Hsu



Tishan Hsu, *Auto-Immune* (detail), 1988

© Tishan Hsu. Courtesy: the artist and Empty Gallery, Hong Kong

Contrary to popular belief, Tishan Hsu offers a simple proposal. Orifices open up from flat surfaces or tiled sculptural pieces, or are embedded in skin-bag surfaces or technologically manufactured images. But his violating fissures, seamlessly embedded, are not intended to illustrate the engagement of the body under the historical epoch of technology. Rather, they produce an affective relationship with the technical object. It doesn't look like anything you've seen before because he isn't referencing standards and methods in art history—in fact he evades these, which is why you'll never see paint in his work because of the medium's provenance in the history of painting. He produces work on another premise altogether.

Yuk Hui's book *The Question Concerning Technology in China* (2016) proposes a theory of technology called "cosmotekhnics" that roots the contemporary definition of *techne* in Chinese cosmology, which perceives a unity of heaven and humanity. The argument goes that different places are informed by different material conditions and thinking, thereby necessitating a different theory of technology. Hsu's unfamiliar articulation of *techne* in his work since the 1970s is grounded in anterior foundational myths as well, nurtured by a cosmology he has been surgically suturing through intuition.

After studying architecture at MIT, Hsu moved in 1975 to New York, where he worked at one of the very few office jobs that then involved a word processor. He found this engagement with the virtual presented on-screen remarkable, but regarded the physicality of the word processor itself as the site of mediation: you look at this box and see a screen that shows you a complete illusion of a world, and it is completely absorbing. You realize the world shown is not an illusion. It's in the same space you are, and your awareness of this object occurs at the surface. The interface—introducing body to machine—is constitutive of sorcery, or as Wendy Hui Kyong Chun writes, "sourcery." In her account, introduced in 2008, we valorize the user as agent, a fantasy of our control. Source code is a fetish and makes our machines demonic and our desire for dominance endless. Close engagement with software "will not let us escape fictions and arrive at a true understanding of our machine, but rather make our interfaces more productively spectral."¹ It is its concern with the physical that makes Hsu's work critical and confusing. Its spectrality is materially based. Hsu does not believe that uploading to the cloud hails the end of the body. There is no preoccupation with ghosts of future's past, nor fear of technological dominance over humans, but an animistic articulation from the presence of present cyborg-like interfaces. In these foundational myths there are no origin stories.



Tishan Hsu, *Portrait (2)*, 1984
© Tishan Hsu. Courtesy: the artist and Empty Gallery, Hong Kong

In general, Hsu's work does not photograph well. Most of the works appear flat where they are sculptural, or like a screen even when they are three-dimensional. The tiled sculptures appear clinically clean and perform surgical theater with dramatic suspense. One of Hsu's earliest hanged works, *Portrait* (1982), was made using oil stick, enamel, and concrete on wood. The piece is six inches thick. The corners are rounded (another evasion of hanging-art convention, which usually presents the work as an angular window) and there is a thick black-and-pink frame around the eyes, lips, and other orifices operating on the same field. A rounded pink rectangle seemingly pushes through the plane in the center. *Portrait (2)* (1984) was made with oil stick, enamel, Styrofoam, and concrete on wood. It is a rounded square bearing a black vignette around its edges, the steel gray surface marked by defined ridges with an upside-down trapezoid-like shape in the center. Resembling a dehydrated body, it suggests a strange musculature underneath the canvas surface. Hsu's only other work that has ever implied self-portraiture through its title is *Fingerprint* (1989). Hsu was in Cologne from 1988 to 1990 for an artist residency, and the requisite paperwork required his fingerprints and a "certificate of good behavior." *Fingerprint* is a one-off piece and the only straightforwardly figurative work in his opus. It features a laser-printed copy of the submitted document, his inky prints contained by a thick aluminum frame with wire-reinforced glass on top. The work is vacuum sealed—a comment on bodily surveillance replicating a synthetic environment where the body has no air.



Tishan Hsu, *Fingerprint*, 1989
© Tishan Hsu. Courtesy: the artist and Empty Gallery, Hong Kong

Hsu's works often present clinical trials and tribulations, like surgical theater. This is where you can see the body exploded. Though he himself does not watch surgical theater (which looks something like a livestream of an operating room), Hsu did go under the knife in 2006 when he experienced a kidney transplant. Through this process, he came to know practically every chemical in his body because he did a lot of research on his own. He felt that the doctors treated him like a machine, and his earlier work from the 1980s began to feel newly prophetic. *Cold Cut* (1987) is a rounded square hanging work divided into top and bottom, its orifices fitted with mini grates, smatters of fresh red "blood" spilling out. *Transplant* (1987) as a title is evocative enough, seeming to refer either to

surgical procedures or the status of an immigrant, or both. The question is not about locating the body in relation to technology; such modular structures, Hsu tells me, seek to “reconstitute the body in a different way.”²

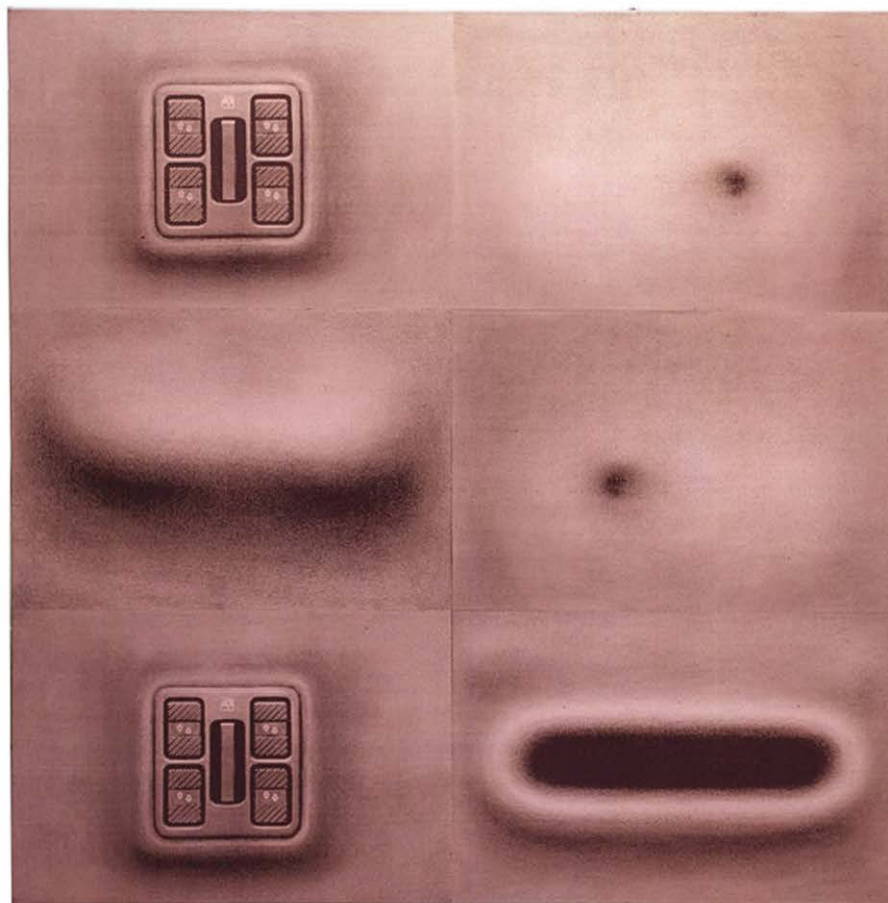


Tishan Hsu, *Vertical Ooze*, 1987
© Tishan Hsu. Collection of Centre Pompidou, Paris.
Courtesy: the artist and Empty Gallery, Hong Kong



Tishan Hsu, *Intensive Care*, 1990
© Tishan Hsu. Courtesy: the artist and Empty Gallery, Hong Kong

Even the “furniture” pieces mirror this constant restructuring, following both Hsu’s architectural education and the way offices can be arranged. His earlier furniture pieces are simpler, made of ceramic tile on wood, oil compound, steel, and sometimes vinyl or concrete. *Cellular Automata* (1989) is divided into a three-by-nine grid outlined with organic black shadows that bulge like musculature under skin, and references Hsu’s work from the earlier half of the 1980s, which included many cell-like diagrams. The size of the body is unclear, but either way, it can be taken apart like building blocks and put back together. The proposition might be understood as liberating or as a bodily horror, reminding me of the reception of the works of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. On the “body without organs” in *Anti-Oedipus* (1972), psychoanalyst Joel Kovel wrote, “Immersion in their world of ‘schizoculture’ and desiring machines is enough to make a person yearn for the secure madness of the nuclear family.”³ In 1990, the Paris-based gallerist Charles Cartwright showed *Cellular Automata* in a group show. Cartwright had recommended Deleuze and Guattari to Hsu, although the latter would not begin a deep engagement with their texts until more than a decade later.



Tishan Hsu, *Cordless*, 1990

© Tishan Hsu. Collection of Museum für Moderne Kunst, Frankfurt am Main. Courtesy: the artist and Empty Gallery, Hong Kong

Proceeding through Hsu's work chronologically reveals that the timeline of his works parallels progressions in technological innovations in production processes. In *Cellular Automata*, Hsu used silkscreen for the first time. Transferring photographic film onto nylon-like screens, and we witness the inaugural technological repetition of his forms. Hsu does not use technology as a means to an end, or merely as a tool for visual illustration. He is engaged with technological processes themselves and how technology can produce its own images—another unification of the organic and machinic. Over time, the high-contrast black outlines that demarcated the modularity of Hsu's work in the early 1980s began to fade. The work of the 1990s shows faint traces of lines marking a grid, making a hybrid surface constituted of different materials and images. In the early 2000s the artist spent a year mastering Photoshop. The development of archival printing by Duggal, one of the largest printing labs in New York that was willing to work with artists, led to the possibility of digital printing on canvas. What Hsu originally did by hand became possible first via silkscreen, then Photoshop, and later in *The Shanghai Project* (2013–ongoing) by UV printing on aluminum. Technological processes had evolved dramatically, and mobilizing them yielded plastic and seamless works—the opposite ethos of collage.

In David Shannon's beloved children's picture book *A Bad Case of Stripes* (1998), Camilla Cream loves lima beans but refuses to eat them because her friends make fun of her for it. She begins to turn into the colors and patterns of her friends' taunts, growing roots, berries, and crystals and eventually merging with the architecture of the room. Though farfetched, Shannon's illustrations remind me of Hsu's works; they both demonstrate the mimetic potential of the body to fuse with its environment, mutually constituting each other into a singularity. Hsu was born in Boston to

Shanghainese immigrant parents, grew up in Switzerland and Wisconsin, and later became part of Pat Hearn's East Village gallery roster. The 1990s language of identity politics did not speak to Hsu then, and it still doesn't. He is neither here nor there, though this position does not disturb his sense of place, which is one of immediacy. As Jeppe Ugelvig pointed out in his profile on Hsu for *ArtReview Asia*, Hsu's politics are much more aligned with the posthuman and the theories of Rachel Lee.⁴ In *The Exquisite Corpse of Asian America: Biopolitics, Biosociality, and Posthuman Ecologies* (2014), Lee asks: "If race has been settled as a legal or social construction and not as biological fact, why do Asian American artists, authors, and performers continue to scrutinize their body parts?"⁵ Rather than looking at the radicalized body through socially constructed notions of race, Hsu literally reconfigures its parts, suggesting another social order. Following his mother's death in 2013, Hsu set up a studio in Shanghai and worked there for three years. Among her possessions he found letters between his mother and her family in China from the 1950s and 1960s and a rich family archive of photographs accumulated by his great-uncle. Some pictures were missing from the photo albums, edited out by the Communists during the Cultural Revolution, requiring the album's future owner to imagine the missing scenes of bourgeois life. Aware of the weight of this historical burden, Hsu felt disconnected from the images: they had everything and nothing to do with him. His parents never spoke of this time when he was growing up. Hsu first showed the collection of works known simply as *The Shanghai Project* at Empty Gallery in Hong Kong in 2019. It featured family photographs seemingly disturbed by digital transmission waves and further morphed by bright red or green silicon markings and drips. He felt the topic would be too sensitive to show in mainland China and too distant to show outside an Asian context.



Tishan Hsu, *Boating Scene 1.2.1*, 2019
 © Tishan Hsu. Courtesy: the artist and Empty Gallery, Hong Kong. Photo: Lance Brewer

The four works in the *Boating Scene* (2019) series show warped images of a well-dressed family on a boat. A double displacement occurs, first of the family itself in migration, and then in its confrontation with digital textures. The images are UV printed on aluminum, and computer-chip-like shapes of pigmented silicone appear to drip through the back of the plates. As Donna Haraway proposed in "The Cyborg Manifesto,"

"The silicon chip is a surface for writing; it is etched in molecular scales disturbed only by atomic noise, the ultimate interference for nuclear scores."⁶ The images appear disturbed by ghostly transmissions, rendering the historical accuracy of the original image a moot point. Through this project, Hsu became aware of the prescient absence in his personal historical imaginary. Like all absences, it is constituted by the presence of something else. Hsu's cosmology provides an ontology, a logic of being guided by the animism of technical objects. What a sense of being alive.

- [1] Wendy Hui Kyong Chun, "On 'Sourcery,' or Code as Fetish," *Configurations* 16, no. 3 (2008): 300.
- [2] Author interview with Tishan Hsu, November 30, 2019.
- [3] Joel Kovel, *History and Spirit: An Inquiry into the Philosophy of Liberation* (Boston: Beacon, 1991), 255.
- [4] Jeppe Ugelvig, "Tishan Hsu: The Chinese-American Artist Who Pioneered New Ways of Representing the Interface between Physical and Virtual Worlds," *ArtReview Asia*, Spring 2019, https://artreview.com/features/ara_spring_2019_feature_tishan_hsu/ (https://artreview.com/features/ara_spring_2019_feature_tishan_hsu/).
- [5] Rachel Lee, *The Exquisite Corpse of Asian America: Biopolitics, Biosociality, and Posthuman Ecologies* (New York: NYU Press, 2014).
- [6] Donna Haraway, "The Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century," first published in *Socialist Review*, reprinted at <https://faculty.uca.edu/rnovy/Haraway-A%20Cyborg%20Manifesto.htm> (<https://faculty.uca.edu/rnovy/Haraway--A%20Cyborg%20Manifesto.htm>).

Tishan Hsu (b. 1951, Boston) spent his very early years in Zurich, then grew up in Ohio, Wisconsin, Virginia, and New York. He studied architecture at MIT and received his BSAD in 1973 and M.Arch in 1975. While at MIT, he studied film at the Carpenter Center, Harvard University. He moved to New York in 1979, where he currently resides. Hsu first showed in New York at Pat Hearn Gallery. Since 1985 he has shown extensively in the United States, Europe, and Mexico. His work is in the collections of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; Centre Pompidou, Paris; Museum für Moderne Kunst, Frankfurt; the High Museum, Atlanta; the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles; the Museum of Contemporary Art, North Miami; and the Frederick R. Weisman Museum, Minneapolis. Hsu has served as a board member of White Columns, New York, and the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture. He has been a professor of visual arts at Sarah Lawrence College and a visiting professor at Pratt Institute and Harvard University.

Hera Chan is a curator and writer based in Hong Kong, currently working as the associate public programs curator at Tai Kwun Contemporary. Her ongoing work involves building a global contemporary art pageant through Miss Ruthless International. She was fellow at the RAW Material Company, Dakar, and a curator in residence as part of the All The Way South exchange between the Guangzhou Times Museum and Artista x Artista in Havana. She cofounded Atelier Céladon in Montreal and has staged projects at Para Site, Hong Kong; Spring Workshop, Hong Kong; UCCA Center for Contemporary Art, Beijing; SBC galerie d'art contemporain, Montreal; SAVVY Contemporary, Berlin; and Artista x Artista, Havana. Her writing has appeared in *Artforum*, *ArtAsiaPacific*, *Art-Review Asia*, *Frieze*, *Ocula*, *Spike Art Quarterly*, and *TAKE*.

Originally published on Mousse 70 (<http://mousseemagazine.it/product/mousse-70/>)

ArtReview Asia

Tishan Hsu

The Chinese-American artist who pioneered new ways of representing the interface between physical and virtual worlds

By **Jeppe Ugelvig**



Tishan Hsu's early work provokes a strange corporeal response that speaks directly to the experience of inhabiting a body in a digital age. The unidentifiable orifices, limbs and proxy-organs in his paintings of the 1980s and 90s fuse seamlessly with glitchy cybernetic grids, while the sleek ergonomic curvature of his sculptures evokes body parts, computer screens and office furniture. Hsu's works could be considered bodies in their own right, but also assert an almost corporate objecthood when you encounter them in person (that *corporate* and *corporeal* are cognate only makes the status of these objects as physical things – to be sold or inhabited – more ambivalent).

By rendering technology as the interface where representation and abstraction intersect in both art and life, Hsu proposes a radically alternative approach to the body and its politics, beyond the boundaries of what we understand as 'physical' and 'virtual', carbon and silicone, flesh and soul. This perspective makes 1980s works such as *Head* (1984) – an eerie flesh-toned, wall-based landscape of bodily holes rendered in lumpy Styrofoam and acrylic – and *Ooze* (1987) – an imposing and alien interior rendered in turquoise tiles – seem hyper-contemporary more than three decades after their completion, at a time when digital systems have encroached further into the experience of being human, and techno-bodies such as cyborgs, robots and avatars are being created, debated and politicised with ever greater speed.



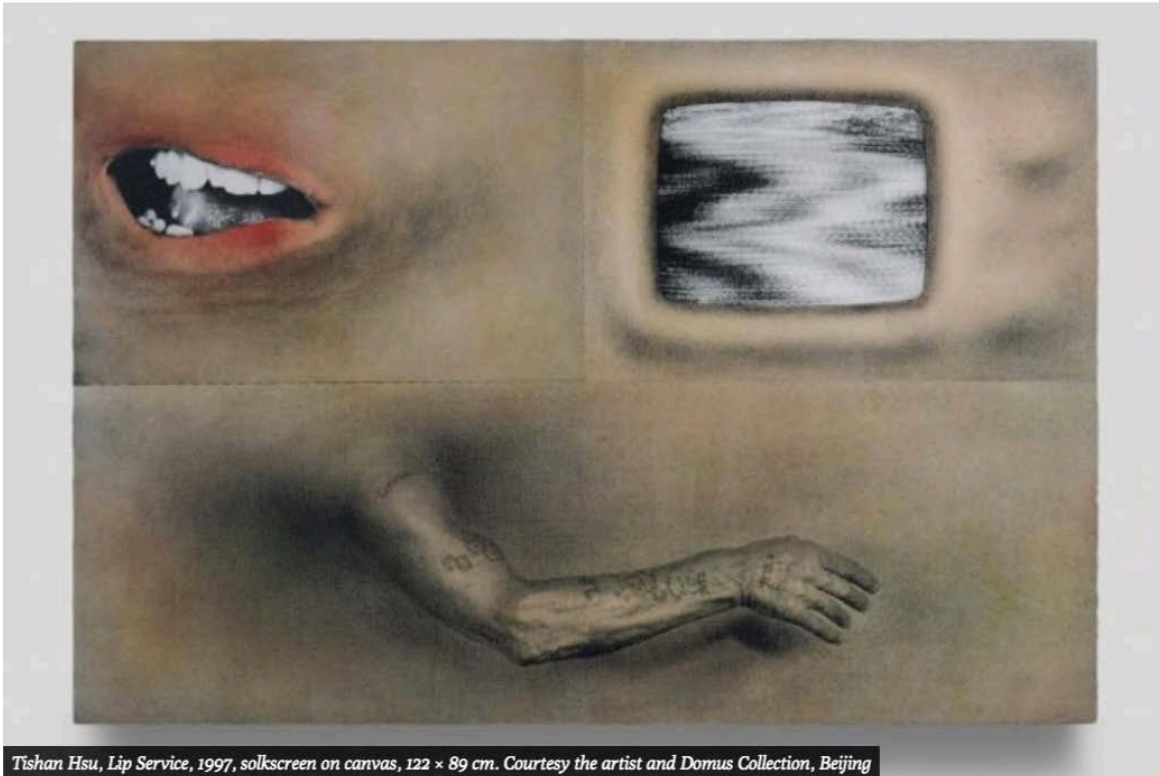
Tishan Hsu, *Head*, 1984, acrylic, concrete, Styrofoam, oil, enamel on wood, 91 x 61 cm. Courtesy the artist and Empty Gallery, Hong Kong

While echoing the historical preoccupations of much cybernetic art of the past 30 years, Tishan Hsu has remained outside its canon. Born in Boston and raised in Switzerland and Wisconsin to Shanghainese immigrant parents, he started making art in his teens but chose to study architecture at MIT before moving to New York in 1975. There he encountered Pat Hearn, the Boston ex-punk and emerging gallerist, who had just set up shop in the East Village. As part of a programme including Milan Kunc, Peter Schuyff and Philip Taaffe, he inevitably became affiliated with the resurgence of painting of the 1980s variously known as neo-geo, neo-pop or post-abstraction – genres generally shunned by the critical art establishment, who saw them as cynically reducing abstraction to pure decor, to kitsch. But while evoking a politics of simulation similar to that of, say, Taaffe, Hsu's work aligns more closely with predecessors such as Bridget Riley, concerned with examining the effect of the body moving through and across optical planes – such as paintings, for example, or computer screens.

Hsu's emphasis on affect, indeed, couldn't be further from the cold simulationism of his contemporaries: the work is intimate, personal and in continuous dialogue with the body. As a graduate, Hsu worked as a word processor at one of the city's earliest office jobs involving a computer, and it is this now-ubiquitous experience – existing in front of a monitor – that would produce the conceptual basis for much of his work. Bodies morphing into hardware can be seen in works such as *Lip Service* (1997), in which TV screens become a part of a larger corporeal entity. Inversely, in *Virtual Flow* (1990–2018), bodies appear as silkscreened medical images (sourced from hospitals) within clinical glass boxes on a steel cart, mutated by skin-toned craters and lumps. That the unsettling structure – half medical cabinet, half body – extends to a standard electrical socket brings the trope of being 'plugged in' to an abject extreme.

The appearance of white noise, glitches and dislodged body parts adrift in the grid is reminiscent of the 'cyberpunk' aesthetics of the early 1990s, which similarly worked to articulate anxieties and fantasies about a uncertain digital future. But while much cybernetic thinking from this era imagined the web as a form of life privileging the immaterial mind (and thus doing away with the body), Hsu's work insists on the fundamental corporeality of our encounter with such virtual systems. The body figures here not as some disposable prosthetic, but as a kind of interface, a place that connects

various systems of reality. "I have always had certain doubts about the 'transition' from the body to the virtual," Hsu tells me in his Brooklyn studio. "There is a tendency to default to the image of the body we have inherited, but what we experience ontologically and cognitively opposes that quite directly." In the *Interface* series of inkjet prints from 2002, for example, Hsu began to present body parts in warping grid systems, forming a kind of skin that resembled a digital screensaver. He describes it as an attempt to "explore a different kind of 'embodiment' than art (Western or non-Western) had portrayed" that could reflect "the impact of technology on how the body located itself in the world".



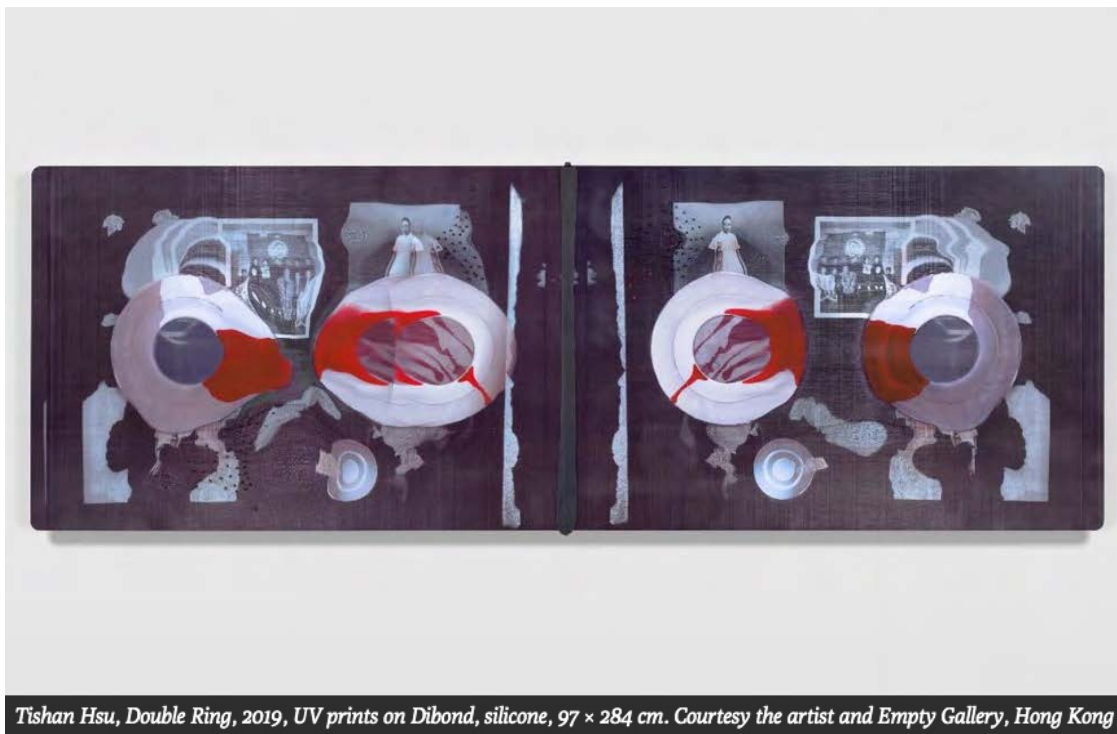
Tishan Hsu, *Lip Service*, 1997, silk screen on canvas, 122 x 89 cm. Courtesy the artist and Domus Collection, Beijing

This bodily discourse – stripped of markers such as gender, sexuality and race – is a far cry from the representational identity politics of the 1990s. Hsu's posthuman approach to the body echoes the work of more recent scholarship by theorists including Rachel C. Lee, who in her 2014 book *The Exquisite Corpse of Asian America* veers away from a conventional biological understanding of race to explore a more fragmented and distributed material sense of Asian American identity, informed by chemical, informatic and cybernetic flows. While one of the few successful Chinese-American artists of his time, Hsu never joined its roster of names in the canon of American art-history, in part, perhaps, because his art did not foreground his ethnic identity (one could think of Simon Leung, for example, a contemporary of Hsu, who also started at Pat Hearn Gallery). In fact, his prophetic biocybernetic perspective struggled to find its audience. After a few years in Cologne during the late 1980s, Hsu, disillusioned, retreated from the commercial artworld and acquired tenure as a professor in fine arts at Sarah Lawrence College in upstate New York.

The death of his mother in 2013 caused Hsu to reconsider his heritage and its relevance to his artistic practice. Perusing her possessions, Hsu discovered a collection of letters between his mother and her family in China dating back to the 1950s and 60s. Separated by the communist revolution of 1949, which prohibited Hsu's parents from returning to Shanghai, the letters spoke of persecution, suicide and survival as well as the more mundane aspects of everyday life; a winding social history of which Hsu had been totally unaware. So he set out to track down and reconnect with the extended

families of his late parents. Taking up residence in Shanghai for three, then five, then six months at a time, Hsu became absorbed by this newly discovered social and historical context and spent several years examining its material remnants, particularly the family's rich image archive (a result of his great uncle's passion for photography).

Elements of this archive appear in Hsu's rounded aluminium print *Boating Scene – Delete* (2019), part of a new body of work referred to simply as *The Shanghai Project*, featuring a bucolic boating scene with an impeccably dressed family, a rare document of prerevolution Shanghai from the 1930s. *Double Ring – Absence* (2016), also an aluminium print, features scanned pages of a photo album, with many of its images seemingly ripped out. This pictorial absence speaks to the rigorous governmental censorship of the time, as any representation of bourgeois life was carefully and systematically erased by the city's Red Guards, as well as the absence of this family history from Hsu's own life. Hsu labours these images or absent spaces through a variety of present-day scanning, editing and digital reproduction techniques, accentuating their eeriness as alien historical documents: the layers of affect, lost and retrieved over time.



Tishan Hsu, *Double Ring*, 2019, UV prints on Dibond, silicone, 97 × 284 cm. Courtesy the artist and Empty Gallery, Hong Kong

How does genealogy and family history translate into data? As always, it is the circulated information embedded in the virtual that constitutes the actual 'material' of Hsu's practice. While his early work simulated a digitisation of the image, his new work emerges directly from it. "The whole reason I could do this project is because of technology, because of the Internet," he points out. By mining a lost experience of familial trauma through digital communication – email, Skype and Whatsapp exchanges with his Shanghai family – and by processing the material remnants through digital image-making and editing, Hsu again renders technology as a space in which to negotiate identity, the body and history. "Somewhat ironically, it is the technology of photography in the twenty-first century that is not only enabling me to make any connection to but in fact has made me aware of the absence in the first place." This absence – this personal data loss – speaks to how cultural memory lives, dies and recoups itself, even in today's photo-saturated, digital and seemingly 'connected' culture. Through the suggestive aesthetic of tech, familiar diaspora themes such as cultural memory, trauma and social histories are rethought through digital and

technological metaphors. “It’s kind of about information and the personal,” he adds. “And how the personal registers through technology; what is coded, stored, and what is not.”



While evoking the critical strategies of quintessential identity-based art practice – memory, trauma, personal archaeology – Hsu regards *The Shanghai Project* as an extension of his life’s practice, although its reference to Asian bodies is, he acknowledges, a ‘radical step’. After consulting its local artworld, Hsu estimated that showing this more personal body of work in Shanghai would be too politically risky due to the contentious status of the history of the revolution. Hsu believed that first showing the work in the US would entail its being read, against the artist’s wishes, as a statement bound up in identity politics, so for some time it seemed likely that the project would remain permanently in storage. But when an opportunity arose in Hong Kong, it seemed to make sense. The Chinese Civil War of the 1940s resulted in mass immigration from China to the then-British colony; even now a third of the city’s population is of Shanghainese origin. “This resonates with my own position as an Asian American who is showing work for the first time in Asia,” he concludes. “I am an in-between, a hybrid of being inside of the outside in China and outside of the inside in America, if you will.”

Tishan Hsu: Delete is on view at Empty Gallery from 26 March through 25 May

The New York Times

The World Catches Up With Tishan Hsu



Tishan Hsu's "Virtual Flow" (1990). The work is on display at the K11 Art Foundation in Hong Kong. Tishan Hsu and Empty Gallery

By Ted Loos

March 27, 2019

For most of his more than four-decade career, the multimedia artist Tishan Hsu had a knack for being steadily out of sync with the art world, and the art market in particular.

But rather than brooding over that, Mr. Hsu, now 68, simply pursued his vision — making works that ask “how do we embody technology?” as he puts it.

Born in Boston to Chinese parents, Mr. Hsu is about to be featured in three shows in Hong Kong.

“These are my first-ever shows in Asia, and it represents a kind of return, which is really interesting,” he said.

At Art Basel Hong Kong, taking place this weekend at the Hong Kong Convention and Exhibition Center, Empty Gallery will show his works from the 1980s to the early 1990s. The gallery also features a show of Mr. Hsu’s newer work, “Delete,” from March 26 to May 25 at its gallery space in the city’s Aberdeen neighborhood. At the same time, several of his works are featured in “Glow Like That” at the K11 Art Foundation from March 27 to May 13.

“I’ve always made very personal work,” said Mr. Hsu, chatting in his large studio in Williamsburg, Brooklyn (he lives upstairs). “But I admit it’s been a little frustrating at times when people have said, ‘What planet do you come from?’”



At Art Basel Hong Kong, Mr. Hsu will have his first show in Asia.
via Empty Gallery

As he spoke, Mr. Hsu was surrounded by old and new works that demonstrate how hard he is to categorize: He's sort of a painter and sort of a sculptor, and he works with photography, too. But his creations aren't really "installations" in the way the term is used these days, either.

Standing on the floor was "Virtual Flow" (1990), a two-part sculptural contraption made of antiseptic pink ceramic tiles, with a screen-like square evoking a computer or a TV, attached to a cart covered with strange-looking growths.

Hanging above it was "Outer Banks of Memory" (1984), a painting on wood with an evocative textural grain that incorporates concrete and Styrofoam and is studded with biomorphic forms.



Mr. Hsu's "Outer Banks of Memory" (1984).
Tishan Hsu and Empty Gallery

In the latter work, Mr. Hsu said, “memory” referred to that of a computer. It was a perfect example of how he has employed shapes that evoke mid-20th-century Surrealism and Modernism, but always with a forward-leaning, technological slant.

It was with such works that Mr. Hsu gained the attention of the art world in the 1980s, after growing up all over the United States and graduating from M.I.T. He worked with some of the most renowned dealers of the day, including Leo Castelli, Colin de Land and Pat Hearn, who were encouraging, even though Mr. Hsu’s work didn’t fit the prevailing ethos.

At the time, image appropriation was all the rage, as evidenced by Pictures Generation types like Cindy Sherman, as was the painterly brio of Julian Schnabel and Jean-Michel Basquiat.

“Leo Castelli once told me, ‘Tishan, the work needs a context,’” Mr. Hsu recalled. “I could see it didn’t fit in anywhere, so I was sort of in agreement.”

Asked whether his being Asian-American was an impediment to breaking out as a star in the ’80s, he responded, “Oh yeah, definitely,” adding that the art world seemed to be asking the question, “Is this American work?”

Mr. Hsu said that in retrospect, a gig in the early ’70s doing word processing at a Manhattan law firm, during which he had to look at a screen all day, was probably influential in terms of his subject matter. “It was very new at the time,” he said. “People had just started putting together this virtual world.”

Christopher Y. Lew, a curator at the Whitney Museum of American Art, says Mr. Hsu now looks prescient.

“Where we are now in art, more than one generation has been taking on technology and the body,” Mr. Lew said. “We’re all catching up to what he was doing. He was so ahead of the curve.”

Mr. Hsu largely took himself out of the gallery scene for two and a half decades when he took a job teaching at Sarah Lawrence College, from which he recently retired. But he was always making new art, and his practice took a new direction around 2013.



Mr. Hsu's "Boating Scene GREEN 2" (2019).
Tishan Hsu and Empty Gallery, photo by Lance Brewer

“My mother died, and a lot of family history emerged out of that,” Mr. Hsu recalled, adding that there was “blocked trauma” bubbling up because of what his relatives endured during the Cultural Revolution and other upheavals in Chinese history. “At the same time, because of the opening up in China, I was able to meet a lot of my relatives that I never met before.” He started exchanging family photos with cousins.

It eventually led him to spend two years in Shanghai, making the body of work that will be on view at Empty Gallery. In “Boating Scene GREEN 2” (2019), he has manipulated and then printed on canvas a family photo showing his great-uncle and a group on a lake outing. He studded it with green silicone forms.

“I don’t speak Chinese, and I found it about as foreign as you can possibly get,” Mr. Hsu said of his time there, adding that the family photo albums fascinated him. “It was riveting for me, to see this whole narrative. So that became the basis for this project.”

The series was enabled by changes in technology that Mr. Hsu took pains to master several years earlier. “I actually took a year off from Sarah Lawrence and just focused on how to do work with Photoshop,” he said. “I said, ‘You have to do this every day like a sport so that it becomes automatic.’”

His return to the art world conversation continues in the United States, too. Last year, Mr. Hsu was featured in “Brand New: Art and Commodity in the 1980s” at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden in Washington, and next year he has a solo survey show that will travel from the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles to the SculptureCenter in New York, which organized the exhibition.

He was sanguine about whether such visibility represented a long-awaited moral victory, after so many years of making work.

“Are people coming back around to me?” Mr. Hsu asked. “I’m not sure I’d put it that way. I think that now, there’s more of the world that I was imagining.”

Correction: March 28, 2019

An earlier version of a picture caption with this article misidentified the location where “Virtual Flow” by Tishan Hsu is currently on display. It is the K11 Art Foundation in Hong Kong, not Art Basel Hong Kong.

A version of this article appears in print on March 27, 2019, on Page S2 in The International New York Times

ARTFORUM

"Tishan Hsu: Liquid Circuit"

HAMMER MUSEUM
10899 Wilshire Boulevard
January 26–April 19, 2020

Curated by Sohrab Mohebbi



Tishan Hsu, *Liquid Circuit*, 1987, acrylic, vinyl cement compound, alkyd, oil, and aluminum on wood, 7' 6" × 11' 11" × 9".

By the mid-1980s, Tishan Hsu was already creating weird works informed by the impact of an increasingly technologized reality on our minds and bodies. The paintings and objects were strange and slow—totally disconnected formally from what Hsu's fellow East Village artists were creating to popular acclaim at the time—but they presaged the concerns of an entire future generation of artists. Now that the art world has caught up to him, Hsu is finally receiving his first US museum survey. The exhibition, co-organized with SculptureCenter, New York, features close to fifty works spanning from 1980 to 2018, including soothing, screen saver–like abstract paintings, eerie sculptures made of ceramic tiles and cement, and early experiments with software, all capturing a specific historical juncture in the human relationship to technology, but in a visual language that feels ever more relevant today. *Travels to SculptureCenter, New York, May 9–August 17.*

— Ania Szremski

Robb Report

Artist Tishan Hsu Was Ahead of His Time. Now His Art Is More Relevant Than Ever.

Tishan Hsu's paintings and sculptures about the blurring line between technology and the human body left '80s audiences baffled. The art world is finally catching up to him.

BY JULIE BELCOVE ON DECEMBER 29, 2019



Back in the early 1980s, before personal computers and the internet and Wi-Fi and iPhones, before Facebook and Google and Uber and Netflix, when tax returns and college theses and invitations and bills were all on paper, Tishan Hsu worked nights word processing in law firms so he could make art by day. A graduate of MIT and a keen observer of the human condition, he noticed not only the speed with which a word processor churned out documents but how operating the nascent technology made a person sit, how it made a person *feel*. Gradually, a funny thing happened: The two worlds collided.

His paintings and sculptures began to reflect his assessment that technology was becoming an extension of the human body, a condition he concluded was destined to intensify over time. Modular tiles in his sculptures echoed bits of digital data; three-dimensional objects hinted at contraptions yet to come. Paintings evoked computer monitors but also blood cells or flesh. The body, he determined, could no longer be depicted the way it had been for millennia. Hsu was

seeing the future. “At that point, art was in this camp and the technology people were in the other camp, and they were going to be ‘evil,’ undermining the humanistic world we live in,” he says. “And I didn’t see it that way.” Making no value judgment on new technology itself, Hsu was interested instead in its inevitability—and its impact.

An archetypal misunderstood intellectual ahead of his time, he worked quietly for decades, largely overlooked or forgotten by the art world—until now. Curators too young to have been on the scene in the ’80s have rediscovered Hsu, and a retrospective of his work will open at the [Hammer Museum in Los Angeles](#) on January 26 before traveling to the SculptureCenter in New York in May. “I realized I’d never encountered work like that,” says SculptureCenter curator Sohrab Mohebbi of a Hsu piece he saw in a group show in 2018, which spurred him to organize the exhibition. “It really felt of now but was made in 1987. I went to his studio and was blown away.”



Autopsy, 1988

Courtesy of Peter Ross

On a quiet block in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, Hsu, 68, opens the door to an unassuming building. It is deceptively spacious, with a small studio opening onto a much larger one. Several of his completed paintings hang on walls like a time capsule; in one, mouths are interspersed with a warping grid, and in another, the surface is striated like a computer screen on the fritz. Other works, unfinished experiments, lie on tables or lean against shelves. Hsu lives upstairs. The proximity allows him, on sleepless nights, to come down and fiddle around, or just think. He is tall, a little stooped, his hair still dark. His demeanor is serious. He doesn’t smile much.

On the back wall, there’s an enormous painting with seemingly disparate blown-up images: The mouth of a fish represents nature, he explains; a wound from an incision suggests the human race, and a temperature dial, technology. “They’re all connected, they’re all together as one,” Hsu says, then quickly adds that he himself figured out the symbolism largely in retrospect. While painting it he would tell visitors, “This is very intuitive. The work will reveal itself. I can’t give you a shtick that’s going to say what it’s about.”

Hsu's prognostications about the digital age could perhaps themselves have been foretold. Born in Boston to Chinese immigrants, he grew up with a father who was an engineering professor and a mother who was a trained opera singer and encouraged his artistic leanings. Living in Zurich as a small child and then hopscotching across the US—Madison, Wisc.; Blacksburg, Va.; Long Island, N.Y.—he studied privately with local painters. One teacher his mother found had him painting in the sobering realist style of Edward Hopper; another guided him toward impressionism. Hsu began showing—and selling—his paintings while a teenager in Virginia.

During his last two years of high school, by then transplanted to a suburb of New York City, he hesitated giving up what he describes as the “validation” he received for his art. But he wasn't drawn to the artist's life, at least not the cultural stereotypes of it. He excelled academically, and his father and brother had attended MIT, so he decided to matriculate there to study architecture, though he never fully abandoned painting. MIT had little in the way of art offerings, but Hsu found a painting seminar. At the end of the term, his professor told him, “You should just drop out, move to New York, eat, drink and breathe paint.”



Cell, 1987

Courtesy of Peter Ross

“I was just like, whoa,” Hsu recalls. “I couldn't quite compute.”

He worked up the nerve to go down to New York to meet a few of his professor's contacts and trawl the SoHo galleries. In one, he recalls, “you opened this door and there was all this stuff in the hallway. You go upstairs, and there's this painting on the wall in an empty room. And that was the show. It was so raw and laid-back. It was astonishing.

“And this is what he wanted me to drop out for,” continues Hsu, eyebrows raised in disbelief.

Returning to MIT was a no-brainer. Hsu finished his degree and stayed on to earn a master's. Architects still used pencils then, but next door to his studio, the discipline's first wave of digital 3-D graphics was being developed. “I could see eventually this is going to be everywhere, and I could just intuit this was going to change everything,” he says.

He loved architecture, but as grad school wound down, he started thinking about giving painting a real shot. “I began to see that it was not a choice—that I sort of had this disease,” he says. “Or *disease*. It was something I could not avoid.”

Hsu moved to a barn in the country and gave himself a year. “I said the only thing I’ll allow myself to do is artwork,” he recalls. Walks would be tolerated; a paying job, not. “By the end of the year, the work really wasn’t coming very well. I said, ‘Okay, I gave it a try.’ ” Conceding defeat, he recommitted to architecture and took a job.



R.E.M., 1986

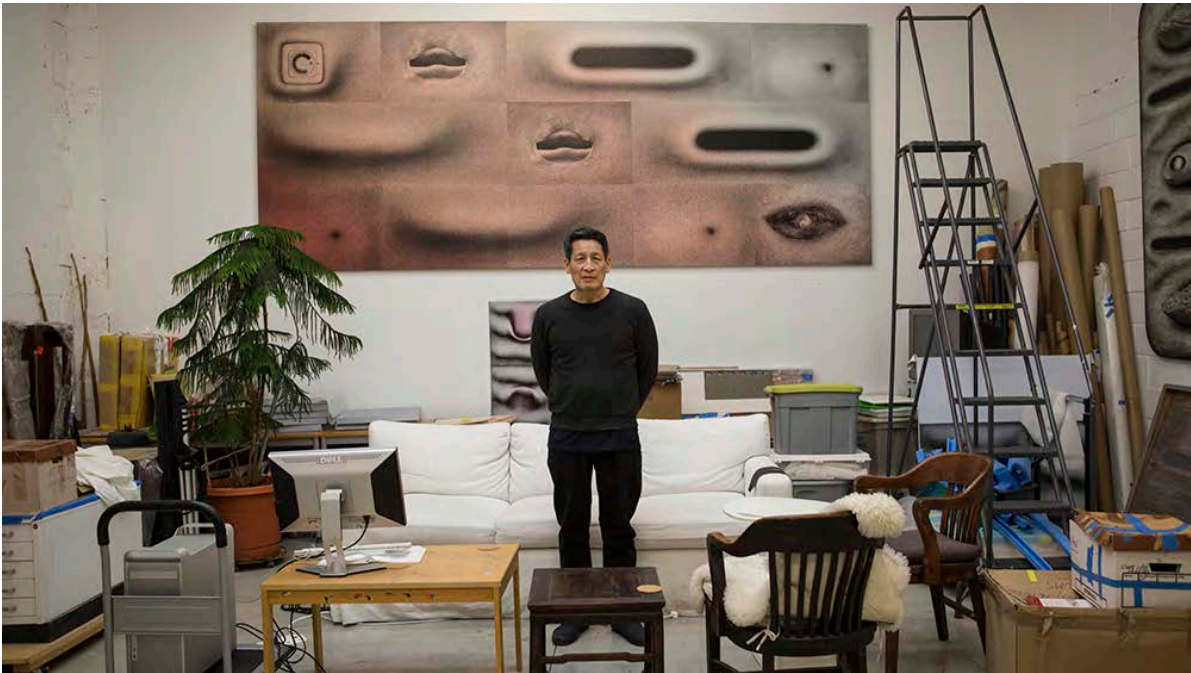
Courtesy of Peter Ross

Then a funny thing happened. Within a few months, his ideas about art finally started to coalesce. Hsu quit his job and landed a subsidized studio in Boston. Eventually, with his savings depleted, he hit upon word processing as a survival gig. It was the 1970s, and traditional secretaries were still wedded to their typewriters. “So having gone through six years of higher education without learning how to type, I taught myself typing,” he says. “I went to a local secretary school, got their textbook and then got a job temping for law firms word processing. And I say this only because that began my real interaction with technology and language.”

With a marketable skill, Hsu moved to New York in 1979. For years—was it two? five? He can’t quite remember—he made art in his studio by day, then word processed documents at a law firm after dark. “It was perfect because I could devote my best attention all during the day, and when I was really tired and exhausted, go in and start working for them,” he says. “It was also very removed. You didn’t have to talk to anyone. You could just go in there and bliss out. And actually still think about my [art].”

The two worlds Hsu inhabited—mindlessly typing legal documents in one, dreaming up inventive works of visual art in the other—could not have seemed more opposite. But gradually, they merged. “I’m here physically in front of this machine, but then this machine is taking me into this whole other illusionist world,” he recalls feeling. “It wasn’t like a window you look into. This was a totally immersive environment.”

In the way that for centuries European artists painted stories from the Bible almost exclusively, Hsu decided to make art about our culture's dominant alternate reality: technology. And more specifically, how its relationship to the body was "getting more and more comfortable, more and more seamless."



The artist in front of *Natural Language*, 1994

Courtesy of Peter Ross

Hsu rounded the corners of his canvases to echo the curves of a screen, painted eyes and used relief techniques in areas to allude to human tissue. The pieces looked paradoxically manufactured yet organic; they were illusionistic yet objects in and of themselves. The work spoke presciently of a future few could fathom, one that, 35 years hence, we are now living, AirPods jammed in our ears, fingerprints unlocking our phones. But the art world was stuck in the '80s.

Art galleries tended to build their stables through connections—one artist recommended another, often an art-school friend or a studio mate. Not having attended art school, Hsu felt a distinct disadvantage when it came to networking. In those days, though, an artist could still walk into a gallery cold and drop off slides of the work in the hopes of luring a dealer for a studio visit. Hsu made the rounds. "They all talked with each other," he says of the gallerists in those days.

Jay Gorney, who'd opened a gallery in the emerging East Village in 1985, explained to him that "sculptures were expensive to sell, hard to ship, hard to move," Hsu recalls. Being an architect, "I had a lot of sculptures at that time." Susan Brundage, who worked for Leo Castelli—a towering figure in postwar art who represented Jasper Johns, Robert Rauschenberg and Andy Warhol, to name a few—kept encouraging Hsu to come back to the SoHo gallery. "She'd say, 'Well, he's really busy right now, but maybe next time.' " Eventually, Castelli granted an audience and advised him, "Get a show in the East Village and then come back to me."

In the meantime, Baskerville + Watson, on 57th Street, put him in a 1984 group show with other young artists. "Carole Anne [Klonarides, the director] was the first one who I think really got it," Hsu says. But after the show, she told him, "This is going to be hard."

“It was just very strange work,” he says. “People didn’t know where to begin.”



The artist in front of Splits, 1992

Courtesy of Peter Ross

And it had no context: No one else was making anything remotely like it, which, rather than scoring him points for originality, left viewers bewildered. Peers in the group show, for instance, included Richard Prince and Louise Lawler, who were on the cusp of breaking through as pioneers of appropriation—blatantly borrowing other artists’ work for their own—and their pieces couldn’t have looked more different from Hsu’s. Nor were his works anything like Julian Schnabel’s, Eric Fischl’s or those of the other neo-expressionists then in high demand.

It wasn’t only his artistic sensibility that made Hsu an outlier. The art world of the 1980s was lily white, and Hsu stuck out. The East Village community appealed to him, but he didn’t really feel a part of it. Nevertheless, boundary-busting gallerist Pat Hearn took a chance on Hsu. “The reviews in general were very positive, but no one understood what this was,” he recalls. Musical instruments? Faux wood? Surrealism? “They were just making guesses.” Still, some of it sold.

Hsu simplified his work, enabling Hearn and, later, Castelli to sell more of it. The powerful British collector Charles Saatchi acquired pieces. “Then the work started getting more difficult for people. It was much less approachable,” he says. “And I could see that if I really wanted to pursue the vision that I wanted to do, I really could not work with this idea of developing a market.” Hsu moved to Europe.

Unlike just about every other living artist on the planet, Hsu recoiled from his newfound ability to live off his art in Cologne, Germany. “I hated having to sell work and then pay my rent or whatever,” he recalls. “I said I’d much rather have a 9-to-5 job than this. This is probably why I didn’t relate to being an artist. It wasn’t cool to me.”

He returned to the US, moved his family to upstate New York and landed a teaching job at Sarah Lawrence College. For more than 20 years, before retiring in 2018, he continued to make work on his own time but showed rarely, a state of being that contented him. “It didn’t occur to me not to do it,” he says. Silk-screening led to Photoshopping. “But I knew the digital alone was too detached,” he says. Seeking what he calls the “effect of painting without painting,” he began playing with silicone, more commonly a sculpture medium.



Hsu's brushes

Courtesy of Peter Ross

Angela Ferraiolo, a member of the visual and studio art faculty at Sarah Lawrence, describes Hsu as a “very responsive membrane” and an “exacting” experimenter who spends years perfecting his materials and processes. “He believes in art in its purest form,” she says. “What his day job did was allow his art practice to be pure R&D.”

In 2006, Hsu experienced perhaps the modern world’s ultimate melding of the body and technology: He underwent a kidney transplant, particularly ironic in light of his 1987 work *Transplant*, which was acquired by the Metropolitan Museum of Art. “The operational theater was totally an art installation,” he says with a laugh. “It was amazing.” Now, he says, not altogether facetiously, “I consider myself a cyborg. Google is my memory.”

One year Sarah Lawrence introduced a course on Asian-American literature, which Hsu had never had the opportunity to study. He audited the class and came away with a heightened sense of his own identity. “In fact, I was questioning why I didn’t have more explicit connections to identity in my work,” he says. “Am I in denial?” What he came to understand, though, is that there is no single Asian-American experience and that he was indeed making work about his identity, which includes his architecture training and his work as a word processor as well as often having been the only child of Chinese heritage in the classroom. “In a way, I had to create a different body in the world. That seems very simple. And maybe I was just projecting all of this onto new technology: We’ll have a different body. Maybe it’s really about my own situation in the world.”

After spending decades contemplating humanity's future, Hsu in recent years has found inspiration looking to his own family's past. Throughout his assimilated American childhood, which began in the 1950s aftermath of Mao Zedong's ascent and McCarthyism and bumped up against the Cultural Revolution in his adolescence, his mother, fearful they would be shunned in the US and their relatives persecuted in China, urged him to pretend the family's roots were in Hong Kong, not mainland China. His mother spoke little of her life there before immigrating, and her death in 2011 led Hsu to reconnect with his extended Chinese family.

Hsu again left New York, this time for Shanghai, in 2013. "I said to myself, 'If no one wants to show the work that I do here, would it be worth it?' And I said it would be." Each morning he would walk five blocks to his studio—"Five blocks in China, where you don't know the language, is like a universe"—and then delve into old family photographs his Chinese relatives shared with him. Intuitively, he blended these artifacts—themselves products of a once groundbreaking technology—with his visual language. As he repeatedly manipulated the images digitally—a boat is full of people and then suddenly not—and printed them on aluminum, he says he came to accept "that this really isn't about my history. It's realizing the absence of this family history in my growing up in the US."



Liquid Circuit, 1987

Courtesy of Peter Ross

In this age of ubiquitous digital photography, Ferraiolo sees the thread from Hsu's earlier oeuvre in this ongoing body of work, titled "Shanghai Project." "It's about technology's effect on memory," she says, "how we construct memory, how we bring memory back into the present."

Although the work is deeply personal, Hsu says the idea of absence is growing more universal as social media becomes all-consuming. "Can you be absent anymore? Can you erase yourself?" asks Hsu, who has never even joined Facebook. "Can you actually have privacy anymore?"

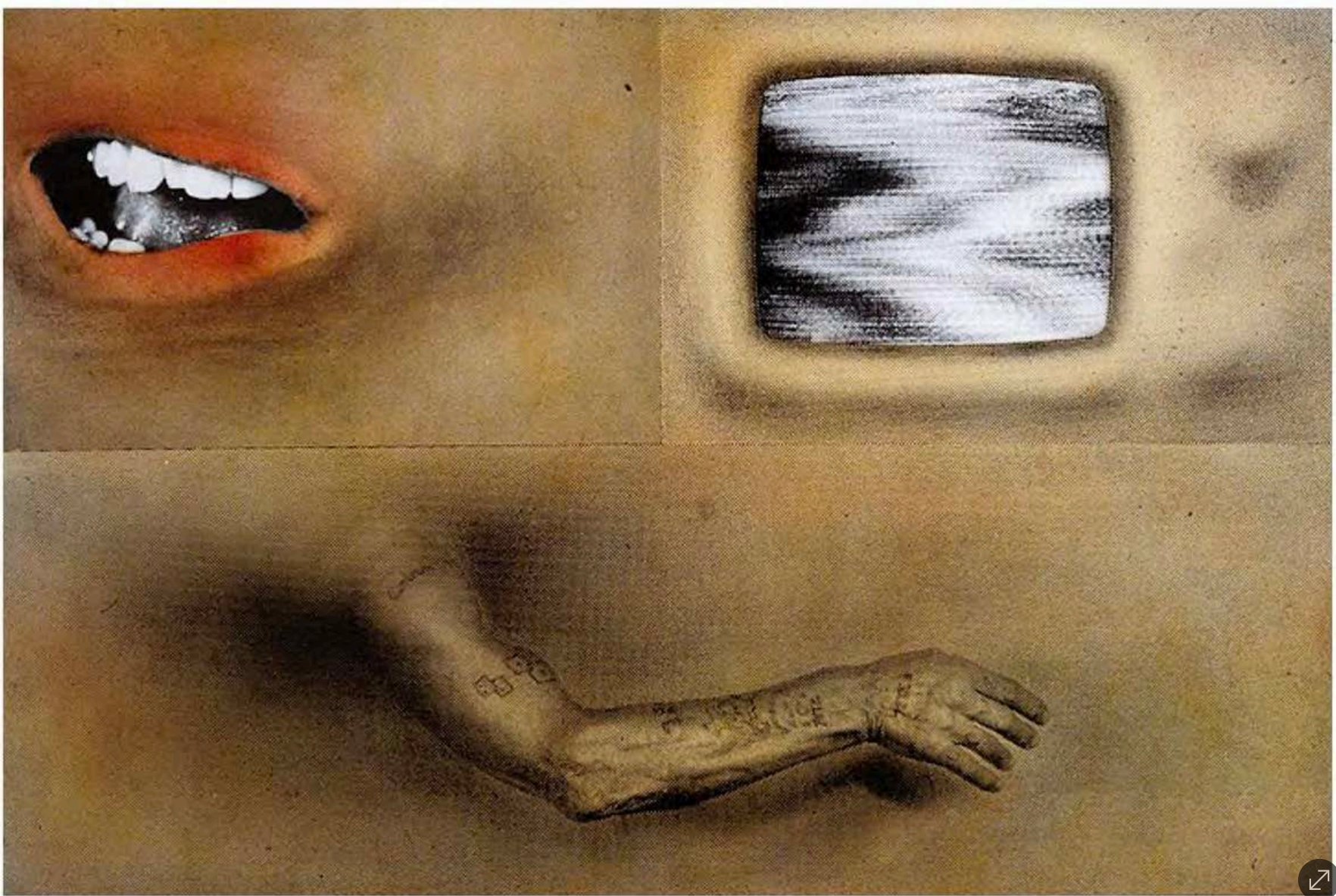
It was during his time in Shanghai that Hsu received an e-mail from a curator interested in exhibiting his work. He has since shown to enthusiastic reviews in Hong Kong as well as in group shows at the Hirshhorn Museum and Bard College's Center for Curatorial Studies in upstate New York. Hsu laughs at how his friends suspect his years of obscurity were all just part of a grand plan. "They used to say, 'Tishan, what's going on here? I mean you're not doing anything,' " he says. But Hsu knew people would see the work differently one day. He simply had to wait patiently for the future to arrive. "The fact that I could just do my work and be really true to my vision—I couldn't really ask for more."



Art

Once Deemed Too Weird for the 1980s Art World, Tishan Hsu Is Back

• By Rob Goyanes Jan 30, 2018 2:39 pm   



Tishan Hsu, *Lip Service*, 1997. Courtesy of Empty Gallery.

Entering Tishan Hsu's studio, I notice, among the clutter of tools and books and notes, a rubbery ear sitting on the table. And on the walls: eyes, noses, nipples, and skins, all repeating like distorted code across a series of artworks hung on the wall.

Kindly but cautiously, Hsu offers me green tea. It steeps as we walk around. The art seems to breathe. “I always felt from early on that technology was going to profoundly change our lives,” he says.

Hsu—one of the few Chinese-Americans who found success in the 1980s New York art scene—was known for his hybridic, sculptural paintings and installations, and was shown by titanic dealers of the era such as Pat Hearn, Colin de Land, and Leo Castelli. I’m here to discover, among other things, why he disappeared from public view for nearly two decades—only to reemerge this year with a series of major shows: inclusion in “Brand New: Art and Commodity in the 1980s,” at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden in Washington, D.C., opening in February; in March, he’ll have work at Empty Gallery’s booth at the Armory Show, followed by a solo show at Empty Gallery later in the fall; and will have work at Bard College’s Center for Curatorial Studies in June.



Portrait of Tishan Hsu, 2018.



Tishan Hsu, *Boating Scene (Diptych)*, 2016. Courtesy of Empty Gallery.

Born in Boston in 1951, Hsu spent his early childhood in Zürich, Switzerland, while his father was completing his engineering dissertation. That was followed by a drastic change of scenery, as Hsu then moved to Ohio, Wisconsin, and Virginia. At the age of 10 in Wisconsin, Hsu's mother arranged private lessons in the art department of the school where his father taught. A precocious artist, Hsu started winning awards and showing in museums while living in Virginia. "My first one-person show was at the Roanoke Fine Arts Center in my early teens, after which I began selling work privately," Hsu says.

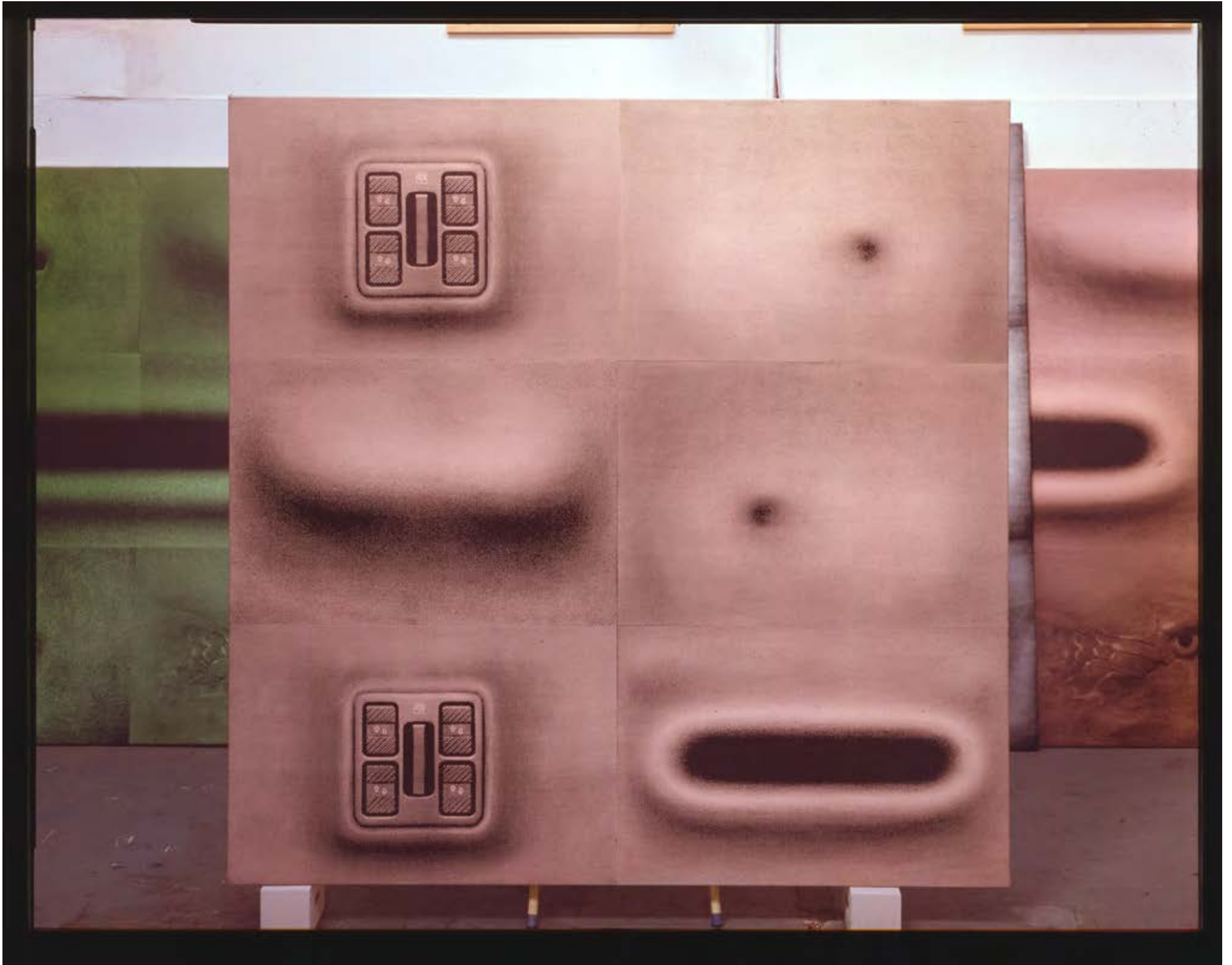
While studying architecture at MIT in the mid-1970s—as well as a stint studying filmmaking at the Carpenter Center at Harvard—he realized that his deepest interest lay somewhere in the technological ether.

"Philosophically, I was interested in this technological context that I had no idea about," Hsu says. "Conceptually, I was always interested in the object, and the change in our understanding of the object," he adds.

This "technological context" was the one that would rise from the ashes of Fordism and manufacturing.

After moving to New York in the late 1970s, the artist worked as a word processor at a law firm while also working full-time on his art practice. He had a solo show with White Columns in 1984, and another with Pat Hearn in 1985. "I was always doing both painting and sculpture together," Hsu says. Indeed, the works combined not only mediums, but also probed the fusion of the body and technology. Hsu utilized the shape and spirit of screens before they were a ubiquitous reality, and rounded the edges of his sculptural, trompe-l'oeil works

before ergonomic design was mass market—pieces like *BlueBlood* (1985), which seem to combine these features with a microbiological focus on cell-like structures swimming in waves, or *Ooze* (1987), an installation that resembles a lake with grids floating atop.



Hsu's aesthetic is a mingling of the human body, mind and machine; the artist is a creator of biocybernetic landscapes. As we walk around the studio, he shows me

some other works from this time period: There are more half-hidden eyes, or lips that seem like they're trying to speak.

From early on, Hsu held a clinical interest in the body. He would call up hospitals for medical images and embed them in the work. Looking at these pieces, it feels like you're staring into a chthonic, unearthly soup that's swallowed and mutated people and objects alike. The experience is also akin to looking in a mirror that magically reveals the true but hidden nature of your own relationship with technology. "I felt that we needed a different way of thinking about our bodies in the world," Hsu remarks, "and that images of the body, on their own, would not necessarily reflect the way that our bodies were functioning in the world."

After a successful string of shows in New York, Hsu went to Cologne, Germany. He showed across the continent, and though he was not meteorically successful, he was able to support himself with his art. However, something wasn't quite right. "When I was living in Europe and selling a lot, I could feel the pressure of the market, both subliminally and consciously," Hsu tells me. He also felt that many people's reception of the work was off the mark—perhaps because it was, simply, ahead of its time. (Hsu also acknowledges the fact that the art world was extremely white—even more so than today—which presented an additional hurdle.)

Despite the similar aesthetic of visual artists such as Ashley Bickerton or filmmakers like David Cronenberg and David Lynch ("Blue Velvet was a stunning movie for me," he says), Hsu admits that it didn't seem people were ready for the work. "It was a very frustrating exercise to go through," he says, "so misunderstood."

So Hsu decided to self-impose a disappearance from the art world. He got a teaching job, had a kid, and spent the '90s outside the public eye. However, this doesn't mean he stopped making art. One such work from this decade, *Fingerpainting* (1994), which hangs on the wall of his studio, is a giant silkscreen work that undulates from fleshy to bluish, hands outstretched as if they're trying to escape the art, or pull you in.



Tishan Hsu, *Blue Blood*, 1985. Courtesy of Empty Gallery.



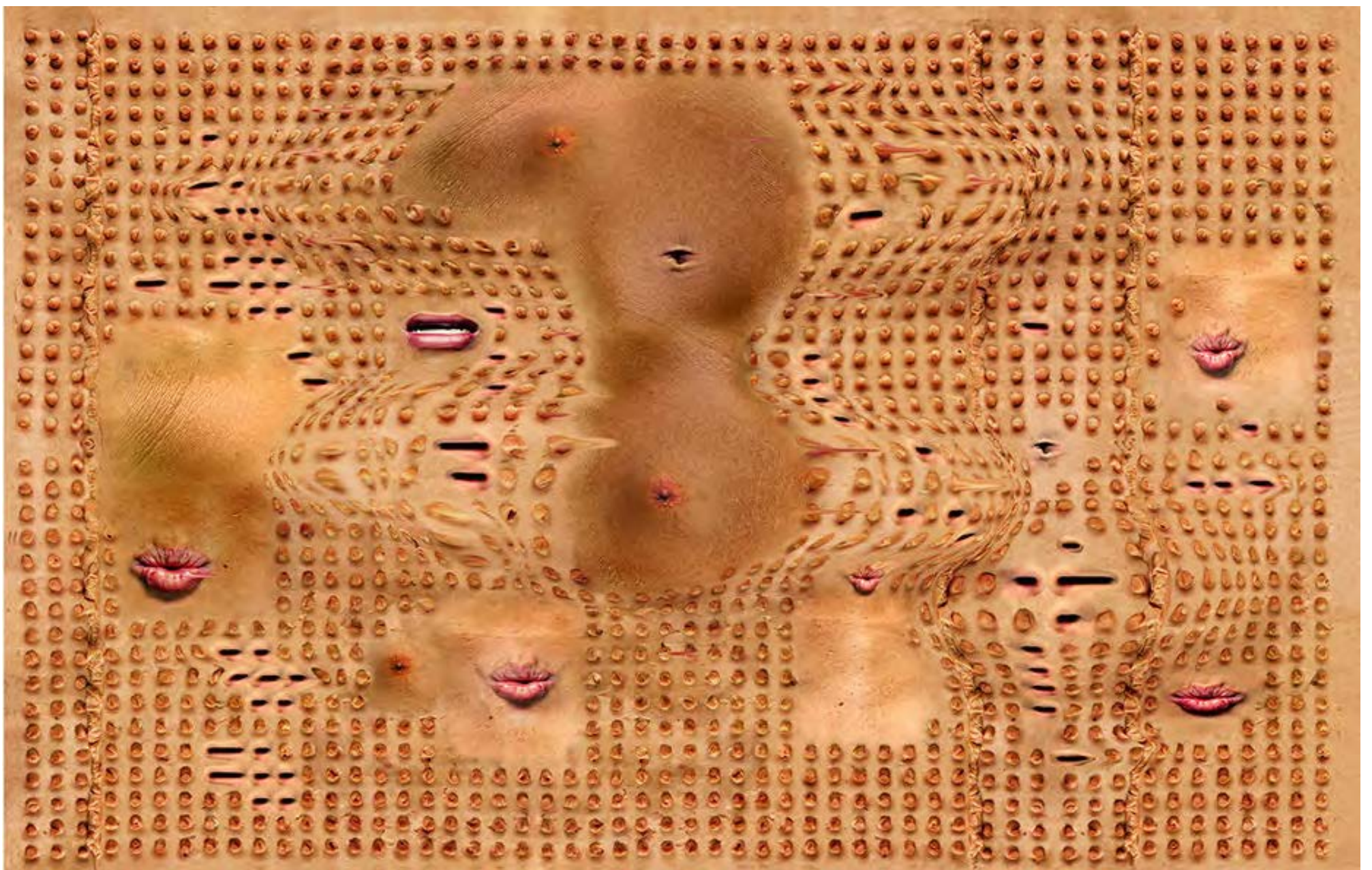
Tishan Hsu, *Double Absence*, 2016. Courtesy of Empty Gallery.

Crucially, the emergence of digital technology was starting to enable Hsu to make the work he'd always dreamed of. "As technology was evolving throughout all of this, I was able to try it out," he says with a smile. With the emergence of a very user-friendly version of Photoshop at the turn of the millennium, and wide-format printing, a new horizon appeared. "What was interesting is that [the technology] was just following what I was trying to do. It was making the work more clear, more radically what the art was trying to be."

Then, in 2006, Hsu encountered a life-changing experience that reaffirmed and echoed his practice of negotiating the body's merging with foreign objects: He received a kidney transplant. "When I entered the surgical theater, I thought, *this is the most intense installation I have ever experienced*" Hsu says.

In much of his oeuvre, there are little to no obvious clues pointing to his Chinese heritage. However, a new piece is brewing for a show at Empty Gallery in Hong Kong later this year. The “Shanghai Project,” as he refers to it, started in 2012 following the death of his mother. “My sister and I discovered hundreds of letters written to her and her brother,” Hsu says. “Those letters were hidden from us for our entire lives because of the trauma.”

The topic of the family living through the violence of the Cultural Revolution was something that was rarely, if ever, discussed. The discovery of these letters led Hsu to reconnect with family across the U.S. and China, and he decided to visit Shanghai, where a relative of his—a doctor whose identity Hsu would rather not specify due to the political sensitivity of the subject—had his home. Around 1967, the living room of the house was converted into an office for the Red Guards.



Tishan Hsu, *Interface with Lips*, 2002. Courtesy of Empty Gallery.



In 2013, Hsu visited Shanghai, and would maintain a small studio there until 2016. It's not what Hsu found in a relative's home that shocked him, but rather what he didn't find.

“So we start digging these [photo albums] up, and I noticed there were all these missing photos. I asked, ‘What is this? Why are they missing?’” There was adhesive residue in the areas where the missing photos had been, ghostly traces. Hsu's relative told him that the Red Guards were responsible: “They took out pictures that had any connection to bourgeois life.”

Hsu scanned the albums, which contained images of family gatherings, some on boats and others portrait-style, and added his signature gestures: digital warping, pools of fluorescent green, cell-like sculptural structures, or drips of silicone extending out, like stalactites in some forgotten cave.

“Because of digital imaging,” Hsu says, “I could take these photos, scan them, then blow them up and alter and edit them. The state of digital editing allowed me to work with these in a way I never would have done 15, 20 years ago.” The works from the “Shanghai Project” are even more haunting than the body parts that populate his other works, evidence of the forced forgetting that the Red Guards tried to impose.

So, after a long period of research and work outside the public's view, Hsu is back. His uncommon aesthetic, too weird or layered for most audiences in the 1980s, now seems prophetic, anticipating like-minded works by younger artists such as Hayden Dunham and others. The artist—who has always mingled the technological and the human—has appropriately found new tools to explore the trauma and resilience of his own family.

Rob Goyanes



Overlooked, but not forgotten: Tishan Hsu presents first solo gallery show in over 20 years

His most recent works are on display at the gallery's Grand Marine Center venue, while earlier pieces are on view at its stand at Art Basel Hong Kong

GARETH HARRIS

25th March 2019 08:52 GMT



Tishan Hsu's *Virtual Flow* (1990-2018) on show at the Empty Gallery Courtesy of Tishan Hsu and Empty Gallery

The Empty Gallery in Hong Kong is shining a spotlight on the Chinese-American artist Tishan Hsu, who came to prominence in the 1980s but retreated from view in the 1990s. Hsu's most recent works are on display at the gallery's Grand Marine Center venue, while earlier pieces from the 1980s and 1990s are on view at its stand at Art Basel Hong Kong. "We found Tishan, archived his work and got his studio up and running again," says Alexander Lau, the gallery's director.

hospital drip using a Diet Pepsi bottle, and the styrofoam and enamel work *White Noise* (1983, price undisclosed), which resembles a warped electronic plug socket.

The forms and contours of Hsu's futuristic works are inspired by technology. "In some of my earliest work, I reference forms from technological devices such as radio and television that were beginning to penetrate our cognitive reality in new and more invasive ways," Hsu says.

The artist often uses "relatively traditional processes, such as silkscreen, painting and carving, to explore the effect and feeling of technology," says Lau, who adds that Hsu's interest in technology grew out of his upbringing and training as an architect (Hsu studied architecture at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in the early 1970s).

Hsu says that his work may have been overlooked because although it was "intuitive and slow", it did not reference any text or history, "which has been an important component of contemporary art". He adds: "While there was significant collector and institutional interest, there was not enough to create a market."

But in a sense, technology caught up with Hsu. At the turn on the millenium, he began to make works using early versions of Photoshop. "Looking back, the evolution of imaging software, printing technologies, new materials, sensor technology, video and sound have enabled the work to unfold in clearer and more radical ways. The sensibility needed the technology. There has been a synchronicity that I did not expect," he says.

In the past few years, Hsu has worked on a project focused on historical photographs discovered in albums of his extended family; this new body of work is on show at Empty Gallery. "The work evolved out of a confluence of events, including the death of my mother in Boston, which precipitated my setting up a studio in Shanghai, where family members who I never knew for most of my life have lived for many years," Hsu says.

He discovered that family photos were physically removed from several of his great uncle's family albums during the Cultural Revolution; some of the new works incorporate images of these defaced pages. "Recent advances in the technology of photography and the internet have enabled me to reconnect to an 'absent' history through historical photographs preserved and shared by extended family members in China and the US."

• [Tishan Hsu](#) ↗, *Empty Gallery, until 25 May*

WEISMAN ART MUSEUM

FEBRUARY 14, 2017

Focus on the Collection – Tishan Hsu's Liquid Circuit



It is garish. It is massive. It, at times, protrudes. It seduces its viewer into examining every pulsating, changing inch of its black and yellow acrylics and it generates a subconscious, encompassing buzzing not unlike a pervasive television static.

No sound is literally produced. The canvas remains still.

Thus is the power of Tishan Hsu's 1987 work *Liquid Circuit*. The title is just one of the riddles prompted by Hsu's "sphinx-like creation"—a work that plays between moods of a cool, disaffected technological and a dynamic, gurgling biological. The biological moments glow with a pulsing nuclear power in an effect Hsu describes as an "ether." The overbearing, almost noxious yellow is suggestive of a type of flesh (whether it originated from a futuristic, android, or alien being is difficult to say). Hsu's exaggerated staples puncture the flesh, their entry points marked with keloid scars invoking the natural, communal, and eventual atrophy all organic bodies endure. Yet the luminescent flesh is stretched over the skeleton of *Liquid Circuit*'s twin monitors and given rounded corners, which equates the structure with insentient technology such as computers and television sets. The mysterious screens are certainly the originators of the enveloping white noise, as their static buzzes and paces up and down the canvas while searching for a signal. Vents appear between the gray and blue electromagnetic waves and though their presence hints at a Central Processing Unit, they do not reveal any underlying mechanics. On top of it all, the radioactive *Liquid Circuit* seems to breathe within the comfort of its own undulating atmosphere, again evoking Hsu's "ether."

It is a strange and contradictory biomorphic machine. Perhaps the answer to *Liquid Circuit*'s riddle lies in, as they always do, a calculating logic. It offers a treaty between the two moods, questioning whether such a difference needs to, or still, exists. Hsu argues for the reality of a merged identity between technology and biology. He demonstrates this balance through presenting a technological art with a distinct hand-craftedness. It is this presentation within *Liquid Circuit* that argues his locked technological system breathes and grows simultaneously with the viewer.

And why shouldn't such a symbiotic relationship exist in the current era? In the same year of *Liquid Circuit*'s creation, the artist explained, "we make machines, then they make us." After thirty years, Hsu's insight is equally, if not more, relevant. In the twenty-first century, necessity emphasizes efficient and constant potential. In 2015, 92 percent of American adults owned cell phones and 73 percent owned personal computers. Information is no longer delivered in a linear format capped daily by the 10 p.m. news but is instead placed within an eternal blogroll. Personalities are defined and divided by social media, or even operating systems—lifestyles simplified to "Mac or PC." The static hum is ever-present through lightbulbs, watches, self-powered vacuums, electric toothbrushes, and other technologic material culture. Hsu notices these objects evolving the contemporary culture responsible for establishing them, saying, "these objects were made to help us but they have changed the world and therefore changed us."

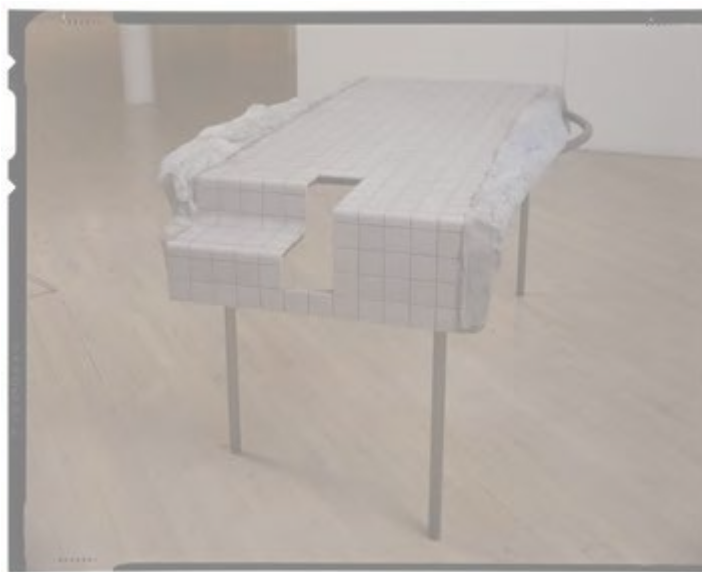
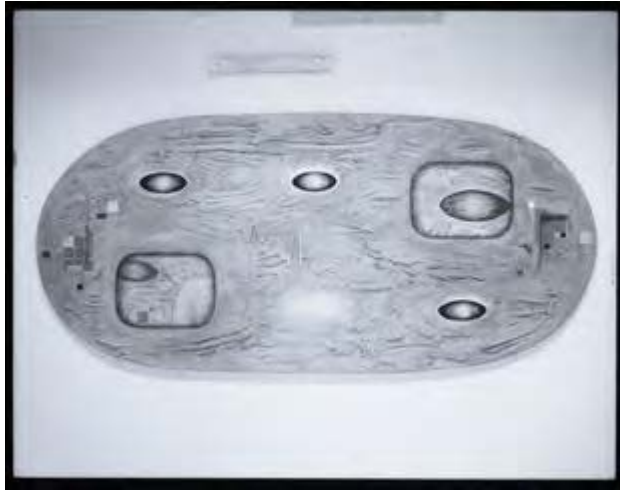
Hsu does not offer a critique of the intimacies of humans and technologies. *Liquid Circuit* is merely a mirror to it—more hopeful than resigned and questioning what it means to exist in the world where entire exchanges and relationships can live in the technosphere. It's the age of the techno-sublime, and the colossal, neon bio-machine reflects the relationships between "people, their desires, and their systems."

— Laura Moran, 2016 – 17 E. Gerald and Lisa O'Brien Curatorial Fellow. Taken from the Spring 2017 Newsletter.

TISHAN HSU

Pat Hearn Gallery, 39 Wooster St. Through April 29.

The key to Tishan Hsu's riveting show at Pat Hearn hangs just inside the door. Behind gridded safety glass we see part of the artist's application for some government document—a truncated form bearing fingerprints, address, and birth date. It may be just a passport application, but the disturbing impression of something more ominous lingers. The gallery itself houses five large two- and three-dimensional works. Photographic imagery of an eye, a barely recognizable open mouth, a round orifice, and X-ray pictures of lungs are coupled with techno-objects ranging from an intravenous bottle holder to a commercially manufactured wire mesh cage. In the clinically white space of the gallery, you feel as if you've entered a medical detention center, some futuristic version of the tuberculosis clinic in Thomas Mann's *Magic Mountain*. That the work is abstracted through repeated, ambiguous images and a nearly monochrome palette of grays and browns makes its effects all the more chilling. It also allows Hsu to keep the images hovering between abstraction and representation. The round orifices are obviously meant to evoke vaginas and to simultaneously allude to forms ranging from earthen mounds to unrolled condoms—or any other associations viewers might have. The elegance of the allusive, minimalist imagery and the sterility of the machine-made objects yields an unexpectedly potent blend. Hsu's virtuosity makes you realize that terror frequently comes in not-so-lurid, everyday forms. Even bright red blood would offer some kind of relief from his haunting—and haunted—vision. *Robert Atkins*



TISHAN HSU: PAINTINGS

SHOWING

May 7, 1988 - June 26, 1988

Tishan Hsu's evocative sculptured paintings combine industrial scale, glowing color, high-tech material, and aerodynamic edges with forms suggestive of the landscape or body in transformation. Hsu's work suggests a dialogue between the technological and the organic, a connection between the handle and the hand.

The Boston-born artist, trained in architecture at MIT (BSAD, 1983, M.Arch, 1975), has lived in New York since 1977. Dana Friis-Hansen, the assistant curator of the exhibition, writes: "Tishan Hsu investigates the interrelationships of our physical being, our landscape, and technology, the major transforming force of our era. To reflect the uneasy tension created by the encroachment of the machine into the human and natural terrain, Hsu embeds each painting with subtle organic traces—gentle landscape lines, biomorphic undulation, or fleshy forms—a projection of our yearning for the familiar comforts of another body or the calming effect of a horizon."

In addition to recent one-person exhibitions at galleries in New York and Atlanta and group shows in Copenhagen, London, Paris, and Salzburg, last year Hsu's drawings, paintings, and sculptures were the subject of a major exhibition at the Carnegie Mellon University Art Gallery. Hsu will also be featured in the upcoming binational exchange with West Germany being organized by the Institute of Contemporary Art and Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

Publication with essay by Dana Friis-Hansen.

Tishan Hsu

PAT HEARN GALLERY

Tishan Hsu's sculptures have become at once maniacally irrational and maniacally intellectual. They are strange hybrids, seemingly primitive organic creatures and sophisticated electronic machines simultaneously. *Cellular Automata*, 1989, looks as though it contains Frankenstein amoebas; the piece recalls the site of some successful technological operation. In the wild *Feed Forward*, 1989, computer-generated images that in themselves seem new forms of life receive a transfusion of human blood. The sinister red-alert emergency telephone on the wall suggests the danger of bringing such viral images to life. *Living Color*, 1989, suggests that the red objects it contains may be all too dangerously alive. *Double Bind*, 1989, presents a chest X-ray that seems to radiate with its own uncontrollable life—this seems to be the reason it must be caged and strapped down like a madman. Hsu's sculptures, which sometimes combine freestanding and wall elements (as in *Security*, 1989) have realized the demonic potential they always had. They deal with one of the plagues of civilized life—invented bacteria/automata, which may invade and poison our lives. Certainly Hsu's cells, and his works in general, seem more toxic than benign. They already demonically possess our minds: they are fantasies that have become actual.

I think Hsu's artistic point is that abstraction lends itself to articulating life forms, particularly the technologically innovated forms of elementary life. He implies that abstraction is not only the "natural" language of the modern technological world, but also the inherent language of nature, which operates with abstract techno-logic. Hsu is not simply revitalizing abstract forms or showing the inherently abstract character of biomorphism, but trying to articulate the oneness of abstraction and life. He suggests the underground symbiotic intimacy of geomorphic and biomorphic forms in art—the way each has fed on and been assimilated by the other. This metaphorically implies the vitality of abstraction—and the abstractedness of vitality, even at its most spontaneously metamorphic. Hsu's sculptural images and imagistic sculptures can be interpreted as articulating the spontaneous technological generation of abstract life. They suggest the abstract simulation of our technological world—life forms as abstract texts—reminding us that abstract art is still capable of serving as the profoundest articulation of the zeitgeist. They speak to the unconscious dread aroused by the fact that we can no longer differentiate between the concrete and the abstract, the real and simulated.

Hsu is, in a sense, the Cézanne of post-Modernism: the master whose contradictory currents of quotation and theatricality are used to articulate the uncertain character of desire in our increasingly synthetic world. Desire is uncertain today because it does not know if its object is dead or alive. Where Cézanne deadened the life he desired by esthetically idealizing it, Hsu brings the dead, but life-simulating forms that are the object of post-Modern desire, to actual life by suggesting their inherent (rather than esthetically imposed) pathological character. Hsu's arbitrary objects are an advance beyond the simulated symptoms of Surrealism, because they are rooted in the actual. These works show that the arbitrary abstract forms invented by art can be genuine symptoms of a pathological world, as well as indications that today the world only enters art in pathological form.

—Donald Kuspit

[illegible][illegible]



Ti Shan Hsu, *Institutional Body*, 1986, acrylic, compound, alkyd, and oil on wood, 84 x 47 x 4".

Ti Shan Hsu

Leo Castelli; Pat Hearn

Can the technological be made expressive? Is the technological inherently expressive, much as we think the organic is? Has the "modern" task of art been to draw out this "new" expressivity, in celebration of the dominance of technology in our lives? These are the questions Ti Shan Hsu addresses. They are not new questions. They emerged with Constructivism and were sustained by Minimalism. What is new is that Hsu's technologically oriented, geometrically conceived objects—among the most innovative (some would say eccentric) that I have seen in a while—are ambivalent rather than affirmative about technology. They accept its inevitability in our lives, but they do not exactly jump for joy at the "triumph of instrumental reason."

John Dewey once said that we are only as good as our instruments, and the Constructivists believed that they could design modern instruments that would satisfy all our wishes. Minimalism can be understood as the stylistic dregs of this conformity to the utopian credo of early Modernism. Today, such utopian instrumentalism is not only in disrepute but seems naive and absurd; events have caught up with it. How, then, to get beyond the naive utopianism of the streamlined, and to signal the new melancholy of the technological? Hsu suggests an answer: by introducing, within the sign of all-controlling instrumental order—the grid, now

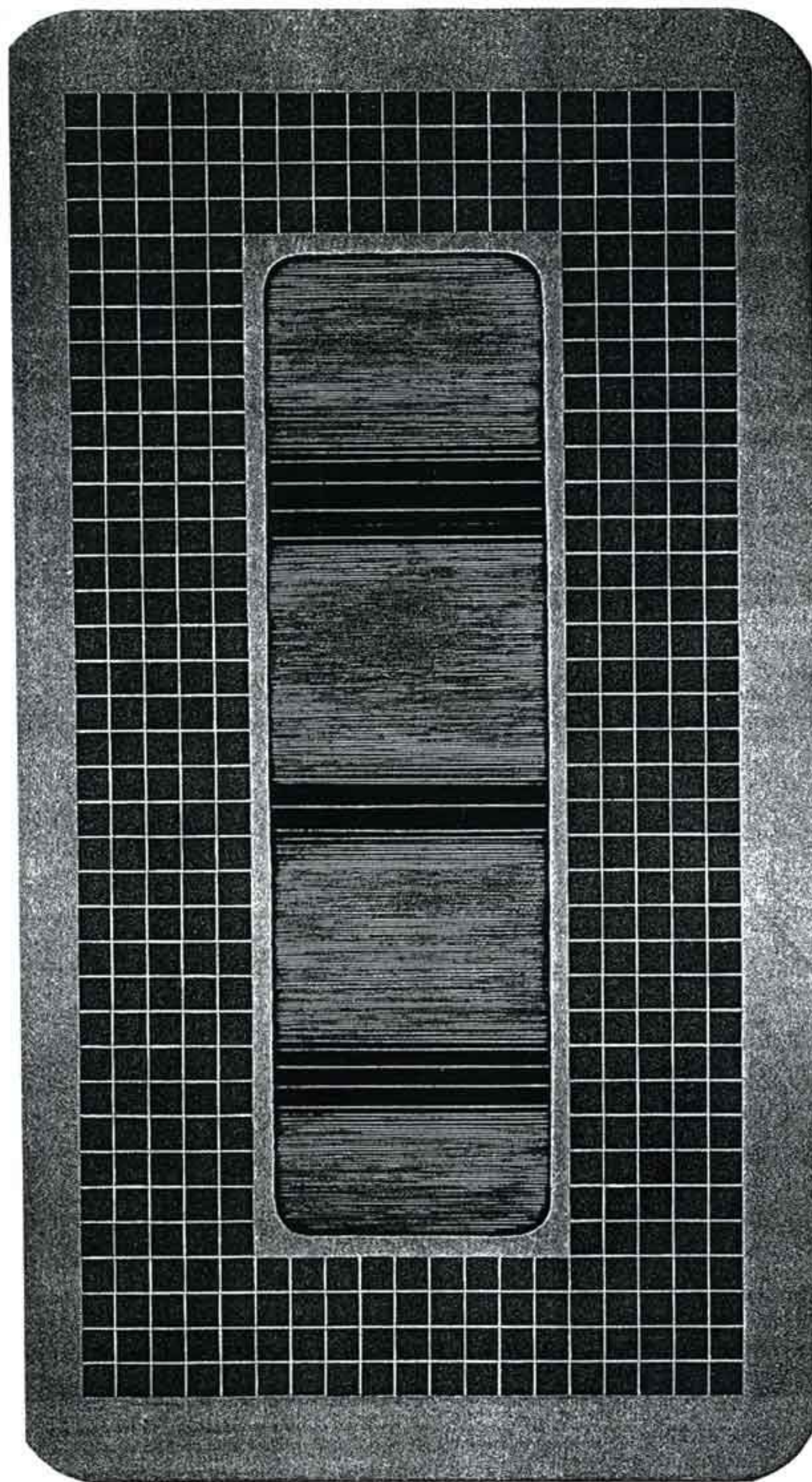
associated with the silicon chip—a textural "dysfunction," an "atmospheric" disturbance, an oddly phantasmal energy. Many of the current "neo-geo" artists have tried something like this, but none of them has succeeded as brilliantly as Hsu, or has been so underivative of traditional Modernist geometrical abstraction. None has managed to give us the sense of unclassifiable expressivity that belongs to but also seems to defy the technological. Thus, in *No Name*, 1986, and *Bumper to Bumper*, 1987, a certain murkiness infiltrates the form. In *Liquid Circuit* and *Cell*, both 1987, it is contained by symmetrical sections of the structure—but one senses it festering, a plague in a Petri dish. Curvilinear shapes within the "dis-eased" space echo the curved corners, tokens of the smoothness of technological control and of the false placidity it induces. Although the expressive ooze germinates within the structure of control, it is at once destructive of it and emblematic of the destructive force latent within it. Hsu brings out the morbid expressivity of technological control, its seductive Mephistophelian character. Its promise is spent, but it is still poisonous.

Hsu's expressivity is nongestural, but it is not simplistically mechanical; it is the electrostatic of technological burn-out, the sizzle of a short circuit in a fully functional system: the source of the "mystery" of technology. The system may recharge itself, as in *Cell*, where the organic matter is packaged in rationalized units of streamlined clarity. But within this brave new cellular order, "rede-

signed" from the mischievous, obviously eccentric expressivity of *Ooze*, 1987—in which system and expressivity are seamlessly one—the poisonous atmosphere is embedded in the surface, permeating the grid and creating a visual tattoo that commands our attention.

—DONALD KUSPIT

ARTFORUM



TI SHAN HSU

*So, hold me, Mom, in your long arms.
So hold me Mom, in your long arms.
In your automatic arms, your electronic arms.
In your arms.
So hold me, Mom, in your long arms.
Your petrochemical arms. Your military arms.
In your electronic arms.
(Laurie Anderson, "O Superman,"
Big Science, Warner Bros., 1982)*

CLAUDIA HART

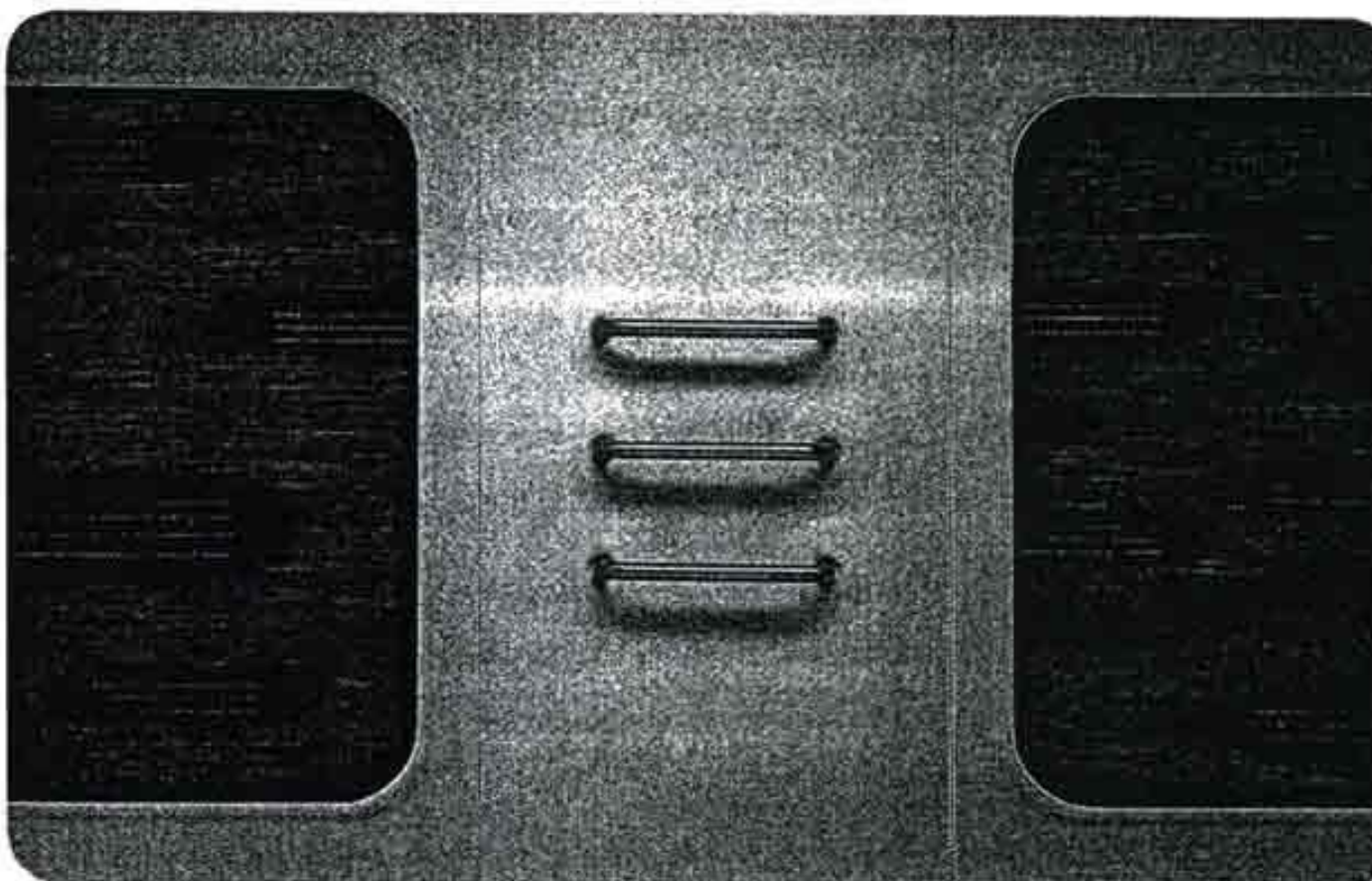
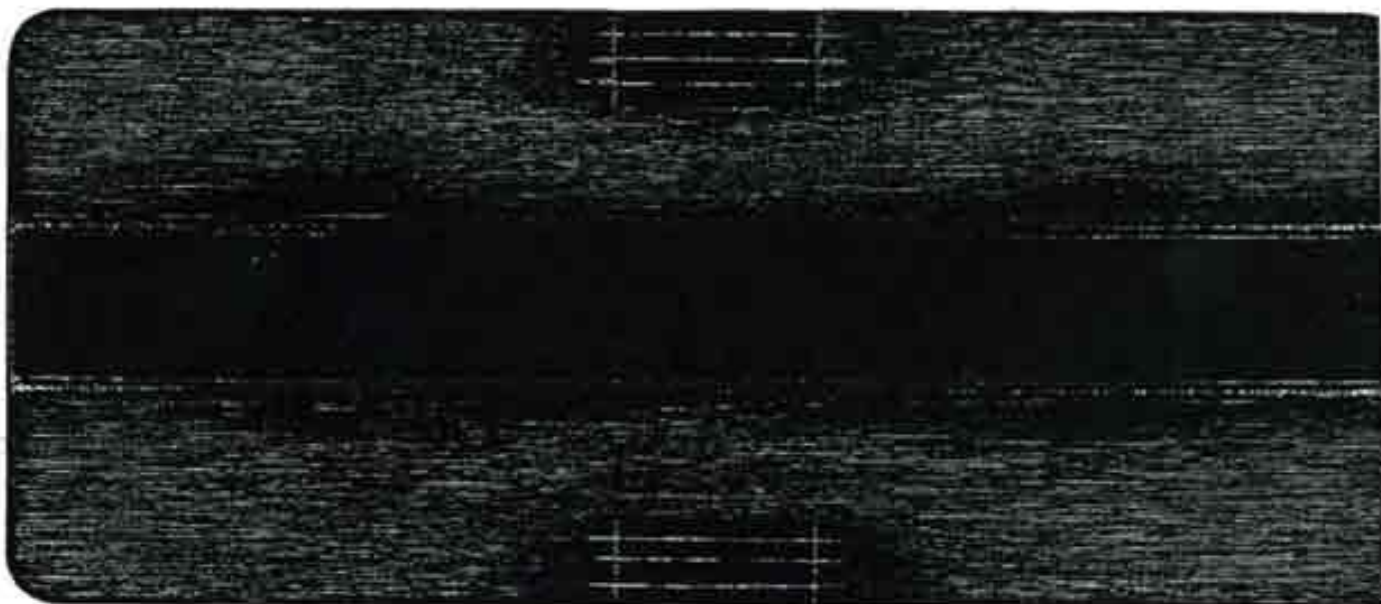
Someone said they were "landscapes of landscapes," and this is certainly so. Relief paintings and sculpture by Ti Shan Hsu are also, certainly, "breathing objects," as he calls them, and "biomorphic machines" in the sense of Duchamp's *Brides*. Part viscera, part cybernetic brain, part terrain, part computer control panel, part flow-chart, part map, they evoke "infernal depths, darkened skies, deep seas, sombre forests, thunder, lightning which tears through the clouds ... something terrible ... and sombre."¹

These last words were written by Denis Diderot in 1767, to describe subjects he considered to be sublime and the feelings they might provoke. Hsu's multivalent imagery which overlays a fleshy sense of the body and a sense of atmospheric sky—or better, the vast impenetrable blackness of outer space—do suggest the chthonic Nature historically associated with sublime landscapes. Yet Hsu's landscapes are specifically technological, suggesting identically blisters on the body of a mutant from the Saturday morning cartoons, flesh seen through the wrong end of a telescope, or static on a video monitor that transmogrifies to become (like the avatars of a Rorschach test) an

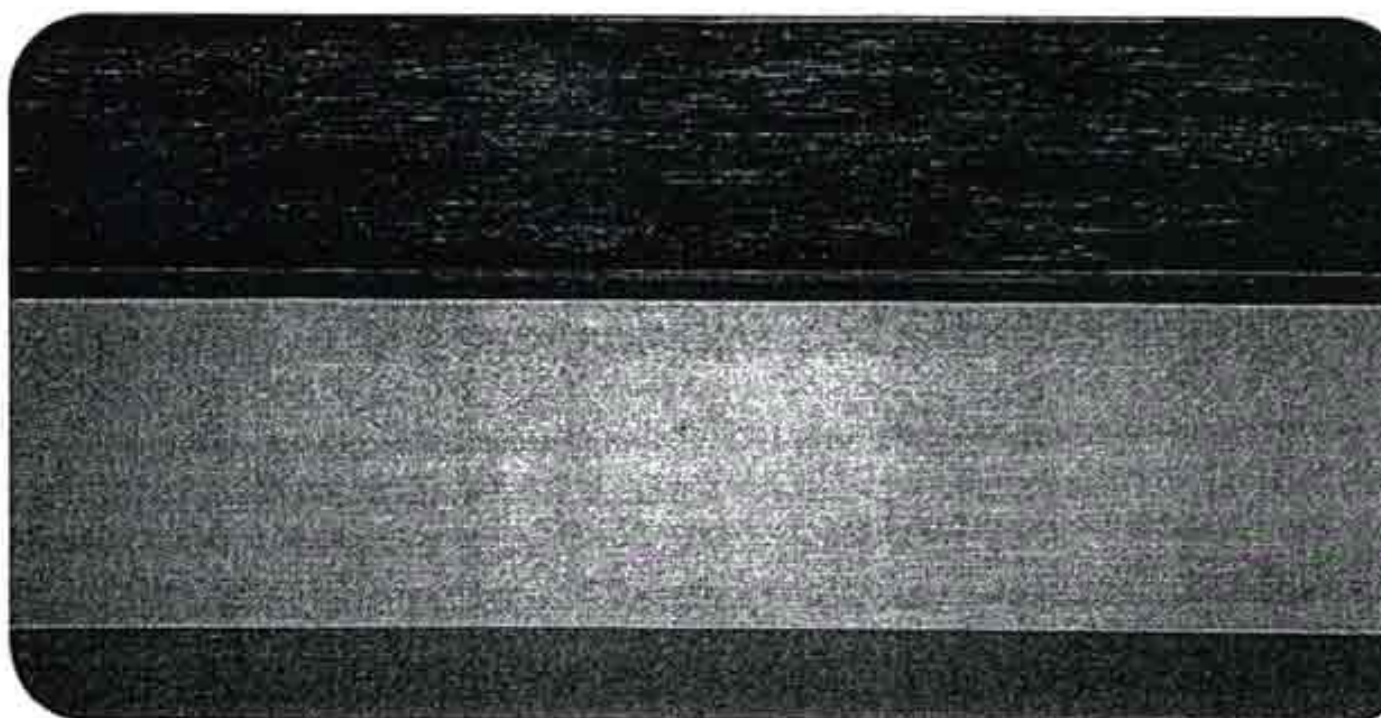
aerial perspective produced by a flight simulator, and the view through a porthole affixed to the deck of a starship. All of these might be considered twentieth-century counterparts to sublime landscapes, meant to "present the unrepresentable" by embodying Burke's eighteenth-century call for "the terrible and the beautiful." But Hsu's sublime is a techno-sublime, and it is his fusion of landscape, the body, technology and the human experience of all of these that distinguishes his work. In so doing, Hsu has applied the metaphor of technology in much the same way that the Romantic painters did that of landscape, to explore issues of human consciousness.

The corners of each of Hsu's wall pieces are radiused, like those of video screens and computer monitors. Each composition is then further subdivided, at least one division always consisting of illusionistic "screens," grainy black surfaces scratched to reveal glazed colour below. Such *scraffito* suggests static suffused in a cool blue "sublime" electronic light. Hsu's illusions are painted *trompe-l'oeil* under these scratches. The screens contain the references to landscape; hovering on the edge of abstraction, they purvey a liquid, undulating atmosphere that Hsu likes to call an "ether," congealing in some images to form something like clouds, in others, the planets and in others, flesh. Outside the screens, sections have been built up with a modelling compound and painted with luminescent colour or sheathed with materials favoured by once-fashionable hi-tech interior designers – black, moulded rubber, or modular tile. These materials together simulate the smooth, metaphorically seamless casings of advanced technological machines, particularly the computer, differing from machine-age devices in that they do not attempt to expose and identify their "functions."

Despite its hi-tech veneer, this work is obviously hand crafted, interweaving multiple references to the human body. Mounds and crevices, although sometimes painted with saturated colour, still suggest the soft fleshiness of bodily protuberances, like free-floating, embryonic noses, breasts and bellies. The undulations painted on the illusionistic screens seem to effect orifices as well as planets, exuding a *trompe-l'oeil* evanescence – Hsu's "ether" here becomes sweat or saliva or steam. Surprisingly, the combination of satu-



(Opposite page): **Compressed Expansion** 1986 Acrylic, alkyd, compound, ceramic tile on wood 85" x 47" x 4" (Collection Mr Joshua Gessel). (Above): **Low Band Width** 1987 Acrylic, alkyd, compound, oil on wood 39" x 96" x 4" **Liquid Circuit** 1987 Alkyd, compound, aluminium, oil on wood 90" x 143" x 9" (Collection Mr Joshua Gessel) (Below): **American Band Width** 1986 Acrylic, alkyd, compound, oil, vinyl on wood 47" x 95" x 4"



rated colour, scratching, hi-tech and body references evokes distinct emotions, a particular moodiness. The cross-referencing of body to computer suggests that in technological society the boundaries between man and machine environment have bled – eroding and redefining an earlier proscribed relationship between nature and culture. Both combine so that in Hsu's art Romantic concerns have evolved into a strange and ambiguous amalgam of electronics and psychic response.

Jacques Ellul has described the interlocking technological systems surrounding us as subsuming and replacing nature.² Our environment, once a landscape, is now technological. Technology is universal, permeating the material world and thereby moulding all other areas of human activity. Our most private and personal things – our chairs, our tables, our kitchens, our processed food – are technologized, both through their means of production and in their aesthetic form. The technological aesthetic has been colloquially tagged "good design." The "best" – and most expensive – of everything, from toothbrushes and running shoes to automobiles and high-rises is "designed" (hence Hsu's penchant for "hi-tech" as a cartoon of the technological construction vocabulary). Ellul has also suggested the manner in which psychic processes, as well as objects, become technologized:

Each activity has been equipped with instruments or "ways of doing" that come from technology... there is a technology of reading (speed reading), as well as a technology of chewing... there is household "equipment," and on the other hand, the best way of acting in such and such a circumstance, to obtain such and such a result. The interpenetration of the two processes [that these two poles represent] makes technological universalism on the individual's level at the same time as the universalization of the use of technological products, not only a machine but also, for instance, remedies, whose general use leads to specific



PETER HALLEY *Blue Cell With Triple Conduit*
1986 Acrylic, Roll-a-text on canvas 77" x 77"

COURTESY INTERNATIONAL WITH MONUMENT

*behaviour. This behaviour is conditioned by the car, the TV set, etc., but also and simultaneously by the technology of relaxation or group dynamics.*³

Human beings thereby internalize the procedures and strategies of technological systems, their behaviours and manners mimic a technology that, like Galatea, has gained a certain autonomy. Technological devices are therefore the permeable membranes across which a process of evolutionary osmosis occurs. "We make machines, then they make us," Hsu has stated, suggesting the formulation of a technological consciousness. And because consciousness is Hsu's interest, his work addresses the technologies with which we come into most intimate psychic contact, those that speak directly to us: information devices like television and the computer.

Initially developed during World War Two for decoding, the "incredible growth of the personal computer industry (despite the fact that few good uses outside business and industry have yet been found for them), and the vast amounts of energy, money and scientific expertise being poured into artificial intelligence, indicates the seductiveness and power of fascination exerted by computers. Computers are a reflective pool of water that can also speak, a mirror of human beings built

by human beings to answer metaphysical questions ("What is thinking?" "What is being?") Anyone who has watched someone sit quietly for hours, typing messages into a computer terminal, may be reminded of Narcissus and his obsession. Similarly, television is a cultural mediator with which individuals may instantly plug into all of humankind. It substitutes for ritual, as Baudrillard has suggested, providing a means of collective communion. Communications which were at one time either discreet (interpersonal) or symbolic (written/pictorial), are now, with technology, pervasive, generalized and invisible, another possible source of the *ether* which Hsu has described as being the stuff and substance of his earth-to-air-to-flesh metamorphosing abstractions.

It is along the lines of communication that Hsu's concerns intersect with those of Peter Halley. Halley's portrayal of conduits is meant to convey a message about an urban society constricted by the interlocking networks of technology. His paintings refer to the geometric structures of a Mondrian, but Mondrian's utopic celebration of the systemic (of the Modern) has been replaced by a critique. A modular grid is now conceived as a prison cell. Halley has identified his work as reflecting the position of Baudrillard whose standard Marxian-derived criticisms of technology define it as being yet another system regulating ideological control. Technology is identified as a manifestation of the capitalist system of production, one class of commodities among many, proliferating as a result of the profit motive. Hsu, on the other hand, views technological objects as being other than commodities, as being other than the products of a particular system of production; instead he sees them as links in a complex interchange between people, their desires and their systems (which they have created and which in turn create them). Hence Hsu has wrought a technological art that is viable: obviously hand-crafted, it pre-

sents the technological system as a living, breathing thing. His attitude differs also from that of Ashley Bickerton, whose work – perhaps unintentionally – confirms Hsu's position. Bickerton's art is associated with Halley's, and Halley's Baudrillardian line. His air-brushed, wall-mounted boxes are covered with images of machine parts and with invented lettering. Using fake languages that apply the forms and mechanisms of structural linguistics, Bickerton connects contemporary language studies with technology, indicating – as Ellul has suggested above – how a technological consciousness may subtly spread. The analytic technical terms and strategies of the linguistic sciences have been, in the cultural study of semiotics, further reduced and mechanized. Then in turn, semiotics, widely accepted within the art community, expresses a belief – tacitly held – that language is but a subset of technology which may therefore be neatly inserted into the network of communications.

Hsu has described objects – all things imagined and created by people – as effecting, as much as being an effect of, the culture producing them. ("These objects were made to help us but they have changed the world and therefore changed us.") This evolutionary interchange, he feels, becomes even more generative today as we are possessed by interactive computers, intended from their very inception to act as extensions of the human brain. ("The body oozes out into the machine then back into us.") In this the artist has closely identified himself with Elaine Scarry, who, in *The Body in Pain*,⁴ has managed to pinpoint another site at which the relationship between nature and culture now pivots.

Developing her own critical vocabulary, Scarry has defined an, until now, unexplored relationship, identifying "artifice" – all of human creation – as a manifestation of the primary requirement of human "sentience": the relief and expression of human suffering and pain. She designates culture as a projection of this, among other psychical requirements of being. Deconstructing *Capital* and other writings by Marx, she equates all systems of production with "the dimension of civilization in which the originally disparate conditions of sentience and the imagination are visibly conflated," and the "artful extension of the metabolic and genetic secrets of the

human body."⁵ And it is finally in her identification of *Capital* as a fully articulated premonition of our own now object-saturated material culture that Scarry relocates nature and culture:

*Throughout his writings [Marx] assumes that the made world is the human being's body and that, having projected that body in the made world, men and women are themselves disembodied, spiritualized. A made thing remade not to have a body, the person is himself an artifact.*⁶

And if, in our material culture, the body and the object have gained a certain equivalence, then, according to Scarry, not only can objects (like the computer) be considered extensions of human functions (thinking), but the body also absorbs object qualities:

*It the conditions of sentience are objectified, made social, placed in human exchange, one of the most essential facts about sentience has been eliminated – its deep privacy, its confinement of its own experience of itself to itself, its being felt only by the one whose feeling it is. In civilization, as in the early altars of religious culture, the body is turned inside out and made sharable. That sentient beings move around in an external space where their sentience is objectified means their bodies themselves are changed.*⁷

Such perceptual change is also manifested in many of the activities of recent science that Scarry views as enactments of the human desire to make the body into an object and extend that body, through objects, into the world. In this way, culture turns nature (the body) into culture (artifice) back into nature (the body):

*Modern science...has increasingly revealed that the remaking of the human body is an ultimate aim of artifice, since the grafts, immunological systems, each year extend the confidence with which we intervene in the human tissue itself...The presence of such man-made implants within the body does not compromise or "dehumanize" a creature who has always located his or her humanity in self-artifice. If we do not yet have the descriptive mechanism that can account for the way in which human beings unconsciously assumed responsibility for their own bodily evolution, evolution has at least brought us to a place where that unconscious goal, buried and inarticulate in our beginnings, has finally surfaced and become indisputable.*⁸

Scarry describes a world governed by a kind of animism, although her animism exists as a psychical, rather

than metaphoric, reality. She identifies the embodiment of sentience in objects of artifice as basic to being, and by merging the human body with the technological object, Hsu does likewise. But in so doing, he also expresses a shift in a cultural attitude towards nature and towards science, a shift with parallels in the Romantic crisis. During the Enlightenment, the classical conception of the unity of the world was fractured. Alchemy, for example, which combined science, a mystic cult of nature and the study of psychic states into one practice, suffered a Cartesian split, and science and nature were polarized. The former was viewed as the locus of reason, the latter became the "Nature" of the Romantics, a repository of human emotions. Feelings were projected onto the landscape, resulting, for one, in the concept of the sublime. Sublime landscapes were seen as articulating ideas about death and the desire for transcendence. Today, a hundred and fifty years later, Scarry and Ellul posit that material culture – not nature – is the significant human environment. Nature therefore can no longer be a viable carrier of human projections. Thus, as the conventions of Romanticism have settled into a series of hollow gestures – reified as neo-expressionism – and as we suffer the "failure of science," artists like Halley and Bickerton show us a world without a sublime, what it feels like when old symbols and aspirations become irrelevant. Their position is extreme, stating that there is no longer any meaning at all – anywhere. Hsu instead relocates the sublime landscape to the technosphere. Meaning is not lost at all but is merely – elsewhere. ■

NOTES

1. Denis Diderot, *Salons*, Vol. 3 (1767) (Ed. Jean Seznoc and Jean Adhemar, New York: Oxford University Press, 1963), pp.165-166.
2. Jacques Ellul, "Technology as the Environment," *The Technological System* (New York: Continuum, 1980), pp.34-50.
3. *Ibid.*, p.170.
4. Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985).
5. *Ibid.*, p.244.
6. *Ibid.*
7. *Ibid.*, p.252.
8. *Ibid.*, pp.253-254.

Claudia Hart is an artist and writer, based in New York.

LE CORPS ULTIME

The work of Tishan Hsu announces the era of the artist as metaphysical genetician. Transplants of artificial organs, highly sophisticated and synthetic skin but also genetic manipulations. The postorganic physiology drives the body into an unhuman mutation, in a synthetic becoming of unthinkable consequences. The treatment is impossible to distinguish of its pathology equivalent in the traumas that these new forms of life produce on our conscience. As a sort of soul sismographer, the artist tries to trick these mutations and shock-waves.

If using a postminimal syntax, the art of Tishan addresses a model rather than a concept. Applying to it a logic of representation can only prove highly irrelevant while he sets to work processes of experimental, dissuasive and non referential, programmatic modelizations. Which explains the shock effect and insecurity in which this work maintains us. The work 'Pacemaker' doesn't relate to anything: two hospital ward on wheels tables, maintaining under transfusion whatever perceptive organ, awaiting transplantation, under scannerized control. This clinical 'montage' modelizes the transformative mutilations that our modes of perception are confronted to.

The absence of bodily representation eliminates any kind of phantasy, libido, or any psychopathology aesthetic. The work addresses our ailing senses and organs, as if they were artificially stimulated by an internal micro processor, self regulated under screen control and directly connected to the switchboard of the gallerist-clinician-surgeon...

The clinical operation of Tishan Hsu can be described as a liquidation of the body as organism... The achievement of its staging throughout this century: from the self mutilations of the actionnists, the unleashed primitive gestures of body art, the cosmic anthropometries of YKB, to the dada spirit of provocation, all installations and psychosensorial experiments. All of these works belonged to a nucleus of common sensations. They all solicited an intersubjective relation, critical or comical in turn between our bodies and the body of the other. More even they questioned an image of the body: phantasy or refoulement, memory or imaginary, fears and desires. Lost image of the neo expressionist death that never ending mourning.

Forward ahead comes the body as metastasis, that needs to be protected from any cellular or genetic collapse, of the threatening risks of immunitary deficiency and artificial organs's collapse. Body without a territory, without a space, faceless, with no consistence. Transparent body, body as circuit of information, run through by various intensities of fluxes. Organless body as Deleuze and Guattari would call it, deterritorialized as Baudrillard would put it. 'The deterritorialization is not the exile any more, nor a figure of metaphor, it's a figure of a metastasis. The one of a depriving of meaning and territory, a lobotomy of the body resulting from a panicking of the circuits. Electrocuted, lobotomized, the soul is nothing more than a brain circonvolution'.

Ending with the body is also finishing with the face. A throwing over that Tishan operates with an experimental precision, in the clinical rather than aesthetic meaning of the word. Also abolishing identity and memory. Close the reign of the subject rather than trying to say its critical anxieties as Beuys, its media anonymity as in the work of Ruff, Wall, Levine or Dimitrijevic, the egotic convulsion shown by Bacon and more recently with Longo, Kruger or Sherman. Without regressing back to the primitive figure of neo expressionism or the christian deities of transavantgarde.

Inventing something beyond the face, to shape a searching head, not a totemized head but a head as laboratory. Or more exactly organless bodies, a head as machine to produce anticorpses. 'Undoing the organism never meant committing us suicide but open the body to connexions, calling for a structuring, circuits, conjunctions, stagings, displays.. and passages and distributions of intensities, territories and unterritorialized territories'².

The works of Tishan Hsu pave the way to the paths of mutant conscience and unhumanization of perception. Are we in front of a therapic bombasting on the anemied body of art or of an unhuman future yet unseen, bordering on science and myth, vision and technology. Are we to operate aesthetic eutanasia, refuse the nightmare and reverse to the 'Good indian' myth, or consider that this organless body, faceless, this sensorial circuit, synthetic, announces new forms of awareness, other visions, other desires in the unhumanity ahead of us.

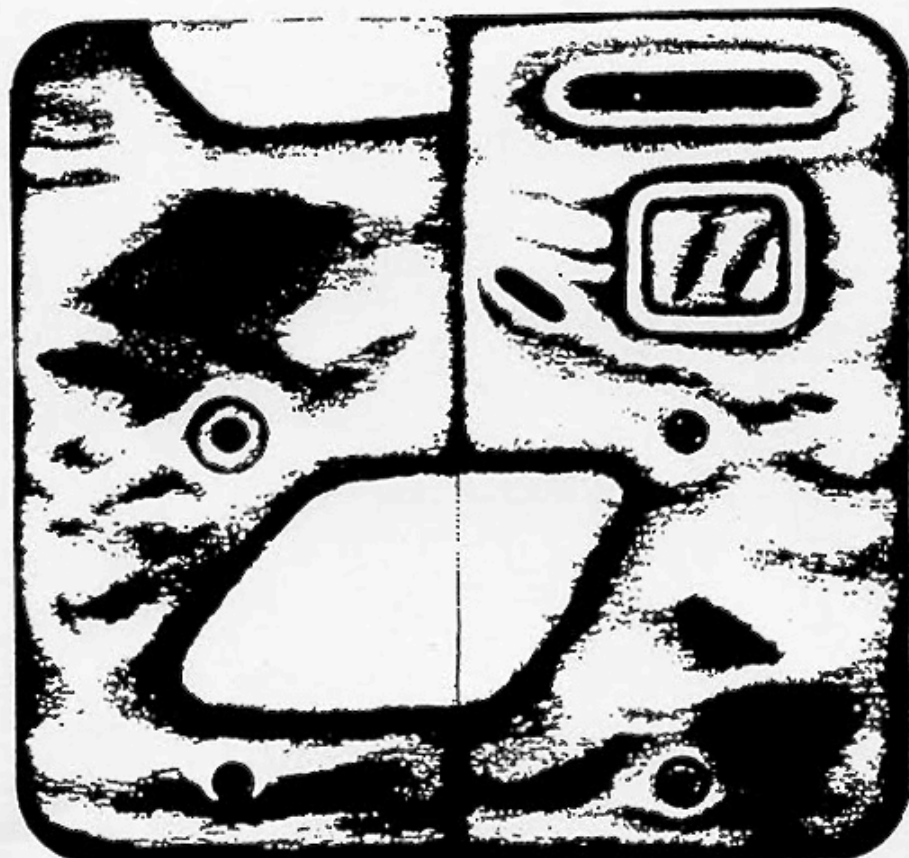
Olivier Zahm

¹ J. BAUDRILLARD in 'L'autre par lui-meme' 1989 Editions Galilée.

² G. DELEUZE et F. GUATTARI 'Mille Plateaux', Editions de Minuit.

Review of Exhibitions

NEW YORK



Ti Shan Hsu: *On a Clear Day*, 1985, acrylic, enamel and concrete on wood, 90 by 96 inches; at Pat Hearn.

Ti Shan Hsu at Pat Hearn

It is natural to wonder what painting will look like at the turn

of the 21st century. Perhaps it will evolve out of an ideal meeting of technology and spirit and will truly aspire to universal comprehension. If that is to be the case, then the work of Ti Shan Hsu could be considered prophetic, a harbinger of the future. These paintings of colored concrete, oil stick, alkyd and enamel on wood panels might be topographical maps of Saturn, plans for a surrealist Oriental garden, or perfect artwork for the walls of the starship *Enterprise*. They look like nothing I've ever seen.

Part of the appeal of Hsu's work, other than the skill with which it is made, is the gravity-defying orientation of all elements in the paintings. Despite the heaviness of the materials Hsu uses, all his forms seem weightless, suspended or frozen in space. Though he generally avoids direct references to nature, there are occasional simplified shapes that appear to be remnants of more complex, recognizable ones. In *Blue Blood*, a modified, angular gold animal head (resembling a bull) with a single black "eye" hovers above several lozenge-shaped mounds whose centers are dug out, revealing a gritty, chewed-up core inside. A fragmented head with a green eye, parts of legs, arms and a foot dispersed on a fleshy pink background comprise

the individual units of. *The Window and Door of the Seated Nude*. In the upper left corner a thick, textured area of sky-blue, gouged with fingers or a blunt tool, gives the piece the look of a partially uncovered primitive burial site.

The majority of the paintings, however, despite their biomorphic shapes, are nonreferential, though their titles might lead one to believe otherwise. Such works as *Pregnant Plus*, with its large central mound that looks like a life preserver, and *Head*, a small, pink symmetrical composition that has two dark "eyes" and a pair of blue-gray lumps above and below them, imply that Hsu may either start with an image in mind or arrive at his titles after the fact. In either case, Hsu apparently does not choose to separate himself from traditional themes, no matter how obscure his sources may be.

There are several paintings that don't follow this pattern. In *The Cross Product of Madame X*, the only horizontal work shown, six forms, each of a distinct character and color, are evenly distributed. Some of the color from these odd forms bleeds into the vivid yellow-orange background. With the original black enamel surface methodically scratched away to the edges of the painting (as it is in all of Hsu's pieces) to reveal the glowing colors underneath, *Madame X* is a delicate balance of color and shape that gives the work a meditative, quiet persuasiveness.

The diptych *On a Clear Day*, Hsu's most ambitious composition, is a playful mix of striated, mottled, brightly colored rhomboids, ovoids, assorted illusionistic gashes and holes, and what could be a lacerated cough drop. The pseudo hills and valleys and bleeding color add to the visual pleasure of traveling in, out and around the painting. The piece has a rhythm and fluidity, a freedom of movement that is decidedly different from the static quality of several of Hsu's other works. A little more bounce, and Hsu's paintings might really take off.

—Robert G. Edelman

a/July 1985