SPIKE art Magazine
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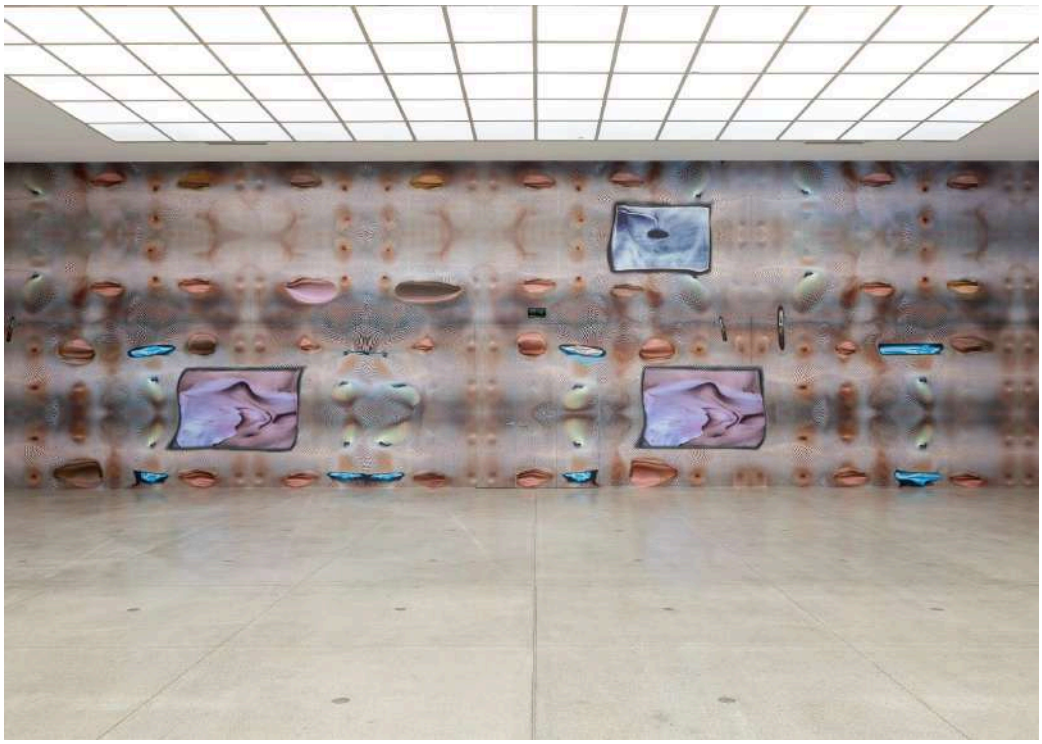
SPIKE

Tishan Hsu at Secession

by Ramona Heinlein



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.

Hsu's works constantly play with building up illusion, only to break it down once more. If you look closely, you will see not only literal holes in the surfaces, but also glitches. The artist is not scared to be bold, nor to make mistakes, the works' imperfection and contingency testifying to a hybrid sensibility. The dot grid in skin-screen: emergence (quadriptych) is interrupted with slight deviations; the various parts of the wallpaper don't always perfectly match; and the sculpture tablet-skin-screen, a laptop-like surface with bodily silicon molds on the its front, reveals its profane building structure on its back. Hsu's works disclose their made-ness, emphasizing that they share a continuum of existence with the spectator, instead of creating yet another fictitious world. It is their eccentric combination of the rational and scientific with the uncontrollable and irrational, their vulnerable situatedness in the here and now, that make you look in awe, and not without a shiver down your spine.

Mousse Magazine
22 December 2023

MOUSSE

Tishan Hsu "recent work 2023" at Secession, Vienna

Curated by Bettina Spörr

"My concerns in the work were about the body and technology; it was very simple. Many people asked me if I was trying to imagine a future. I felt I was responding to what I saw in the present."
—Tishan Hsu

Titled "recent work 2023," the American artist Tishan Hsu's exhibition at the Secession consists entirely of new works. After his first major retrospective, which opened at the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles in 2020 and then traveled to the SculptureCenter in New York, where Hsu lives, the artist's work was prominently featured in the central exhibition "The Milk of Dreams" at the 59th Venice Biennale in 2022. For last year's Carnegie International, he conceived several large-scale sculptures; the sculptures he now presents at the Secession elaborate on the ideas they articulate. Taken together, these three major exhibitions in recent years threw Hsu's creative evolution over the past four decades into relief, illustrating both his changing choices of techniques and materials and his methodological constancy and persistent pursuit of key concerns.

Hsu's preoccupation with the body in a world of technology dates back to the 1980s. How bodies and consciousness change in the interaction with digital technology is a question he has insistently probed. Hsu's insights into the interpenetration of human and technology have proven visionary; science fiction anticipated its culmination in the hybrid existence of the

cyborg, but it left few traces in the art of the 1980s.

Hsu, who studied architecture at the renowned Massachusetts Institute of Technology in Cambridge, moved to New York in the early 1980s and started exhibiting his art. His training at MIT with its culture of innovation and research into the technologies of the future was formative for Hsu, who is still eager to adopt novel technologies and integrate them into his creative practice. Meanwhile, he retains classical "handmade" techniques and processes and cherishes the deliberate slowness of artistic production. Hsu's works are always both—manufactured in a traditional practice and involving cutting-edge processes.

His open-mindedness and embrace of experimentation are reflected in the diversity of media in the exhibition. The large sculpture *tablet-skin-screen*'s form derives from the shape of an open laptop computer; planned down to the smallest detail by the artist, it was industrially manufactured out of metal modules and incorporates body casts made of translucent acrylic. The sculpture's flesh-toned surface coating gestures toward the fusion of human and digital interface. To Hsu, the world that surrounds us is like a matrix out of which everything can emerge anywhere—pictorial compositions combining digital patterns with silicone casts of human or animal body parts grow from the walls, *Car-Body* appears to hover in the air in the gallery, and one wall is lined with a digital pattern wallpaper that reprises forms from the pictures. A LED video wall shows the unconstrained ongoing transformation of digitally generated forms, accompanied by an ambient sound that fills the room. The interpenetration of physical bodies with virtual digital forms that Hsu's oeuvre explores and visualizes is reflected by titles like *screen-body-data, pig ear-screen-skin 2, grass-screen-skin / object 3, double-breath-green-2*, and *Breath 9*, whose descriptive and enumerative quality recalls scientific experimental series. The numbers suggest the works' iterative character: they are versions and mutations rather than singular manifestations.

LISSON GALLERY

ArtForum
29 May 2023

ARTFORUM 艺术论坛

Tishan Hsu on the screen as an object and new hybrids

Interview by Miao Zijin
Translated by Bian Xiaohui

Today, reality seems to have finally caught up with Tishan Hsu's work. Since the 1980s, he has explored the intertwined relationship between the body and technology across multiple media. In his recent works, "screen-skins," presented at Empty Gallery in Hong Kong, flesh-colored, wrinkled silicon surfaces and easily recognizable images become pathways for imagining the presence of visible and invisible biopolitical modes of control and aesthetic fields. We enter virtual space through screens, but in the gloom of the venue, the artist flips the screens into physical objects, attempting to directly address the inherent contradictions of our current technological environment through an overload of illusion. The exhibition runs until June 24th.

In my work, different series employ different methods and employ a wide variety of media. My interest isn't in a single medium, but in what you can do with it. For "camera-screen-skin," I used my own photographs and other source materials. This approach to working with photographic images has evolved significantly over the past decade, as software technology has transformed both the database of source material and how it's accessed. I feel like I'm immersed in a kind of "installation" of images and software, and my body is, in a strange way, becoming the embodiment of technology itself. This is the phenomenon I seek to describe in my work.

The flatness of the work is intentional, a hallmark of my work since the 1980s. I'm trying to convey a paradox within the 3D environment created by screen technology with the rise of the internet. On the one hand, the computer screen is an object, experienced and perceived through our bodies, but at the same time, it also houses the virtual world of interactive

networks. This illusion isn't the illusion of perspective in traditional painting, a window or frame through which viewers can peer into another "world." The illusion here is created through the materiality of the flat screen. This illusion, born of a real object, isn't a product of pure imagination or dream. Twentieth-century abstract painting and Dadaism sought to eliminate the illusion of the pictorial plane, pursuing a fidelity to the reality of objects, through which they could depict a rational, scientific world. Since then, and to this day, we find ourselves trapped in a strange world filled with illusions emanating from the flat screen. These illusions have permeated our physical perceptions, profoundly destabilizing our sense of "reality." Artificial intelligence is pushing this uncertainty to an extreme unprecedented in human evolution. Therefore, my work is not an attempt to save the "lost illusion", but to describe the illusions that constantly emerge around us in the form of "reality", which are no less real than the real objects.

The completely darkened exhibition hall at Empty Gallery and the unusual lighting conditions for this exhibition emphasize the works' visual resemblance to "screens," or rather, make them resemble illuminated screens in a theater. However, I feel this also obscures a crucial aspect of the work. As mentioned earlier, much of my work addresses the paradoxical existence of the screen as an object. From the earliest days, my paintings have employed rounded corners, completely unaware that computers and other electronic devices would adopt the same design. These rounded corners and their relationship to the illusory painting surface prevent viewers from interpreting the painting as a perspective window. The rounded corners transform the image into an object. Furthermore, these paintings all have a thin black border, which, while completely invisible in the dark exhibition hall, becomes more noticeable against a light-colored wall. This thin border is crucial. It reinforces the contradiction between illusion and flatness. I've also applied reflective paint on the back of the paintings to accentuate the "flatness" of the surface. This backlit "illumination" not only emphasizes the work's object-like nature but also creates a screen-like "aura," a feature obscured by the dark exhibition hall. In fact, viewing these

works as "illuminated" screens doesn't necessarily require a completely dark space. In part, my work seeks to contrast these hallucinatory screens with the modernist environment we inhabit, which is often a neutral, brightly lit space like a hospital. I aim to create a contrast between the screen's hallucinatory world, imbued with "aura," and the nearly spotless physical environment we inhabit in the 21st century.

The lowercase words in the work's title are partly to suggest that no entity is more important than another. This opens up the possibility that anything can be connected to anything else, like Lego blocks. In Lego, whether it's a head, a hand, a brick, a wheel, a window, or a plant, all the blocks are equally important and can be connected in any way. I'm interested in fusing different components together, like body-screen or body-technology, to create new hybrids. I'm curious about how to create convincing hybrids, not only conceptually but also, sometimes, pictorially, to create a "whole" that may be strange but very convincing. I feel that certain boundaries in the way we interact with the world are becoming increasingly blurred, sometimes leading to difficulties and confusion. Technology is enabling this blurring, and artificial intelligence is accelerating it. Is there a new entity that combines screen and skin, forming a "thing/object"? And in terms of identity, I've experienced this hybridity in my own identity.

*This article was originally published in Chinese and is presented here in English translation
To view the untranslated text, please find the article here.

Artnet
21 March 2023

artnet

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.

by Louise Benson

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 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.

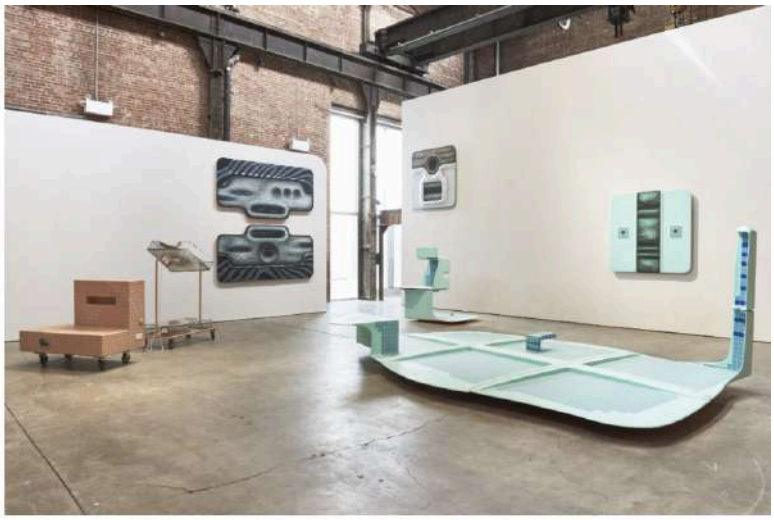
In "Delete," his first exhibition at Empty Gallery staged in 2019, Hsu reflected on data as a carrier of memory, a subject that he introduced from a personal perspective. There, he traced his own history, including the rediscovery of family photographs following his

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, 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 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.

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.

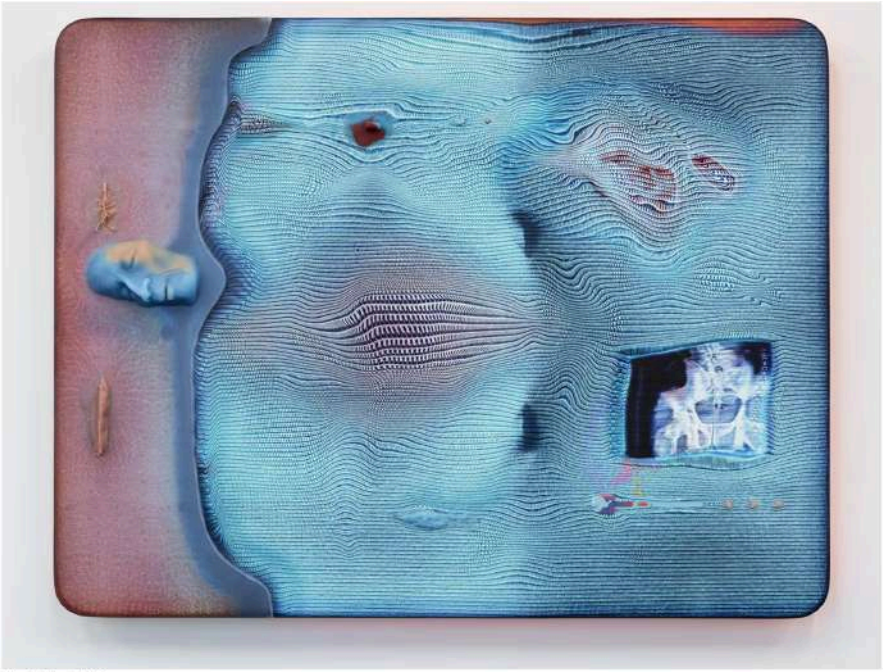
When we met, Hsu was about to fly out from New York for the opening of his latest exhibition, "Screen-Skins," at Empty Gallery in Hong Kong. The solo show continues his work begun during the 1980s, while responding directly to the new technologies available today. "I used to have to photograph a model 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.

Highsnobiety
Fall/Winter 2022

HIGHSNOBIETY

IN BETWEEN AGES WITH ARTIST TISHAN HSU

WRITTEN BY DEAN KISSICK



Tishan Hsu, Breath 7, 2022

In the 1970s, while studying architecture at Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), Tishan Hsu began to feel that the world was changing. He felt that we were about to live through unprecedented times, and to be confronted by something bigger than we can understand. Technology was about to change everything.

The following decade, having moved to New York City, Tishan tried to channel and express a sense of that change by making art. Today, aged 71, he continues to attempt what few other artists do: to describe how it feels to be alive now, in this strange, new technological world. He has been doing so for decades, but reality has finally caught up with him and the metamorphoses he was sensing have become plain for all to see. Humans, machines, and software are bound closer and closer together. We are sinking into our screens, and so is the world.

These past four years, Tishan's career has flourished. He's in this year's Venice Biennale, until November 27, and the 58th Carnegie International, which opens in Pittsburgh on September 24, as well as the group shows "The Painter's New Tools" (which I helped organize with my friend Eleanor Cayre) at Nahmad Contemporary, New York, until September 24; "Cloud Walkers" at Leeum Museum of Art, Seoul, until January 8, 2023; and

"Future Bodies From a Recent Past" at Museum Brandhorst, Munich, until January 15.

Tishan Hsu, Watching 1, 2021, Tishan Hsu, Watching 2, 2021

Before 2019, Tishan hadn't shown in a long while — assuming the work he was engaged with would have little appeal to the market. At the end of the 1980s, after exhibitions with Pat Hearn Gallery and with Leo Castelli, just as the art market was really accelerating, Tishan left the New York gallery world. He moved to Cologne for a couple of years. He came back and took a part-time teaching job at Sarah Lawrence College that allowed him to keep making his art and experimenting in his studio without having to worry about sales or pleasing anybody else. In 2018, the art world began to take interest in his '80s work again, just at the time he was about to retire.

It was in his New York gallerist Miguel Abreu's group exhibition, "The Poet-Engineers," in 2021, that I saw one of Tishan's works, *Breath*, for the first time. I had no idea what to make of it, or where it might have come from. It was like nothing else I'd seen: an inkjet of undulating blue cybernetic goop, with a trompe-l'œil window opening into an x-ray of a skeleton, printed on a wooden board with soft, rounded corners, which floated in front of the wall and emitted a faint, rosy glow from its back. On its surface protruded waxy silicone fingertips, or maybe nipples, and a man's face floating there in the slime, eyes closed, his expression uneasy. I was reminded of John Everett Millais' painting of a drowning *Ophelia* (1851–52) in the Tate, and also of *The Matrix* (1999); of figures trapped in lines of glowing code, of men asleep inside the pod dreaming of their lives.
Tishan Hsu's compositions are disorientating. They are screens you could lose yourself in. Everything is warped, or melting into something else. Bodies are disassembled. Eyes, noses, and ears are scattered Picasso-like about the place. They might seem cold and impersonal, dehumanizing even, but they come from his very personal experience of living through momentous and ongoing changes we have yet to understand. They seem to embody some of the keenest questions of the 21st century: like how has digital technology transformed our experience of reality? How has it affected our sense of selfhood? What level of agency

are we able to retain as the tools we create spiral out of control, and where is art in all of this?

Tishan Hsu, grass-screen-skin / object 1, 2022

Dean Kissick: Your mother was an opera singer. Was that a big influence on you becoming an artist?

Tishan Hsu: Certainly my mother being an opera singer had a big influence, not so much because of opera, but because of her artistic passion. She had a number of ideas about how she wanted to raise her children that involved what you do with leisure time and the arts. When she observed my interest in art, she brought in private teachers right away. She had a very professional attitude toward encouraging my creativity. She never imagined my being a professional artist, she just thought we were living in America, there was a lot of leisure time from what she could see, and she didn't want me just wasting it. She wanted to give me something more sustaining.

So we had music, art, literature, trips to museums, concerts, and that kind of thing throughout my childhood. Both my brother and sister played multiple instruments, as did I. We had trios in the house. I competed on piano. But at a certain point in high school, she could see I was having much more fun with my social life and let me drop all of the music. She saw I had a far greater passion for visual art and gave me a private studio in the house.

One thing I learned from my mother is that I saw what technique does. Playing music requires a particular kind of discipline, and she did give me pointers on how to practice. I was able to stick with it, whether from parental pressure, or because I found a certain interest in it. But I could see after a year of practicing in certain ways, with techniques she learned from her Russian teacher early in her training, that you could do a lot of things with the discipline of technique, once you have it. Technique can enable a kind of freedom. That really struck me.

My mother had a great appreciation for all art and the history of art. She loved watching basketball and saw the players' movements and plays as pure artistry. She discussed why certain composers were great and why others weren't. She would talk about different opera singers' voices. She talked about different periods, how when you're in between two ages, you have two different sensibilities, and that can be very rich; rather than if you happen to be born in the middle of one age, so that you only really have one sensibility. But I never considered going to art school. I never considered being an artist. This was just a hobby. Coming from an Asian-American family, I had those kinds of pressures.

Tishan Hsu, Closed Circuit II, 1986, Tishan Hsu, signal.noise/membrane, 2020

Kissick: Yes, I can relate.

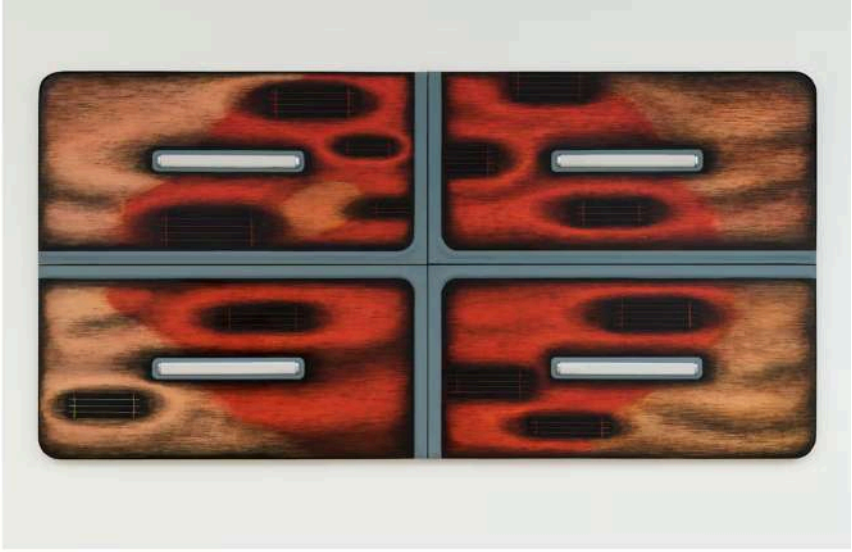
Hsu: I went to college and studied architecture. I loved architecture, and it would allow me to have the kind of economic security that my parents were concerned with. But in college I still felt the nagging question of whether to be an artist. That was a much more intimidating decision. In college I did take a painting class and I was still thinking seriously about it. I was observing what was going on in contemporary art. I went to New York a number of times from Boston. This was in the mid '70s.

There wasn't an art department at my college. But it turned out that one professor who was an art historian was very familiar with the contemporary art world. He started this studio painting class, which was more based on a personal interest he had. After the course, he told me I should drop out, and go to New York to eat, breathe, and drink paint. That was just really wild to me — that a professor would propose this.

But it gave me a taste. And in graduate school, where I got my architecture degree, the same professor told me, "You're never going to go back to it. You've stayed out too long." And I said, "Well, I think I'm going to take the whole year off after I graduate. I'm just going to do nothing except art. So if I want to do anything else, I'll just say, 'No, you can't do it. I can only do art.'"

I felt I needed to do this as a final way of making the decision before I really got started in life, and I needed to know whether I really had it in me. That's what I did, and at the end of the year I gave up. It wasn't working out, the work wasn't coming. Then I took a drafting job in a small architecture firm, and after three or four months, I decided I couldn't be an

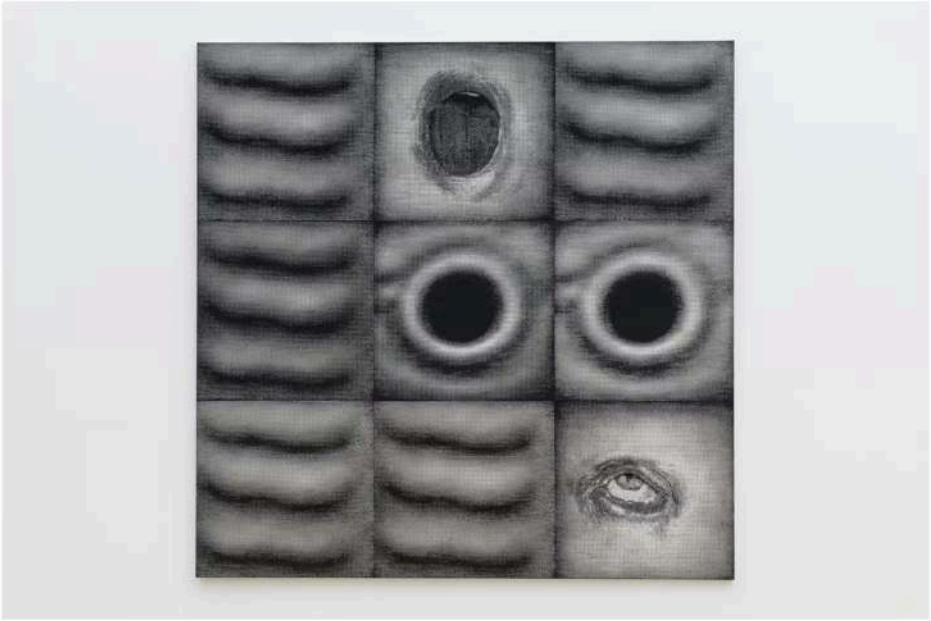
architect, that it wasn't a choice anymore and making art was just what I needed to do by necessity. I then started producing work that I felt could sustain me and really committed myself. My lifelong partner, Alina, was a profound influence in making this commitment and in the evolution of the work throughout my life.



Tishan Hsu, Cell, 1987

Kissick: And you became a star of the New York art world in the '80s.
Hsu: Well, first of all, I never felt like I was a star. I would never describe myself that way. Even though I was showing in major galleries, I always felt somewhat alienated from the art world. I showed at Pat Hearn and Leo Castelli because they were the only gallerists who were willing to actually give me a show. People were not understanding my work. I didn't fit in anywhere. I felt a lot of rejection around the work, perhaps because of incomprehension, or perhaps due to my race, or both, although the reviews were positive. Everything felt confusing in terms of what I was doing in the art world and how I was being perceived. But in my mind, my work was not very resolved, and I felt the strangeness of the work. I felt people were looking at it like it was finished. And I knew it wasn't. To me, it had a lot of problems, even though works sold. What I was showing was just what I could do then. I felt there was a much longer way to go.
So why did I withdraw so much from the art world? There were a number of factors. My son was born right around then, and raising him took a lot of psychological and emotional energy. I had experienced how much energy and effort was taken up by exhibitions. A career of exhibitions doesn't necessarily feed into the energy needed for doing one's work. So I did what many artists do: I found a teaching position that gave me a certain financial independence. I was still connected somewhat to galleries; but I could tell at the same time where I wanted the work to go, and I didn't think collectors were going to buy it or galleries would show it, even though almost all of the previous shows had sold well. I wanted to make the work more extreme and I needed time to be very experimental with it.
I wanted to be removed from concerns over whether it was going to sell. And much of the

discourse in contemporary art at the time just did not feel compelling to me. I saw other things going on in the culture, and going on in the world, and those weren't what the art world at the time was discussing, although there were overlaps and connections. I felt compelled enough by what I was observing to sustain me in doing the work without art world validation. I tell students you have to get up every day to be able to work and you need something that's going to motivate you. The urgency of the world around me was the driver. I knew what was motivating me and what wasn't.



Tishan Hsu, Cellular Automata 2, 1989

Kissick: Do you feel more in sync with the art world now?
Hsu: The art world's very different than it was. I feel like there's a wider understanding of what my work is trying to do, and that feels validating and gives me energy, time, and support. But I feel out of sync with the extent to which the market has influenced the expectations and perhaps requirements of galleries. Before, the work was more in my imagination, and now I can draw from the world explicitly. The work feels closer to the world we're living in. That changes my relation to the work in an unexpected but liberating way. I don't have to imagine it. Its attributes are everywhere.
The way I interact with much of the art world now is through the screen, which is ironically what the work has tried to address: the cognitive effects of taking in the world through the screen. What I was trying to imagine was a change in syntax; the way it has physically expressed itself was unimagined. I happen to live in a certain historical period here. I was born in the middle of the 20th century, and I'm living into the 21st.

Tishan Hsu, Gray Zone-4, 2020, Tishan Hsu, Gray Zone-5, 2020

Kissick: We're between ages.

Hsu: When I emerged in the '80s, there was very much a sense of cynicism among artists, that everything had been done. I didn't feel that way. Particularly having experienced MIT, where the entire institution is premised on the opposite. I mean, it's not an optimistic future that we've ended up with, and I think that fact contributed to this cynicism, but I felt that there was still something unknown going on, and it didn't need to be optimistic. I wanted to understand it — to be more conscious of it. It wasn't projecting an ideal world as with Modernism, where we were going to get rid of all the ills of human existence and reach a kind of transcendence. But there was still something unprecedented emerging from technology and integrating with human life in unimagined ways. In the context of Postmodernism, I felt we had to be careful not to throw the baby out with the bath water. I felt, at the time, much of the existing art did not address certain aspects of the change I was feeling. However, in music and literature, there was more experimentation around these questions. I asked myself, what is it I'm going through here? There's something that needs work here, needs understanding. Whatever it is, reverting to the past wasn't helping me to make sense of what I was experiencing.

At MIT, I had observed the research that was going on. I had a sense of the impact it was going to have on the world. It was just going to happen. It was going to create problems of its own, but it was going to be new and we would need to deal with it and find agency. I felt we still, as human beings, needed to make sure that whatever is developing is somehow in sync with what we want the world to be. And that there was a certain agency to be maintained, if not fought for, there still. At this point, the concept of agency is much more complicated by our beginning to question, what is human?

I spent a long time thinking about Postmodernism and the idea that everything is predetermined. That was part of the cynicism, and I think it's still going on today, actually — this question of, do we have any agency left? Are we going to be able to control AI? Can we

control social media for our benefit?

Tishan Hsu, Thumb-Eye-Extended 2.0, 2020

Kissick: It's really going on today.

Hsu: That's the existential position I feel we're in. I think with the integration of technology in our lives, there's so much happening to us in this collision that we don't understand. And the works are helping me to realize how much we don't understand about what's going on and where we are. Where are we, as humans, going to end up? The work helps me to keep asking that question. And as the work evolves, it clarifies certain things and then opens up other things. There's just so much. I see the question of what is human intersecting with questions around environmental collapse. These are incredibly powerful forces. I mean, I don't need to even say it — just the whole political world now is at the hands of this technology. These are the arenas where this is all playing out. And basically, I think we are underestimating the magnitude and impact this is really having, and I think that's part of the problem. Our governments, corporations, education, healthcare, law, and civil rights are barely keeping up. Technology's moving faster than we can almost cognitively take in. That's how I experience it. That sense of unknowing is what the work is pointing out for me. So the work to me looks very strange. I can't describe, with words, the whole thing. I can feel it when I'm doing it, and I see it, but it's asking for a different language. I don't think that's there yet.

FlashArt
6 July 2022

Flash Art

Tishan Hsu: Body Currents

by Franklin Melendez

1 2

Tishan Hsu, *Breath 7*, 2022. Detail. UV cured inkjet, acrylic, silicone, and ink on wood. 121,9 × 157,5 × 14 cm. Courtesy of the artist; Miguel Abreu Gallery, New York; and Empty Gallery, Hong Kong. All images © 2022 Tishan Hsu / Artists Rights Society (ARS), 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.

1 2 3 4 5

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

Painting as Screen

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 (I) (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. 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, this 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."

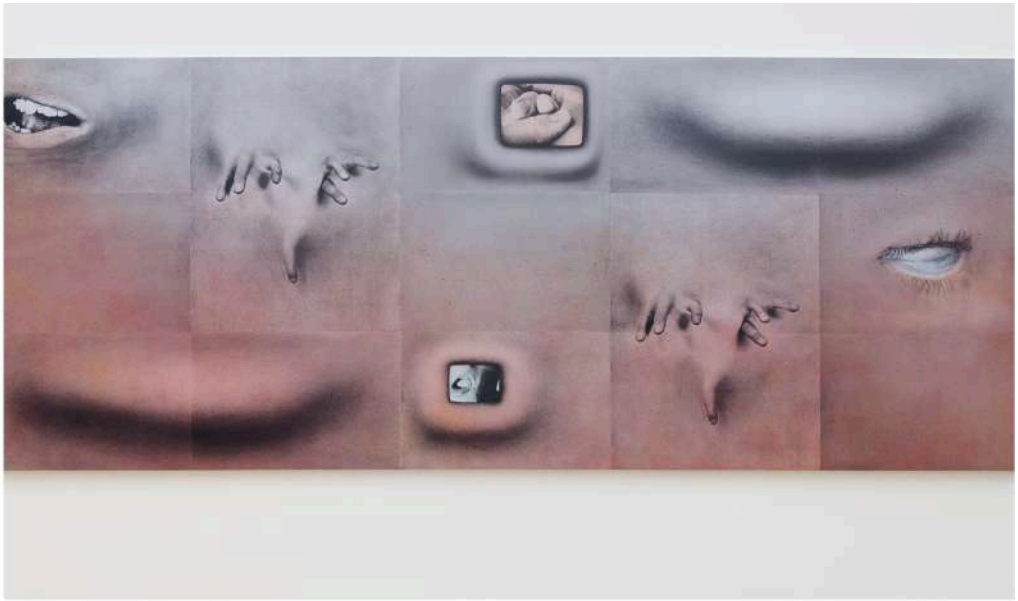
1 2

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

Membrane to Membrane

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 Euclidean 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.



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

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).

① 2 3

Tishan Hsu, *Phone-Breath-Bed* 1, 2021. Detail. Polycarbonate, silicone, stainless steel wire cloth, UV cured inkjet, wood, steel, and plastic. 115.6 x 185.6 x 121.9 cm. Photography by Stephen Faught. Courtesy of the artist and Miguel Abreu Gallery, New York. All images © 2022 Tishan Hsu / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

Beyond Concrescence

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.

① 2

Tishan Hsu, *grass-screen-skin / object 2*, 2022. UV cured inkjet, silicone, acrylic, stainless steel, ink on wood. 121.9 × 229.6 × 13.3 cm. Photography by Stephen Faught. Courtesy of the artist and Miguel Abreu Gallery, New York. All images © 2022 Tishan Hsu / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

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 underscores 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."

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.

LISSON GALLERY

The Brooklyn Rail
December 2021/January 2022

THE BROOKLYN RAIL

Tishan Hsu: *skin-screen-grass*

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.

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.

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

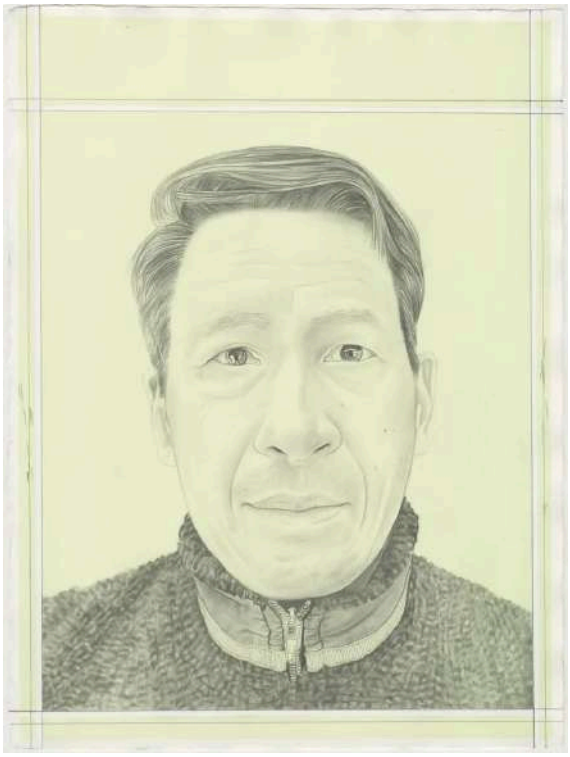
Where a popular rhetoric of ease and lightness—Donna Haraway called it "sunshine"—seems to cleave machines from the realities of human bodies and human pain, Hsu's visceral work asserts that such extrication is not true to lived experience on individual or algorithmic levels. Examining our affective, 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?

The Brooklyn Rail
February 2021

THE BROOKLYN RAIL

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 Scwhendener 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.

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.

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.

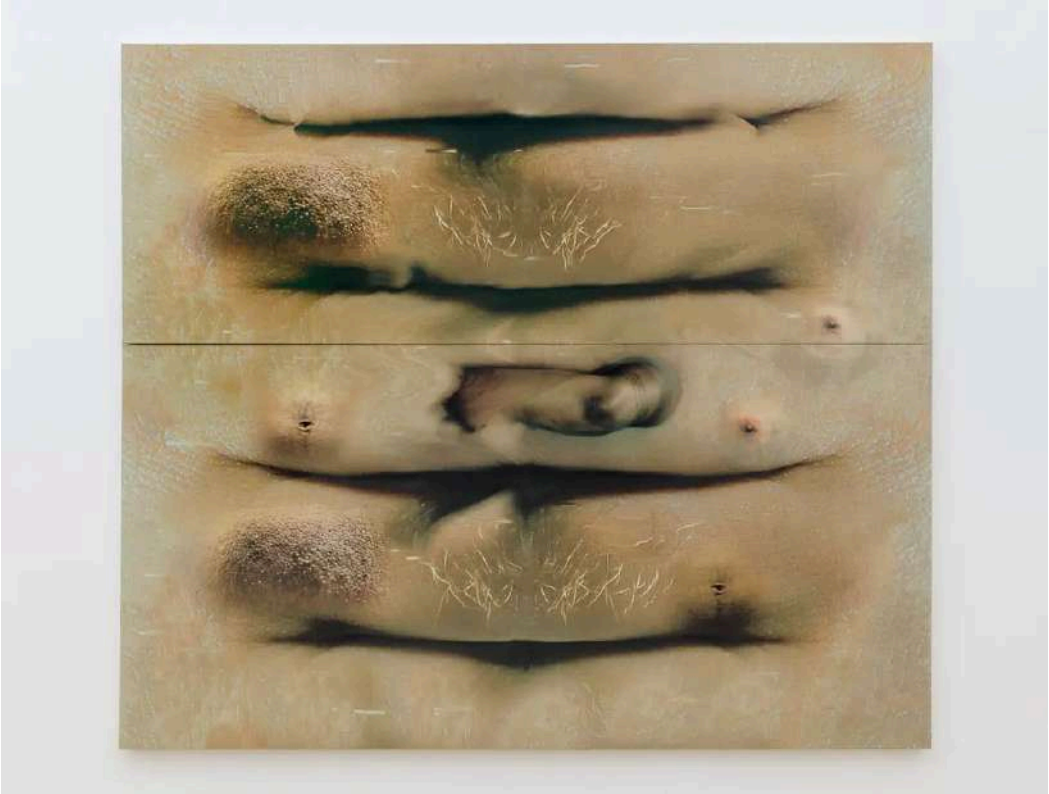
So, in that sense, I was trying to establish how I can get that object there and that's partly what drove the idea of the rounded corners, and that these flat boards are away from the wall so they appear to float on the wall. These are just three-eighths inch painted plywood. Now for those of you who 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.



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.

Rail: Can you talk about Cellular Automata 2?

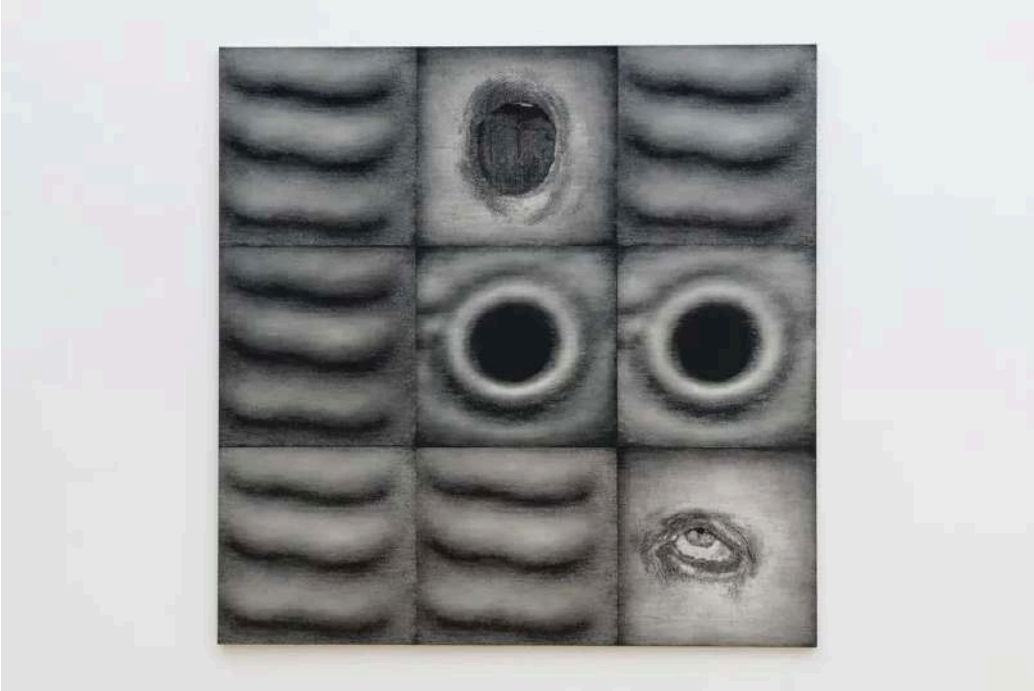
Hsu: Yes, so here I'm just experimenting with black and white silkscreen. The way this is made is modular which is a structural paradigm in all my work, in that technology is designed and produced modularly. So the square module was done by hand. It was just one module, and then I photographed that one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

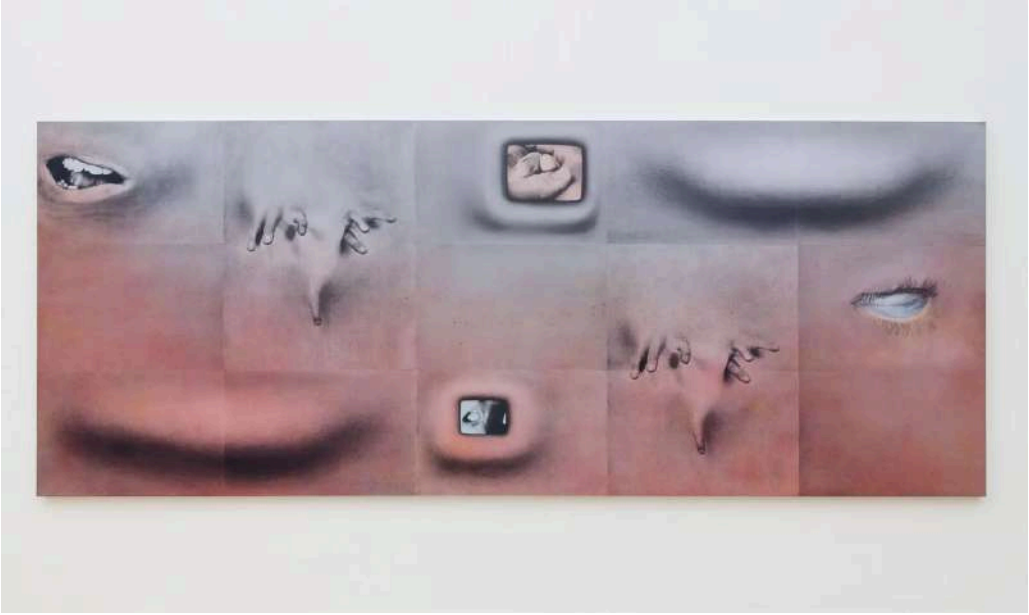
with traditional handmade techniques of art making, and the more technological production of images was very important to me.

Rail: How about Fingerpainting? What changed?



Tishan Hsu, 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: 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.



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.

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).

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.

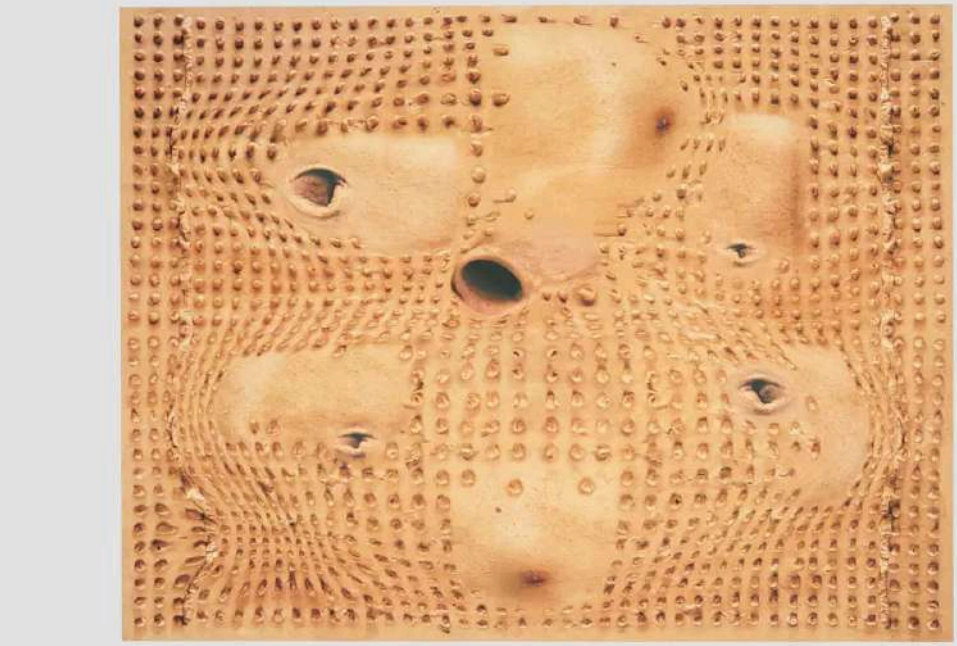
The flat tile pieces, like *Ooze* or *Vertical Ooze* (1987) really were about this kind of technological space of data, and that it would go on and on and I was trying to do it in what may seem a retro way, using actual physical materials, rather than just hopping onto the computer and going with it. 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, Innies and Outies, 2002. Archival inkjet on canvas. 44 x 57 inches. © 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)?

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.

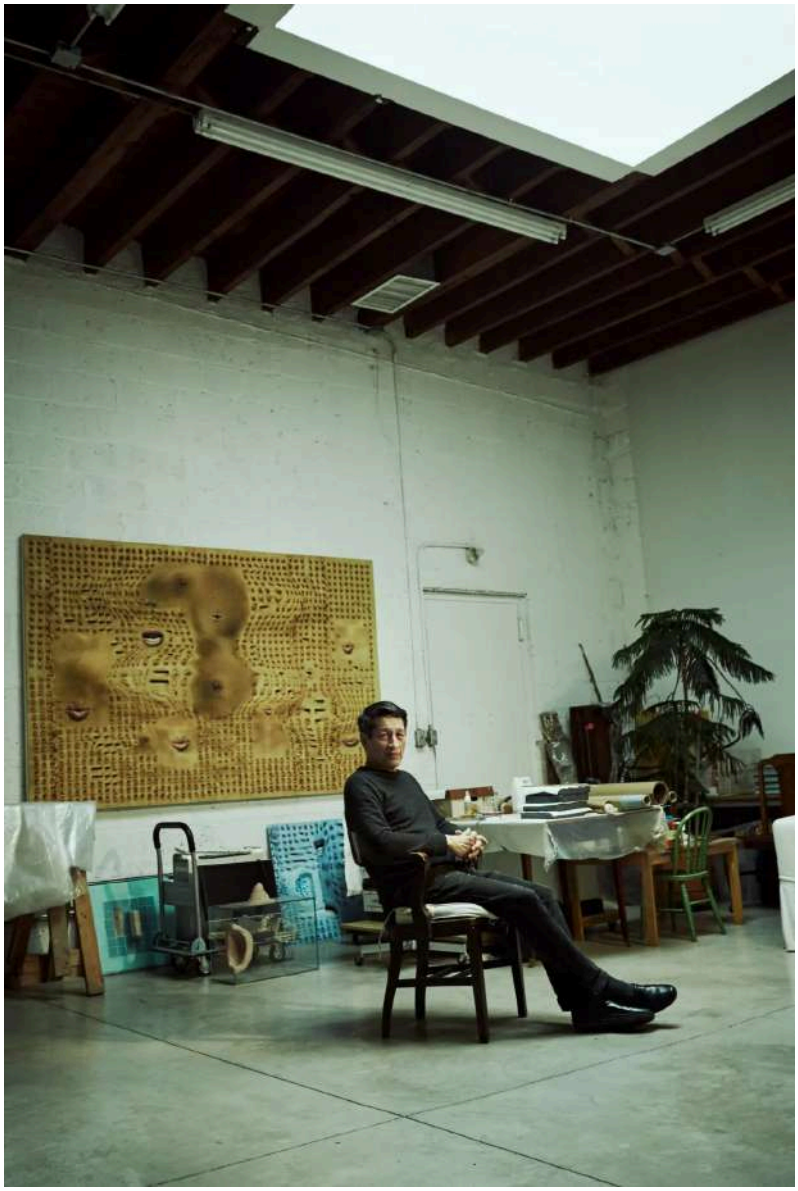
And so I think Flusser's speculative writing is very accurate in terms of what's happening now, and about to happen in a much more obvious way perhaps. I think the sense of time and future-past is collapsing because things are moving so quickly. A lot driven by the speed of technology and the speed of 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.

The New York Times
7 January 2021

The New York Times

An Artist for the Dystopian Age

Artist questionnaire by Adriane Quinlan



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.

Credit: Flora Hanitijo

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

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.
Credit: 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.
Credit: 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.
Credit...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.
Credit :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.
Credit: 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.
Credit: 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 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.

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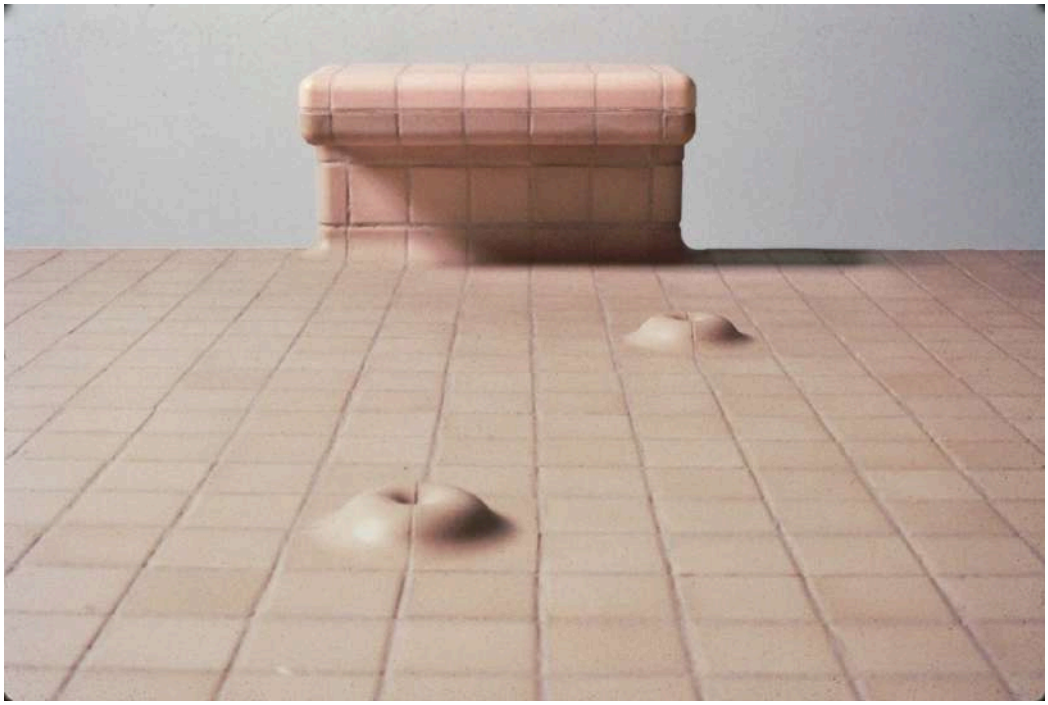
Clinical Cosmology: Tishan Hsu

by Hera Chan



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 "cosmotechnics" 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." 1It 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.

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.

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

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.

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.

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.

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 theSkowhegan 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.

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ArtReview

Tishan Hsu

by Jeppe Ugelvig

Tishan Hsu, Boating Scene green 1, 2019. ARA Spring 2019 Feature

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.

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".

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.

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."

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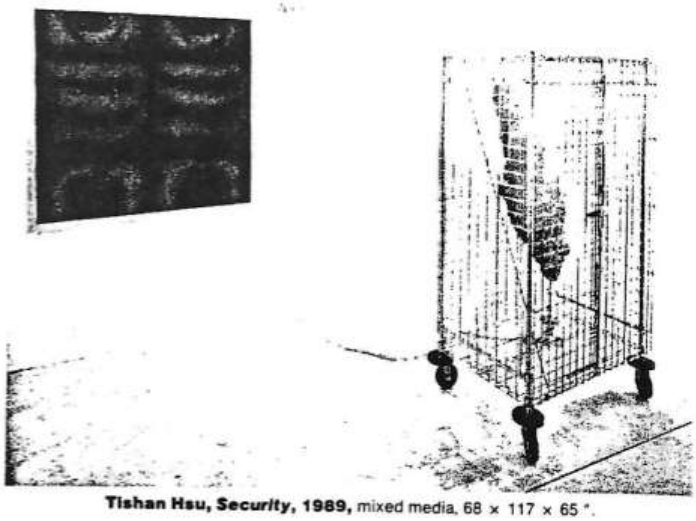
TISHAN HSU: PAT HEARN GALLERY

By Donald Kuspit



Tishan Hsu, *Security*, 1989, mixed media, 68 × 117 × 65 ".

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 innovative 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

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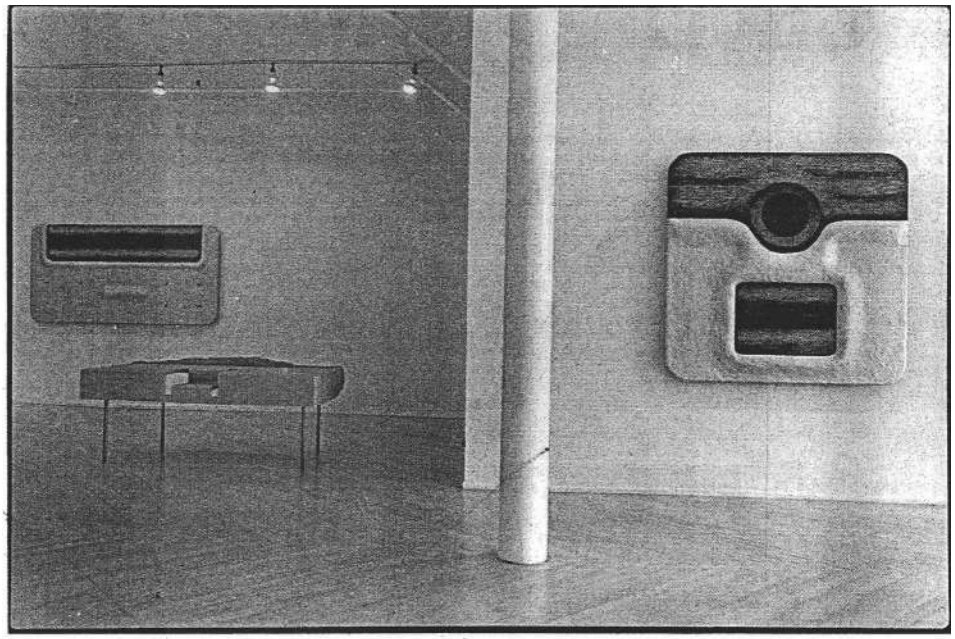
24 June 1986

the village VOICE

Ti Shan Hsu: A Chat

by Gary Indiana



Ti Shan Hsu: left to right, ***Rapid Transit*** (1986); ***Closed End*** (1980); ***Closed Circuit*** (1986)—at Pat Hearn, 735 East 9th Street (closed)

I thought it might provide some relief for both reader and writer to run an interview this week. The reader has had to hear -my ideas and · opinions every week f(lr over a year, and I have had to come up with them every week, often with a deep sense of embarrassment over having quite so much to say about things that may not, in many cases, finally be worth entertaining an opinion about. So I decided to pick a New · York artist, Ti Shan Hsu, who is currently showing his work at · the Pat Hearn gallery, and find out what this artist is thinking: whatever that happened to be, it would come from a different voice than my own. (A writer who never tires of hearing his own voice must be singularly blessed or cursed. Not I, not I).

A lot of attention is being placed on abstraction of a certain kind. Some of the titles of your pieces refer to things like conduits and circuits. Peter Haley, for instance, operates with all these ideas he has from Baudrillard about circuits and so forth. What is your relationship to someone like Baudrillard, or an artist like Peter Halley?

What I've read of Baudrillll'a and Lyotard, the sort of vision they present is very interesting, very contemporary; they have a lot to say. My work is intuitive. It developed over a number of years, according to a certain sensibility. It really had no words directing it. It came from a direct experience of everyday life. So when I became aware of Lyotard's and Baudrillard's writing, it seemed to describe something I feel much more internally, physically. I'm interested in something that's not necessarily illustrative of an idea. I would have to step a little bit away from the current moment, so to speak —

For instance —

There's a lot of talk about "Neo-Expressionism is dead," or something like that. I don't really see much difference between the underlying content of Neo-Expressionism and the New or Neo-Abstraction of whatever you want to call it. In the art world generally, there's this kind of time frame we're all slotted into, five years this, then five years that, then five years this, and it's gotten to the point that a dealer can predict, "This is gonna go five years and then something else–" and it's just so simplistic and unnecessary. It becomes so expected that it's short-changing what art could do. My feeling is that a lot of current discussion has been about loss of faith, a sense of failure, a sense that there's nothing vital that can really be done any more, and that life has become somewhat deadened and empty and lacking any real vital impetus. That's understandable—we're at the end of a rather traumatic century, and we are tired, especially tired of new forms. In that context, I think we're tired of the myth of Modernism. It's clear things aren't better, progress wasn't necessarily made in the last 50 years, However, to say that nothing new is going to be done, that this is the end, is extremely egocentric, not of a person, but of our time: that our time is so particularly special. I'm not so sure that it is.

The particular construction of culture we deal with in the art world — what you said about being slotted into a moment— as far as I can tell, what's going on in this very restricted little art world paradigm is that the kids who were making Neo-Expressionist paintings, which were dumb, have been replaced by smarter kids who think they're intellectuals or something, in the playpen. That's not a cultural moment for me, really. That has to do with social life—which smart kids will get good grades in the magazines this year. It's boring.

I guess that's putting it a bit more strongly. Even that, you know—I think there are new things going in the world now, I don't mean this year, or this season, but we're moving in a new context, and I think these French philosophers are interesting because they're addressing a much broader framework, it's much newer than we may even be aware of right now. I don't feel the art world has really dealt with it in a substantive way, and in fact to deal with it may take longer than the three years it would take for it to be "in," understood, and then dropped.

I think we've become so enslaved by the idea that the new always means a new form, and formalism is dead, so let's not go that road—it's so simplistic to look at it that way. I mean, form is there whether you want it or not, and maybe the mistake was to consider form the

be-all and end-all. Form is the means to something else, to say something. I can look at any work, and I can talk about form. I don't think form is the essential thing, however. I think the world is changing, there are new things to be dealt with. Not that the world is going to be any better. I think that, as opposed to the modernist vision, the world may get worse. I think life will be just as tragic, as painful, and as difficult as it always has been, but that doesn't mean there isn't something new to talk about. Maybe the emphasis will be different. Or how we feel pain will be different. Or the sense of tragedy will be new—that, to me, is exciting.

The relationship of consciousness to technology hasn't really been explored very ambitiously by visual art. I think literature has done it. Visual art that wants to talk about this isn't so developed. It's one reason why so-called Neo-Conceptualism has been so disappointing. That work should be more generative than it has been. At the point where it takes on that capacity, the people making it can't wait to become part of the art establishment, and thereby lose the possibility of going on.

I certainly feel a bit of that pressure myself. Market forces are a temptation, another word in a mechanical way. Market forces are a temptation, but in many ways a negative temptation. Maybe as artists we need to be aware of what market pressure is doing to the work—sometimes you're so much in it that you're not even aware of what you're potentially losing. I'm interested in multiplicity rather than singularity, something inclusive rather than exclusive. If we talk, for example, about going from expressionism to abstraction, or this pattern from cool to hot which is so well understood now, to a fault, by artists—is it possible, that maybe there's something else, let's call it X, that may not fit into the categories of cool-hot, or expressionist-minimal—that maybe, this wasn't always the case, you know, 200 years ago people didn't talk about art being cool or hot, or expressionist or minimal. Maybe a whole different paradigm needs to be constructed or dealt with.

In connection with your own work, you've referred to The Body in Pain, Elaine Scarry's book.

I found Elaine Scarry's book fascinating, because, first of all, I've been very frustrated by the way the art world has dealt with deconstruction. People deal with it in such a simple, appropriative, It's legit-mk way, to make their work seem current, and deconstruction is actually very complex, a complex way of looking at reality. Elaine Scarry's book is radical and brilliant because she uses deconstruction in a deep, substantive way, going from pain and war and torture into creativity and making. It's not that she—for those who haven't seen her book—talks about one and then the other, but in a deconstructive way turns one into the other and back again. It shows you that something very negative can, underneath, actually be very positive, and what's positive can be negative. It goes back and forth between opposites, and she covers a wide range of experience, managing to illustrate how one thing can be turned into another. She looks into the world, not just into

literature—she's not just taking a text and showing how each word can turn into another word in a mechanical way. She's looking at the world deconstructively, and using texts, and words, to get at that. But it's very much about direct experience, and I feel that direct experience is somewhat lacking in a lot of the work that we see now.

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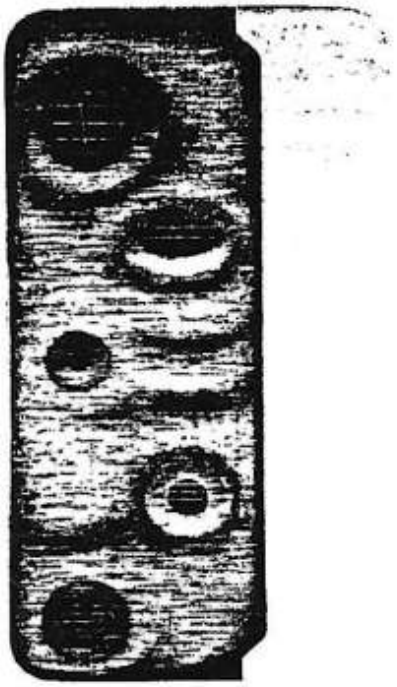
Ti Shan Hsu
Leo Castelli; Pat Hearn

By Donald Kuspit



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

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, "redesigned" 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.