

Tishan Hsu
Selected Press

I accept Modernism's conclusion - the Self is lost.
That's one less thing to worry about. Freed from the
"Self," consciousness enters the "Object" - merges
with the world.

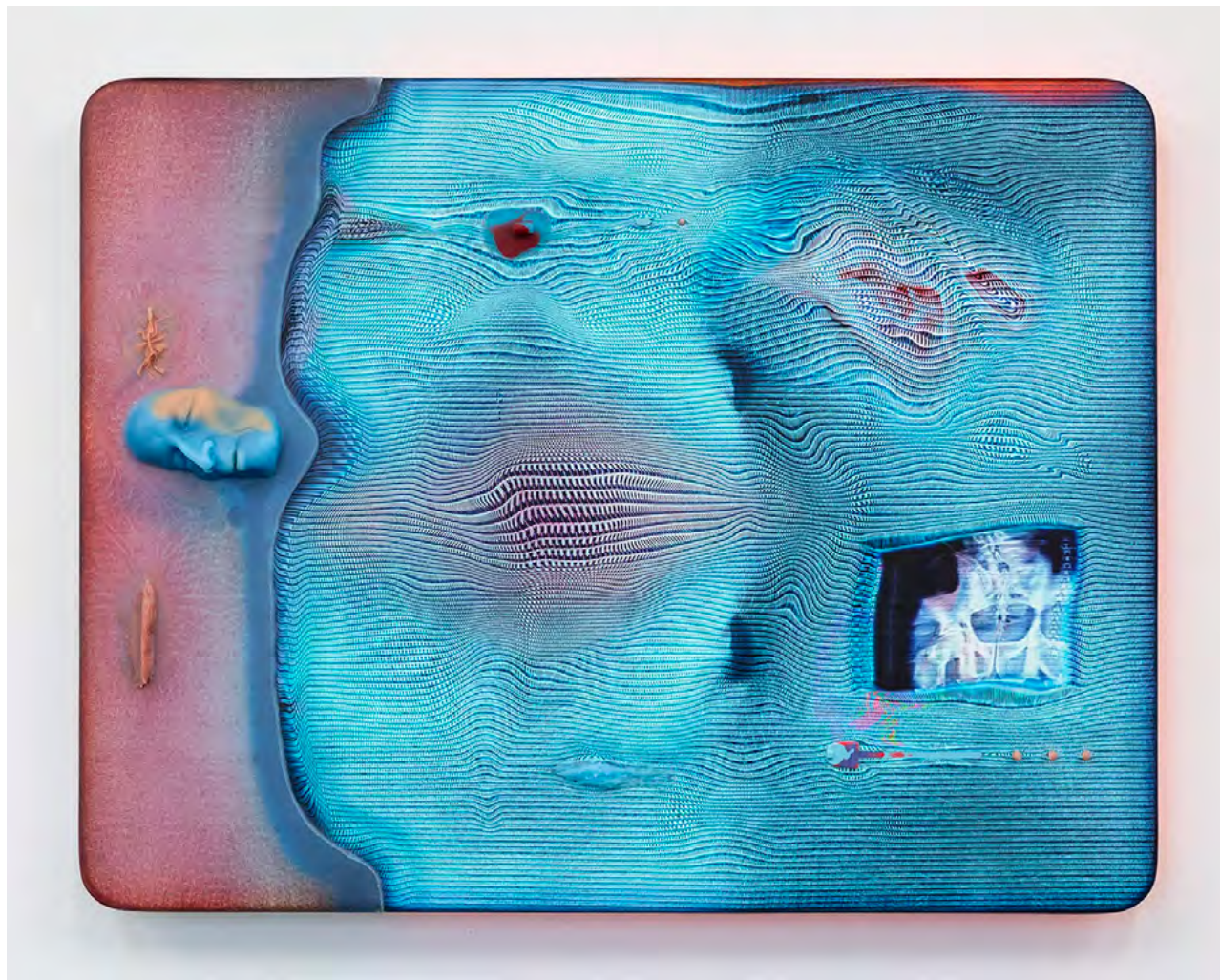
Ti Shan Hsu
September, 1983

HIGHSNOBIETY

IN BETWEEN AGES WITH ARTIST TISHAN HSU

15 November 2022 In Culture

Words By Dean Kissick



Tishan Hsu, *Breath 7*, 2022

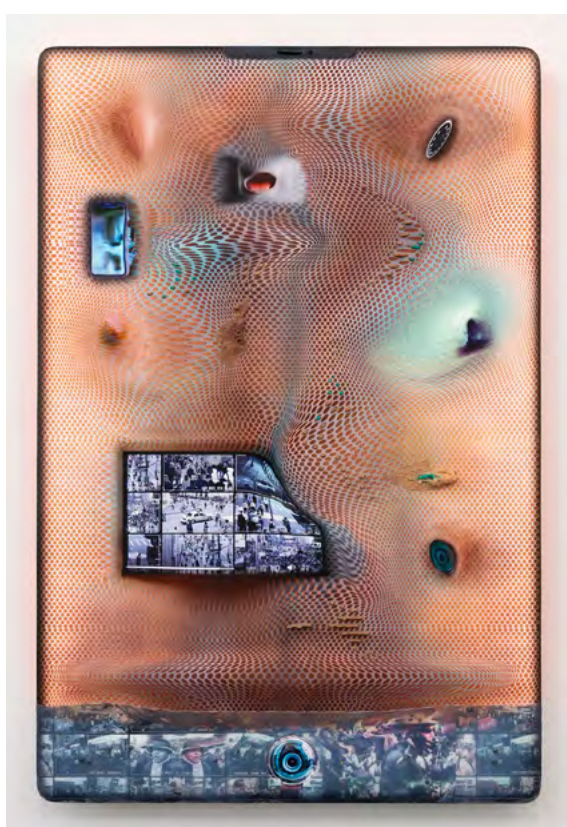
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In the 1970s, while studying architecture at Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), Tishan Hsu began to feel that the world was changing. He felt that we were about to live through unprecedented times, and to be confronted by something bigger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

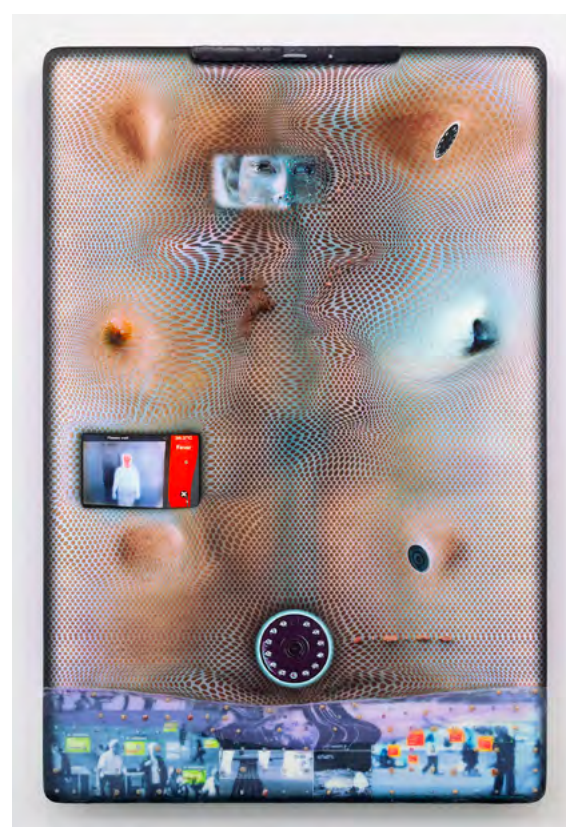
These past four years, Tishan's career has flourished. He's in this year's Venice Biennale, until November 27, and the 58th Carnegie International, which opens in Pittsburgh on

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*, 2022

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Tishan Hsu, *Watching 2*, 2022

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PHOTO: STEPHEN FAUGHT.

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
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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
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PHOTO: JEFF MCLANE.



Tishan Hsu, signal.noise/membrane, 2020
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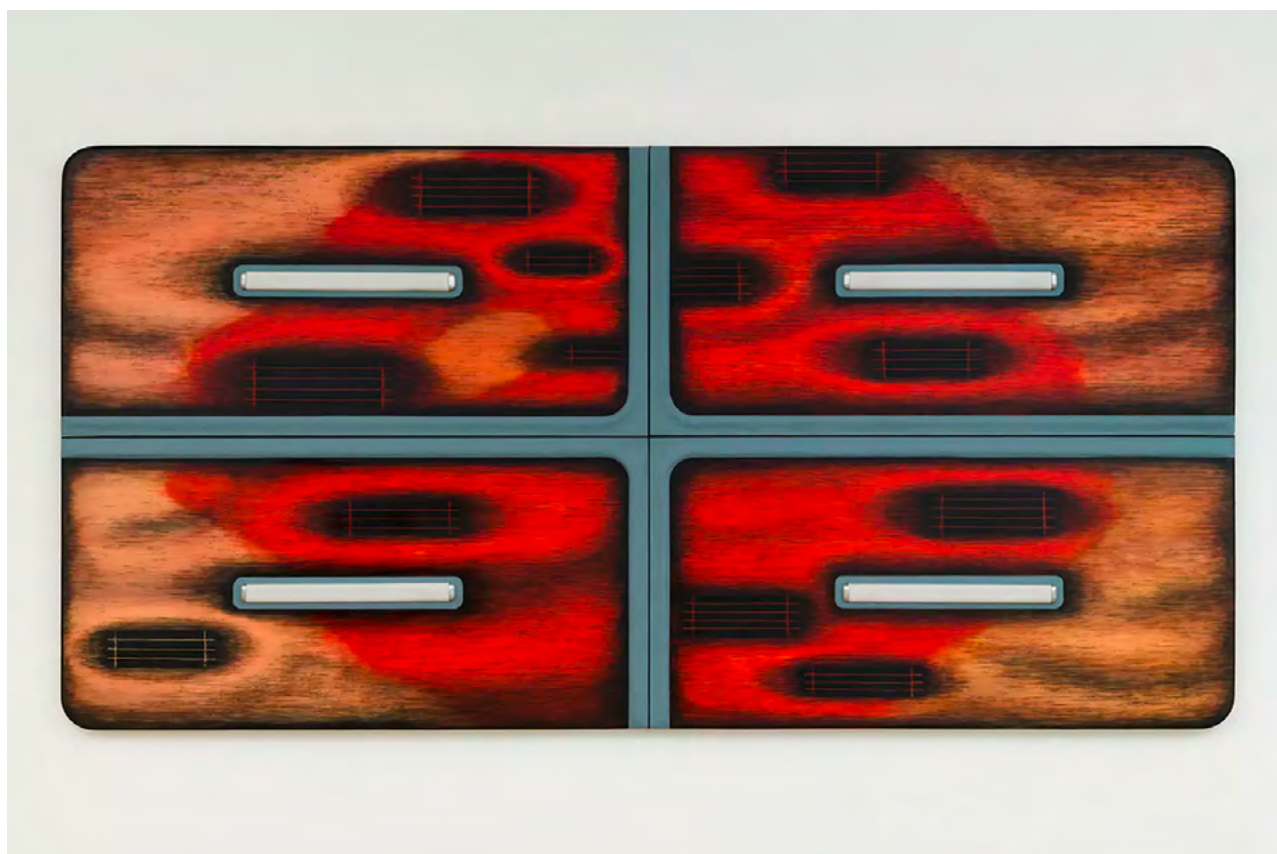
Kissick: Yes, I can relate.

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.



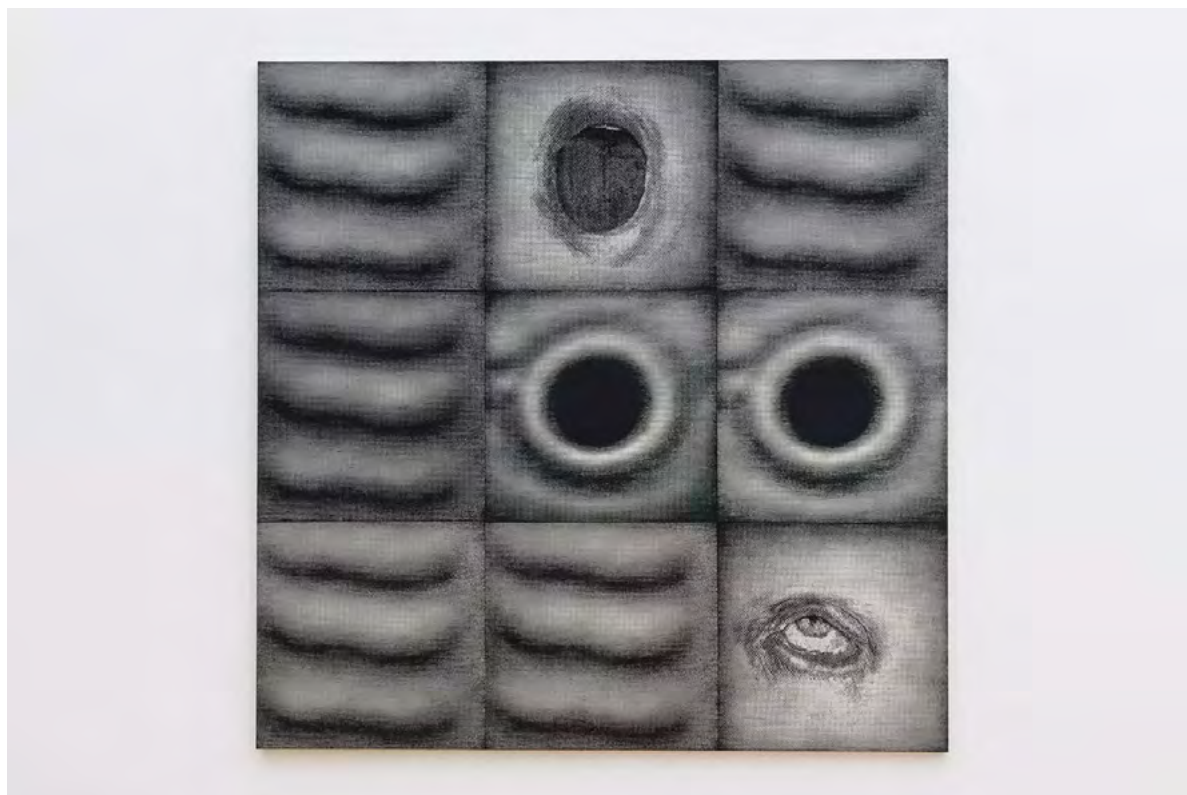
Tishan Hsu, Cell, 1987
© 2022 TISHAN HSU / ARTISTS RIGHTS SOCIETY (ARS), NEW YORK. PHOTO: JEFF MCLANE.

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
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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.

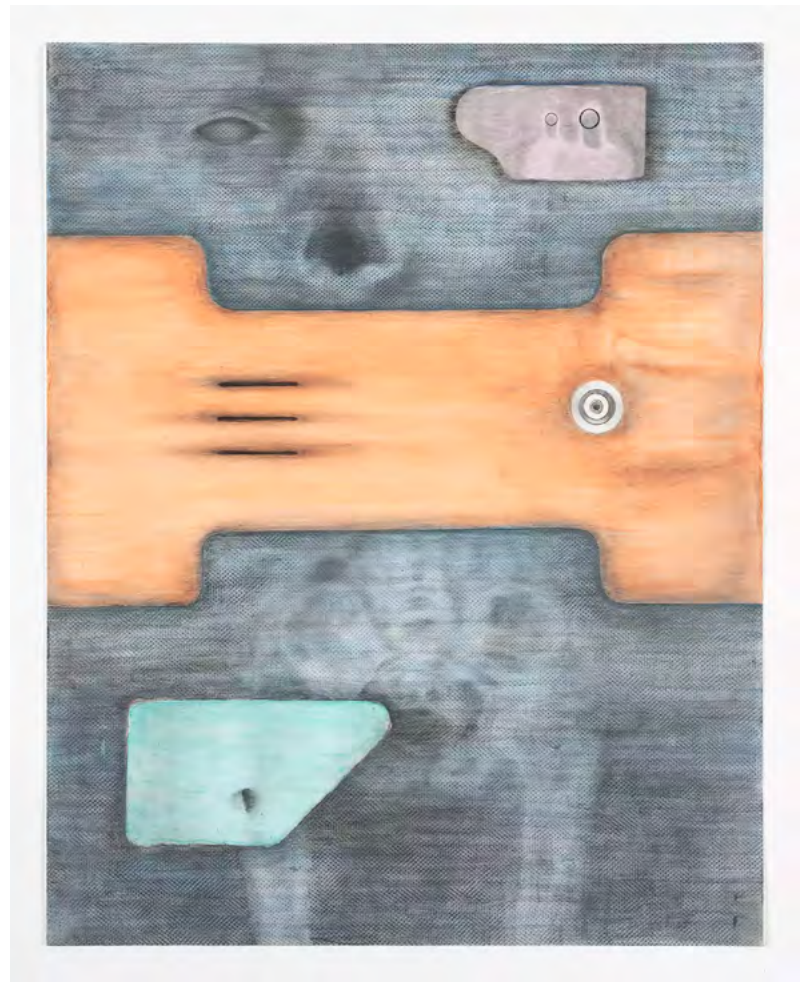
Kissick: We're between ages.

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.



Tishan Hsu, Gray Zone-5, 2020
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Tishan Hsu, Gray Zone-4, 2020
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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
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PHOTO: STEPHEN FAUGHT.

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.

Flash Art

339 SUMMER 2022, FEATURES

Tishan Hsu: Body Currents by Franklin Melendez



Tishan Hsu, *Breath 7*, 2022. UV cured inkjet, acrylic, silicone, and ink on wood. 121.9 x 157.5 x 14 cm. Courtesy of the artist; Miguel Abreu Gallery, New York; and Empty Gallery, Hong Kong. All images ©2022 Tishan Hsu/ Artist 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.



Tishan Hsu, *Closed Circuit II*, 1986. Acrylic, alkyd, Styrofoam and vinyl cement compound on wood. 149.9 x 149.9 x 10.2 cm. Photography by Jeff McLane. Collection of Rubell Family, Miami. All images ©2022 Tishan Hsu/ Artist 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 (1)* (1982) or *Plasma* (1986), with their alien contours and bulbous protrusions, provide a good indication while attesting to Hsu's expert manipulation of unorthodox yet humble materials. Their fleshy expanses — hovering between base materiality and slick illusionism — certainly made an impression, but lacking any immediate points of reference or critical coordinates they were also largely misread. At the time, Hsu was lumped into the rubric of neo-geo, a term that gained some traction in the late '80s but is now mostly notable for its general vagueness — a portmanteau for a broad range of practices favoring a hard-edged approach that at times verged on (or deliberately embraced) kitsch. Fellow Hearn stablemates Philip Taaffe and Peter Schuyff were also shoved into this "next big thing," which was sometimes referred to by the hipper postmodernist moniker "simulationism."

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



Tishan Hsu, *Vertical Ooze*, 1987. Ceramic tile, urethane, vinyl cement compound, acrylic on wood. 132.1 x 180.3 x 61 cm. Photography by Jeff McLane. Collection of Centre Pompidou, Paris. All images ©2022 Tishan Hsu/ Artist 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."

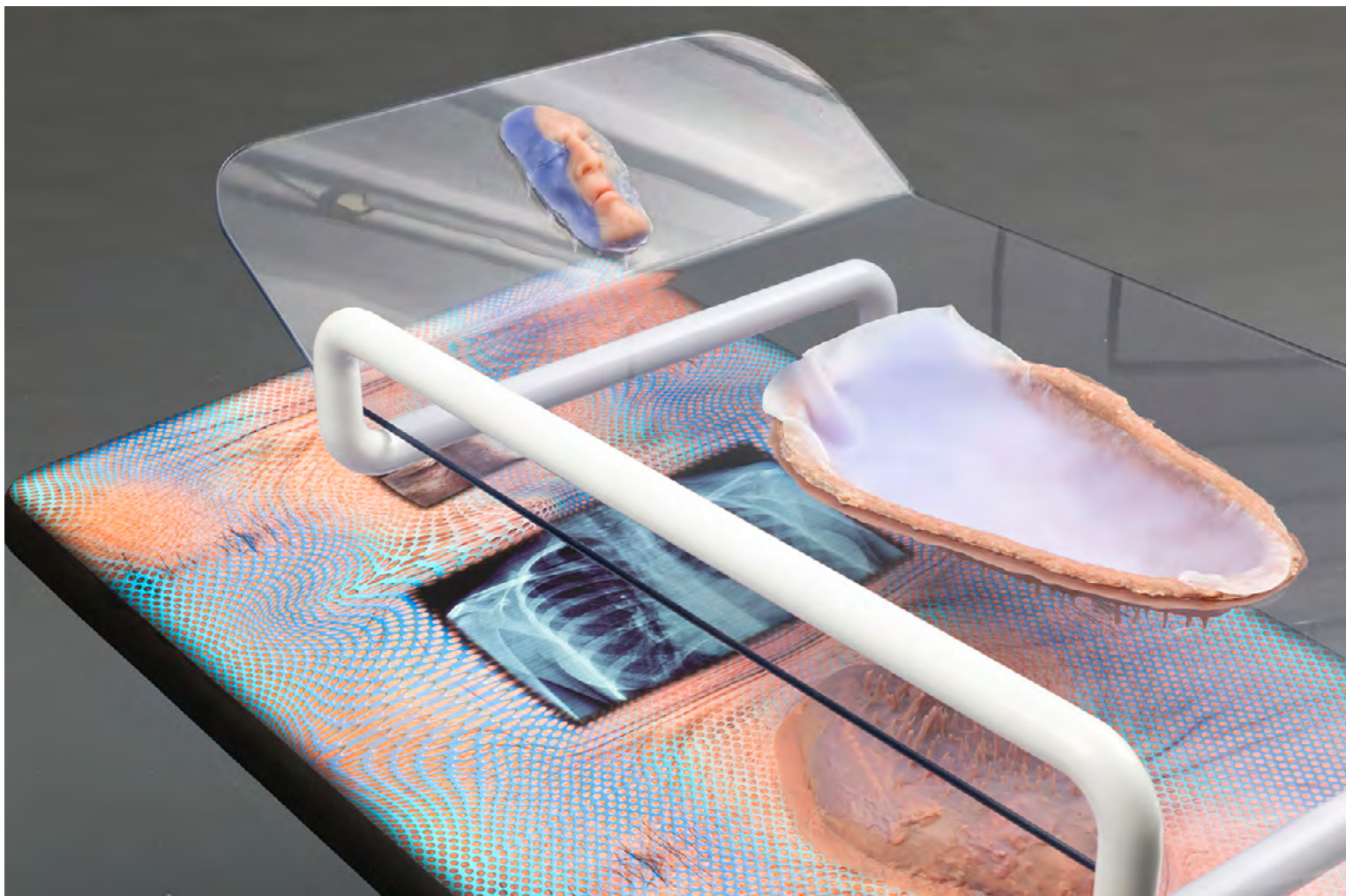
This is the operating principle of a sculpture like *Vertical Ooze* (1986), a stack of three hospital-green tiers that evoke an architectural model, a fountain, or a trippy distortion of Anthony Caro's Euclidian arrangements. The interiors of each segment are lined with tiles that are as banal as any found in a public bathroom, yet maybe also nod to the elasticity of the pixel (this is how I read the nub-like protrusion on the bottom tier). This hybrid object — brushing up against the virtual, but also reveling in its own gravity — posits an encounter between two distinct but interrelated corporealities: viewer and object. In so doing, it opens up a line of thinking that is less interested in projecting visions of an anxious future than mapping the vicissitudes of an ever-shifting present.



Tishan Hsu, *Fingerprinting*, 1994. Silkscreen ink and acrylic on linen. 180.3 x 449.6 cm. Photography by Jeff McLane. Courtesy of the artist and Miguel Abreu Gallery, New York. All images ©2022 Tishan Hsu/ Artist 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).

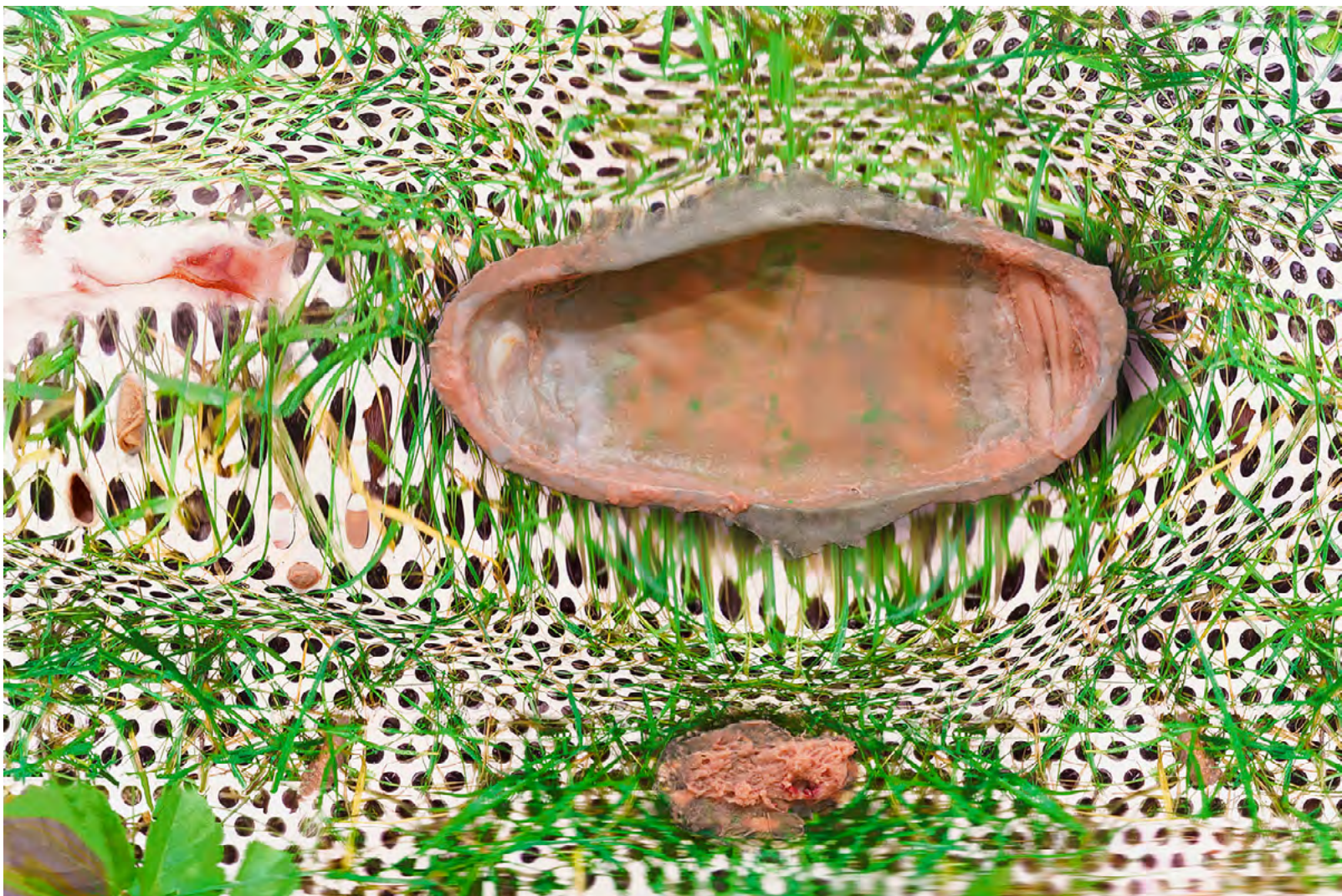


Tishan Hsu, *Phone-Breath-Bed 1*, 2001. Detail. Polycarbonate, silicone, stainless steel wire cloth, UV cured inkjet, wood, steel, and plastic. 115.6 x 195.6 x 121.9 cm. Photography by Stephen Faught. Courtesy of the artist and Miguel Abreu Gallery, New York. All images ©2022 Tishan Hsu/ Artist Rights Society(ARS), New York.

Beyond Conscience

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.



Tishan Hsu, *grass-screen-skin / object 2*, 2002. UV cured inkjet, silicone, acrylic, stainless steel, ink on wood. 121.9 x 228.6 x 13.3 cm. Photography by Stephen Faught. Courtesy of the artist and Miguel Abreu Gallery, New York. All images ©2022 Tishan Hsu/ Artist 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 undercores the utility of affect as a vector into that which exceeds our understanding. As Hsu notes: "[affect] seems to be reaching for a kind of awareness of our emotional, psychological, and embodied processing, as an integrated response, which might help to identify, in some partial way, what is happening internally in this new interface we increasingly inhabit, between the body and technology." He adds with typical forward-looking candor: "I am reaching intuitively, and perhaps I use the term too loosely, partly because I feel we may not have an adequate vocabulary to describe what we, as a species, are undergoing at this time in history."

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

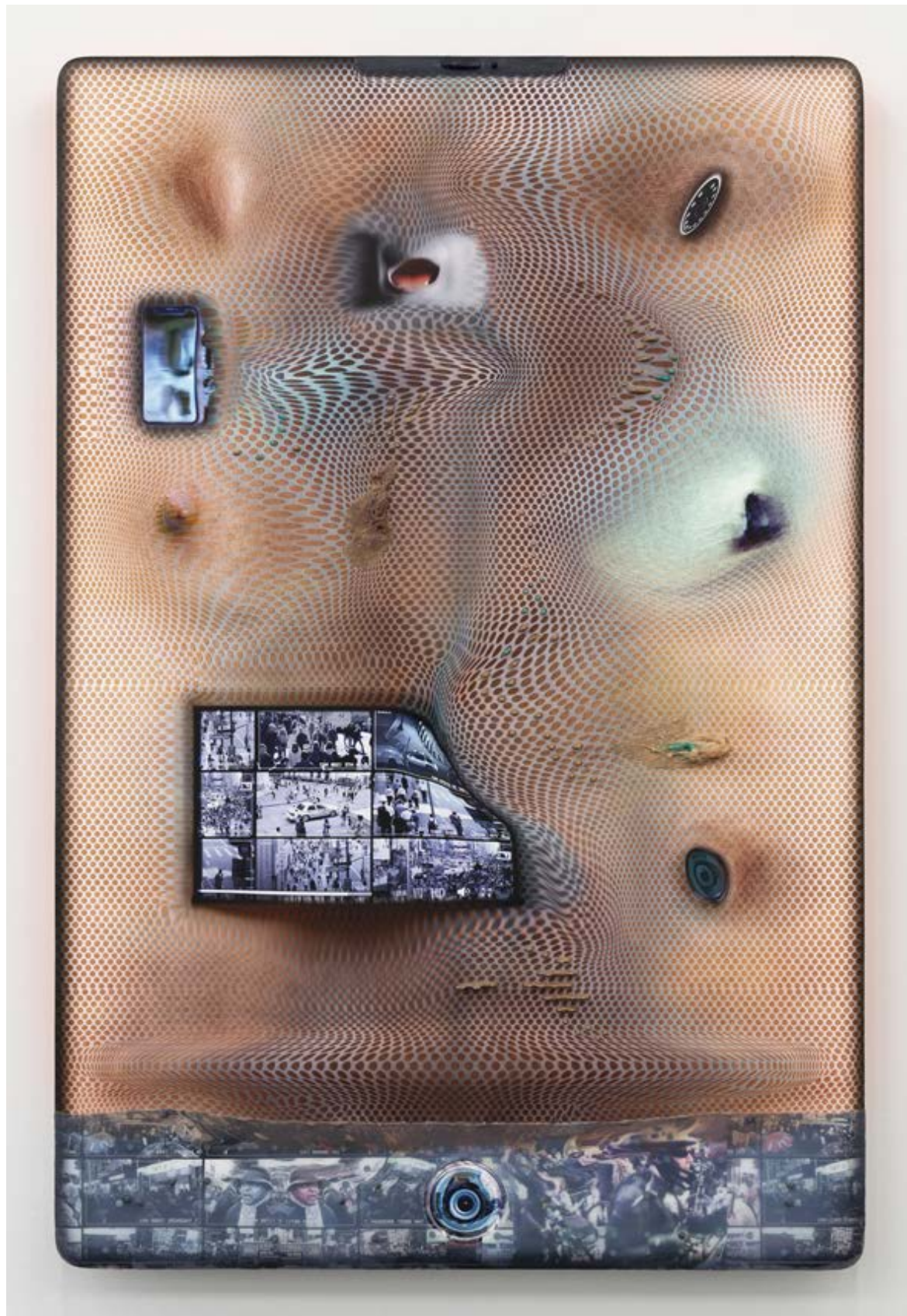
Franklin Melendez is a writer, art advisor, and independent curator based in New York. He is the co-founder of DM Office, which he currently runs in collaboration with Romain Dauriac.

BROOKLYN RAIL

Tishan Hsu: *skin-screen-grass*

DEC 21-JAN 22

By Cassie Packard



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

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

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

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



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

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



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

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

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

Contributor

Cassie Packard
Cassie Packard is a Brooklyn-based art writer.

<https://brooklynrail.org/2021/12/artseen/Tishan-Hsu-skin-screen-grass>
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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."

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

Martha Schwendener (Rail): My real enthusiasm for your work comes not just from what's going on in the present but in the longer history of the art of technology, of bodies, of sculpture of object making and photography—a lot of other things! I first encountered your work at the SculptureCenter in Long Island City. I felt a little embarrassed, I have to say, that I hadn't known about your work beforehand. For me it was really encountering a new artist, but that's how art history works, and also historiography. I write about someone who was kind of forgotten from the same period, a writer, philosopher named Vilém Flusser. Sometimes people aren't ready for certain images or ideas or objects, because the thinking seems either very future oriented or so strange in the present. I don't want to say that your work was ignored, it was highly celebrated, but then there was a quiet moment and people like me who came into the art world a little later, weren't aware of it. So Tishan, can you talk about your process in terms of your background in architecture? And I know you studied painting as well. How does it synthesize in your practice?

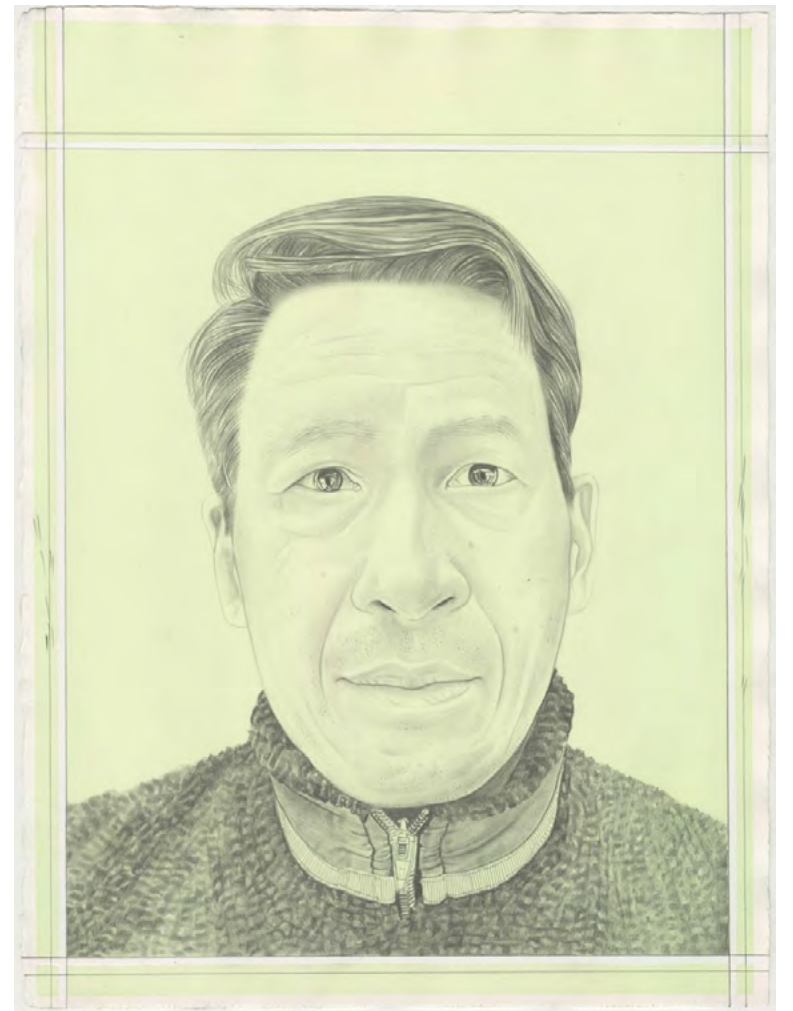
Tishan Hsu: Looking in retrospect at this body of work, which covers the 1980s into the '90s, I have a very different sense of it than I had when I was making it. This was a very intuitive process from the beginning. I did not have any kind of explanatory text to provide, and I think that made it difficult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

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

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

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

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



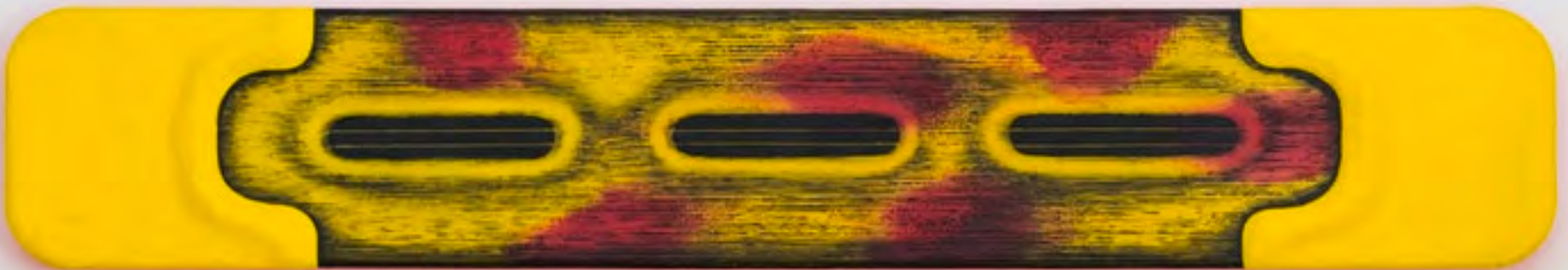
Portrait of Tishan Hsu, pencil on paper by Phong H. Bui

Hsu: In college I studied both photography and film, along with architecture, and I seriously considered being a filmmaker. I thought film was going to be the media of the future. After grad school, I experienced the culture beginning to adopt this screen modality in the workplace, working a part-time job as a word processor in a Wall Street law firm. I felt there was a new kind of affect in the body's relating to a screen object. To me, it was compelling. And even though I wasn't working in a media that was technological like film or video, I felt that there was something perhaps more traditional media could address, that could grasp the kind of sensibility that is created when we're interacting with technological objects. I felt that this was going to be a new paradigm and I began reading writers who were discussing it in that way. This helped to confirm the intuitive sense that I had enough to pursue it. With that in mind, I began focusing on the work.

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

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

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



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

Hsu: 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.

Hsu: 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?



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.

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

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

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.



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: 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.

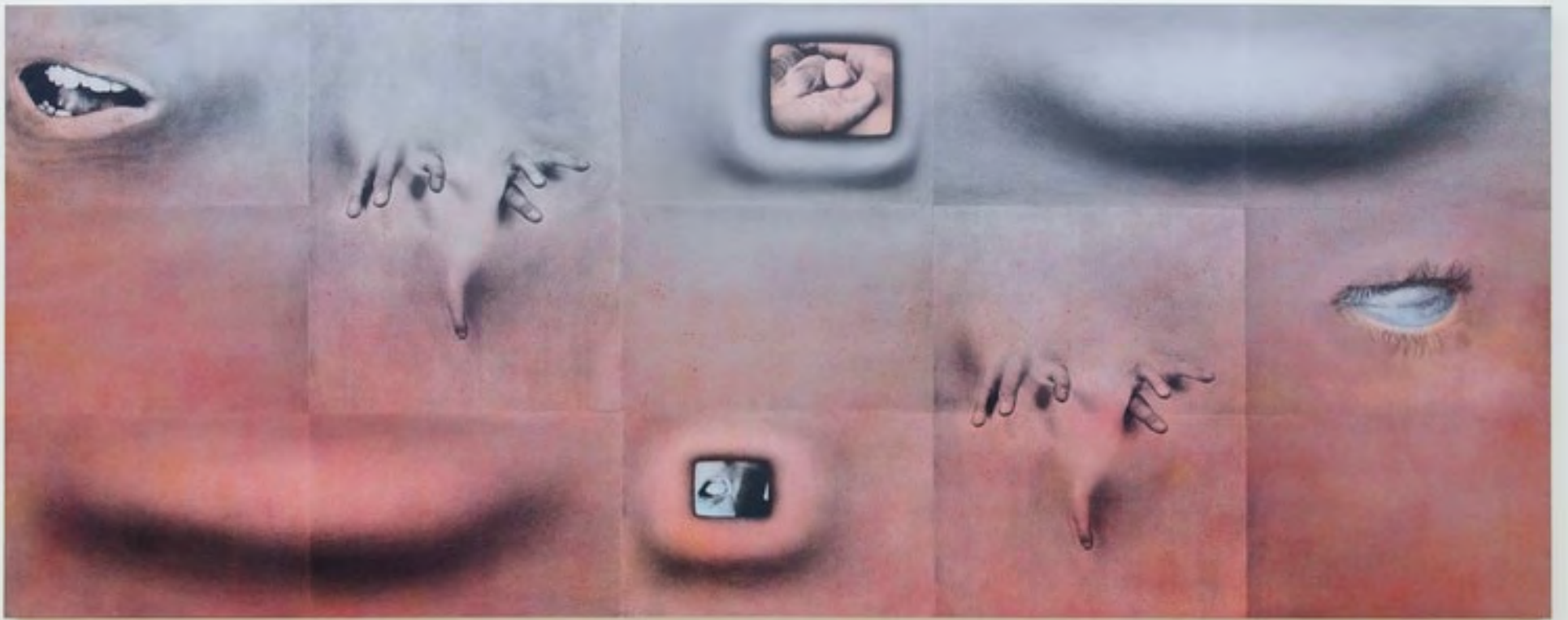
So it's a technological process and then it's somehow about the body. But I also wanted to maintain the affect of more traditional, handmade media. The fact that I could hand make these ripples gives me a certain affect that was important to me. I'm fusing them with the clinical affect of medical images.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

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

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

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



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.

Rail: 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.

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



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

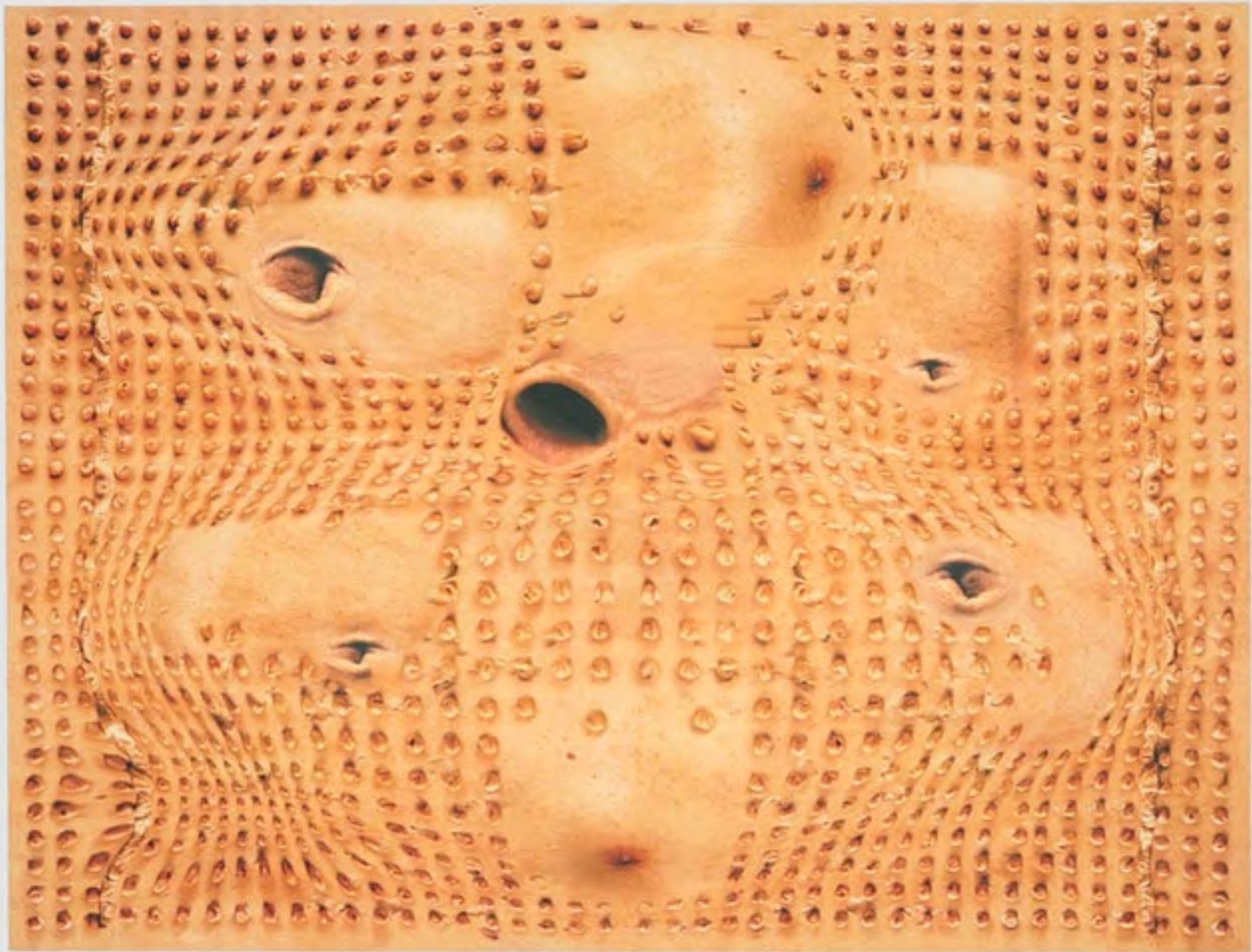
Hsu: When Photoshop appeared for the consumer and for the artists to work with, I took a year off from teaching just to learn Photoshop, just to see whether it was something I really felt like I could invest myself in as a new way of making an image. In the beginning I thought it wasn't going to work,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

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

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.



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

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.

frieze

Tishan Hsu's Prescient Yet Apolitical View of Technology

At SculptureCenter, a recent survey takes a narrow look at the artist's career, focusing on his tech-inspired works from the 1980s and '90s



The medium looks like it could use a good massage in Tishan Hsu's painted wooden panels. With their rounded corners and painted backs that cast a screen-like glow onto the walls, they suggest our now-ubiquitous smartphones and tablets. Their surfaces are built up with acrylic and enamel to mimic a machine's casing and frame trompe-l'œil, shadowed displays that make literal the computing metaphor of a 'skin'. In *R.E.M.* (1986), a moulded peachy-buff casing frames a staticky black-and-white swathe that suggests a lumpy ribcage bisected by venting grilles. The effect is one of dermal layers stretched across hardware, at once both man and machine. But these works were made in the 1980s, and seethe with bulging veins and trapped body parts with all the body horror of David Cronenberg's *Videodrome* (1983). Hardware melts into meatware replete with trypophobia-inducing ports. The paintings are accompanied by sculptures, drawings and a video in 'Liquid Circuit', the artist's first institutional solo show in the United States, currently on view at SculptureCenter in Long Island City. (The survey opened last year at the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles before travelling to New York.)



Tishan Hsu, *R.E.M.*, 1986, installation view, 'Tishan Hsu: Liquid Circuit', SculptureCenter, New York, 2020, acrylic, alkyd, vinyl cement compound on wood, 152 x 152 x 10 cm.
Courtesy: the artist and SculptureCenter, New York; collection of Marian and James H. Cohen; photograph: Kyle Knodell

After studying architecture at MIT and film at Harvard, Hsu found himself working nights at a law firm, hunched over a word processor. It's a posture that has since become so commonplace as to have spawned its own neologisms such as 'tech neck', 'texting thumb' and 'tablet elbow'. (You're probably doing it right now.) While the Pictures Generation was appropriating on-screen images, Hsu was more interested in the apparatuses that broadcast them and their all-too-visceral effects on our bodies. There is one exception: a small side room features a number of pencil drawings, mostly preliminary sketches for other works in the show. There are also some silkscreens and Xeroxes from the mid-1990s onwards that include a character from *The Simpsons* (1989–ongoing). It's a jarring geo-cultural anchor in a show that may scream 1980s but otherwise floats in a vacuum. Notably, unlike artists making cyborg-like works today, Hsu's bodies are neither explicitly racialised nor gendered. He did not begin making work about his Chinese heritage – none of which is included here – until 2006.

Although Hsu showed with iconic dealers such as Leo Castelli and Pat Hearn, he was consistently overlooked during his time. But it's hard to tell whether this exhibition is a reappraisal or a rediscovery. There's a melancholic air of obsolescence here, all these hybrid forms being relegated to the scrap-heap of art history before ever getting their chance to shine. And there's a sense of closing an academic fist around a firefly too, which dampens some of the works' curious effervescence that appears not as bubbles but as tickly static. I think of the way that 20th-century science fiction wanted the future to be just, but cyberpunk just cared that it was weird. My disappointment with this show is that it feels under-contextualized in this space – but maybe it's just that it's not weird enough.



Tishan Hsu, *Liquid Circuit*, 1987, installation view, 'Tishan Hsu: Liquid Circuit', SculptureCenter, New York, 2020, acrylic, vinyl cement compound, alkyd, oil, aluminum on wood, 229 x 363 x 23 cm.
 Courtesy: the artist, the SculptureCenter, New York, and Weisman Art Museum, Minneapolis; gift of Dolly J. Fiterman; photograph: Kyle Knodell

The first rule of writing about Hsu is to call him prescient. Here are some things that his work prefigured: a post-human fusing of man and machine, secondary and tertiary screens, flat design, our wretched technological present. The painting *Closed Circuit II* (1986) is particularly unsettling in its resemblance to Instagram's old logo. Of course, said logo was loosely based on the Bell & Howell camera of the 1950s, but skeuomorphism nevertheless becomes a pertinent way to consider the show's beguiling mixture of smoothness and metal-cold terror of being trapped mid-transformation. Only: who is the designer, and who is the audience here? Is the obsolete object on which these hybrid forms are modelling their current skin the human or the machine? Better not to dwell on it. Safer. Long live the new flesh.

'Tishan Hsu: Liquid Circuit' is on view at SculptureCenter, New York, through 25 January 2021.

Main image: 'Tishan Hsu: Liquid Circuit', 2020, exhibition view, SculptureCenter, New York.
 Courtesy: the artists and SculptureCenter, New York; photograph: Kyle Knodell



ARTIST'S QUESTIONNAIRE

An Artist for the Dystopian Age

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



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

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."

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.

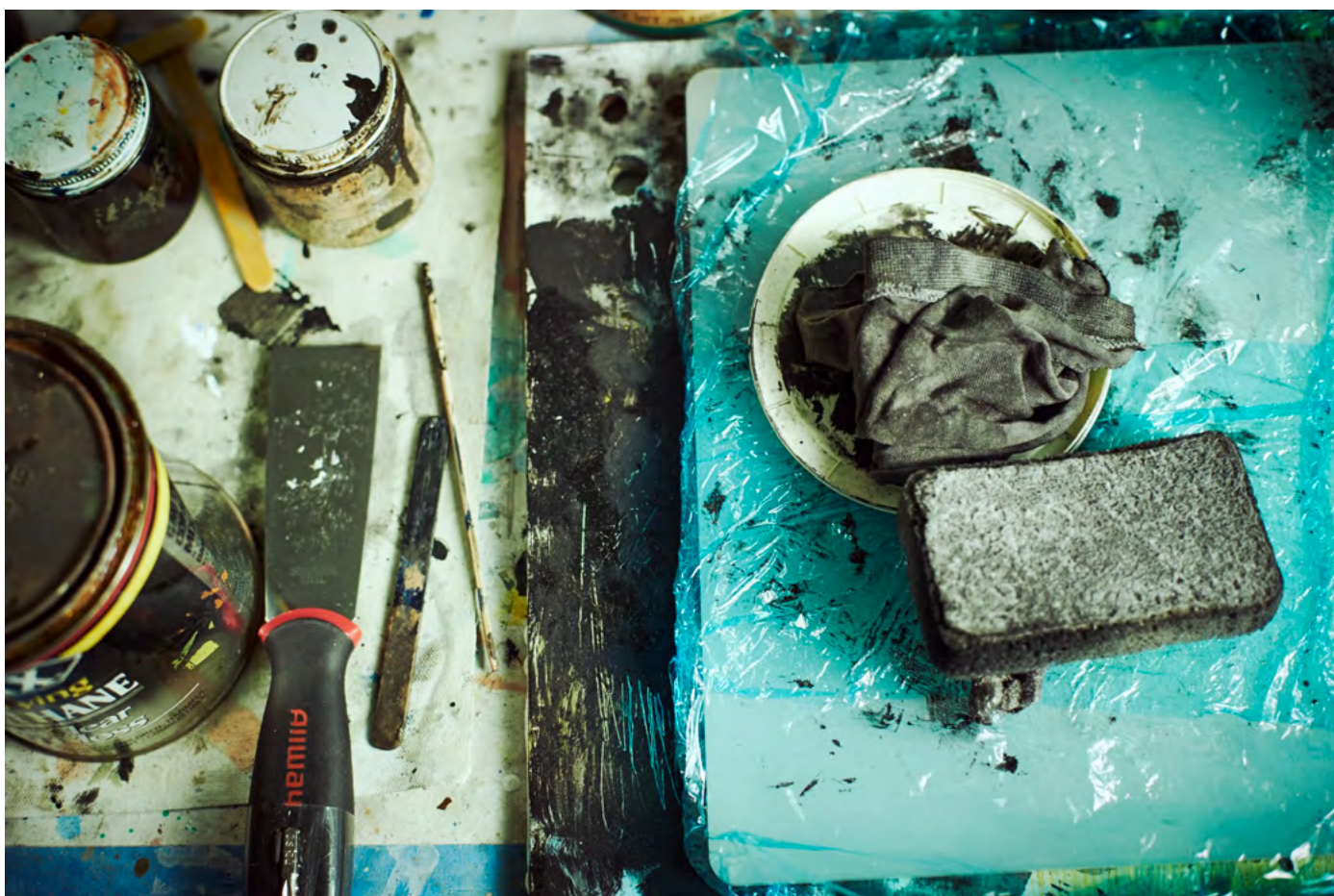


Yogurt containers are just one part of Hsu's system for organizing the substrates he uses to give his sculptures textures that are alternately scratchy and gooey, organic and shellacked. Credit: Flora Hanitijo

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."

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.



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

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.



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

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

No.

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

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What's the last thing that made you cry?

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

What do you usually wear when you work?

Old clothes.

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

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

What do you bulk buy with most frequency?

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

What embarrasses you?

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

Do you exercise?

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

What are you reading?

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

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

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

sculpture



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

Tishan Hsu

January 4, 2021 by Elaine A. King
Long Island City, New York
SculptureCenter

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

Hsu's work is not a theater of science fiction but an interpretation of the present imbued with thoughts about the future. It is also a realization of his efforts to come to terms with a new biological and technical paradigm. Though his work is deeply rooted in questions of how technology affects us as human beings, there is no denying its debt to the dematerializing strategies of Minimalism and conceptualism. And yet his two- and three-dimensional objects transcend Modernist formal values to reveal the eerie eccentricity of life in a post-industrial age. Multiplicity rather than singularity is paramount: pared-down forms meld with eccentric, brightly colored rhomboids and ovoids, assorted illusionistic gashes, holes, and glazed, scratched black surfaces reminiscent of silent electronic screens. Intended to evoke many things, these divergent elements coexist within carefully calculated, unconventional constructions that blend the sculptural and the painterly through clashing textures, high-tech materials, and bombastic surfaces. The metaphorical layering is at times disturbing, yet its bewitching novelty demands further examination. Wood, metal, acrylic, rubber, and aluminum seem to offer material familiarity, but their unusual juxtaposition within strange color planes, protrusions, and haunting light dissolves any sense of comfort.

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

Art in America



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

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

Born in Boston to Chinese immigrants, Hsu studied architecture at MIT before moving to New York in 1979. Briefly a fixture of the downtown art scene, exhibiting at the Pat Hearn and Leo Castelli galleries, he went on to become one of the first artists to experiment with Photoshop and digital manipulation, incorporating newfound computational techniques into analog art forms.

Hsu’s first exploratory paintings are curious creations, straddling the border between two and three dimensions. *Couple* (1983) and *Squared Nude* (1984), vertical wooden panels composed of paint and mixed mediums, evoke Futurism reinvented for the digital age; instead of capturing a flurry of movement made newly visible by photography, they render human cells and orifices as if pixelated on a staticky screen. To create that effect, however, Hsu scratched and etched into his wooden surfaces. Later paintings continued to grapple with the “space” of a screen; to capture both material flatness and virtual depth, Hsu often thrust three-dimensional objects violently through the picture plane. In *Outer Banks of Memory* (1984), a miniature “screen” rests jauntily against a larger canvas; *Fingerpainting* (1994), a silkscreen print, juxtaposes Renaissance-esque depictions of outstretched hands with screen-mediated body parts. Despite his interests in technology, Hsu never relinquished a manual sensuousness. (Indeed, some of the main delights of the show are his drawings and smaller studies; delicate, finely lined, and whimsically colored, they are frequently jotted down on whatever Hsu had at hand—a scrap of paper, legal letter-head, an envelope.)



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



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

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

Hsu's works are so unique that it is difficult to imagine corresponding movements. Some pieces reveal the influence of Minimalism—Donald Judd's stacked aluminum boxes, Carl Andre's floor grids of metal or stone—yet Hsu's insistent bodily references evade those artists' impersonal abstraction. Hsu also worked in a different way than his contemporaries in the Pictures Generation. Whereas artists like Richard Prince, Laurie Simmons, and Cindy Sherman used photography to appropriate and critique the imagery of mass media, Hsu remained fixated on the infrastructure of technology. (His closest peer is probably Nam June Paik, less for his video works than for his towers of television monitors.) There are no pop culture references in the exhibition, unless we count one 1986 painting with an eerie resemblance to the Instagram logo, or, curiously, a Xerox copy of Dr. Hibbert from "The Simpsons." Not gaining traction amid the Neo-Geo and Conceptual movements, Hsu decamped to Cologne in 1988; after returning to the United States two years later, he taught at Sarah Lawrence College until 2019.

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

Between 2013 and 2016, Hsu maintained a studio in Shanghai; in 2019, he exhibited his work from that studio in Hong Kong. (Unfortunately, there was not enough time to include any of it at SculptureCenter.) Repurposing photographs depicting family members during the Cultural Revolution, Hsu scanned, distorted, and reprinted the images onto aluminum panels adorned with silicone forms, suggesting that history can operate much like technology in embellishing and supplanting one's memories. No longer an outlier in an art world that today includes artists like Paul Chan, Hito Steyerl, and Ian Cheng, Hsu presents works that bear little trace of "Asian futurism"—to borrow the critic Dawn Chan's term for a techno-Orientalism that situates Asian agency solely in the future—but reflect instead the globally ubiquitous experience of the human subject being rendered into data points to be collected and processed. In the light of his "Shanghai Project," we can recognize Hsu's lifelong obsession with absence and embodiment as a reaction to the past as much as to the future, and his collected output as an act of reclamation.



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

BROOKLYN RAIL

ArtSeen

Tishan Hsu: *Liquid Circuit*



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

For the last four decades, Tishan Hsu has worked across sculpture, video, painting, and photography to consider the question: “How do we embody technology?” Hsu was born to Chinese parents in Boston, trained as an architect at MIT, and active in the NY art scene in the 1980s where he worked with gallerists like Leo Castelli and Pat Hearn. Hsu’s work was prescient then, and still feels prescient now, although the context he found himself in during the ’80s was unable to synthesize disparate aspects of his work: its relation to Minimalism, the ongoing gentrification of New York, and his Asian-American identity. Hsu’s material references draw from sculptors like Robert Gober and Ashley Bickerton, but his imbrication of body and media feels like a conceptual precursor to contemporary art/tech practices like Sondra Perry and Juliana Huxtable, for whom any claims to an indivisibility between body and media are always laced with questions of race and gender. This conversation is part of the future that Hsu’s works anticipated.

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

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



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

Hsu's surfaces recall both the slick, retro-feeling grids of '80s futurama (like vaporwave meets the Jetsons) but also degraded, or sickly, human flesh. In *Cellular Automata 2* (1989), nine quadrants show a range of isolated parts: two holes that look like round nostrils, perhaps, a mouth, an eye, and then several ambiguous folds of tissue. The openings are reminiscent of wounds, but the smooth edges around the holes suggest that they've healed, or that they were engineered in some way. Occasionally, the holes are the result of violence. *It's Not the Bullet but the Hole 2* (1991), is a silkscreen black-and-white image split into six quadrants, the top left of which appears to be a photograph of a bullet wound, complete with a small measuring tape. A red blush effect stands in for blood or inflammation, hinting at the violence of the interface between humans and technology. The remaining five quadrants have fleshy, rectangular protrusions with wrinkles and folds that look like skin.



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

Other holes look more like computer parts. In *Manic Panic* (1987), two rectangular panels with oblong protuberances have various orifices with lines in front of them that make them look like grates, or the ventilation sections of computers, or in *Liquid Circuit* (1987), a large panel in Thunderbird yellow, a set of chrome ladders resemble ribs flanked by ventilator grates. In Hsu's work, the collision of machinic and human bodies is not always harmonious.



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

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

HYPERALLERGIC

Sculptural Paintings That Channel the Static Soup of Television

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



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

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



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

His early paintings — wall reliefs may be a better term — on display at SculptureCenter in Long Island City, evoke the rounded squares of vintage television consoles. Using Styrofoam and cement, he builds up a topographic moon-like terrain onto the surface of his panels, later flooding it with either neon or flesh-tone acrylic paint, only to then scratch the paint away to reveal the stratum below. The scratches upon the rounded canvas recall white noise on a television screen; static made tangible. Some of these works, like "R.E.M." from 1986, take a more sculptural form, reminiscent of a flattened Barbara Hepworth. At other times, works like "Liquid Circuit," from a year later, incorporate ready-made elements such as stainless-steel handles, calling to mind Robert Rauschenberg's *Com-bines*.

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

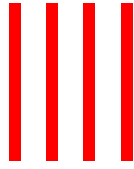


Tishan Hsu, "Portrait" (1982), oil stick, enamel, acrylic, vinyl cement compound on wood, 57 × 87 × 6 inches

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

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

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



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



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

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

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



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

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



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



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

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

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



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



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

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



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

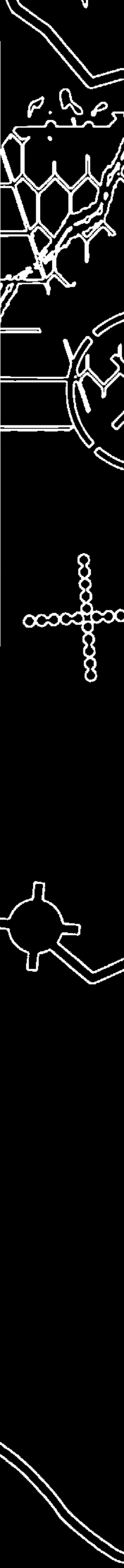
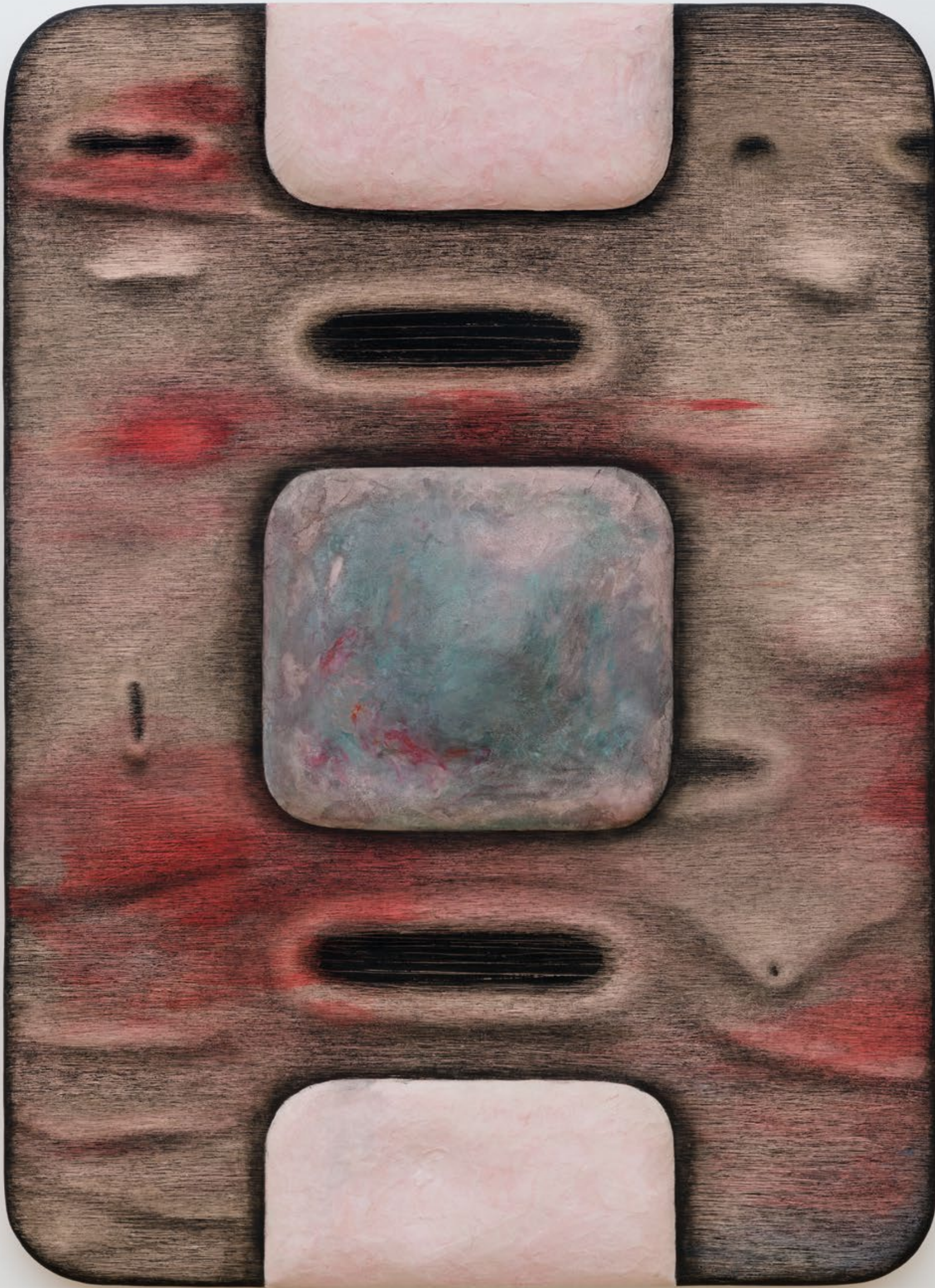
For me, these works are by turns compelling and pleasantly queasy-making, but not without a welcome sense of humor, as in their ba-dum titles such as *Holey Cow* (1986), a drippy, wide bench in bright yellow shot through with apertures and Holstein-black splotches alike. In another macabre joke, *Heading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

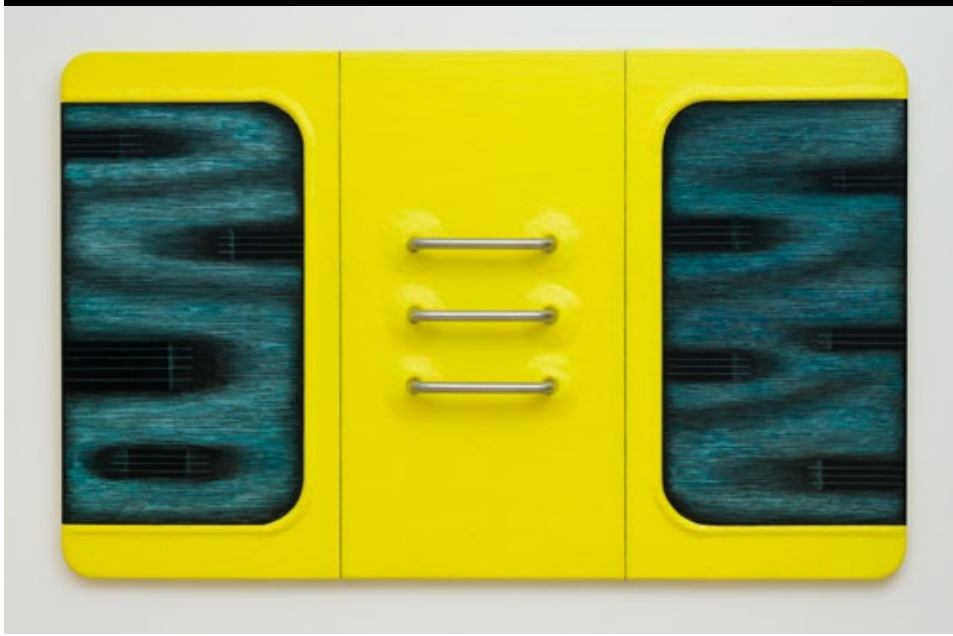
Hsu has long eschewed articulations of his work through that choking diaphane called "identity." This is true even in a recent project that draws from family photo albums found in Shanghai, a place he did not know in his youth, but where he has recently spent a few years living and working in the wake of his mother's death. When Hsu found the albums, many images were missing—a removal attributed to the Red Guards. In the resulting works, he elides these representations still further: warping and eroding them, covering faces with cells in the indelible green of early digital screens' phosphor type. These most recent endeavors are not represented in *Liquid Circuit*, but their emergence perhaps elucidates how, for the last forty years, Hsu's interest has not been in the self, nor the individual's subsumption into technology, but rather in a larger political economy of visual culture, the digital forms of which are never—despite loud claims to the contrary—truly immaterial. From vast server farms to cobalt mining in the Congo to the manufacturing of chip boards and precision plastics in places like Malaysia and Shenzhen, the smooth interfaces of our digital lives are made possible by environmental degradation and mass immiseration at the hands of both corporate evil and our own complicity. It's a wound so big you don't have to stick your finger in it to believe.

KALEIDOSCOPE



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TISHAN HSU

LIQUID CIRCUIT

Words by Lola Kramer

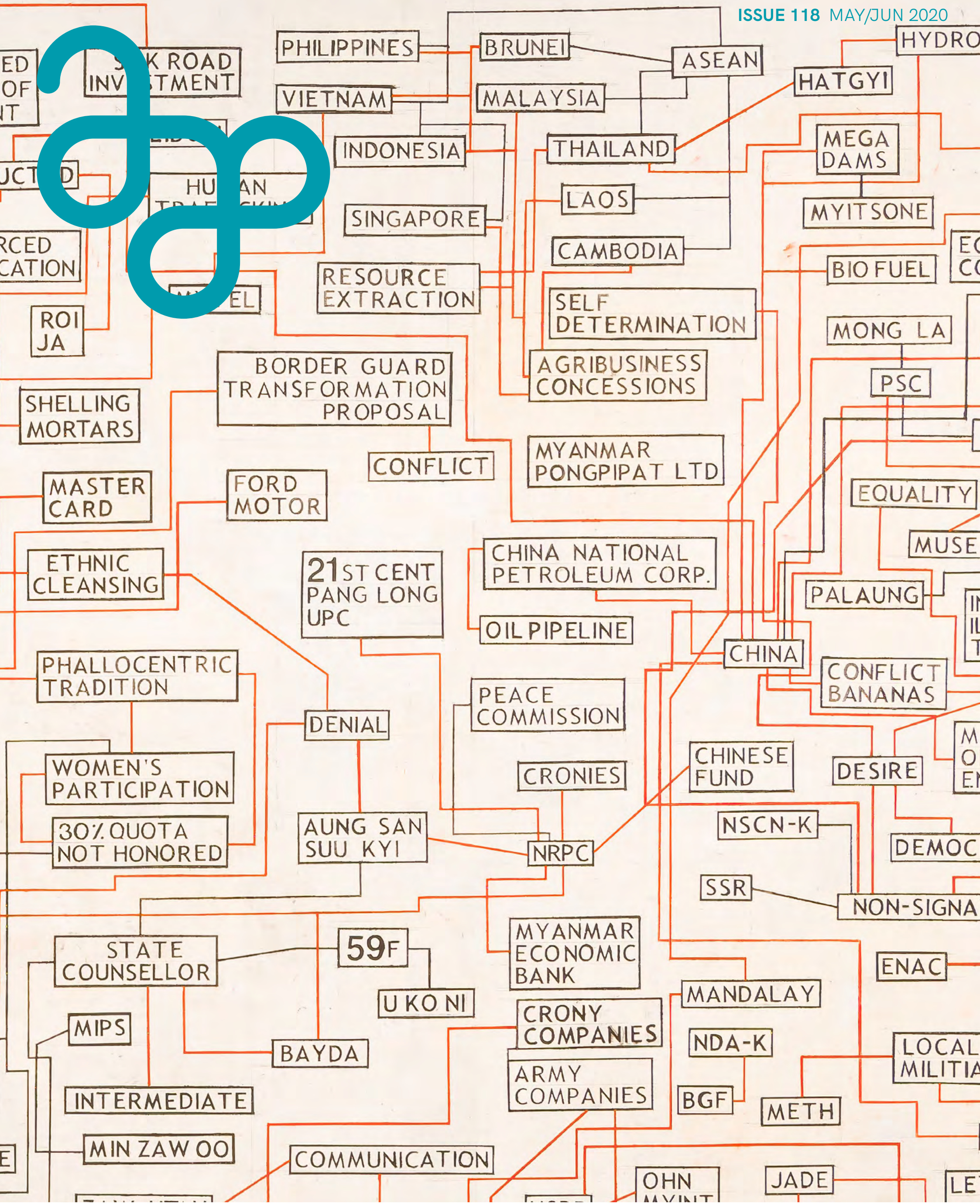
To explore the influence of technology on the human condition, turn to Tishan Hsu. The New York-based artist has created work about the alienating relationship between technology and the human experience for nearly forty years. His first museum survey in the United States, “Tishan Hsu: Liquid Circuit”, has finally arrived at Sculpture Center, a bi-coastal event that follows its initial debut at the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles. Curated by Sohrab Mohebbi with Kyle Dankewicz, the exhibition assembles significant works from 1980 to 2005. It tells the story of an artist’s capacity to apprehend momentous changes and speaks to the notion that an artwork might not be meant for the time it was made. Although his radical paintings and sculptures captured the attention of the downtown East Village art scene of the ’80s, Hsu’s work has been largely overlooked by audiences until now. Without much market success through his exhibitions at galleries like Pat Hearn and Leo Castelli, Hsu ultimately withdrew from the art world to dedicate himself to teaching, echoing Duchamp’s 1961 prophecy that “the artists of the future will go underground.”

After completing the Environmental Design and Architecture program at M.I.T., Hsu found a position at an architectural firm. However, he quickly knew that working a conventional 9 to 5 would never suit him. In a recent conversation with Hammer curator Aram Moshayedi, the artist recalls that he “started having fantasies about walking out of the office without telling anyone where [he] was going.” Hsu decided that he would be an artist and that he needed to do this in New York—but he was also a realist, and understood that he couldn’t rely solely on his artistic practice to pay the bills. During the late 1970s, the unavoidable role of technology in the workplace began to come into view. There was a new demand for this kind of work. Hsu learned to type and found himself a night job doing word processing at a blue-chip Wall Street law firm. A stealthy infiltration of the screen began to find its way into his work. Even before computers were widely available, Hsu understood that to be a body in the future is to be a body with a device. In *Cell* (1987), a large-scale rectangular wall-relief composed of four painted panels with sculptural

forms resembling ceiling light fixtures attached, our digital divide is embodied both three-dimensionally and pictorially. Behind these floating appendages is a finely scratched, painted surface of wood, an illusionistic technique Hsu uses throughout the work to convey screen static. Organically shaped holes of black space betray the void behind the ominous picture plane of the screen. What appears are red glowing lines that are reminiscent of a music sheet before any notes have been written.

Wall-hanging works like *Cell* simulate the sense of the technological without being technological. While Hsu’s use of static mediums like painting and sculpture may have appeared counterintuitive, they were not. He was not attempting to rewire or reconfigure television sets as Nam June Paik had in his 1987 work *Li Tai Po*; nor was he merging with the flow of media through video works as Gretchen Bender had done. Instead, he was transmitting the feeling of one medium through another. This is precisely what one feels when encountering the cold, sterile environment of *Virtual Flow* (1990–2018), a two-part modular pink tiled sculpture with a glowing screen on wheels attached to an incubator-like machine with biological forms growing inside of it. The work recalls the unlikelihood of Richard Brautigan’s 1967 poem “Watched Over by Machines of Loving Grace,” in which the machines of the future have freed people from the oppressions of labor (a fate which may or may not come to fruition any time soon). The work is yet another example of Hsu’s ability to project into the future. Even today, the fields of healthcare have become “virtual.” The technological shift is still underway, furtively transforming our lives from its fundamental elements and its bodies. Being “plugged in” is a way of life, and Tishan Hsu’s work feels more urgent than ever.

On view through 25 January 2021 at Sculpture Center, New York, “Liquid Circuits” is the first museum survey exhibition in the USA of artist Tishan Hsu (American, b. 1951, lives and works in New York) bringing together key works from 1980 to 2005.



Tishan Hsu

Liquid Circuit

Contemporary art frequently expresses the zeitgeist, with artists taking on the role of truth-teller or even diviner. Chinese-American artist Tishan Hsu began making work that approximated present-day screen culture back in the 1980s—decades before smartphones became commonplace. His uncanny clairvoyance in picturing our current technological intertwinement was so avant-garde at the time that audiences and the art market were simply baffled by his acrylic and wood wall sculptures and expansive tiled installations. As a result, Hsu continued to work in relative obscurity in the ensuing decades. His first institutional survey, “Liquid Circuit,” organized by SculptureCenter in New York, debuted in January at the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles. With pieces from the ’80s to the new millennium, the show introduced a new generation of viewers to Hsu’s prescient work.

Hanging high on the wall and evoking the all-seeing Dr. TJ Eckleburg billboard in F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* (1925), Hsu’s

Portrait (1982) employs a Magritte-like surrealism to picture the jumbled components of a face and body within a black contoured frame like that of an iPad—a visually apt but anachronistic comparison, since Hsu created this work 28 years before the device’s invention. Floating eyes and orifices, rendered in sketchy, fuzzy lines meant to mimic television static, gape at the viewer amid pink, fleshy, vinyl blobs. In its dissolution of the human form into the technological and vice versa, *Portrait* reminds us that while technology surveils us at every turn, we have become willing culprits as we adopt digital tools as mediators between us and the world. To this point, *Closed Circuit II* (1986) bears a strange resemblance to the Instagram logo, which in turn is based on a Polaroid camera. The surface of Hsu’s sculpture is subtly molded as in the curves of a body; the aperture evokes a Cyclopean gaze. As with a spouse or a beloved pet, technology and humanity begin to resemble one another.

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

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

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

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

JENNIFER S. LI

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



Spike Art Magazine NYC Issue

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DIGITAL

DINOSAURS

TISHAN HSU

“LIQUID CIRCUIT”

HAMMER MUSEUM

26 JANUARY –

19 APRIL 2020

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

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

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

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

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



Tishan Hsu, *Cell*, 1987

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

© Tishan Hsu

Photo: Jeff McLane



View of “Tishan Hsu: Liquid Circuit”, Hammer Museum

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

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

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

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

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

Grace Hadland

ARTFORUM

MAY/JUNE 2020

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BODY HORROR

This page: Tishan Hsu, *Vertical Ooze*, 1987, ceramic tile, urethane, vinyl cement compound, acrylic, and oil on wood, 61¼ × 70⅞ × 24¼".

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



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

MATTHEW RONAY

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

Some of Hsu's pristine Euclidean models, such as *Ooze*, 1987, resembling a barren sauna basin waiting to be filled with myriad fluids, arouse in me a love for the rational illusion that architecture brings to sculpture. Offsetting this order are feelings of confinement, abandonment, and disease. Are the works' patterns, punctured with holes, just some piebald markings, or are they lesions, viral cells, torture wounds? The world created by Hsu's reliefs feels stagnant, swampy; at the same time, it suggests the paradoxical experience of cosmic velocity, when things seen through a spaceship window appear still even though they're careening through the universe. The ship's claustrophobic interiors will also appear in sharp contrast to the sublime infinity of outer space. Similarly, the louvers in Hsu's paintings like *Closed Circuit II*, 1986, which resemble dashboards or readouts—or interfaces for an AI assistant like the medicine cabinet in George Lucas's *THX 1138* (1971)—are hauntingly still, almost refrigerated, yet imply activity. The oscillators in the painting show nothing, or perhaps their sine waves are so long we cannot see them. *Has humanity flatlined?* the artist seems to ask. *Has technology paused evolution?*

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





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

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

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



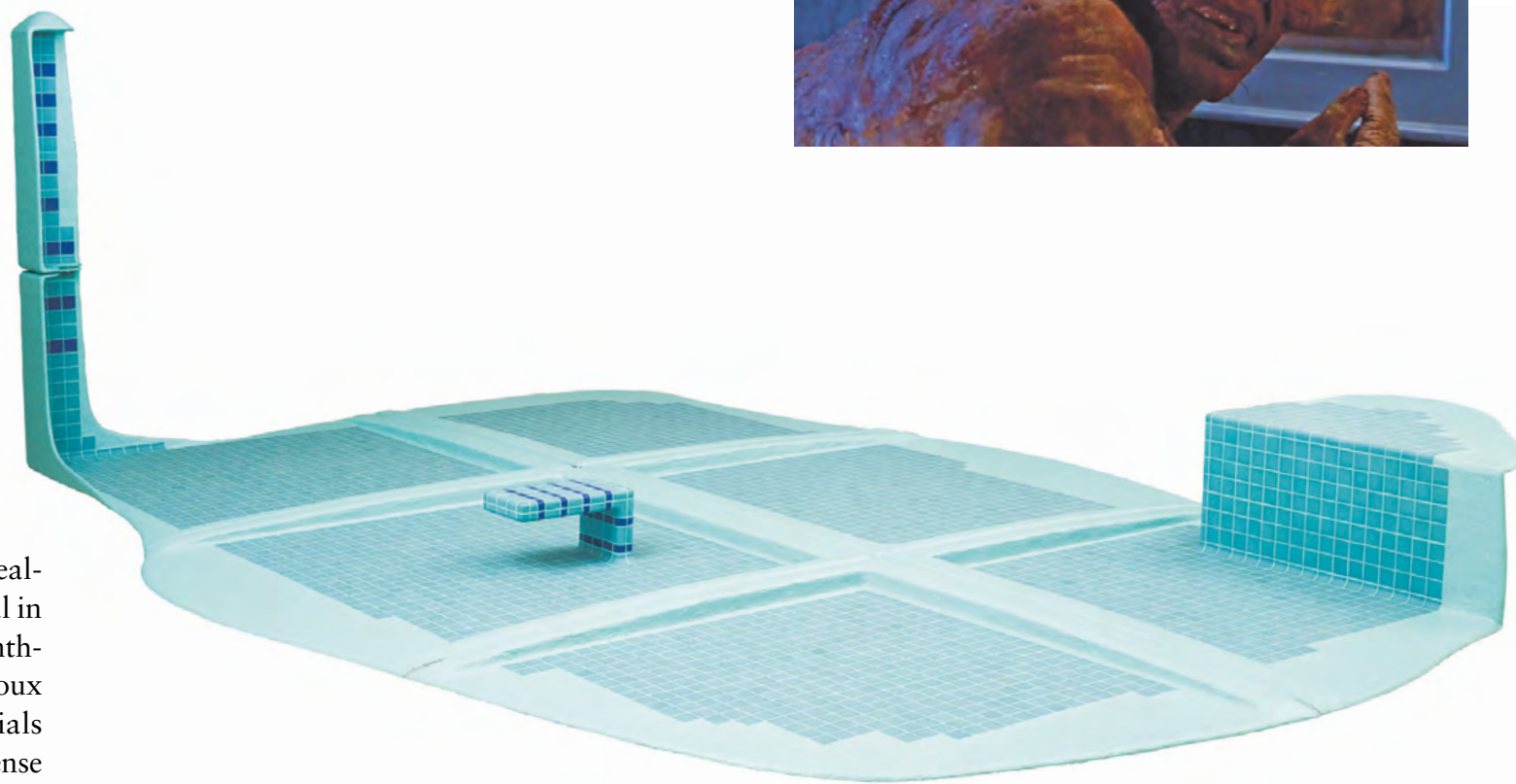
*Has humanity flatlined? the artist seems to ask.
Has technology paused evolution?*



and the room. How the body is like a room and vice versa. She also writes about how we don't have nuanced language to communicate pain and how we don't believe each other's pain. And now I'm thinking about the kind of pain that a body remembers. Looking at Hsu's work makes me feel like I am renting pain in the process.

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

I always see abs in the paintings, too. They may be something similar to the pharyngeal arches that appear just beneath the head of a human embryo. These outpouchings, which look like little fat rolls, develop into the facial muscles we use to express ourselves. They also become the muscles and bones of the neck, as well as important organs that help us speak, like the larynx. Hsu's are folds of expression. Although perhaps they're—yes—ribs? The painting *Outer Banks of Memory*, 1984, is sick. It has sores. I recognize this as the same language of falling apart I revel in every time I watch Jeff Goldblum in David Cronenberg's *The Fly* (1986). It, too, is a tale of aging, disease, entropy, and the winnowing of organic matter, an artwork made during the 1980s that seemingly reflects the horror of AIDS, even though the director insisted there was more to it. Is it possible that an artwork can insist when an artist does not? I hope so, for selfish reasons. (I usually grow bored of my own



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

Below: Tishan Hsu, *Ooze*, 1987, ceramic tile, urethane, vinyl cement compound, and acrylic on wood, 11'5½" × 15'1½" × 5'8½".



interpretations.) We currently find ourselves suffering the wrath of an elementary technology—the Covid-19 virus—and the sterility and the vulnerability of our bodies Hsu's works addressed in the '80s hold as true now as they did then. That Hsu's abstractions, almost forty years after they were made, can capture the cruelty and ethos of a similar moment suggests that abstraction's slipperiness is still useful and will remain so.

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

When I'm looking at his work, I'm trying to find out if I identify with the Body or with the Mind. Certainly, the strict, geometric tile grids of shower works like *Autopsy*, 1988, encourage me to apply empirical knowledge to the forms, to read them in accordance with the languages of design, architecture, and science, as do the utilitarian qualities of control-panel works like *Manic Panic*, 1987—works with ordered holes covering or holding in some sort of smog or organs and wires. But their lumps, and their Möbius strip-like

bending of space, keep me from classifying them as such. The works are skins, and skins protect. Scarry writes of how the rooms where torture takes place mimic the bodies being tortured: "In normal contexts, the room, the simplest form of shelter, expresses the most benign potential of human life. It is, on the one hand an enlargement of the body: it keeps warm and safe the individual it houses in the same way the body protects the individual within." I keep coming back to the sense that Hsu's work is made by an artificial intelligence that harvested all the information about life-forms so that it could build a virtual model, the walls of which articulate its observations. But by trying to isolate and understand their tendencies, it destroyed the Gaia-like properties of life-forms by dividing them up. Division leads to more division. What we're left with is prisons.

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

MATTHEW RONAY IS A SCULPTOR LIVING IN NEW YORK.



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

Below: Richard Artschwager, *Table and Chair*, 1963–64, melamine laminate on wood; table: 29 3/4 x 52 x 37 1/2", chair: 45 x 17 3/4 x 21".

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

LANE RELYEA

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

But again, there were differences. Like other neo-geo artists, Hsu paid homage to the sleek Minimalism of the '60s and seemed especially drawn to the work of Richard Artschwager. But for Hsu—unlike, say, his contemporary Haim Steinbach, who was also influ-

enced by Artschwager—it wasn't the older artist's Pop tendencies that were of interest; rather, it was the surrealism of his material choices, how his preference for synthetics over metals, for concoctions like Formica and Celotex, seemed less about the hard facts of industry than about the hocus-pocus of chemistry. Like Artschwager, Hsu favored a dyspeptic palette of drab browns and grays unsettled by sudden flashes of more pungent hue. And like Artschwager's, his work confounded its own status as autonomous art by flirting with the unassuming look of functional furniture and equipment, mere auxiliaries in a wider landscape of purposive activity.

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

Robert Gober, and, even more significantly, the fascination with biomedical engineering that characterized Matthew Barney's earliest exhibitions.

Take Hsu's *Autopsy* from 1988, a standout in the retrospective. The piece has a fresh gleam to it, albeit a contradictory one, befitting both showroom merchandise and sterile lab equipment. Which makes the object initially suspicious: Is this about the allure of consumerist pleasure or the threat of hospital suffering?



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

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

And then there's that strange pink paste that crowns the work. Whatever it is (the checklist suggests cement compound coated in acrylic paint), it stands in stark contrast to the piece's otherwise smooth, disinfected surfaces, all that stainless steel and ceramic tile, which can be so easily mopped clean. Opposed to the regularity and sameness of the gridded brown tile work,

the pink cement is all craggy irregularity. Maybe this is the object's function: to provide an appropriate theater for the sober, clinical inspection of such aberrations and eccentricities. Unlike the wheels at its bottom, the wheels at its top are out of commission, their usefulness suspended. They can't act, though they can be acted on. They recall the way cartoons depict dead animals, flat on their backs, with their legs sticking straight up in the air. Suddenly symbolism creeps back in; this could be some sort of high-tech funeral pyre. But that's not quite right, because the ritual performed here seems too convoluted, too self-absorbed. What we're looking at is an apparatus that has become preoccupied with its own lack of seamlessness and self-consistency, that has grown aware that it too possesses a soft underbelly. *Autopsy* comes across as an object that's about to dissect itself. □

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PENTA

Contemporary Artists on Art and Society

By Abby Schultz, March 23, 2020



Tishan Hsu
Photograph by Grace Rivera

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

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

Penta: While poetry may not make anything happen, it does provide “a way of finding meaning,” as the U.K.-based poet Tamar Yoseloff has said. How do you think art—in the form of poetry, painting, sculpture, or anything else—helps society understand the social and political disruptions of our time?

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

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

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

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

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

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

Myers: One of the things that interests me about the [Auden] poem is that it’s about Irish identity. Yeats, as an Irishman, is central to Yeats’ practice...in that sense of being a colonized people who is resurrecting the kind of beauty, romance, and specificity of the Irish idiom within an overarching English idiom. What is contrasted in the piece is this sense of Irish literary storytelling, song, and culture as being loud and empty and without any kind of consequence. The fact that we are still talking about Yeats proves the lie to that. Everything from tap dancing to a certain kind of storytelling comes from that kind of early progenitor. Look at the quilts of Gee’s Bend—working-class people making quilts that rival any of the abstract expressionists, their contemporaries—and you realize there is a way in which art is made for speaking from the bottom up. Art is really good at having an outsize voice, a voice that allows for Motown [in Detroit] to Burna Boy in Nigeria; for young, poor people to be able to speak to the masses. What’s sad is when the art world forgets that this is in our capacity—to speak from the bottom up.

Shiferaw: I don't think art [disrupts] intentionally. It just does it naturally. The moment you introduce yourself into the world, you're already disturbing and disrupting a system that's already ongoing. An unseen person is out there being seen, like Burna Boy. I don't make work to intentionally disrupt, but my existence within a system disrupts it. That's why it's probably more interesting to see works from [those who are] not so rich or privileged.

Penta: Can artists bridge the divide between the practice of making things and the expectations of the art world?

Hsu: There have always been museums, there's always been an art world, and there's always been art. And art sometimes is part of the art world and sometimes it's not. The power of art is that it manages to survive while all of the social, political contexts that surround it change.

I'm curious whether something like performance will survive as a form. [Serbian performance artist Marina] Abramovic managed to do her retrospective in a kind of museum context and preserve the performances after 20, 30 years [at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in the spring of 2010].

Rottenberg: Performance, maybe, is one of the only art forms that could survive because it could be like an oral tradition without materiality, like an oral tradition of myth-making, rather than of preserving technology or objects in climate-controlled storage.

Myers: I'm interested in the idea that there are art worlds that aren't easily mappable onto New York or L.A. or Paris. In that space comes a lot of possibility for resistance.

When you see young performance artists in the Philippines or Vietnam or Kenya, everybody is into "durational performance." Why? Because their images of performance are all still images. They think I laid down [in a photo] for 10 hours, and that's what the performance is. It's a fascinating moment of misinterpretation, retranslation. In places in which the language doesn't quite meet up, there is a lot of space for resistance.

Hsu: By where they are and what they're doing, you mean? It's not conscious resistance.

Myers: Mistranslation is one of our most fruitful tools as artists. Meritocracy is a lie. The best artists are not the ones who are selling. The ones who are selling are the ones who have access to the market in a certain way. When you realize that mistranslation is as much a part of this as anything else, it opens up a sense of possibility.

Hsu: It's difficult to say that if a work is succeeding in the market, it's not good work, and only work that is not in the market is good. Because art is bigger than that, no matter how big or powerful the market is. Good art can come from any context, as can bad art.

Myers: Amen.



New York-based artists Christopher Myers and Tishan Hsu.
Photograph by Grace Rivera

Shiferaw: The Aboriginal Australians, the native people of that land, have always made works—song lines, patterns. But in recent years, there are a lot of wealthy entrepreneurs, Western art historians, who have tried to market Aboriginal art as contemporary art, which I find interesting because I don't see it as contemporary art, I see it as its own thing and it's as significant as contemporary art.

Hsu: Even in the context of contemporary art, I don't think it detracts from the power of that work. The work is there, and in a way [the Aboriginal artists have] gained more exposure to the world by somehow being seen as contemporary. They shouldn't need the market or the contemporary collectors, but it has [brought] a lot more people to see the work and to look at it for what it is.

Rottenberg: But then that's problematic, too. It's like: Who can speak for politics? Who has the right? There's also this fear of like, "Oh, I can't speak to that." Since the Trump era, there's a kind of retreating again to, "I can't do work that would touch any kind of sensitive topics because I don't perhaps have the full kind of vision of what that means." There's a lot of fear, too, of upsetting people.

Hsu: Do you feel that's related to the market or a separate issue going on right now?

Rottenberg: It's a separate issue. It's a political issue. It's about what your peers are going to say, rather than if [an artwork] is going to sell or not: "How can you take your privileged freedom to document things that are not in your immediate surroundings or to speak for people that are not you." There's also confusion and questioning about what position you come from as an artist.

Hsu: That's a critical issue. [Artists] dealing with their "work" are dealing with issues that are very much a part of being human that don't actually fall within economics or law or business, or whatever other things that the professional world or the working world deals with. To the extent that artists, because of the road that they're open to, hit on these kinds of collisions and controversies, are actually revealing to the broader world that doesn't have necessarily the time or focus to do so [themselves]—but actually is interested in it. Art is a filter that we can [use to] begin to talk about these other things or begin to be aware of these other things. That's a way that art can illuminate social, political issues.

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

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

BY JULIE BELCOVE ON DECEMBER 29, 2019



Courtesy of Peter Ross

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

His paintings and sculptures began to reflect his assessment that technology was becoming an extension of the human body, a condition he concluded was destined to intensify over time. Modular tiles in his sculptures echoed bits of digital data; three-dimensional objects hinted at contraptions yet to come. Paintings evoked computer monitors but also blood cells or flesh. The body, he determined, could no longer be depicted the way it had been for millennia. Hsu was seeing the future. "At that point, art was in this camp and the technology people were in the other camp, and they were going to be 'evil,' undermining the humanistic world we live in," he says. "And I didn't see it that way." Making no value judgment on new technology itself, Hsu was interested instead in its inevitability—and its impact.

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



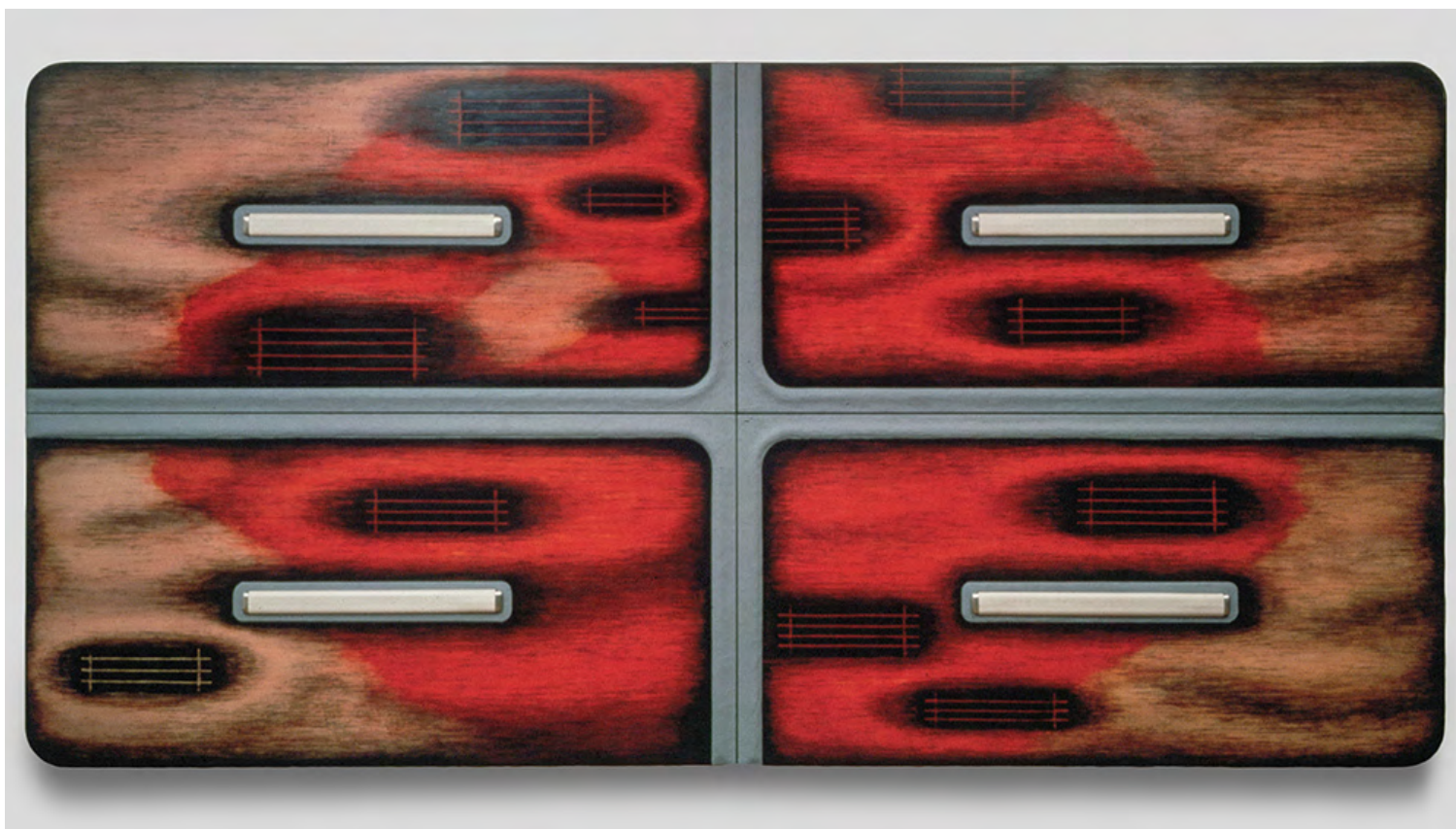
Autopsy, 1988
Courtesy of Peter Ross

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

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

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

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



Cell, 1987
Courtesy of Peter Ross

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

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

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

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

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

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



R.E.M., 1986
Courtesy of Peter Ross

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

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

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

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



The artist in front of Natural Language, 1994
Courtesy of Peter Ross

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

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

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

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

"It was just very strange work," he says. "People didn't know where to begin."



The artist in front of Splits, 1992
Courtesy of Peter Ross

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

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

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

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

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



Hsu's brushes
Courtesy of Peter Ross

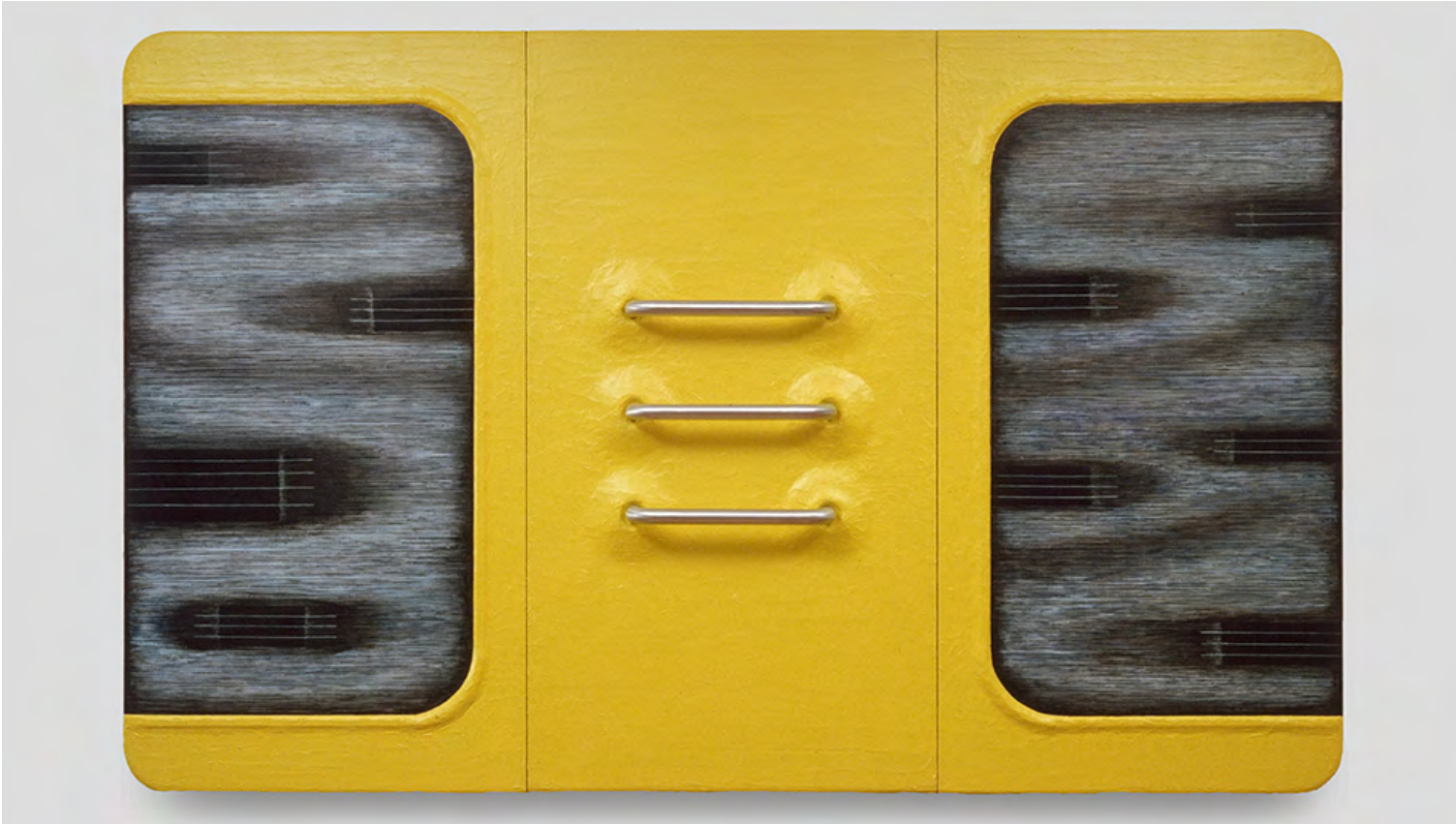
Angela Ferraiolo, a member of the visual and studio art faculty at Sarah Lawrence, describes Hsu as a “very responsive membrane” and an “exacting” experimenter who spends years perfecting his materials and processes. “He believes in art in its purest form,” she says. “What his day job did was allow his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

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

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

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

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



Liquid Circuit, 1987
Courtesy of Peter Ross

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

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

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



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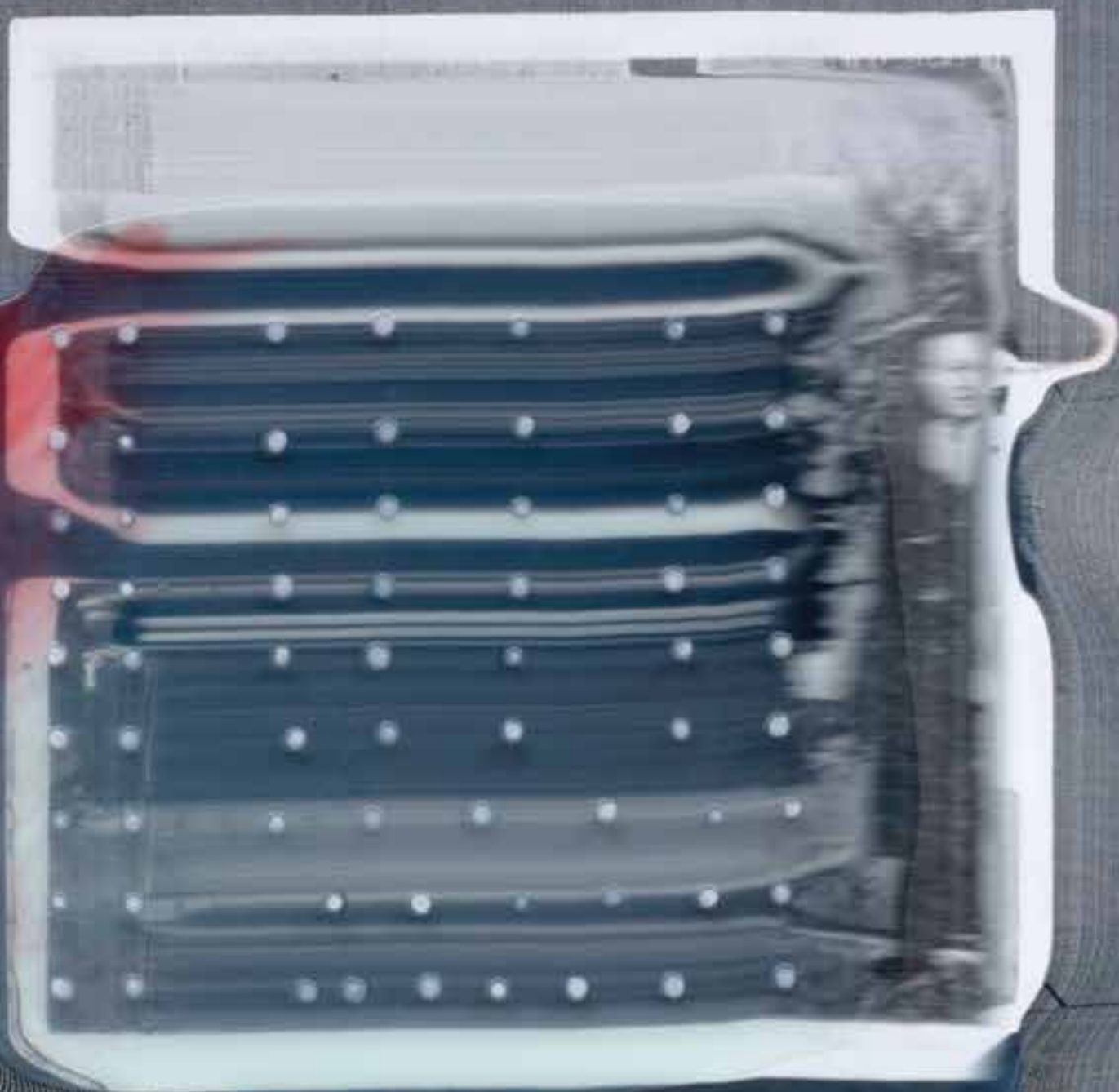
Clinical Cosmology: TISHAN HSU

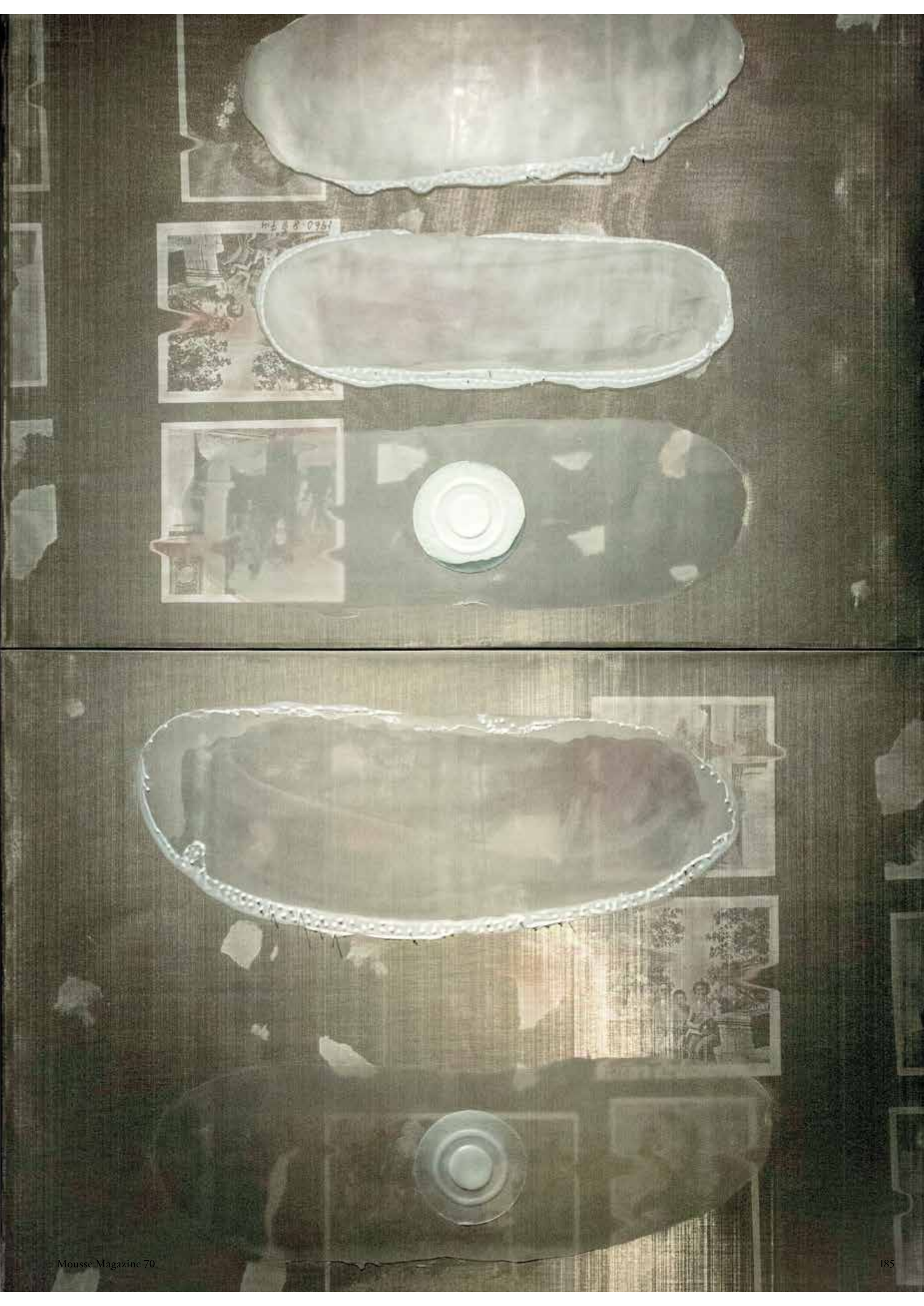
BY
Hera Chan

Clinical Cosmology:
TISHAN HSU

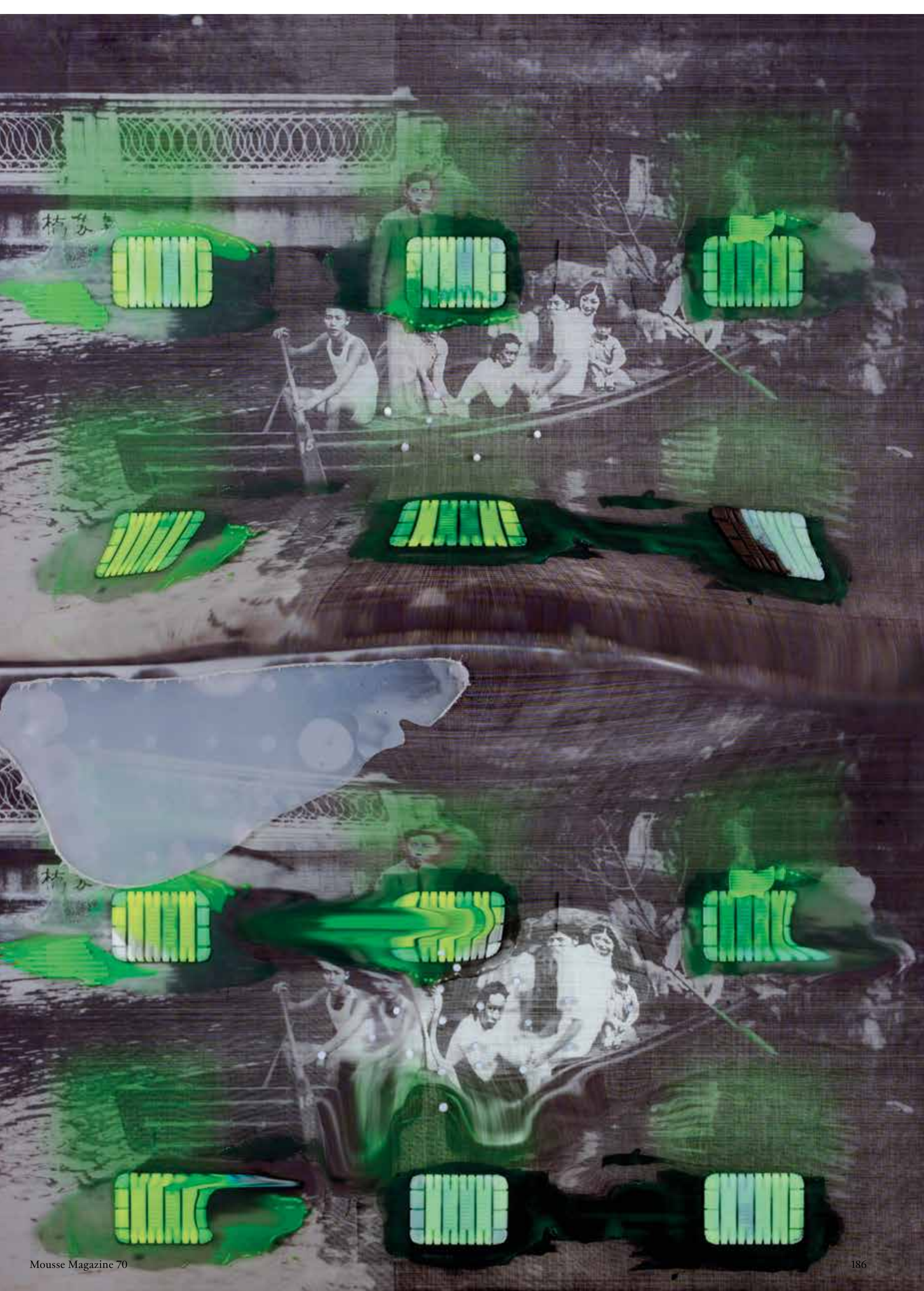
Contrary to popular belief, TISHAN HSU offers a simple proposal. Orifices open up from flat surfaces or tiled sculptural pieces, or are embedded in skin-bag surfaces or technologically manufactured images. But his violating fissures, seamlessly embedded, are not intended to illustrate the engagement 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.







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- 180 *Blue Cross* (detail), 1991.
© Tishan Hsu. Courtesy: the artist and Empty Gallery, Hong Kong.
Photo: Pierre Le Hors
- 183 *R.E.M. revisited* (detail), 2002.
© Tishan Hsu. Courtesy: the artist and Empty Gallery, Hong Kong
- 184 *QMH 3.2.1* (detail), 2019.
© Tishan Hsu. Courtesy: the artist and Empty Gallery, Hong Kong.
Photo: Lance Brewer
- 185 *Dread-Fog*, 2013.
© Tishan Hsu. Courtesy: the artist and Empty Gallery, Hong Kong.
Photo: Michael Yu
- 186 *Boating Scene 1.1.2*, 2019.
© Tishan Hsu. Courtesy: the artist and Empty Gallery, Hong Kong.
Photo: Lance Brewer
- 190 *Auto-Immune*, 1988.
© Tishan Hsu. Courtesy: the artist and Empty Gallery, Hong Kong
- 191 *Double Bind*, 1989.
© Tishan Hsu. Courtesy: the artist and Empty Gallery, Hong Kong
- 192 *Intensive Care*, 1990.
© Tishan Hsu. Courtesy: the artist and Empty Gallery, Hong Kong
- 193 (Top) *Cellular Automata*, 1989.
© Tishan Hsu. Courtesy: the artist and Empty Gallery, Hong Kong
(Bottom, left) *Vertical Ooze*, 1987.
© Tishan Hsu. Collection of Centre Pompidou, Paris.
Courtesy: the artist and Empty Gallery, Hong Kong
(Bottom, right, from top) *Reflexive Ooze*, 1987.
© Tishan Hsu. Collection of High Museum of Art, Atlanta.
Courtesy: the artist and Empty Gallery, Hong Kong;
Portrait (2), 1984.
© Tishan Hsu. Courtesy: the artist and Empty Gallery, Hong Kong;
Cold Cut, 1987.
© Tishan Hsu. Courtesy: the artist and Empty Gallery, Hong Kong

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

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

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.

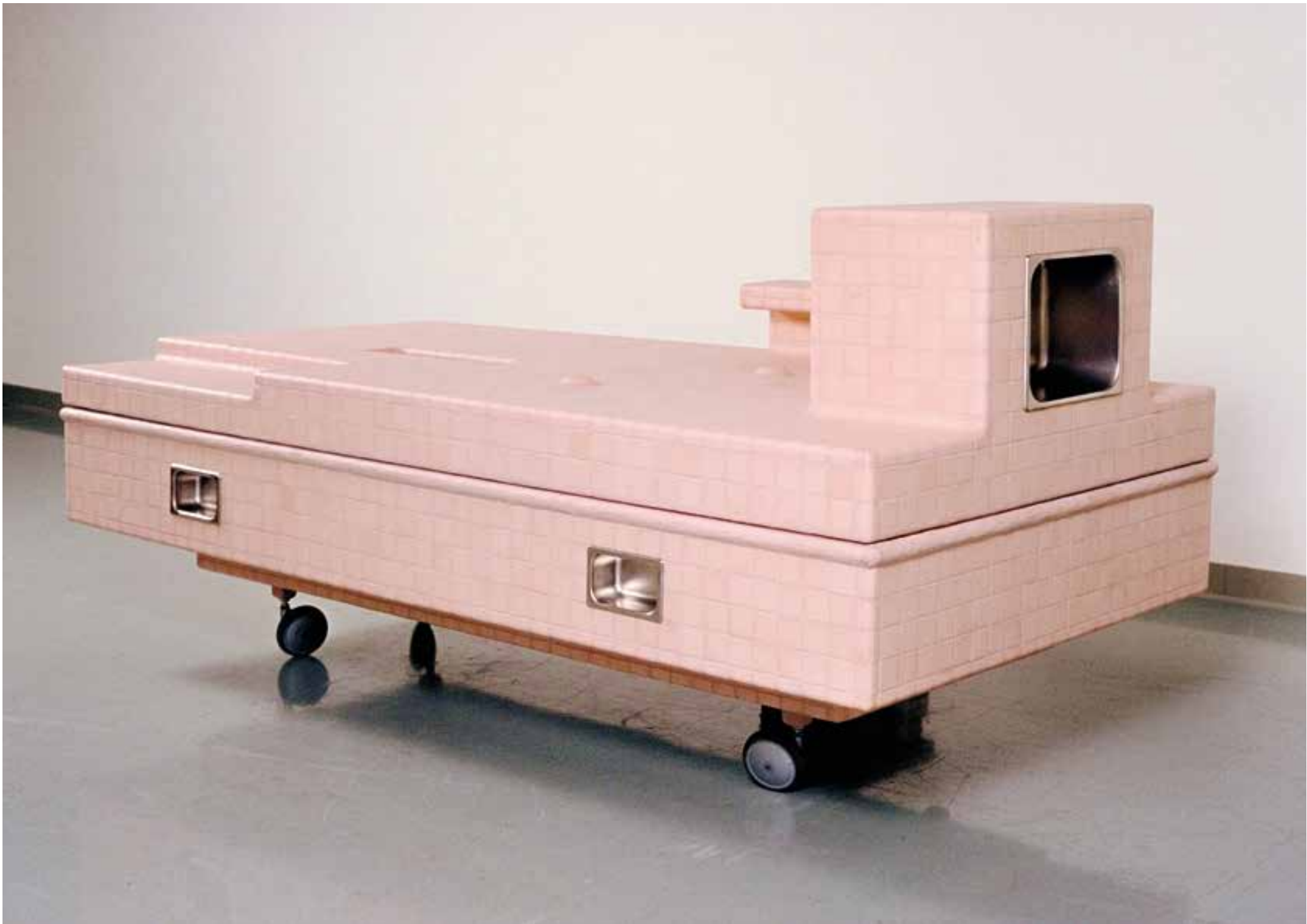
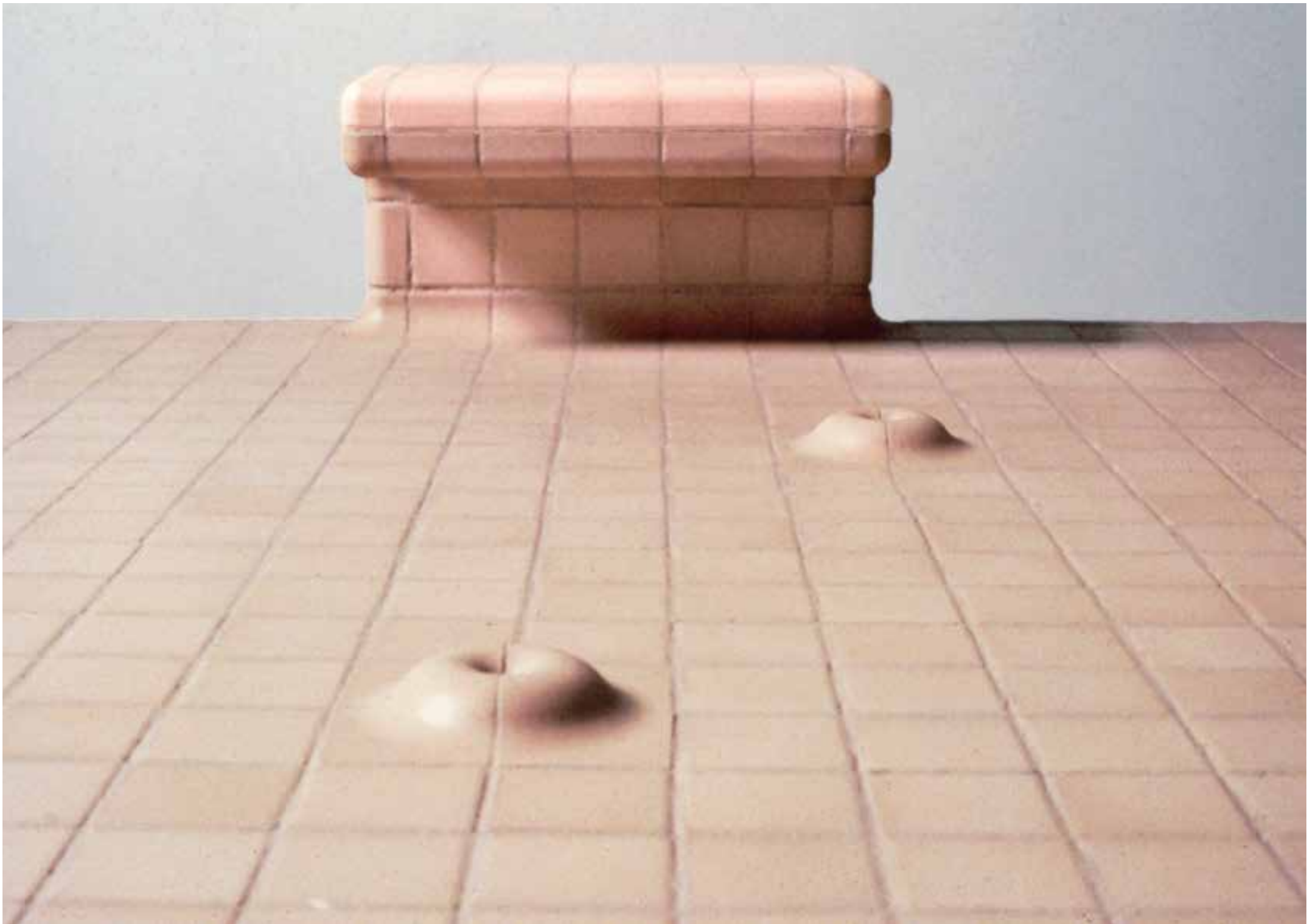
The four works in the *Boating Scene* (2019) series show warped images of a well-dressed family on

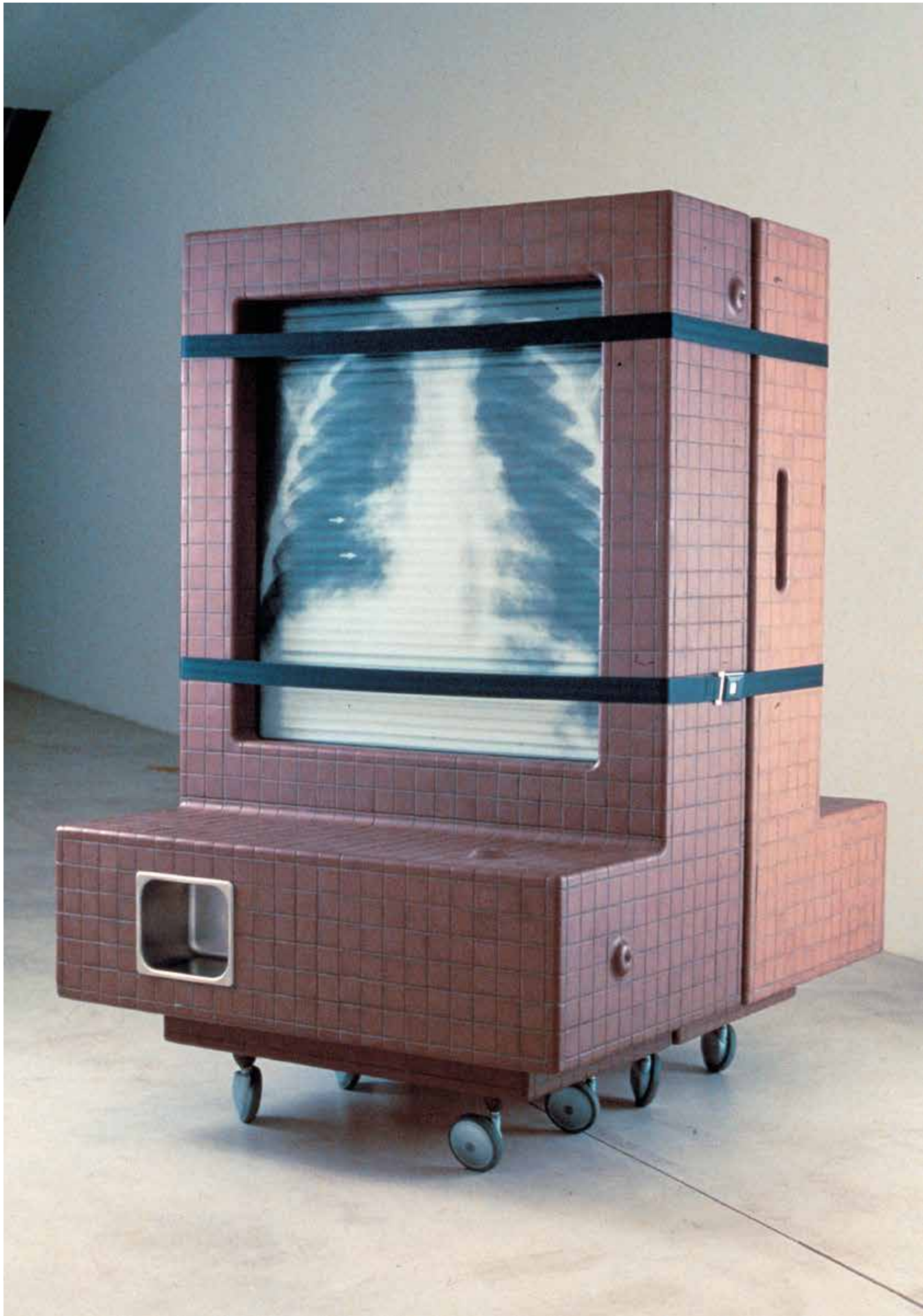
a boat. A double displacement occurs, first of the family itself in migration, and then in its confrontation with digital textures. The images are UV printed on aluminum, and computer-chip-like shapes of pigmented silicone appear to drip through the back of the plates. As Donna Haraway proposed in “The 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.

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

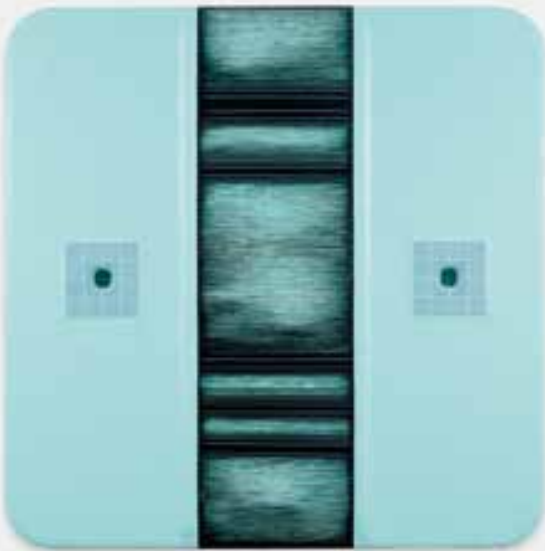
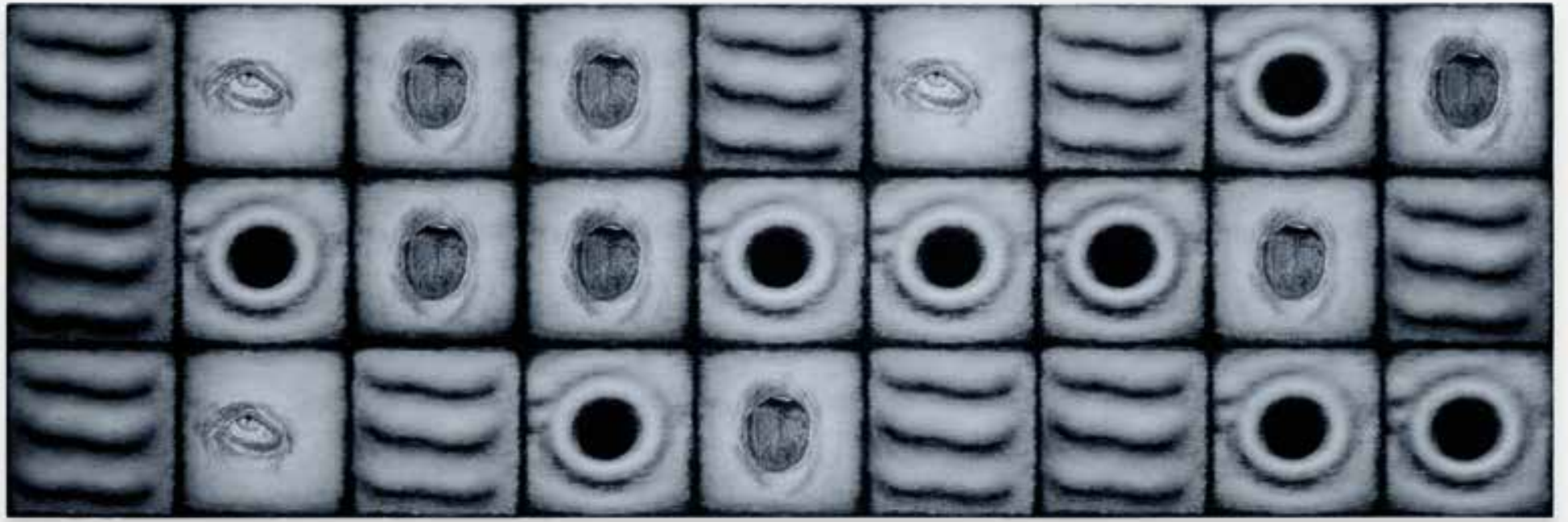
TISHAN HSU (b. 1951, Boston) spent his very early years in Zurich, then grew up in Ohio, Wisconsin, Virginia, and New York. He studied architecture at MIT and received his BSAD in 1973 and M.Arch in 1975. While at MIT, he studied film at the Carpenter Center, Harvard University. He moved to New York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

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









The World Catches Up With Tishan Hsu



Tishan Hsu's "Virtual Flow" (1990) will be shown at Art Basel Hong Kong.
CreditCreditTishan Hsu and Empty Gallery

By Ted Loos

March 27, 2019

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

GARETH HARRIS | 25th March 2019



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

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

Works at the fair include the installation Feed Forward (1989, \$80,000), a piece mimicking a hospital drip using a Diet Pepsi bottle, and the styrofoam and enamel work White Noise (1983, price undisclosed), which resembles a warped electronic plug socket.

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

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

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

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

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

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

• Tishan Hsu, Empty Gallery, until 25 May

Tishan Hsu

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

By Jeppe Ugelvig

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

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

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".



Boating Scene 1.1.2, 2019



Double Ring, 2019



QMH 1, 2019



Virtual Flow, 1990- 2018

Image courtesy the artist and Empty Gallery, Hong Kong

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.”

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

From the Spring 2019 issue of *ArtReview*



Lip Service, 1997

Courtesy the artist and Domus Collection, Beijing



Head, 1984

Courtesy the artist and Empty Gallery, Hong Kong

The Conditions of Being Art: Pat Hearn Gallery & America Fine Arts, Co.

An exhibition at Hessel Museum of Art, Annandale-on-Hudson, is dedicated to two of New York's most influential galleries of the 1980s



It's hard to catch lightning in a bottle, but it may be harder still to stuff the squirming facts of an artistic and social scene into a museum exhibition. Valiantly, and perhaps slightly quixotically, co-curators Jeannine Tang, Lia Gangitano and Ann Butler attempted to do just this in 'The Conditions of Being Art: Pat Hearn Gallery and American Fine Arts, Co.' at Bard College's Hessel Museum. A retrospective snapshot of the intertwined contributions of Pat Hearn and Colin de Land, the redoubtable couple whose galleries cut a storied path through the New York art scenes for 21 years, the show is a reminder of the vital energy that dealers have occasionally injected into the art world. However, through no fault of its own, it feels less like a rousing road map for the future than an elegy for a lost time, both professionally and aesthetically.

Hearn and De Land championed difficult, nearly unsaleable art. De Land, in particular, was known for his desultory approach to the art business, despite his role in founding what would become the Armory Show. (The catalogue notes that De Land frequently owed his artists money and struggled to pay his rent, while Hearn ran a significantly tighter ship, presumably partly owing to her early advocacy of 1980s market darlings like Philip Taaffe, Peter Schuy and George Condo – the latter's work was notably absent from the show.) It's hard to imagine an approach less suited to our time, where the scramble for mountains of cash, especially among galleries of comparable size to Hearn's and De Land's, has become less about greed than about a struggle against rising rent. (Ramiken Crucible, the claimant of De Land's throne, closed this year.)



'The Conditions of Being Art: Pat Hearn Gallery & America Fine Arts, Co.' exhibition view, 2018. Courtesy: Hessel Museum of Art, Annandale-on-Hudson

Hearn, among her long list of accomplishments, is remembered for her advocacy of artists and activists who were affected by the AIDS crisis, particularly the photographers Mark Morrisroe (represented here with a collection of his grubby, sexually charged portraits) and Jimmy DeSana (whose black and white pictures of people as sexual sculptures recall Erwin Wurm's 'One Minute Sculptures', 1997– ongoing, crossed with Robert Mapplethorpe's 'X-Portfolio', 1978), and for almost single-handedly founding the East Village gallery scene. De Land's programme, on the other hand, was associated with artists like John Knight, Andrea Fraser, Renée Green and Peter Fend, who were grouped together under the imprimatur of Institutional Critique, as well as überhip avant-gardists like Alex Bag, Kembra Pfahler and Art Club 2000 (a collective of Cooper Union undergraduates for whom De Land acted as ring leader). Both Hearn and De Land died tragically young, both of cancer.



Christian Philipp Müller, Works from A Scene of Friendliness Mellowness and Permanence, 1992, mixed media installation. Courtesy: the artist and Galerie Nagel Draxler

The pair were long due for a retrospective, and the exhibition and comprehensive catalogue amply fill in the history. Many of the works on view were familiar, like Joan Jonas's ritualistic films and the lush paintings of Jutta Koether and Mary Heilmann. Others, however, were welcome surprises, like the trio of wall works and a sprawling sculpture by the unjustly forgotten Tishan Hsu and a hilarious installation by Alex Bag, which bitinglly satirizes art fairs as venues for artistic prostitution. The show's lamest ducks are sententious, bone-dry works by Peter Fend, Jason Simon, Lincoln Tobier and their October-toting ilk, which embody the worst impulses of the era's snooty academicism and political windmill-tilting. But despite these small pitfalls – ticks of De Land's academic training in philosophy – the exhibition's total picture is one of insatiable intellectual and aesthetic curiosity and uncompromising integrity, the likes of which are rarely seen today.

'The Conditions of Being: Pat Hearn Gallery & America Fine Arts, Co.' runs at Hessel Museum of Art, Annandale-on-Hudson, until 14 December 2018.

Main image: Renée Green, *Bequest* (detail), 1991, panels of lath siding printed with words leading to a door locked with a pad lock. Courtesy: the artist and Galerie Nagel Draxler

Gallery-as-Form: ‘The Conditions of Being Art’ at the Hessel Museum of Art

Jeppe Ugelvig



Installation view, ‘The Conditions of Being Art: Pat Hearn Gallery & American Fine Arts, Co. (1983–2004)’, Hessel Museum of Art, Annandale-on-Hudson, New York, 2018. Courtesy Hessel Museum of Art.

What is a gallery? A site, a context, a situation. Imbricated in the history of art are diverse facilitating institutions, and the commercial gallery is a contributor often left out of analysis. As a site of simultaneous production and exchange, galleries may constitute a physical framework for the ‘socius’ of art, while gallerists’ individual strategies of support, advocacy, sale and distribution (as well as, of course, speculation and exploitation) inevitably shapes art in both overt and indirect ways. Yet, with only a few exceptions,¹ the significance of the operations of galleries and the ‘work’ of gallerists are, beyond biography, rarely accounted for in the discipline of art and even exhibition history. By tracing two of the most remarkable US gallerists of their time – Pat Hearn and Colin de Land – the exhibition ‘The Conditions of Being Art: Pat Hearn Gallery & American Fine Arts, Co. (1983–2004)’ at the Hessel Museum of Art in Annandale-on-Hudson sets out to do just that, presenting the gallery as one of art’s sites from which one can and must write a history of art – a history that is at once formal, social and interpersonal.

Unknown to some, near-cult characters to others, Hearn and de Land were central actors in New York’s art world from the early 1980s to the early 2000s, initially as distinct agents but increasingly overlapping as their social, professional and romantic lives interweaved through the 1990s. (Both passed away prematurely as a result of cancer, Hearn in 2000, de Land in 2003). While both partook in multiple exhibition platforms in and outside of New York, the exhibition (curated by Lia Gangitano, Jeannine Tang and Ann Butler) focuses on each of their (more-or-less namesake) commercial galleries, whose libraries and archives have been housed and expanded upon at the Center for Curatorial Studies at Bard College and the Hessel Museum since 2012.² An avid participant in Boston’s punk-driven art and music scene of the late 1970s, Hearn relocated to New York and launched her pristine floor-tiled gallery on the corner of Avenue B and East Sixth Street in 1983 with a series of ‘New Painting’ shows. De Land, meanwhile, launched the sesquipedalian ‘American Fine Arts, Co. – Colin de Land Fine Art’ on East Sixth Street in 1986, showing the work of Richard Prince, Peter Nagy and ‘J. St. Bernard’, one of several pseudonyms under which he would produce art throughout his career. Distinctly, both displayed a fascination for performatively enacting and speculating the ‘gallery’ as a stage and situation within the cultural milieu of a booming cultural metropolis – Hearn through a polished, Mary Boone-esque persona, de Land as an underground impresario – and both with an exceptional understanding of art’s social, political and economic development in their time.

In a scattered chronology, the exhibition traces many of the solo presentations and curated exhibitions facilitated by the two galleries. Between the presentation of now recognised artists' earliest work – including that of Simon Leung, Joan Jonas, Jessica Stockholder, Mark Dion and Jutta Koether – important historical recoveries appear too, for example in the case of Kembra Pfahler (whose name is mostly known in the underground film and music world), the institutional critical artist Lincoln Tobier³ and Tishan Hsu. A contemporary of New York's 1980s 'neo-geo' trend ('neo-geometric conceptualism'), Hsu's wall- and floor-based objects (*aHead*, 1984 and *Institutional Body*, 1986) are abundant with bodily orifices, but also what appears as interior fixtures, the soft curves of stationary computer screens and warped cybernetic grids. As part-bodies, part-machines, they procure an eerie corporeality radically different from the polished, simulated surfaces of many of his contemporaries at PHG, such as Peter Schuyff and Philip Taaffe, whose work surrounds Hsu's in the exhibition's central gallery.



Installation view, 'The Conditions of Being Art', Hessel Museum of Art, Annandale-on-Hudson, New York, 2018.
Courtesy Hessel Museum of Art.

Accompanying many of the works and re-staged installations at the Hessel is carefully presented archival documentation, where promotional material, correspondence and ephemera runs alongside photographs of gallery installs, Christmas parties, art fairs, openings and vacations. In this way, the exhibition sheds a light on the labour of production, mediation and advocacy that lies behind any work of art, particularly as it circulates (or attempts to do so) in a market – but also on the social life that inevitably informs this kind of labour. The curatorial vision is, as a result, purposely messy, leveraging a variety of museological techniques (archival, biographical, formal, contextual) to pose a question back to the audience: *how* do we 'remember' art and its world(s)?

At times the exhibition falls back on well-established art historical themes or tropes, categorising along identitarian lines such as gender or sexuality. For instance, the sexually explicit black-and-white photographs of Jimmy De Sana, a long-time friend and collaborator of Hearn, are presented alongside the post-minimalist installations of Tom Burr, who developed his approach to queer urban archaeology while at AFA. While evoking the iconography of S/M, De Sana's images feel self-consciously outside any real discourse of sexual practice, concerned instead with presenting the human body as one object amongst others; on the other hand, Burr's *From 42nd Street Structures* (1995) and *Movie Theater Seat in a Box* (1997) specifically address gay cruising practices by way of its architectural remnants, the body notably absent, echoing the rapid disappearance of these spaces in a changing New York City. If the exhibition's foregrounding of singular works is sometimes compressed, the accompanying catalogue expands on the social thematics of the show with ten newly commissioned texts by an intergenerational group of art historians and curators, as well as an exhaustive (and very useful) exhibition chronology. In their respective essays Mason Leaver Yap, Jeannine Tang and Diedrich Diederichsen all tackle the ways in which the formation of cultural 'scenes' happens alongside processes of gentrification (Hearn was the very first commercial gallery, following the non-profit Dia, to move to the run-down Chelsea neighbourhood in 1994); and in a highly personal text, Gangitano solidifies Hearn as a ferocious supporter of queer artists, taking on responsibility for multiple artists' estates as the AIDS crisis continued to take its toll.



Installation view, *'The Conditions of Being Art'*, Hessel Museum of Art, Annandale-on-Hudson, New York, 2018.
 Courtesy Hessel Museum of Art.

What comes across strongly from both exhibition and catalogue is the fact that art history always unfolds at the interface between personal lives, social scenes, markets and institutions; what artist Renée Green has referred to as 'contact zones', 'where cultures meet, clash and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power.'⁴ For her 1994 exhibition 'Taste Venue' at Pat Hearn Gallery, partially re-staged at the Hessel, Green recast the gallery as the generically named 'Venue', a 'cheap trendy space in a hip downtown location', advertised in newspapers such as *The Village Voice* as a space for rent by anyone interested.⁵ Over the span of the month, a range of cultural and commercial events unfolded there, marking art's overlapping with other cultural scenes in New York's hip downtown milieu. Whether by actively stylising the presentational modalities of a commercial gallery,⁶ or by showing art 'about' art and its spaces of contact and exchange, it is indeed the concern for the gallery *as a site* that emerges as the most persuasive characteristic across the projects initiated or supported by Hearn and de Land. Julia Scher's security systems, for example, exhibited and installed at both PHG and AFA, reflected on the ambivalent, paranoid pleasure of knowingly being surveilled;⁷ and Andrea Fraser explored the choreographed protocols of the gallery space through performance works at AFA such as *May I Help You?* (1991), which saw three performers – known as 'The Staff' – promptly commencing dense, theory-driven sales pitches of Allan McCollum's minimalist paintings. Distinct from both classical institutional critique and relational aesthetics, the gallery is here neither antagonised nor idealised so much as it is subject to a form of discursive 'site analysis' in which all agents – the artist and gallerist in particular – are subject to interrogation.⁸ By being re-cast or read alongside other cultural spaces (cruising grounds to poker clubs, prisons and natural history museums), we approach through the exhibition an analysis of the gallery as a central platform of modern society, characterised by shifting modes of cultural consumption, work, sociality and critique.

The fact that many of these *in situ* works are still to be properly examined by art history is perhaps due to their limited presence in present-day exhibitions, hard as they were to collect and maintain, and, as a result, re-install or re-stage. The exhibition responds to this through a variety of museological tactics: Scher's *Hidden Camera/Architectural Vagina* is recreated (presumably, non-functionally) in the gallery's entry gallery, Fraser's performance is presented through a single-channel video, while Green's *Taste Venue* is re-presented as a reduced installation on one wall, facing (rather iconoclastically) a series of melancholic oil paintings by Pat de Groot (the last solo exhibition staged at Pat Hearn). An entire room is devoted to 'works from' (i.e. not the entire work) Christian Philipp Müller's exhibition-artwork *A Sense of Friendliness, Mellowness, and Permanence* (1992), including a 'gallery menu' of AFA's achievements, artists and prices and a bookstand stocked with his own exhibition catalogues (reducing his practice to one of didactic, self-exoticised promotion). Stockholder's early total-installation at AFA is represented through a single architectural object (*Untitled*, 1989) in a room of other individual works of art by many artists; while the 1993 occupation of PHG by the experimental Cologne-art space Friesenwall 120 (organised by Stephan Dilleuth and Josef Strau) is rendered through traditional archival vitrines. In grappling with such a large variety of installations (all, presumably, with different involvement from the artists), the exhibition inevitably conveys an uncertainty about the museological importance of the 'stuff'

of exhibitions: is it enough to resurrect the scenography but not the show itself?



Christian Philipp Müller, Works from A Scene of Friendliness Mellowness and Permanence, 1992, mixed media installation. Courtesy: the artist and Galerie Nagel Draxler

It is also by its focus on the life *around* a gallery that the exhibition conveys some of its most vivid histories. Most pertinently, Lutz Bacher's *Closed Circuit* sits as a haunting but poetic portrait of Hearn's last year as she underwent cancer treatment. In 1997, the artist installed a CCTV camera over Hearn's desk, with the live-feed displayed in the hallway of the gallery. In the 40-minute montage included in the present exhibition, we see Hearn writing, talking, reading and speaking on the phone before the slowly accelerating footage begins to bleach out entirely due to the accidental repositioning of a desk lamp. After Hearn's death in 2000, de Land continued for a while to run her gallery by merging it with his own under the moniker 'American Fine Arts, Co. – Colin de Land Fine Art at PHAG, Inc.' Ever the corporate simulator, de Land extended Hearn's stoic professionalism beyond her death, continuing to support her artists and increasingly fusing their critical trajectories.

While romanticisation is an ever-present risk in articulating such histories through the lens of the personal, from the point of view of today it is the idiosyncratic operations of Hearn and de Land – not the cult of their personalities – that qualify as the material for the writing of art and exhibition near-histories. Balancing finely between these, 'The Conditions of Being Art' is a contribution to an understanding of, as Green articulated in her press release for 'Taste Venue', 'the function of the gallery ... what it *has* been, fissures in that structure and what it can become'⁹ – as well as a bold exploration of how one might remember such a function in the space of a museum.

'The Conditions of Being Art: Pat Hearn Gallery & American Fine Arts, Co. (1983–2004)', is on display at the Hessel Museum of Art until 14 December 2018.

The 1980s New York art world was cynical and crass. Should we be honoring it?



Barbara Kruger's 1987 "I Shop Therefore I Am" silk-screen, featured in the Hirshhorn's "Brand New: Art and Commodity in the 1980s." (Tim Nighswander/Barbara Kruger)

By Philip Kennicott
Art and architecture critic
February 14, 2018

If you lived through the 1980s, here's a trigger warning: The Hirshhorn's "Brand New: Art and Commodity in the 1980s" dredges up some ugly stuff. There is little pleasure in much of the work on view, which can be seen only as a symptom of a wrong turn in American culture. This is the rag-and-bone shop.

It may, however, be a necessary show, albeit a sad one. Curator Gianni Jetzer has brought together material that explores the evaporation of the line between art and commodity in the 1980s. It deals with the branding of art and artists, who embraced the techniques of corporate advertising, sometimes critically and with ironic detachment, but all too often with uncritical enthusiasm.

It also focuses on key developments in critical theory and ideas about representation, as the media-saturated world we know today began to take shape, and artists reveled in what seemed to be a breakdown between the real and representation. It ends with the economic crash of 1987 and the age of AIDS, a disease cruelly exacerbated by the sudden right turn in American politics to a sunny, mindless optimism that privileged consumption over compassion, selfishness over the social contract, and American power over American idealism. Artistically, and culturally, we are directly descended from the greed and hypocrisy of the 1980s — a fact that this exhibition emphasizes and perhaps implicitly endorses.

The 1980s are now being chewed up and processed by the art world, with the "Club 57" exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York exploring the formation and efflorescence of East Village artistic culture from 1978 to 1983; a critically acclaimed Peter Hujar exhibition at the Morgan Library celebrating the independent vision of a brilliant photographer who died of AIDS in 1987; and a Leon Golub show at the Metropolitan Museum channeling the anger of an expressionist artist keenly aware of his country's foreign-policy failings during this same period. The generation of artists, curators and critics who came of age in the 1980s are now running the show, and have turned their attention to the decade that marked their arrival on the scene three decades ago. "Brand New" is part of this generational attempt to establish the lines and paradigms of history.



Jeff Koons's "New! New Too!," from 1983. (Private collection/Private collection, New York)

"Brand New" focuses on artists who have become household names — Jeff Koons, Barbara Kruger, Cindy Sherman, Jenny Holzer — along with lesser-known figures who were concerned with similar ideas and themes. It's hard to disagree with the premise of the show, stated in the wall text that greets visitors: "... these New York artists changed the landscape of the art world forever — directly impacting the practice and reception of art in the twenty-first century." One might add, many of them also contributed to the moral landscape of the 21st century as well, to the larger art market as we know it today, with its infantilized collectors, money laundering and intellectual triviality.

The show does little to advance the critical understanding of these figures beyond where it has been for decades. And that boils down to a basic question that remains as troubling now as it was 30 years ago: Can you flirt with commercial culture and commercial practices without being co-opted by them?

Kruger has remained a trenchant voice; Koons has not. Other artists on view put too much stock in the idea of mere appropriation, as if lifting a product out of the supermarket and putting it in the art gallery was sufficient. Too many of them simply didn't understand what they were reading, as if the whole of French critical theory could be reduced to an ironic bafflement at the slippage between the sign and signified. Too many of them believed that irony was a sufficient defense against the corruption of consumerism, as if they could somehow sidestep the blunt message of Kruger's 1987 "I Shop Therefore I Am" silk-screen with a knowing wink.



Krzysztof Wodiczko's "Homeless Vehicle in New York City," 1988-89. (Krzysztof Wodiczko/Galerie Lelong & Co.)



Donald Moffett's "He Kills Me," from 1987. (Donald Moffett/Marianne Boesky Gallery)

The art on view runs a range, with the best of it the most engaged with genuine political and cultural concerns, and the worst sophomorically confused by the bewildering barrage of media, advertising and poorly digested critical currents floating in the ether. The Guerrilla Girls managed to use the techniques of advertising effectively to challenge the misogyny of the art world; so, too, the artists of Gran Fury, who created the iconic "Silence=Death" logo to call attention to the Reagan administration's purposeful neglect of the AIDS crisis. Tishan Hsu's 1988 "Biocube," seemingly stripped out of some kind of morgue or abattoir, is a powerful object, distilling fears of bodily fluids and disease and the dehumanization of health care. David Robbins's 1986 "Talent," a collection of black-and-white glamour shots of artists associated with the New York scene adds nothing of value, nor does the repurposing of a Deutsche Grammophon CD cover by Clegg & Guttman.

This exhibition focuses particularly on the artists of New York during this period, and especially the transformation of the New York art scene from a scrappy outsider to polished insider mentality. But there was a lot of art being made — about the environment, about political culture, about personal identity and about art itself — that dealt more honestly and substantially with the world, especially in Los Angeles. There also was art being made — see the work of Hujar and Golub for example — that remained rooted in visual aesthetics. That isn't the scope of this exhibition, but it's worth remembering that what is on view here is just one current of the 1980s.



The Guerrilla Girls' "These Galleries show no more than 10% women artists or none at all," 1984-85. (Cathy Carver/Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden)

The tone of the show is ambiguous, but in the end, it feels celebratory. The work was "transformational" to be sure. But there also is an implicit connection of the worst of this work — the least critical, most vapid and fully co-opted — to the contemporary art market in a way that feels like self-justification. If much of the contemporary art world is an elaborate scheme to park obscene concentrations of wealth into easily traded commodities, it is in part because some of the artists on view (and the gallerists and critics who celebrated them) in "Brand New" helped lay the groundwork for the current moment. There may have been skepticism about the market and the Man in New York in the beginning of the 1980s, but by the end of the decade, the embrace of branding was all but absolute.

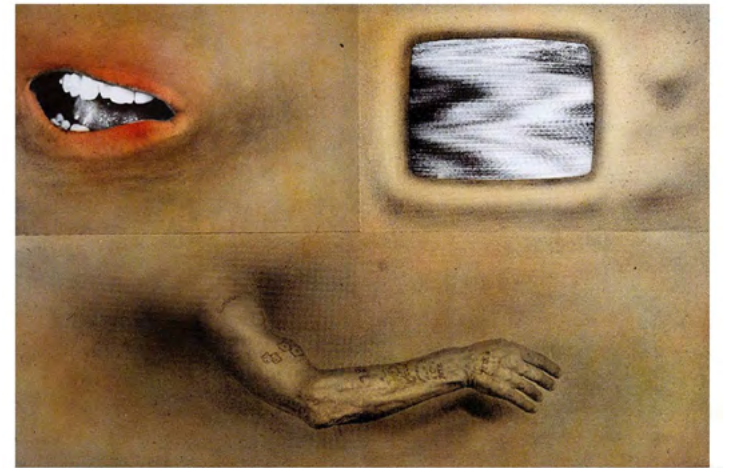
Brand New: Art and Commodity in the 1980s is on view at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden through May 13. For more information, visit hirshhorn.si.edu.

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

Rob Goyanes | Jan 30, 2018

Entering Tishan Hsu's studio, I notice, among the clutter of tools and books and notes, a rubbery ear sitting on the table. And on the walls: eyes, noses, nipples, and skins, all repeating like distorted code across a series of artworks hung on the wall. Kindly but cautiously, Hsu offers me green tea. It steeps as we walk around. The art seems to breathe. "I always felt from early on that technology was going to profoundly change our lives," he says.

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



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



Portrait of Tishan Hsu, 2018.



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

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

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

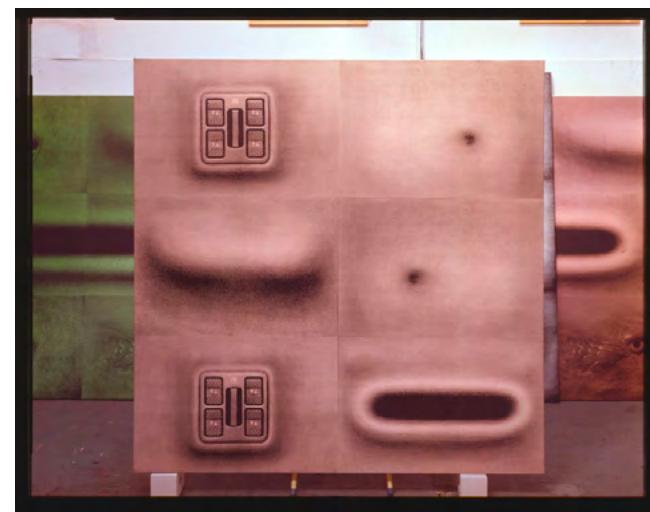
"Philosophically, I was interested in this technological context that I had no idea about," Hsu says. "Conceptually, I was always interested in the object, and the change in our understanding of the object," he adds.

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

After moving to New York in the late 1970s, the artist worked as a word processor at a law firm while also working full-time on his art practice. He had a solo show with White Columns in 1984, and another with Pat Hearn in 1985. "I was always doing both painting and sculpture together," Hsu says. Indeed, the works combined not only mediums, but also probed the fusion of the body and technology. Hsu utilized the shape and spirit of screens before they were a ubiquitous reality, and rounded the edges of his sculptural, trompe-l'oeil works before ergonomic design was mass market—pieces like *BlueBlood* (1985), which seem to combine these features with a microbiological focus on cell-like structures swimming in waves, or *Ooze* (1987), an installation that resembles a lake with grids floating atop.

Hsu's aesthetic is a mingling of the human body, mind and machine; the artist is a creator of biocybernetic landscapes. As we walk around the studio, he shows me some other works from this time period: There are more half-hidden eyes, or lips that seem like they're trying to speak.

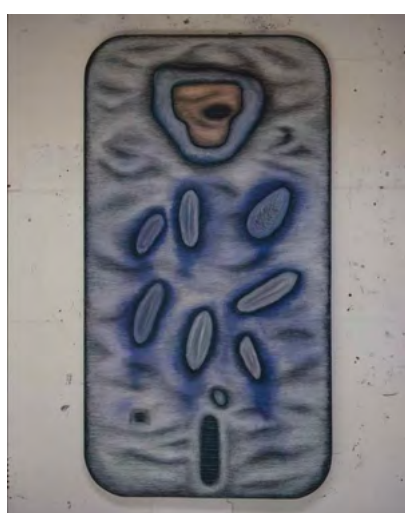
From early on, Hsu held a clinical interest in the body. He would call up hospitals for medical images and embed them in the work. Looking at these pieces, it feels like you're staring into a chthonic, unearthly soup that's swallowed and mutated people and objects alike. The experience is also akin to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



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

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

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



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



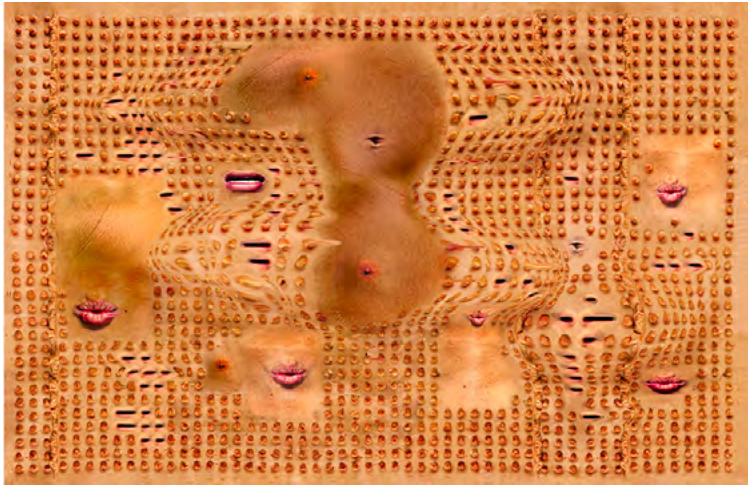
Tishan Hsu, *Double Absence*, 2016.
Courtesy of Empty Gallery.

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

So, after a long period of research and work outside the public's view, Hsu is back.

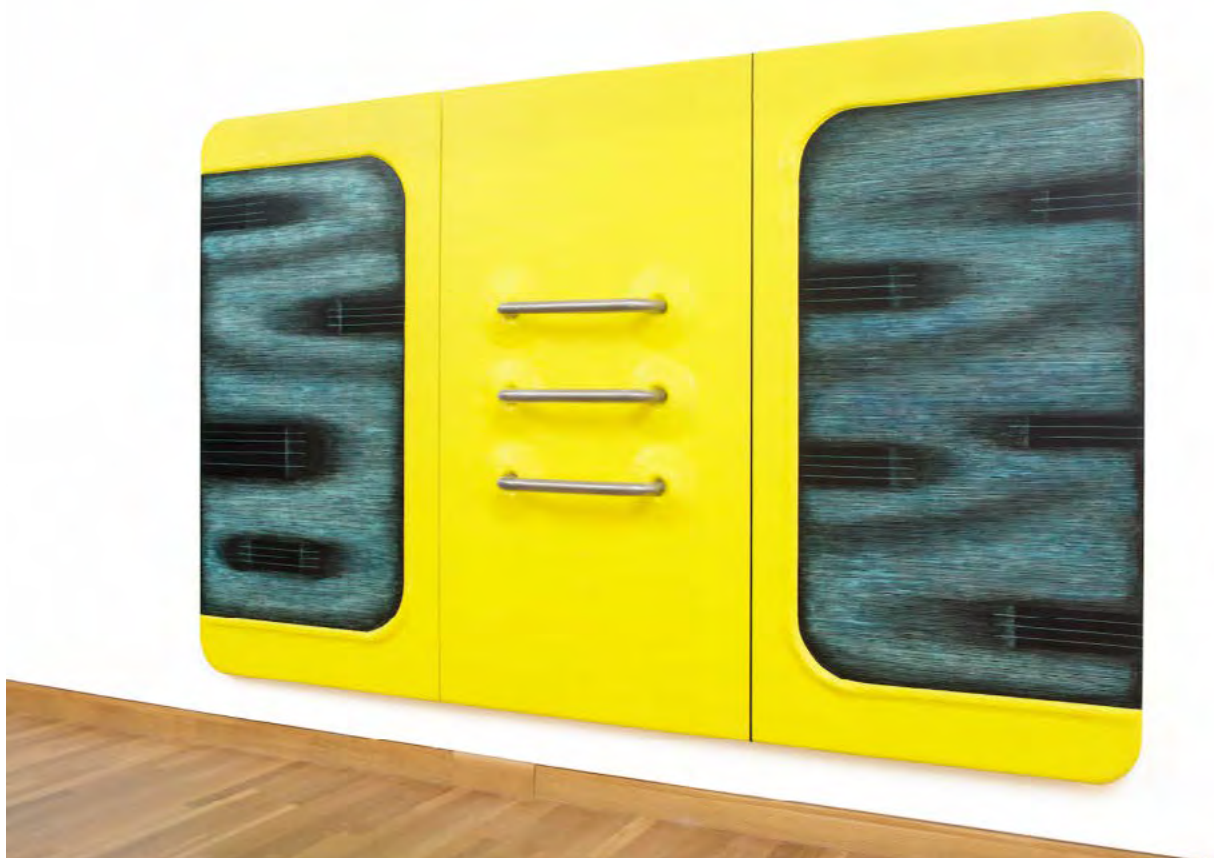
His uncommon aesthetic, too weird or layered for most audiences in the 1980s, now seems prophetic, anticipating like-minded works by younger artists such as Hayden Dunham and others. The artist—who has always mingled the technological and the human—has appropriately found new tools to explore the trauma and resilience of his own family.

Rob Goyanes

WEISMAN ART MUSEUM

FEBRUARY 14, 2017

Focus on the Collection – Tishan Hsu's Liquid Circuit



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

No sound is literally produced. The canvas remains still.

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

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

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

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

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

BELOW THE CANAL AFTER 9/11



**Grimanesa Amoros • Olivia Beens • Y.J. Cho
Jane Freeman • Carter Hodgkin • Tishan Hsu
A. Lebowski • Pamela Lee • Choong Sup Lim
Karen Margolis • John L. Moore
Naoto Nakagawa • Paolo Pelosini
Richard Rudich • Paul K. Wong**

Grimanesa Amoros' work is inter-disciplinary since she has a diverse interest in the fields of social history, geology, scientific research, architecture, and critical theory. Through this, she creates installation works that combine abstract elements of society.

Olivia Beens, artwork is ritualistic in nature. She collects items that were once alive like roots, bones branches, feathers, shells, and other discarded items from land and sea. She combines them in constructions with wire, papier mache and paint, giving them another life and form.

Y.J. Cho, born in Taiwan, displays a personalized, selectively cropped, close-up view of facades of buildings located in NYC's Lower East Side. Cho's selection of forms and color alerts the spectator to the sensitive drama of the every-day environment of the city. Cho's works present how a factual scene based on a photograph can be informed and enlightened by the artist's personal vision.

Jane Freeman, a painter, also builds miniature scenes of New York (primarily Tribeca), as well as other subjects such as tiny opera sets. A favorite theme is pre-gentrified Lower Manhattan—the derelict warehouses and storefronts that express the original commercial/industrial aspect of the neighborhood. Her proximity to Chinatown can be seen in some pieces that incorporate tiny artifacts and street finds specific to Chinatown.

Carter Hodgkin has had major exhibitions in Cincinnati, New York, San Francisco, Tokyo, Japan, and India during her 25 year career. A brief survey of her work took place in New Delhi a few years ago where she participated in the 2nd Khoj Art Residency. In Karlsruhe, Germany her large-scale digital murals became part of a permanent installation.

Tishan Hsu is an artist who has been living in the downtown community since 1979. He showed at AAAC in a group show in 1985 and has since then been included in gallery and museum exhibitions in the U.S. and abroad. Hsu's work has evolved into computer-generated flat panels that fuse painting, printmaking, photography and "virtual sculpture."

"A. Lebowski" is a pseudonym for an artist who likes to do portraiture free from the constraints of his "real" identity. By nature, he is a storyteller so his drawings almost always involve a narrative. Since July, he has been working on a composite portrait of NYC based on correspondence with five very disparate New Yorkers—one from each borough.

Pamela Lee celebrates the life of the Chinatown community in painting. The narrow streets and concentration of food vendors, the chaos of signs and fire escapes, and the park with its motley array of gamblers and fortunetellers, a gathering place for old and young, completes the visual theater which plays out before her eyes. Chinatown's visual landscape is teeming with urban life, much like her childhood memories of Jamaica.

What is this place, this place for whom it can be called their actual or creative home? One artist mentioned how he has always been drawn to this part of New York, feeling more comfortable with the gritty aspect of the neighborhood and of Chinatown as part of this. For him it was always more real. If a major culture complex is developed here in the next ten years, as is being discussed, what will it contribute to New York artistically? Will it have its roots in a relationship with the character of "Downtown New York"?

Below the Canal: After 9/11 is designed to gather artists in Lower Manhattan to help revitalizing New York City. Whether in Chinatown, TriBeCa, or Wall Street artists offer us not only a feel for the texture of this locality, the changes and traumas it has undergone, but the indigenous role and vital meaning of New York's downtown. This is a place where people live and work, where artists sense and shape a unique affinity, where diverse cultures and neighborhoods struggle to thrive. This diverse dynamic should be nurtured, encouraged to have a symbiosis with, rather than be diminished by, large scale undertakings. In this way Downtown below Canal Street can be a legitimate and distinctive part of the economic

and civic life of the city. And it can continue to offer its unique cultural character in the mix of New York life.

The art works selected for this exhibition disclose personal and creative responses, artistic statements formed in the context of this special part of New York City as a "neighborhood" writ large. The participating artists embody some of the diversity of New York's communities—Asian American, Latin American, Afro-American, Italian American, and Caucasian—a diversity that mirrors the global diversity of the post 9/11 era.

As this ongoing project continues, more local artists will be encouraged to get to know each other, to see what artists share about this neighborhood, and what a creative community can tell us about Lower Manhattan/Chinatown post 9/11.

The public is welcome to hear from some of the artists themselves their experiences and recollections of Lower Manhattan at the Artists Talk on April 8th. However, during the exhibition this opportunity will be available through statements and video interviews of each artist.

The exhibition itself consists of installation, painting, sculpture, ceramic reliefs, miniature tableaus, paper cuttings, and paper works. This exhibition is conceived by R. Lee and organized by AAAC.
— Robert Lee

Choong Sup Lim has been working in both Korea and the U.S., he deals with the dichotomies of east/west, interior/exterior, rural/urban, and nature/industry through the contradictions and paradoxes in his work. Forms and materials are carefully selected for their capacity to conjure multiple associations.

Karen Margolis deals with structures beneath visible experience. Within these structures lies the source, which connects all things from the subatomic to the cosmic. Her art is about searching for this underlying source—collecting data, paring it down to its essence and constructing a profile of the nexus of all things living in matter and space.

John L. Moore began a series of paintings on the idea of fire, eight months before 9/11. This was not unusual for him for although abstract and enigmatic, his work has been prophetic in its way. He says himself, his work has always been on what's not seen. In recent paintings, black oval shapes, which once served as surrogates for the presence of the figure, now represent issues or, as he says, non reflecting mirrors.

Naoto Nakagawa has lived in NYC since 1962, where he has taught at Columbia University and Parsons School of Design. He saw the neighborhood demolished to make way for the Twin Towers, he watched as they reached

their full height and on 9/11, 2001 from his studio in Tribeca, Nakagawa watched the Twin Towers fall.


Paolo Pelosini has been working in both Italy and the U.S., he generally makes his art works with metal objects, found in the streets of Manhattan, such as file cabinets, oil drums, shelves, and cans, to which Pelosini refers to as "the local stone." These objects are then cut with an ax and recycled into works of art. Beginning without a precise idea, the process of his art making, with its intense physical action, transposes the artist's emotions to the art object.

Richard Rudich was born in New York and studied architecture before discovering ceramics, a material he has worked with for twenty five years. Most of his work is figurative bas relief and often employs imagery drawn from historical sources to represent some psychological narrative. He teaches painting and architecture at the Fieldston School.

Paul K. Wong, born in Fargo, ND in 1951, got his MFA from U of Wisconsin-Madison; lives and works in NYC since 1978. Is Artistic Director of Dieu Donn  Papermill; works with paper and creates installations; he will be exhibiting a major installation, "Fargo/Far-To-Go" at the Plains Museum in Fargo, this coming October.

Before 9/11 and after, artists who have lived and worked for many years below Canal Street experienced intimately the drab, mundane and spectacular sights, contradictions and transformations of Lower Manhattan. They have witnessed the evolution of this area while living and/or working here.

This is a special part of New York City, a kind of concentrated miniature of the whole.



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March 21st – May 2nd, 2003




Opening Reception: Friday, March 21st • 6:00 PM. – 8:00 PM.

Artists of Lower Manhattan Talk: Tuesday, April 8th • 6:00 PM. – 8:00 PM.
Grimanesa Amoros, Jane Freeman, Naoto Nakagawa, Paolo Pelosini, and Richard Rudich

Gallery Hours: Mon. – Fri. 12:30 PM. – 6:30 PM.
Thursday 12:30 PM. – 7:30 PM.
Other Time By Appointment
Admission Free, Donation Requested

Directions: #N, R, Q, W, & #6 Train to Canal Street. #4 & #5 Train to City Hall. Shuttle Train #5 to Grand Street. M105 or M15 Bus to Chatham Square.

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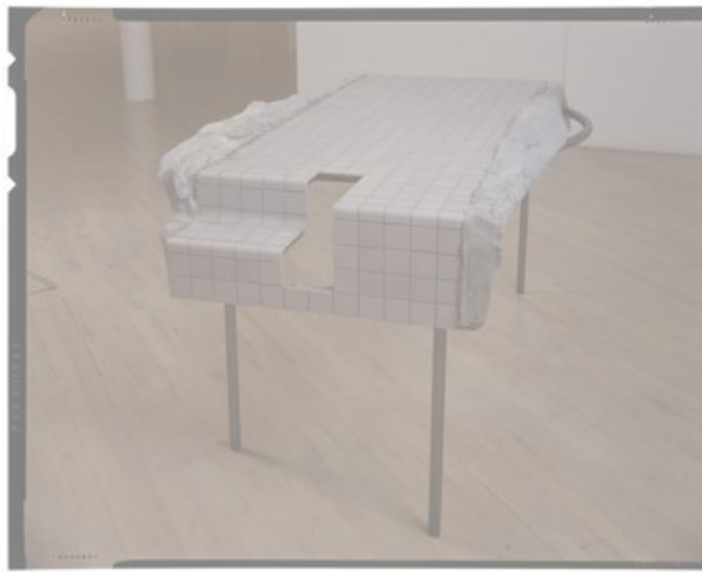
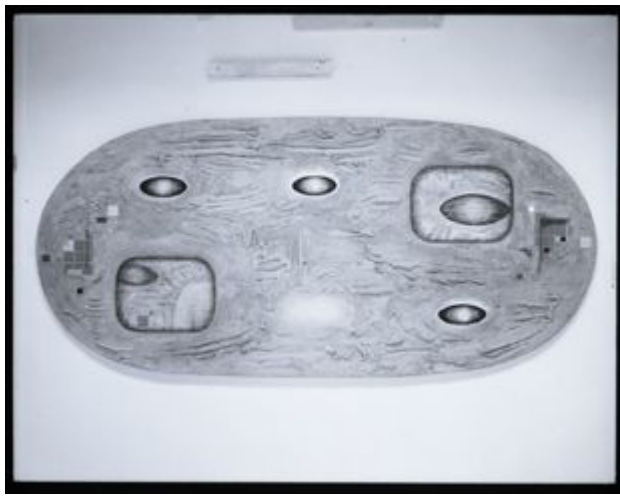
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Design: Lynn Wang 2003

TISHAN HSU

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

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



TISHAN HSU: PAINTINGS

SHOWING

May 7, 1988 - June 26, 1988

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

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

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

Publication with essay by Dana Friis-Hansen.



Ti Shan Hsu, *Institutional Body*, 1986, acrylic, compound, alkyd, and oil on wood, 64 x 47 x 4".

ARTFORUM

Ti Shan Hsu

Leo Castelli; Pat Hearn

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

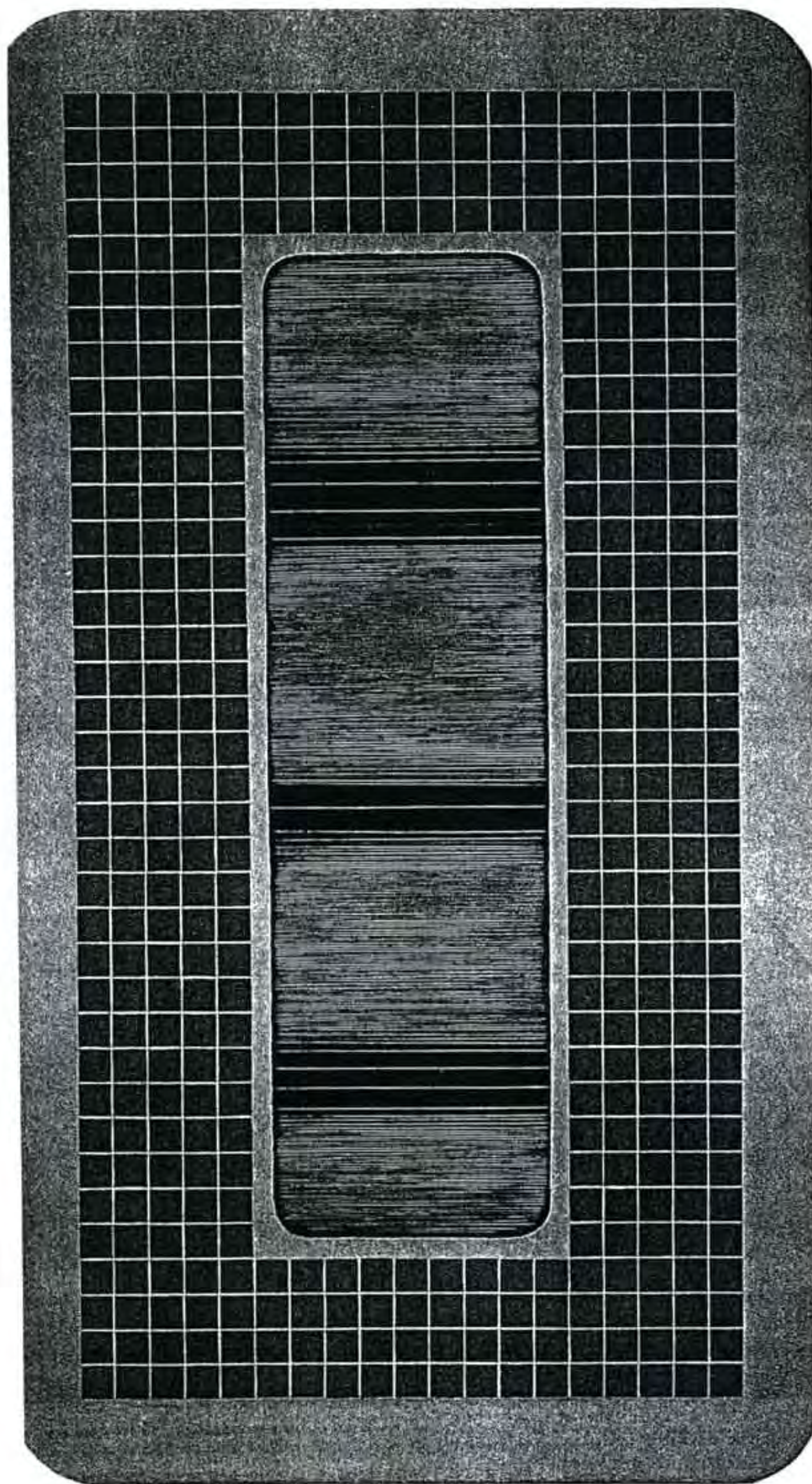
John Dewey once said that we are only as good as our instruments, and the Constructivists believed that they could design modern instruments that would satisfy all our wishes. Minimalism can be understood as the stylistic dregs of this conformity to the utopian credo of early Modernism. Today, such utopian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

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

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

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

—DONALD KUSPIT



TI SHAN HSU

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

CLAUDIA HART

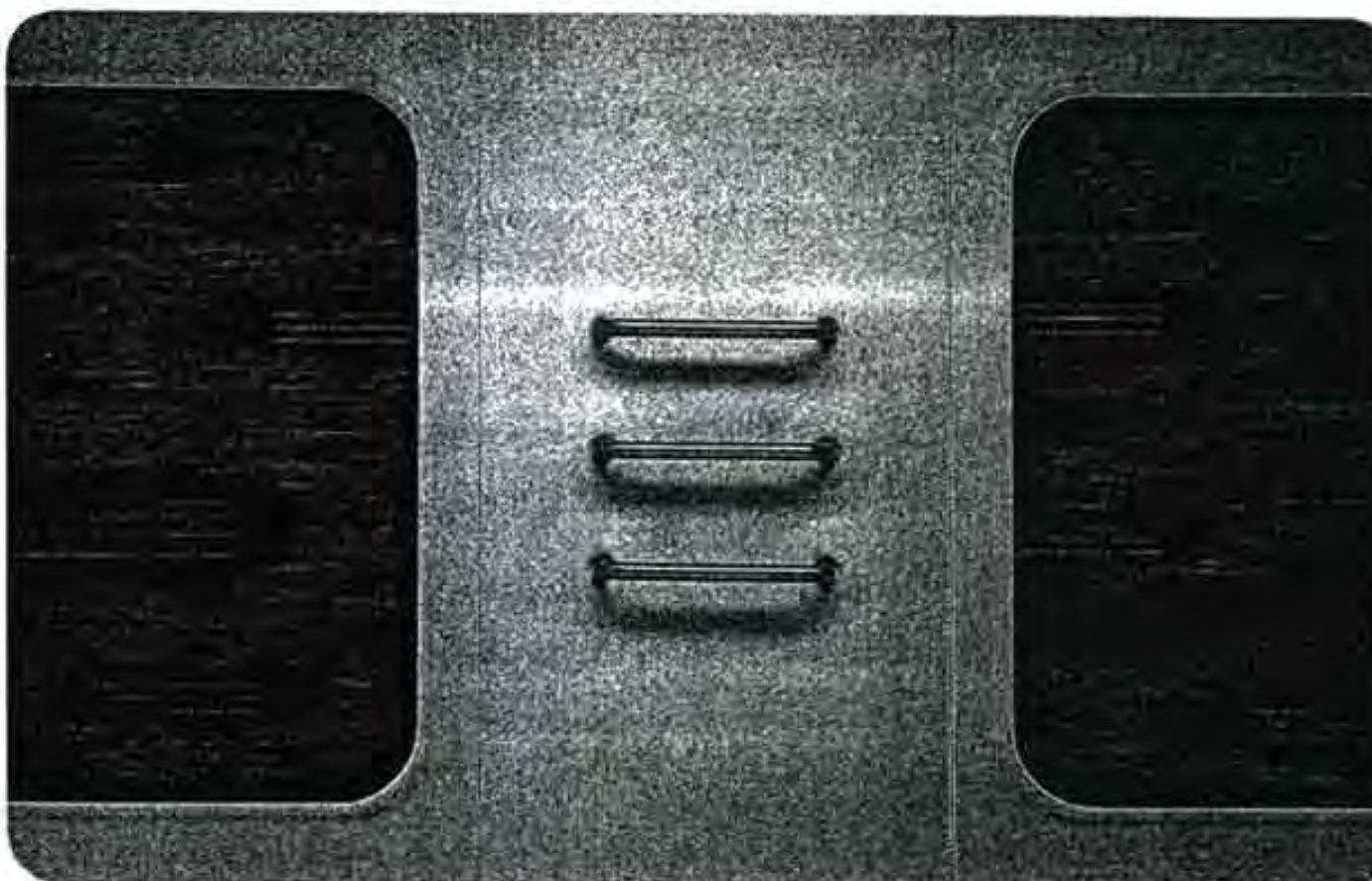
Someone said they were "landscapes of landscapes," and this is certainly so. Relief paintings and sculpture by Ti Shan Hsu are also, certainly, "breathing objects," as he calls them, and "biomorphic machines" in the sense of Duchamp's *Brides*. Part viscera, part cybernetic brain, part terrain, part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

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

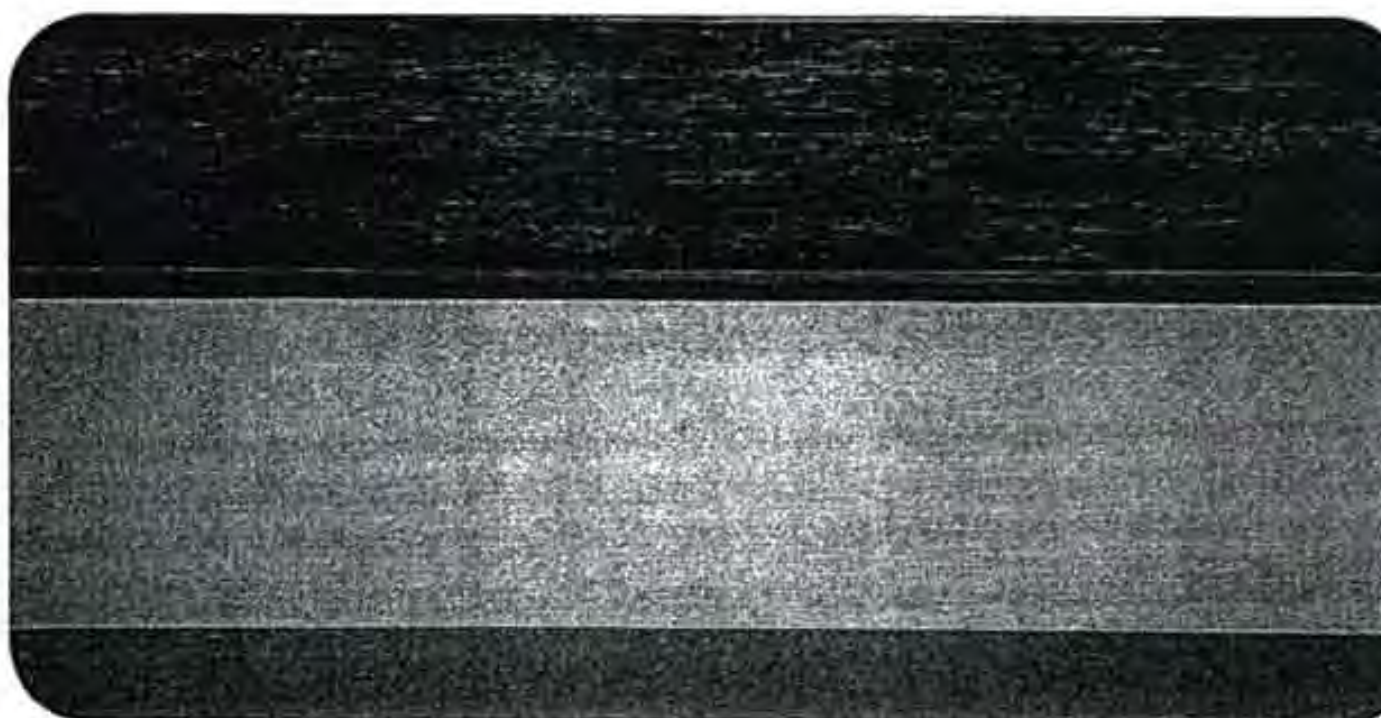
aerial perspective produced by a flight simulator, and the view through a porthole affixed to the deck of a starship. All of these might be considered twentieth-century counterparts to sublime landscapes, meant to "present the unrepresentable" by embodying Burke's eighteenth-century call for "the terrible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

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

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



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



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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

COURTESY INTERNATIONAL WITH MONUMENT

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

NOTES

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

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

LE CORPS ULTIME

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

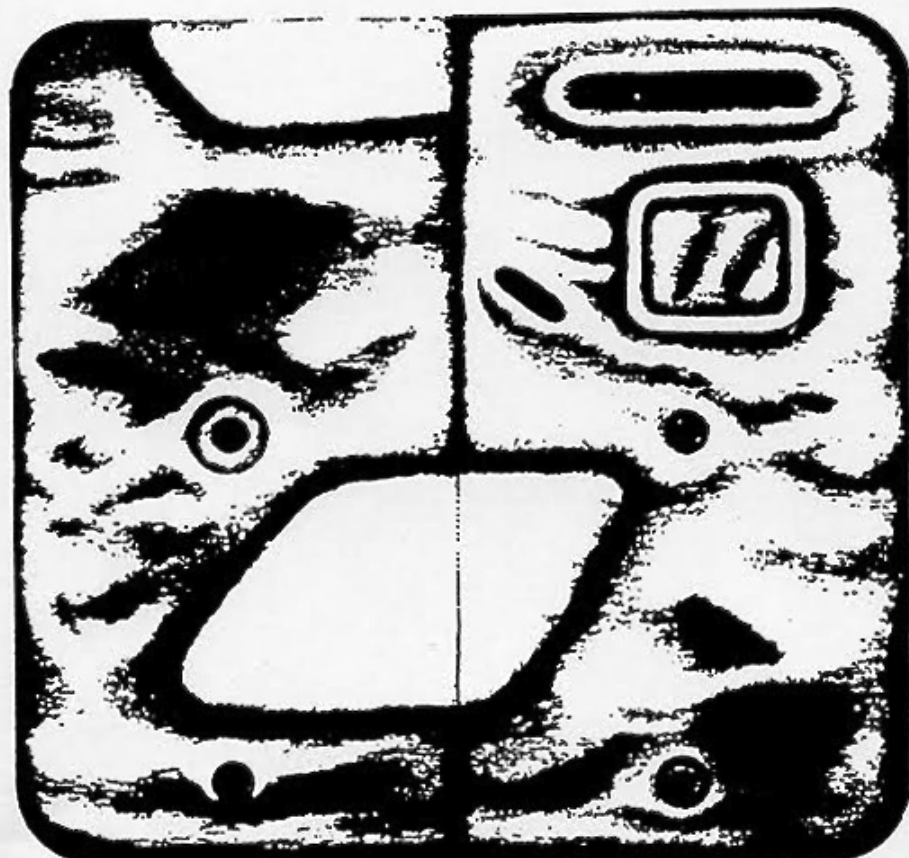
Olivier Zahm

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

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

Review of Exhibitions

NEW YORK



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

Ti Shan Hsu at Pat Hearn

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

—Robert G. Edelman

a/July 1985

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ASIAN ARTS INSTITUTE
EMILY, ANNA & TI SHAN: THE FIRST GENERATION
OPENING ON MARCH 8TH AT 5:30 PM

ASIAN ARTS INSTITUTE is pleased to announce the opening of an exhibition of paintings by Emily Cheng, Anna Kuo and Ti Shan Hsu on March 8th from 5:30 pm - 7:30 pm at our gallery/performance center on 26 Bowery (1 block south of Canal St. in Chinatown). Following the opening and reception, a guest performance of jazz music composed by Fred Houn and the New Asian American Music Quartet begins at 8 pm. An article by art critic and poet John Yau accompanies the exhibition and the catalog. Food will be donated by HSF Restaurant, 46 Bowery.

3 young painters, Emily, Anna and Ti Shan, born and raised in the United States, reflect structural concerns of symbolic metaphors in their work. Their approach and materials vary but their images claim sustained and meditative consideration. Raised in Cinnaminson, New Jersey; in Madison, Wisconsin; in Buffalo, New York; in Virginia and Boston, these artists take part in a very American tradition of painting, yet have added something unique of their own.

Gallery hours are Mondays to Fridays: 11 am - 5 pm; Sundays: 1 pm - 4 pm. The exhibition closes on April 5th. The jazz performance features original musical selections from an extended work for 3 woodwinds and string bass. Admission for the musical performance is \$5.00.

This program is an outgrowth of the cultural activities of Asian American Dance Theatre Inc.

26 BOWERY, NEW YORK NEW YORK, 10013 (212) 233-2154

TI SHAN
& ANNA
EMILY,
ANNA &
TI SHAN

**TI SHAN:
ANNA
EMILY,
ANNA &
TI SHAN:
The First Generation**

**Exhibition of Paintings by Emily Cheng,
Anna Kuo and Ti Shan Hsu**

These catalog pages accompany an exhibition
held at Asian Arts Institute, New York
from March 8 through April 5, 1985.

THE FIRST GENERATION

Born of the first generation in America. You grew up in the hey day of beautiful cars and friendly neighbors. In grade school you saw on television the landing of the first man on the moon, and the death of great political leaders. JFK brushed by you once in a home town parade. You were raised in Cinnaminson, New Jersey - a suburb of Philadelphia, in Madison, Wisconsin, in a suburb of Buffalo, in Virginia and Boston. Though from Hunan and Ning Po, Shanghai and the Philippines, Jiang su and An Hui, your mother knew well Italian libretto and English literature and your father always had an abiding interest in art. You remember "Charlotte" was grand-dad's favorite name. The only Asians in town, you sensed you were somehow different. Dr. Francis L.K. Hsu's book on "Chinese and American" enlightened you as much as anyone. Art was always present. Nearby painters would come and chat, sometimes talk about your pictures. You went to Academies of Fine Arts and had good teachers in high school. Your pictures won awards in Norfolk and the Parthenon in Nashville. Still it was difficult to begin to take yourself seriously. If you did others did not. You were praised yet never really encouraged to go into art. Alone on the sea shore in an abandoned house, how did it come about?

Emily, Anna and Ti Shan together signify a direction Asians in America have come to take. With little or no contact with their Asian heritage, they have come to a mode of painting which reflects a fundamental continuity with the past. Looking inward is a direction that has formed, with these artists, images of compelling authority. They have little interest in the techniques of rendering appearances. In Emily Cheng's work, illusions are contradicted to serve her own purpose. The most recent development in Emily's work began with the small sketch "Symmetrical Schism" and continues in the larger "Medieval Obstacle." Her paintings of spheres and cones are oracular in their power. Ti Shan also transforms illusion of high technology. Their evocation of a timeless Chinese landscape is often undeniable (e.g. Skyrock). Anna Kuo combines an inner intensity with a ritual process of painting both primitive and modern in its resolutions. In the "Wolf of Gubbio" drawn from a medieval tale, Anna triggers the presence of a particular kind of evil menace. It is fruitful to suggest a reading of "Gubbio" as an embodiment of the amalgamation of an Asian and an American inner ethic.

In a high tech environment undergoing rapid change society needs to make sense and give meaning if it is to manage and humanize such change. The search for metaphors that can serve this effort is both personal and public. In images a viewer finds convictions beyond political truisms. In art this viewer holds an opportunity to test them in the crucible of an inner eye. In urban cities filled with

visual clutter it is rare, particularly for Asian Americans, to find images that express and perhaps resolve secrets of essential concern.

This year Asian Arts Institute exhibits artists whose artistic issues and sentiments stretch back in time to touch those of a continuous Asian past. Their work however, acquires a mode of expression in media and character entirely of their own creation.

Robert Lee

ABOUT ASIAN ARTS INSTITUTE

Modern art, as it has evolved in the technologically-oriented West, has often turned to Asia and its collective artistic ideas for new sources of inspiration. Asian artists in America, who have been nurtured by this modern milieu are in a unique position to draw from both Eastern and Western sources. These artists are pioneers of a new art that has important implications for people in Asia.

For asians who live in a Western context, the work of these artists is especially valuable. The American mass media environment makes it almost impossible for an Asian minority to see current images of themselves, to identify and know themselves, and to see their beliefs and values expressed in tangible forms. The work of Asian American artists must be acknowledged and supported, especially by Asians in leadership roles, to enable younger generations to retain meaningful connections with their Asian heritage.

Asian Arts Institute encourages its audience to recognize the vital contribution that the arts make, as a vehicle for the preservation and transmission of culture, which is the basis of every society.

EMILY CHENG, TI SHAN HSU, ANNA KUO: The First Generation

The artists in this exhibition are young and at the beginning of their careers. Each of them sees the world differently. What they have in common is an ability to convince the viewer of the irrefutable "truth" of what and how they see. As a result, Emily Cheng, Ti Shan Hsu, and Anna Kuo have achieved an unmistakable aesthetic identity.

In the work of Emily Cheng — seen at the Tibor de Nagy Gallery this January — a shield or mask-like shape is barely contained by the painting's rectangular form. This graceful opposition is further underscored by the artist's use of color such as pink and green. While the shape suggests a protective presence, the drawn edges and suggestion of light deflect its severity.

I suspect the artist was not only attracted to the shape's emotive power, but was also determined to sever it from its familiar associations with war and theater. Employing a high-keyed palette was just one of the ways she made it something more than a reiteration of a received symbol. As a result, the viewer is engaged by a shape which is historically linked with confrontations of both a violent and imaginary nature, and yet finds no solace in connecting it with its historical precedents. Instead, the paintings demand to be taken on other terms — ones that are becoming clearer as Cheng has continued her investigations.

In the recent works, the oppositions can be announced by the uses of different pictorial languages to depict forms. Not only has a fictive space become more apparent in the composition, but a volumetric form and flat shape are often made to overlap. One could say of Cheng's work that it is a realist presentation of things

that don't exist in a fictive space. Consequently, she has not only moved beyond the stale academic juxtaposition of abstract and figurative, but she has doubled her own possibilities. In doing so, she has transformed the prison of history, and made it immensely habitable.

One can point to Ti Shan Hsu's ability to insert a fictive presence into Minimalism's insistence on the purity of the object. It would be one way of seeing Hsu's work, though not necessarily the most satisfying. Neither restrained by, nor afraid of, the dogmatic aura surrounding the work of artists such as Donald Judd, Hsu's reliefs confront the viewer with an other worldly presence. His symmetrical topographies — their carefully worked surfaces, apertures, and rock-like protuberances — can be seen as an extension of some of Robert Smithson's concerns. Like Smithson, Hsu seems to have more than a passing interest in Science Fiction. However, unlike a number of younger artists, Hsu is not attracted to the theatre of science fiction, so much as he is interested in making objects that embody our desire to come into contact with that which is unknown — the future.

Hsu's reliefs convey the non-human through something as traditional as the artist's touch. Clearly, he does not share the Minimalist's predilection for the machine-made. He knows that, as this age of increasingly debilitating technology speeds up even more, a human presence may make all the difference. Hsu's accomplishment is this: He not only inserts a fictive presence, but also wisely explores its parameters.

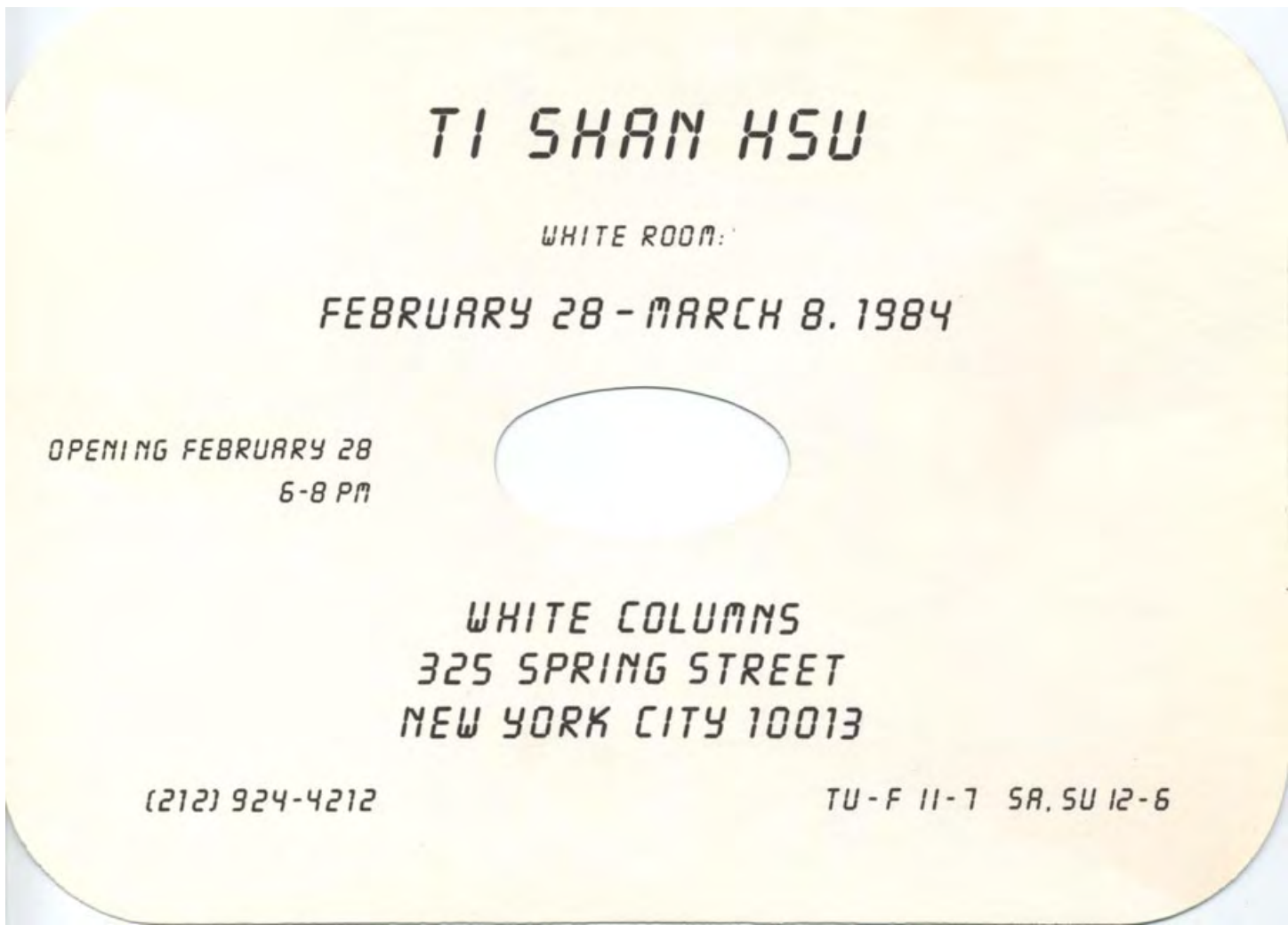
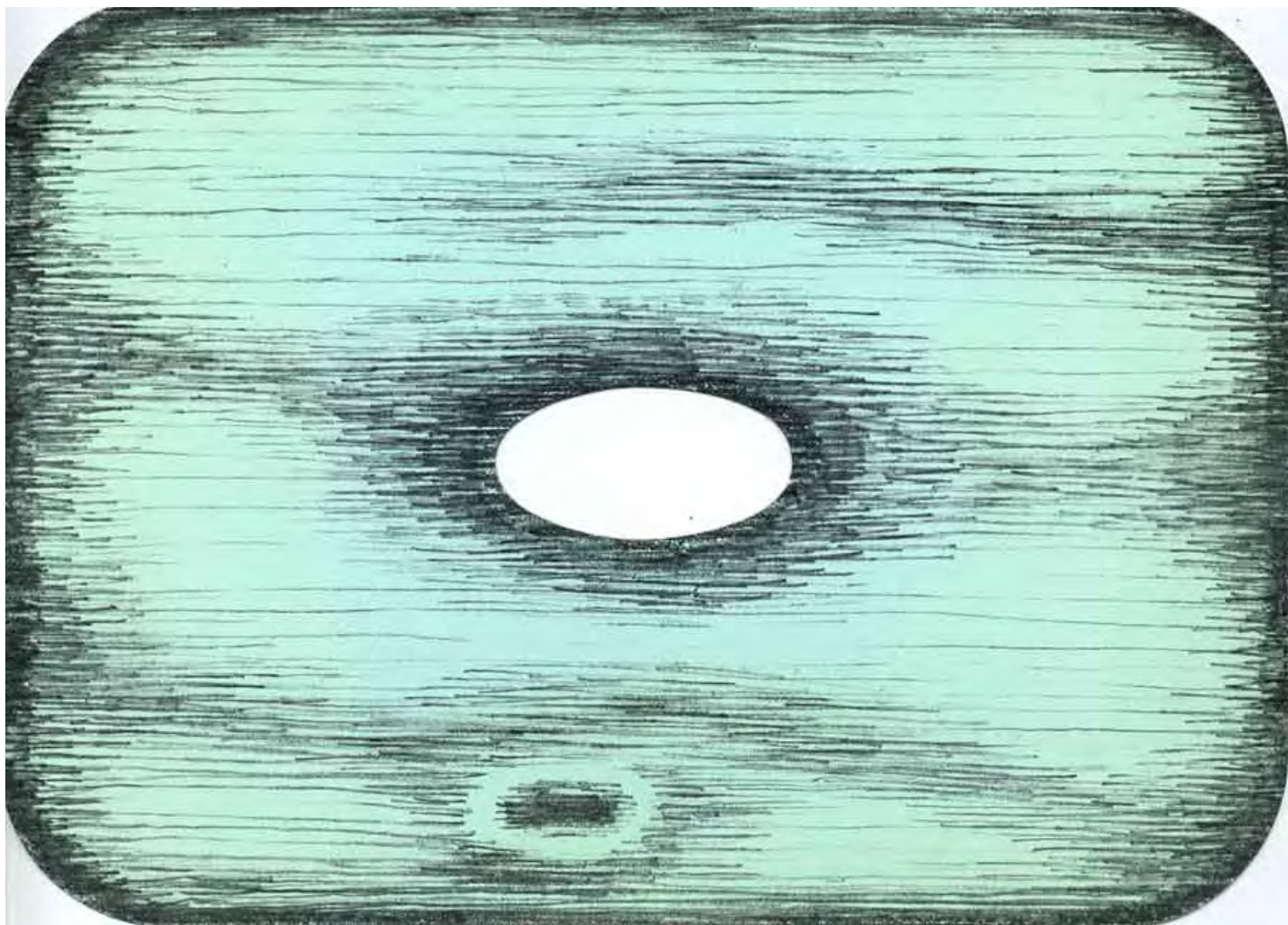
In Anna Kuo's paintings and works on paper, elongated mushroom-like and humanoid forms populate a dark primordial world of pigment. What the images share is an evocative specificity. Evocative because they convey the compelling power of the dream-like landscape; specific because this landscape is the result of a careful mediation between the world of the artist's materials and the elusive inner one.

Centrally located in a number of compositions, Kuo's image of a towering human-like form is both incorporeal and physical, like a ghost who shuts the door after leaving a room. The viewer is both completely convinced and left full of unanswered questions. Her paintings and drawings not only dramatize this possibility, but the images seem to have risen from the interaction between materials and surface, artist's hand and her imagination. It is as if a swirling chaos has been transformed into traces of searing clarity.

John Yau

Born in 1950 in Lynn, Massachusetts, the author presently lives in Manhattan. His poems and prose have appeared in many magazines, while his art reviews and essays have been published in *Art in America*, *Artforum*, *Arts Magazine*, *Portfolio* and *Vogue*.

Exhibition postcard for "White Room:
Ti Shan Hsu", White Columns, 1984



White Columns, New York City, from
Feb. 28-Mar. 8, 1984.