

THE SEER

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 Photography by PETER ROSS

Tishan Hsu in his Williamsburg, Brooklyn, studio with, from left, *Outer Banks of Memory*, 1984, and *Portrait*, 1982

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.”

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.”



CLOCKWISE FROM RIGHT: *Autopsy*, 1988, ceramic tile, compound, chrome; *Cell*, 1987, acrylic, compound, oil, alkyd, vinyl, aluminum on wood; *R.E.M.*, 1986, acrylic, alkyd, compound on wood; Hsu in front of *Natural Language*, 1994.



AUTOPSY: COURTESY KARIN AND PETER HAAS COLLECTION, ZÜRICH; CELL: COURTESY COLLECTION OF RALPH WERNICKE/HERIUS/SHOHE ART; ARCHITECTURE: BERLIN AND ZÜRICH; R.E.M.: PRIVATE COLLECTION, NEW YORK; HSU PORTRAIT: PETER ROSS



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 hopscoching 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.”

“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.

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

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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."

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.”

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 Photo-shopping. “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.

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

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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,

FROM FAR LEFT:
Vertical Ooze,
1987, ceramic
tile, urethane,
compound, acrylic,
oil on wood; Hsu’s
brushes; *Liquid
Circuit*, 1987,
acrylic, compound,
alkyd, oil, aluminum
on wood.

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.”

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.”