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

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, Yiu-kan Hsu worked nights word processing in a law firm 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.

Hsu’s 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 noticed, could no longer be depicted the way it had been for millennia. Hsu was seeing the future. “At that point, art was in its inevitability—and its impact.

He doesn’t smile much. On the back wall, there’s an enormous painting with seemingly disparate blow-up images: The mouth of a fish represents nature, a wound from an incision suggests the human race, R.E.M., 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 worked up the nerve to go down to New York to meet a teacher his mother found had him painting in the sobering realist style of Edward Hopper; another guided him toward impressionism. Hua 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.”

Returning to MIT was a no-brainer. Hsu finished his degree and stayed on to earn a master’s. Architects still used pencils and sheep’s wool, and most of his professor’s contacts and trawl the SoHo galleries. 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 intense. His eyes have never 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 U.S.—Madison, Wisc.; Blackburg, 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. Hua began showing—and selling—his paintings while a teenager in Virginia.

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 farm 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 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.

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The artist with his 1992 painting Splits
membrane” and an “exacting” experimenter who spends years at Sarah Lawrence, describes Hsu as a “very responsive

A rt galleries tended to build their stalls through connection—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 these 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. He made the rounds. “They would look at me with each other,” he says of the galleries in those days.

At Gorney, which opened a gallery in the emerging East Vill-age in 1984, 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 Brandlage, who worked for Leo Castelli—a towering figure in portrait art who repre-
sented Jasper Johns, Robert Rauschenberg and Andy Warhol, to name a few—kept encouraging Hsu to come back to the fifth gal-

And it had no context. No one else was making anything remotely like it, which, rather than scaring him from origi-

ality, left viewers bewildered. Pieces in the group show, for instance, included Richard Prince and Louise Lawler, who were on the cusp of breaking through as proponents 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 white, and Hsu stuck out. The East Village community appealed to him, but he didn’t really feel a part of it. Nonsensical, boundary-busting gallery Pat Hearn took a chance on him. “The reviews in general were very posi-
tive, but no one understood what this was,” he recalls. Musical in-
strument manufacturer Paul Tschambler “complained that they were just making noise.” 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. “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 recollected from his newfound ability to live off his art in Cologne, Germany. “I had a hard time selling and then pay my rent or whatever,” he recalls. “I said I’d much rather have a 9-to-5 job than this.” Hsu was perfectly at home. “I didn’t relate to my vision—I couldn’t really ask for more.”

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mate melding of the body and technology. He underwent a kid-
ney transplant, specifically in light of his 1987 work Trans-
plant, 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 fac-
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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 pure R&D.”

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One year after Lawrence introduced a course on Asian-Amer-
ican literature, which Hsu had never had the opportunity to study, he auditioned the class and came away with a heightened sense of his own identity. “I thought, ‘If I wasn’t questioning why I have no 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 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.”

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A

fter spending decades contemplating humanity’s fu-

ture, Hsu in recent years has focused inspiration looking to-

d to his own family’s past. Throughout his assimilated
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