

Tishan Hsu: Liquid Circuit

By Simon Wu, November 2020



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.



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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.



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



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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.