

DIGITAL DINOSAURS

TISHAN HSU
 "LIQUID CIRCUIT"
 HAMMER MUSEUM
 26 JANUARY –
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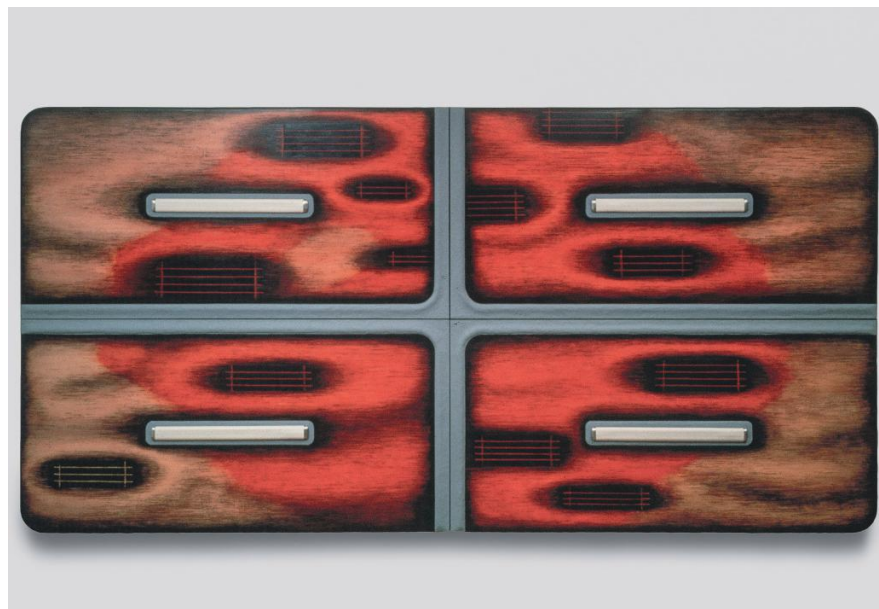
Tishan Hsu's exhibition "Liquid Circuit" puts on display a series of figures that look like they were made through highly sophisticated, machinic versions of the Surrealist game of chance known as exquisite corpse, in which a single piece of paper is folded into sections onto which each person involved 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

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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