

# ARTFORUM

## Body Horror

By Matthew Ronay and Lane Relyea, May/June 2020

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.



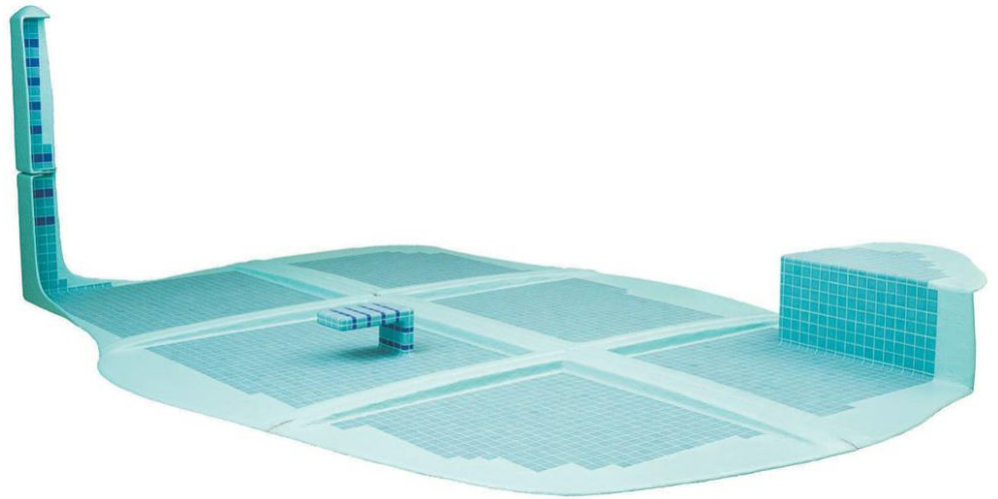
Tishan Hsu, *Vertical Ooze*, 1987, ceramic tile, urethane, vinyl cement compound, acrylic, and oil on wood, 61 3/4 × 70 7/8 × 24 1/4".

### 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?*

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Tishan Hsu, *Ooze*, 1987, ceramic tile, urethane, vinyl cement compound, and acrylic on wood, 11'5 1/2" × 15'1 1/2" × 5'8 1/2".

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 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.



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

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?



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

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 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.



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

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 “scurniture” (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.



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

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 reembodyed, 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.*



Tishan Hsu, *Autopsy*, 1988, plywood, ceramic tile, acrylic, vinyl cement compound, stainless steel, rubber, 55 × 49 × 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.



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

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 influenced 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.



Richard Artschwager, *Table and Chair*, 1963–64, melamine laminate on wood; table: 29 3/4 × 52 × 37 1/2", chair: 45 × 17 3/4 × 21". © Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

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.

**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.**

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? 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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