

# frieze

## Tishan Hsu's Prescient Yet Apolitical View of Technology

By Rachel Aima, January 11, 2021

At SculptureCenter, a recent survey takes a narrow look at the artist's career, focusing on his tech-inspired works from the 1980s and '90s



The medium looks like it could use a good massage in Tishan Hsu's painted wooden panels. With their rounded corners and painted backs that cast a screen-like glow onto the walls, they suggest our now-ubiquitous smartphones and tablets. Their surfaces are built up with acrylic and enamel to mimic a machine's casing and frame *trompe-l'œil*, shadowed displays that make literal the computing metaphor of a 'skin'. In *R.E.M* (1986), a moulded peachy-buff casing frames a staticky black-and-white swathe that suggests a lumpy ribcage bisected by venting grilles. The effect is one of dermal layers stretched across hardware, at once both man and machine. But these works were made in the 1980s, and seethe with bulging veins and trapped body parts with all the body horror of David Cronenberg's *Videodrome* (1983). Hardware melts into meatware replete with tryphobia-inducing ports. The paintings are accompanied by sculptures, drawings and a video in 'Liquid Circuit', the artist's first institutional solo show in the United States, currently on view at SculptureCenter in Long Island City. (The survey opened last year at the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles before travelling to New York.)

After studying architecture at MIT and film at Harvard, Hsu found himself working nights at a law firm, hunched over a word processor. It's a posture that has since become so commonplace as to have spawned its own neologisms such as 'tech neck', 'texting thumb' and 'tablet elbow'. (You're probably doing it right now.) While the Pictures Generation was appropriating on-screen images, Hsu was more interested in the apparatuses that broadcast them and their all-too-visceral effects on our bodies. There is one exception: a small side room features a number of pencil drawings, mostly preliminary sketches for other works in the show. There are also some silkscreens and Xeroxes from the mid-1990s onwards that include a character

from *The Simpsons* (1989–ongoing). It's a jarring geo-cultural anchor in a show that may scream 1980s but otherwise floats in a vacuum. Notably, unlike artists making cyborg-like works today, Hsu's bodies are neither explicitly racialised nor gendered. He did not begin making work about his Chinese heritage – none of which is included here – until 2006.



Tishan Hsu, R.E.M., 1986, installation view, 'Tishan Hsu: Liquid Circuit', SculptureCenter, New York, 2020, acrylic, alkyd, vinyl cement compound on wood, 152 x 152 x 10 cm. Courtesy: the artist and SculptureCenter, New York; collection of Marian and James H. Cohen; photograph: Kyle Knodell

Although Hsu showed with iconic dealers such as Leo Castelli and Pat Hearn, he was consistently overlooked during his time. But it's hard to tell whether this exhibition is a reappraisal or a rediscovery. There's a melancholic air of obsolescence here, all these hybrid forms being relegated to the scrap-heap of art history before ever getting their chance to shine. And there's a sense of closing an academic fist around a firefly too, which dampens some of the works' curious effervescence that appears not as bubbles but as tickly static. I think of the way that 20th-century science fiction wanted the future to be just, but cyberpunk just cared that it was weird. My disappointment with this show is that it feels under-contextualized in this space – but maybe it's just that it's not weird enough.

The first rule of writing about Hsu is to call him prescient. Here are some things that his work prefigured: a post-human fusing of man and machine, secondary and tertiary screens, flat design, our wretched technological present. The painting *Closed Circuit II* (1986) is particularly unsettling in its resemblance to Instagram's old logo. Of course, said logo was loosely based on the Bell & Howell camera of the 1950s, but skeuomorphism nevertheless becomes a pertinent way to consider the show's beguiling mixture of smoothness and metal-cold terror of being trapped mid-transformation. Only: who is the designer, and who is the audience here? Is the obsolete object on which these hybrid forms are modelling their current skin the human or the machine? Better not to dwell on it. Safer. Long live the new flesh.



'Tishan Hsu: Liquid Circuit', 2020, exhibition view, SculptureCenter, New York. Courtesy: the artists and SculptureCenter, New York; photograph: Kyle Knodell



Tishan Hsu, Liquid Circuit, 1987, installation view, 'Tishan Hsu: Liquid Circuit', SculptureCenter, New York, 2020, acrylic, vinyl cement compound, alkyd, oil, aluminum on wood, 229 x 363 x 23 cm. Courtesy: the artist, the SculptureCenter, New York, and Weisman Art Museum, Minneapolis; gift of Dolly J. Fiterman; photograph: Kyle Knodell

*'Tishan Hsu: Liquid Circuit' is on view at SculptureCenter, New York, through 25 January 2021.*