

HYPERALLERGIC

Sculptural Paintings That Channel the Static Soup of Television

By Brock Lownes, October 27, 2020

In Tishan Hsu's work, the canvas becomes a television, a platform of multiple channels, where what channel to tune into is the viewer's choice.



Tishan Hsu, "Liquid Circuit" (1987), acrylic, vinyl cement compound, alkyd, oil, aluminum on wood, 90 x 143 x 9 inches (all images courtesy SculptureCenter, unless otherwise stated)

In 1965 Nam June Paik proclaimed, "The cathode-ray tube will replace the canvas." To some extent Paik's observation rings true, though the art historical pendulum swings both ways; in the 70s and 80s, television became so ubiquitous that it inspired some artists to strive towards materiality. Structuralist filmmakers experimented with celluloid. The Pictures Generation artists appropriated images from the screen, calling attention to the ideology concealed in images from everyday life. The early work of Tishan Hsu continued this fascination with the materiality of media, exploring how the two-dimensional screen could exist in three-dimensions.



Tishan Hsu, "R.E.M." (1986), acrylic, alkyd, vinyl cement compound on wood, 60 x 60 x 4 inches

His early paintings — wall reliefs may be a better term — on display at SculptureCenter in Long Island City, evoke the rounded squares of vintage television consoles. Using Styrofoam and cement, he builds up a topographic moon-like terrain onto the surface of his panels, later flooding it with either neon or flesh-tone acrylic paint, only to then scratch the paint away to reveal the stratum below. The scratches upon the rounded canvas recall white noise on a television screen; static made tangible. Some of these works, like "R.E.M" from 1986, take a more sculptural form, reminiscent of a flattened Barbara Hepworth. At other times, works like "Liquid Circuit," from a year later, incorporate ready-made elements such as stainless-steel handles, calling to mind Robert Rauschenberg's *Combines*.

In *What Do Pictures Want?*, W.J.T. Mitchell claims a medium is "an in-between or go-between space or pathway that connects two things, a sender to a receiver, an artist to a beholder." In many ways, Mitchell is describing an interface, a point in which any two systems meet. Hsu's inter-media work complicates this one-to-one interface relationship between both technological objects and human, human and art objects. By combining the language of sculpture, painting, and technology, Hsu transforms the media interface into a platform or a circuit, where multiple multiple systems of meaning operate simultaneously.



Tishan Hsu, "Portrait" (1982), oil stick, enamel, acrylic, vinyl cement compound on wood, 57 × 87 × 6 inches (image courtesy Empty Gallery, Hong Kong)

In Hsu's representation of a television screen, viewers encounter neither a sculpture fully in the round, nor a painted screen depicting a human subject. Nevertheless, his undulating reliefs evoke the curves of the human body, and the tv-like shape of the canvases gesture to embodied rituals like sitting in front of the tv. In some cases, like in "Portrait" (1982), he even depicts facial features floating unmoored in the static soup of his scratched reliefs.

For Hsu television did not replace the canvas. In his work, the canvas becomes a television, a platform of multiple channels, where what channel to tune into is the viewer's choice.