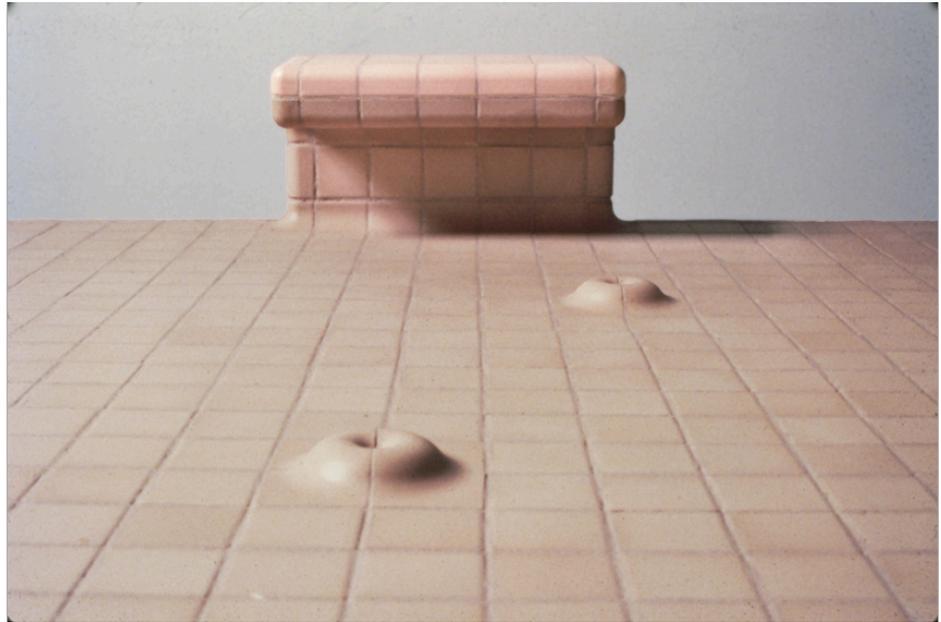


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Clinical Cosmology: Tishan Hsu

By Hera Chan



Tishan Hsu, *Auto-Immune* (detail), 1988

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Contrary to popular belief, Tishan Hsu offers a simple proposal. Orifices open up from flat surfaces or tiled sculptural pieces, or are embedded in skin-bag surfaces or technologically manufactured images. But his violating fissures, seamlessly embedded, are not intended to illustrate the engagement of the body under the historical epoch of technology. Rather, they produce an affective relationship with the technical object. It doesn't look like anything you've seen before because he isn't referencing standards and methods in art history—in fact he evades these, which is why you'll never see paint in his work because of the medium's provenance in the history of painting. He produces work on another premise altogether.

Yuk Hui's book *The Question Concerning Technology in China* (2016) proposes a theory of technology called "cosmotechnics" that roots the contemporary definition of *techne* in Chinese cosmology, which perceives a unity of heaven and humanity. The argument goes that different places are informed by different material conditions and thinking, thereby necessitating a different theory of technology. Hsu's unfamiliar articulation of *techne* in his work since the 1970s is grounded in anterior foundational myths as well, nurtured by a cosmology he has been surgically suturing through intuition.

After studying architecture at MIT, Hsu moved in 1975 to New York, where he worked at one of the very few office jobs that then involved a word processor. He found this engagement with the virtual presented on-screen remarkable, but regarded the physicality of the word processor itself as the site of mediation: you

look at this box and see a screen that shows you a complete illusion of a world, and it is completely absorbing. You realize the world shown is not an illusion. It's in the same space you are, and your awareness of this object occurs at the surface. The interface—introducing body to machine—is constitutive of sorcery, or as Wendy Hui Kyong Chun writes, “sourcery.” In her account, introduced in 2008, we valorize the user as agent, a fantasy of our control. Source code is a fetish and makes our machines demonic and our desire for dominance endless. Close engagement with software “will not let us escape fictions and arrive at a true understanding of our machine, but rather make our interfaces more productively spectral.”¹ It is its concern with the physical that makes Hsu's work critical and confusing. Its spectrality is materially based. Hsu does not believe that uploading to the cloud hails the end of the body. There is no preoccupation with ghosts of future's past, nor fear of technological dominance over humans, but an animistic articulation from the presence of present cyborg-like interfaces. In these foundational myths there are no origin stories.

In general, Hsu's work does not photograph well. Most of the works appear flat where they are sculptural, or like a screen even when they are three-dimensional. The tiled sculptures appear clinically clean and perform surgical theater with dramatic suspense. One of Hsu's earliest hanged works, *Portrait* (1982), was made using oil stick, enamel, and concrete on wood. The piece is six inches thick. The corners are rounded (another evasion of hanging-art convention, which usually presents the work as an angular window) and there is a thick black-and-pink frame around the eyes, lips, and other orifices operating on the same field. A rounded pink rectangle seemingly pushes through the plane in the center. *Portrait (2)* (1984) was made with oil stick, enamel, Styrofoam, and concrete on wood. It is a rounded square bearing a black vignette around its edges, the steel gray surface marked by defined ridges with an upside-down trapezoid-like shape in the center. Resembling a dehydrated body, it suggests a strange musculature underneath the canvas surface. Hsu's only other work that has ever implied self-portraiture through its title is *Fingerprint* (1989). Hsu was in Cologne from 1988 to 1990 for an artist residency, and the requisite paperwork required his fingerprints and a “certificate of good behavior.” *Fingerprint* is a one-off piece and the only straightforwardly figurative work in his opus. It features a laser-printed copy of the submitted document, his inky prints contained by a thick aluminum frame with wire-reinforced glass on top. The work is vacuum sealed—a comment on bodily surveillance replicating a synthetic environment where the body has no air.

Hsu's works often present clinical trials and tribulations, like surgical theater. This is where you can see the body exploded. Though he himself does not watch surgical theater (which looks something like a livestream of an operating room), Hsu did go under the knife in 2006 when he experienced a kidney transplant. Through this process, he came to know practically every chemical in his body because he did a lot of research on his own. He felt that the doctors treated him like a machine, and his earlier work from the 1980s began to feel newly prophetic. *Cold Cut* (1987) is a rounded square hanging work divided into top and bottom, its orifices fitted with mini grates, smatters of fresh red “blood” spilling out. *Transplant* (1987) as a title is evocative enough, seeming to refer either to surgical procedures or the status of an immigrant, or both. The question is not about locating the body in relation to technology; such modular structures, Hsu tells me, seek to “reconstitute the body in a different way.”²

Even the “furniture” pieces mirror this constant restructuring, following both Hsu's architectural education and the way offices can be arranged. His earlier furniture pieces are simpler, made of ceramic tile on wood, oil compound, steel, and sometimes vinyl or concrete. *Cellular Automata* (1989) is divided into a three-by-nine grid

outlined with organic black shadows that bulge like musculature under skin, and references Hsu's work from the earlier half of the 1980s, which included many cell-like diagrams. The size of the body is unclear, but either way, it can be taken apart like building blocks and put back together. The proposition might be understood as liberating or as a bodily horror, reminding me of the reception of the works of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. On the "body without organs" in *Anti-Oedipus* (1972), psychoanalyst Joel Kovel wrote, "Immersion in their world of 'schizoculture' and desiring machines is enough to make a person yearn for the secure madness of the nuclear family."³ In 1990, the Paris-based gallerist Charles Cartwright showed *Cellular Automata* in a group show. Cartwright had recommended Deleuze and Guattari to Hsu, although the latter would not begin a deep engagement with their texts until more than a decade later.

Proceeding through Hsu's work chronologically reveals that the timeline of his works parallels progressions in technological innovations in production processes. In *Cellular Automata*, Hsu used silkscreen for the first time. Transferring photographic film onto nylon-like screens, and we witness the inaugural technological repetition of his forms. Hsu does not use technology as a means to an end, or merely as a tool for visual illustration. He is engaged with technological processes themselves and how technology can produce its own images—another unification of the organic and machinic. Over time, the high-contrast black outlines that demarcated the modularity of Hsu's work in the early 1980s began to fade. The work of the 1990s shows faint traces of lines marking a grid, making a hybrid surface constituted of different materials and images. In the early 2000s the artist spent a year mastering Photoshop. The development of archival printing by Duggal, one of the largest printing labs in New York that was willing to work with artists, led to the possibility of digital printing on canvas. What Hsu originally did by hand became possible first via silkscreen, then Photoshop, and later in *The Shanghai Project* (2013–ongoing) by UV printing on aluminum. Technological processes had evolved dramatically, and mobilizing them yielded plastic and seamless works—the opposite ethos of collage.

In David Shannon's beloved children's picture book *A Bad Case of Stripes* (1998), Camilla Cream loves lima beans but refuses to eat them because her friends make fun of her for it. She begins to turn into the colors and patterns of her friends' taunts, growing roots, berries, and crystals and eventually merging with the architecture of the room. Though farfetched, Shannon's illustrations remind me of Hsu's works; they both demonstrate the mimetic potential of the body to fuse with its environment, mutually constituting each other into a singularity. Hsu was born in Boston to Shanghainese immigrant parents, grew up in Switzerland and Wisconsin, and later became part of Pat Hearn's East Village gallery roster. The 1990s language of identity politics did not speak to Hsu then, and it still doesn't. He is neither here nor there, though this position does not disturb his sense of place, which is one of immediacy. As Jeppe Ugelvig pointed out in his profile on Hsu for *ArtReview Asia*, Hsu's politics are much more aligned with the posthuman and the theories of Rachel Lee.⁴ In *The Exquisite Corpse of Asian America: Biopolitics, Biosociality, and Posthuman Ecologies* (2014), Lee asks: "If race has been settled as a legal or social construction and not as biological fact, why do Asian American artists, authors, and performers continue to scrutinize their body parts?"⁵ Rather than looking at the radicalized body through socially constructed notions of race, Hsu literally reconfigures its parts, suggesting another social order. Following his mother's death in 2013, Hsu set up a studio in Shanghai and worked there for three years. Among her possessions he found letters between his mother and her family in China from the 1950s and 1960s and a rich family archive of photographs accumulated by his great-uncle. Some pictures were missing from the photo albums, edited out by the Communists during the Cultural Revolution, requiring the album's

future owner to imagine the missing scenes of bourgeois life. Aware of the weight of this historical burden, Hsu felt disconnected from the images: they had everything and nothing to do with him. His parents never spoke of this time when he was growing up. Hsu first showed the collection of works known simply as *The Shanghai Project* at Empty Gallery in Hong Kong in 2019. It featured family photographs seemingly disturbed by digital transmission waves and further morphed by bright red or green silicon markings and drips. He felt the topic would be too sensitive to show in mainland China and too distant to show outside an Asian context.

The four works in the *Boating Scene* (2019) series show warped images of a well-dressed family on a boat. A double displacement occurs, first of the family itself in migration, and then in its confrontation with digital textures. The images are UV printed on aluminum, and computer-chip-like shapes of pigmented silicone appear to drip through the back of the plates. As Donna Haraway proposed in “The Cyborg Manifesto,”

“The silicon chip is a surface for writing; it is etched in molecular scales disturbed only by atomic noise, the ultimate interference for nuclear scores.”⁶ The images appear disturbed by ghostly transmissions, rendering the historical accuracy of the original image a moot point. Through this project, Hsu became aware of the prescient absence in his personal historical imaginary. Like all absences, it is constituted by the presence of something else. Hsu’s cosmology provides an ontology, a logic of being guided by the animism of technical objects. What a sense of being alive.

[1] Wendy Hui Kyong Chun, “On ‘Sourcery,’ or Code as Fetish,” *Configurations* 16, no. 3 (2008): 300.

[2] Author interview with Tishan Hsu, November 30, 2019.

[3] Joel Kovel, *History and Spirit: An Inquiry into the Philosophy of Liberation* (Boston: Beacon, 1991), 255.

[4] Jeppe Ugelvig, “Tishan Hsu: The Chinese-American Artist Who Pioneered New Ways of Representing the Interface between Physical and Virtual Worlds,” *ArtReview Asia*, Spring 2019, https://artreview.com/features/ara_spring_2019_feature_tishan_hsu/.

[5] Rachel Lee, *The Exquisite Corpse of Asian America: Biopolitics, Biosociality, and Posthuman Ecologies* (New York: NYU Press, 2014).

[6] Donna Haraway, “The Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century,” first published in *Socialist Review*, reprinted at <https://faculty.uca.edu/rnovy/Haraway-A%20Cyborg%20Manifesto.htm>.

Tishan Hsu (b. 1951, Boston) spent his very early years in Zurich, then grew up in Ohio, Wisconsin, Virginia, and New York. He studied architecture at MIT and received his BSAD in 1973 and M.Arch in 1975. While at MIT, he studied film at the Carpenter Center, Harvard University. He moved to New York in 1979, where he currently resides. Hsu first showed in New York at Pat Hearn Gallery. Since 1985 he has shown extensively in the United States, Europe, and Mexico. His work is in the collections of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; Centre Pompidou, Paris; Museum für Moderne Kunst, Frankfurt; the High Museum, Atlanta; the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles; the Museum of Contemporary Art, North Miami; and the Frederick R. Weisman Museum, Minneapolis. Hsu has served as a board member of White Columns, New York, and the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture. He has been a professor of visual arts at Sarah Lawrence College and a visiting professor at Pratt Institute and Harvard University.

Hera Chan is a curator and writer based in Hong Kong, currently working as the associate public programs curator at Tai Kwun Contemporary. Her ongoing work involves building a global contemporary art pageant through Miss Ruthless

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