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An Artist for the Dystopian Age

By Adrian Quinlan, January 7, 2021

For decades, Tishan Hsu has explored the ever more salient relationship between technology and the human body.



Tishan Hsu lives above his Williamsburg, Brooklyn, studio, where an immense skylight keeps a Norfolk Island Pine alive. The miniature green chair was once the artist's son's but, these days, Hsu uses it to work on pieces on the floor, like the glassy tank just behind him — a cast-off component of a sculpture that grew in another direction. Credit...Flora Hanitijo

When Los Angeles's Hammer Museum was shut down last March, so was the first retrospective of the 69-year-old artist Tishan Hsu. Hanging from the gallery walls for no one to see was Hsu's immense "Cell" (1987), a 16-foot-wide raft of carved wood painted in fleshy tones and overlaid with rigid bars to recall the experience of staring down a microscope into a magnified view of human blood. In another gallery sat "Virtual Flow" (1990-2018), a suite of mock laboratory equipment in a sickening shade of millennial pink, built to "Pee-wee's Playhouse" proportions. Meanwhile,

SculptureCenter

the recorded sounds of a hospital respirator emanated from the device playing the 2005 video work “Folds of Oil.”

In addition to upending the schedule of his retrospective, which was organized by SculptureCenter in Long Island City, Queens, where it is now on view, the pandemic impeded Hsu’s plans to start an ambitious work cycle, as well as the staffing of his studio, in the Williamsburg neighborhood of Brooklyn. But the coronavirus has also made the artist’s longstanding interest in the relationship between the body and technology, the organic and the man-made, seem even more prescient. “I remember telling people in the ’80s, ‘I don’t know what the work is about. I don’t have a text here. The work will reveal itself,’” Hsu said on a recent video call. “It just validates the unconscious.”



An early adopter of digital editing techniques, Hsu helped develop the studio for interactive art at Sarah Lawrence College, where he taught for more than 20 years before his retirement in 2018. Here, his large-scale printer sits next to “Blue Interface With Lego” (2019), a dye-sublimation print. Credit...Flora Hanitijo

Born in Boston and raised by an opera singer and an engineer, Hsu had a childhood that was scored by the warbles of humanity as much as by the orderly hum of machines. As a student at MIT, he studied architecture and began to experiment with sculpture, putting to use his knowledge of ergonomics and organic forms. To fund his art-making after graduation, he took a job temping as a word processor at various law firms; typing on a primitive computer, his thoughts would veer to what screens might do for memory and sense perception. In his off hours, he was reconsidering painting, working with plywood forms. He eventually developed a technique of scratching through layers of paint to reveal gooey, naturalistic shapes in the wood. Staring at these early works can be a bit like looking at an electrical outlet and seeing in its contours and openings a face in shock: eyes and lips sometimes appear to cohere, then fade back into abstraction.\

When Hsu started showing his hand-wrought slabs in New York in the mid-80s, the work felt out of step with the decade’s slick graphic art and loopy, graffiti-inspired paintings. But the subsequent decades revealed Hsu’s anticipation of our current era of industrial design. Pull out an iPhone to take a picture of Hsu’s “Squared Nude”

(1984) or “Institutional Body” (1986) and you’ll notice that the shape, orientation and proportions of the gadget are roughly the same as those of the painted wall hangings. When Hsu’s show opened at the Hammer last January, a curator pointed out that “Closed Circuit II” (1986), a square wall hanging with a lenslike, circular form, resembles an early logo for Instagram. And when asked about “Portrait” (1982), a horizontal wooden slab whose rounded outer edges frame a rectangle scratched in the manic texture of a static-filled screen, Hsu insisted: “I was not thinking of the iPad at the time.”



Yogurt containers are just one part of Hsu’s system for organizing the substrates he uses to give his sculptures textures that are alternately scratchy and gooey, organic and shellacked. Credit...Flora Hanitijo

For a 1989 show at New York’s Pat Hearn Gallery, Hsu focused on the idea of medical intervention. Doctors had told him that he would eventually need a kidney transplant, but that future technology would make the procedure less risky. “I had this idea that the hospital was the most radical site for what we’re doing to our bodies,” he said. “That some future people might look back on us, as we look back on very early cultures that do these things to the body, like impel them or scar them.” The kidney transplant, which Hsu finally underwent in 2006, increased the likelihood of his having a severe response to Covid-19. And so, last spring, he let his staff go and joined his wife, who stays at their home in the Berkshires, where he lived out a version of Thomas Mann’s “Magic Mountain” (1924). “After a month or two it started getting very weird psychologically; you lose track of the days,” he said. At the same time, he spent more of those days scrolling through the news, thinking about how the headlines were designed to entice him to click. He started making drawings studded with eyes and lenses that “watch” the viewer, reversing the direction of the gaze and subverting the hierarchy of spectator and work: the surveyor becomes the surveyed.

Even in the mountains, then, the artist felt watched: by the sites he visited, by the phone he took to bed. “They actually have cognitive psychologists helping them design this software so that they know what will pull you in,” Hsu said. “We need to stop and think about what it’s doing to us and our bodies. So in a way that’s what

my work has been trying to grasp. I would say, whether people connect to my work — I think I’m really just trying to ask the question, ‘What is really happening?’”

On display together for the first time, Hsu’s sculptures ask more questions than they answer. Like props built for the Harkonnen den in a “Dune” remake, they seem designed to furnish a future we could not want to live in — a dystopia that may reflect aspects of our reality, but remains enigmatic enough to hide its politics, and grotesque enough to make more squeamish viewers turn away before they’ve had a chance, as Hsu said, to “stop and think.”



A mix of alkyd resin and oil paint produces a thick, tarry black that Hsu began deploying in the 1980s to paint wooden forms that he’d scratch, forming networks of lines that seemed to buzz with electricity. Credit...Flora Hanitijo

Now back in Brooklyn (his apartment is above his studio), Hsu answered T’s Artist’s Questionnaire via Zoom, having chosen a virtual background of an oozy-looking stucco wall that could easily have been mistaken for the handworked surface of one of his sculptures.

What is your day like? How much do you sleep, and what’s your work schedule?

I have to have eight hours of sleep. I work much of the day and evening. I live where I work, and I like being able to integrate everyday life with my work. I may go down in the evening for several hours, depending on what’s going on. Phone and internet, doing my work, working with assistants and, you know, eating or socializing — it’s all kind of mixed together. I feel like I’m always working mentally, if not actually in the studio. I don’t keep a schedule.

How many hours of creative work do you think you do in a day?

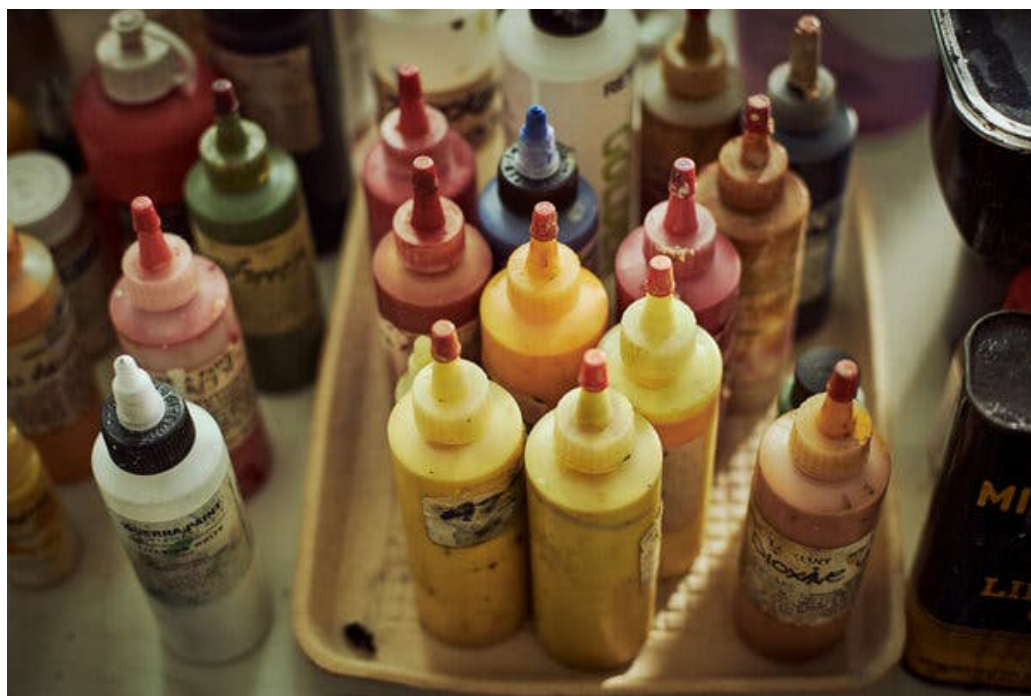
Seven, 10, maybe.

What’s the first piece of art you ever made?

Oh, I can't remember. In elementary school I was drawing all the time. I recall doing a landscape by looking out the window for the first time, and I remember doing a papier-mâché mask, a picture of which was published in the local paper. I drew an architectural rendering in elementary school, and the teacher brought people in to look at it.

What's the worst studio you ever had?

The worst one? I had a studio, I mean, I used the living room of a summer house that had no heat. I was taking a year off after grad school to decide whether I was going to be an artist and said, "I'll only allow myself to do art and nothing else, so if you're not going to do art, you're not going to do anything." And a friend offered this empty old house for the winter. I put down a piece of linoleum and just worked there. The ceiling, floors and walls were all dark brown wood. Small antique windows, a ceiling bulb and a space heater. It was 20 feet from the ocean, which can be pretty grim in the dead of a New England winter.



Hsu's techy, dystopian vision also includes powder pinks, swimming pool aquas and taxi cab yellow — all on view in his collection of acrylics. He credits his understanding of color to an early teacher of his, the painter Maryann Harman. Credit...Flora Hanitijo

What's the first work you ever sold? For how much?

A painting in high school, a landscape. I don't remember exactly what the price was — a few hundred dollars. I was painting from observation along the lines of the Impressionists, studying with the painter Maryann Harman, who taught me everything I know about color.

When you start a new piece, where do you begin?

My ideas for my work have always felt like steps in a long arc of an idea that is still being revealed through intuition. A new piece doesn't feel like a first step, but rather a step in an ongoing journey, where I am already in a context within the work, and

am making the next step. Sometimes it has been difficult to stop at a given point and produce a body of work, enough for a show, when I am seeing the next step. And spending time on the last step feels frustrating and repetitive, like variations on a theme. A teacher once told me I jump too fast and need to get more out of each idea that emerges. I feel I finally have enough understanding of the work that I can retrieve ideas that emerged along the way and allow them to unfold more fully, more effectively, or recombine several in ways I hadn't imagined, thanks to the advance of technological tools available to artists. The steps, in a way, are already there. I just need to take them.

How do you know when you're done?

I don't feel there's anything more to do.

How many assistants do you have?

With Covid, one. Pre-Covid, between two and four.

Have you assisted other artists before? If so, whom?

No.



Before the pandemic, Hsu was planning to hire more help. Lately, he and his sole studio assistant have been using these panels to test a new process for printing. Credit...Flora Hanitijo

What music do you play when you're making art?

Generally, techno. I like a lot of the techno coming from — well, early on it was Germany, where a lot of musicians from around the world were working.

When did you first feel comfortable saying you're a professional artist?

When I moved to New York, after grad school, I called myself an artist. The term “professional” never meant much to me.

Is there a meal you eat on repeat when you're working?

I don't eat in the studio.

Are you bingeing on any shows right now?

I don't watch TV. There are some shows I would like to binge on but don't allow myself the time. I like film, where I can experience it in one sitting. And I'm a news addict, which is one of the big issues I'm wrestling with.

What's the weirdest object in your studio?

The skin of a stingray. It's very tough, and there's almost like an eye right in the middle that's part of the pattern of the skin. It looks like something out of sci-fi. At some point, I was looking for different kinds of skins. I've always been fascinated by how color and pattern manifest in nature and on living creatures.

How often do you talk to other artists?

Well, at this point, my assistants are generally artists, often younger. Occasionally I talk to artist friends closer to my generation.



Hsu barely touches oil paint these days — a degree in architecture at MIT and an interest in industrial design pulled him away from painting and toward sculpture — but the medium defined his early study of conventional landscape painting. Credit...Flora Hanitijo

What do you do when you're procrastinating?

I spend too much time following the news and commentary on the web. I sometimes think I may not be entirely procrastinating. What I feel is an addiction might not be

entirely about my own impulses. I am thinking about the reality described in the recent documentary “The Social Dilemma” (2020).

What’s the last thing that made you cry?

I can’t remember the specifics but some things on the news last year made me cry.

What do you usually wear when you work?

Old clothes.

If you have windows, what do they look out on?

I don’t have windows in the studio. There are only skylights, and I look at the sky.

What do you bulk buy with most frequency?

I order a lot of water. Five-gallon bottles of water. I lived through 9/11 downtown when we had to carry water up seven flights of stairs.

What embarrasses you?

Responses I often get when I’m asked my age.

Do you exercise?

Yes. I do martial arts, specifically action meditation and resistance training.

What are you reading?

“The Futurica Trilogy” by Alexander Bard and Jan Söderqvist. Also, “Critique of Black Reason” (2013) by Achille Mbembe.

What’s your favorite artwork (by someone else)?

There are so many. One? Rosemarie Trockel’s steel sofa with the plastic sheet on it [“Copy Me” (2013)]. A performance of Pope.L in which he buried himself vertically except for his head [“Sweet Desire a.k.a. Burial Piece” (1996)], which I witnessed; I will never forget it. Sun Yuan and Peng Yu’s “Can’t Help Myself” (2016), shown recently at the Guggenheim. William Kentridge’s early animations. Early Bakshaish rugs.