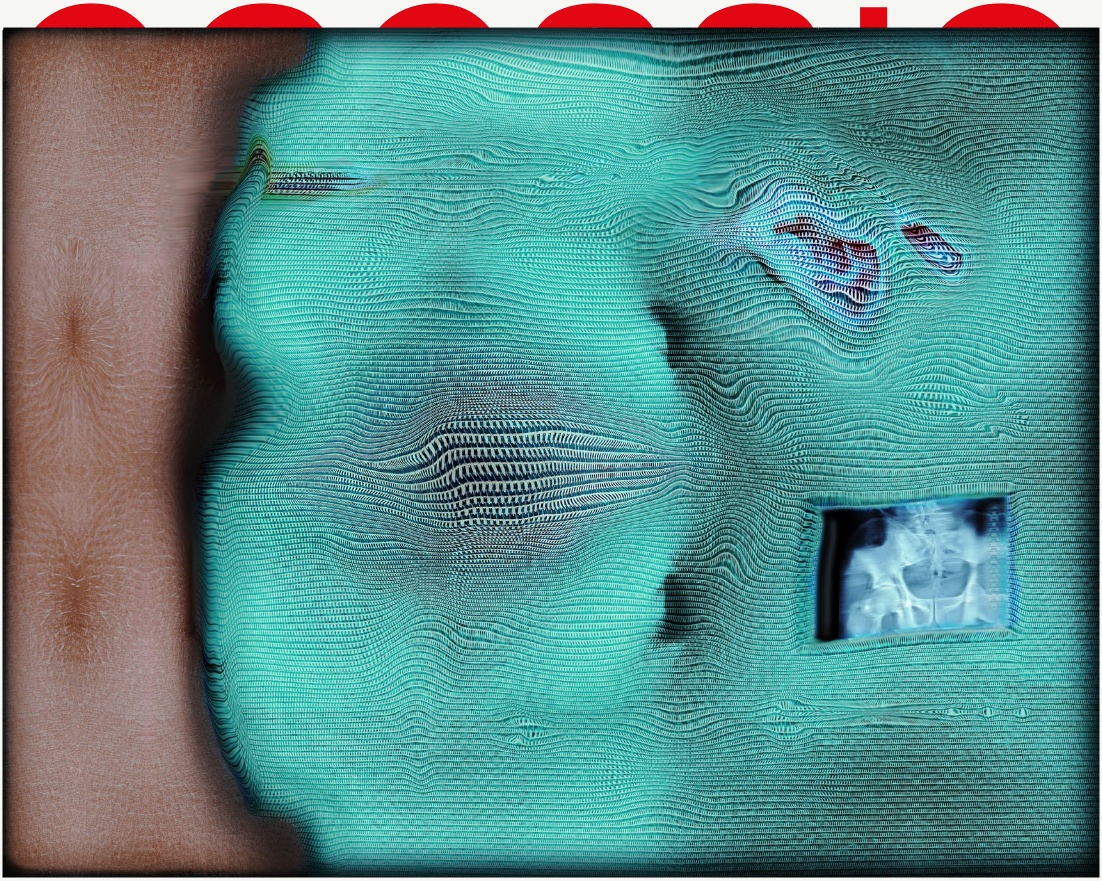
Tishan Hsu

secession



Secession
Tishan Hsu

Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther und Franz König, Köln

When Tishan Hsu learned that the new publication model introduced by the Secession in 2023 calls for freely accessible digital copies of all books complementing the printed version, he was inspired to toy with the relation between the analog book and its digital twin. To do so, he took process-oriented approaches that are integral to his creative practice such as the interpenetration of analog and digital techniques and adapted them to the book medium. Hsu's art harnesses printing processes to translate digitally generated or edited forms into analog media, where they undergo further manipulation, sometimes iteratively, as in a feedback or echo.

In the book, the artist mirrors this process-based dimension of his work with a mutating series of eight pictures created for the downloadable version, whose title image changes over the course of the exhibition's duration not unlike in the computer-generated special effect known as morphing. The intervals at which the cover changes are progressive rather than static. The final image is released on the exhibition's closing day and remains in place as the "infinite" version. Meanwhile, the play with the cover image also turns collecting into a game—the printed dust cover, which exists only in the analog version, features all eight motifs, like a preprinted sleeve for collectible cards, complete with the exact period during which they can be downloaded from the web. An aficionado who wants the full set—almost like a collector buying up NFTs—will need to download the digital book on the specified dates.

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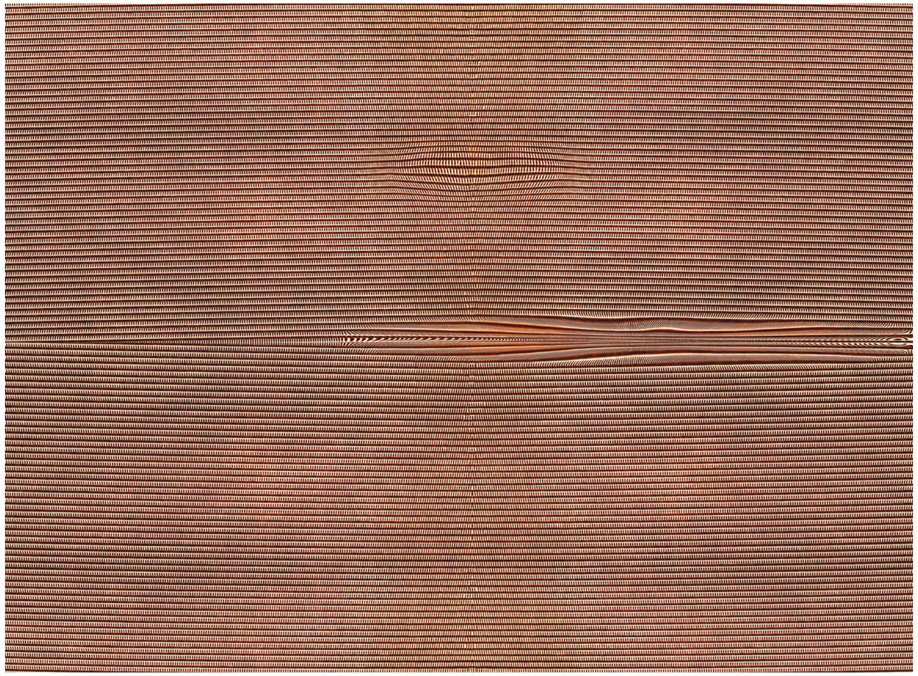

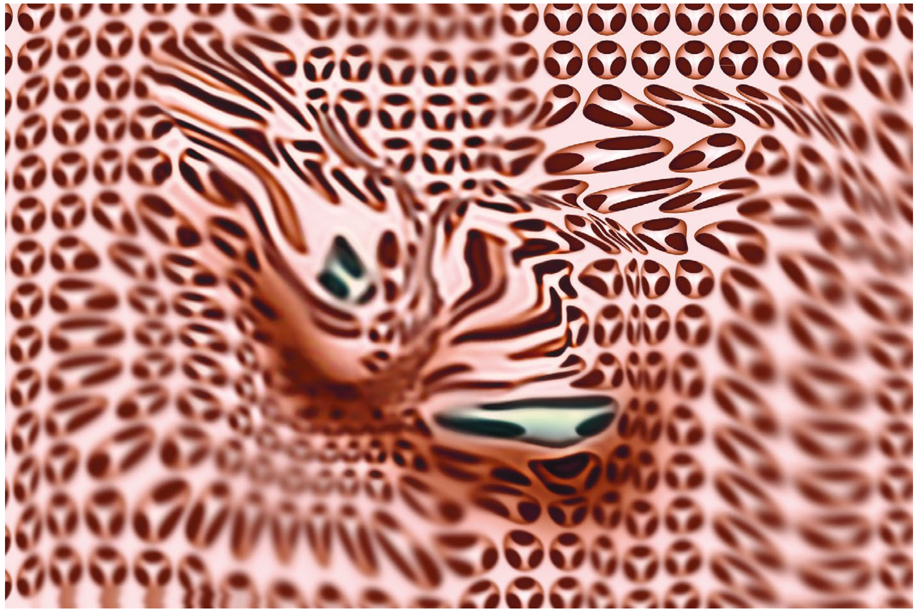

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Tishan Hsu: Gray Zone
Laura Brown

I

To make art is a truly human act. In the face of really good art I find myself returning to this notion as a question: Why did someone make this, *in this particular way*? Painting, we can say, is a mode of image making done by hand; from scratch. Whether that image provides a pictorial likeness, likewise it carries with it certain narrative qualities. Where it remains abstract, meaning lies in a kind of reflection of itself back at the world. In any case it forms into a new, metonymic object: an *icon*. This is a great word for describing the work of Tishan Hsu, whose paintings and sculptures, as such, also start to *contain* many icons. Decades in advance, this artist imagined the folding form of a laptop, the rounded corners of a smartphone, the moiré limitations of digital comprehension, and even the Instagram icon.[1]

Hsu emerged as an art maker in 1980s New York, and, as his career came to prominence there, he would leave the city to spend the final two years of the decade in Cologne—seeking some respite from the industry machine in favor of maintaining focus on doing the work itself. This is an artist who has always been not only dedicated to his vocation from the start, but protective of its priorities. Having studied Architecture at MIT in Boston, his place of birth, Hsu's choice to carry that instruction into the field of art making was surely a precise and deliberate one.

These languages aren't completely apart—in the ways that architecture or textile form a kind of skin in relation to the body, so does Hsu with his art. A painting, as we think of it, is a relatively flattened, physically discrete panel typically hung on the wall. An image—typically materialized through layers of paint—forms the new surface that stretches across this shape and settles into the visual portal we encounter as art. Of course, having traveled through many moments of time and place as a technology, we know that a painting might exist without the image, and certainly without the paint.[2] What remains of this picture-as-portal is the portal-as-picture.

Over the decades Hsu's work has demonstrated a series of internal loops and returns. With him, we can define painting as a time-travel technology: a vehicle for projection into the future that must move in our immediate present. With remarkable presence, where his work points to the unseeable dimensions of technology as it meets with and courses through the human body, its material status as an art object is imperative. In Hsu's world, this skin-to-skin encounter is its own technology. This is where the work's *ideas* come to cross over with their actual *arrival as things* in the world. Cell-into-skin, portal-as-cell, they double then quadruple, multiply and mutate continuously.

II

In his earliest works, Hsu manipulated a vinyl cement compound medium to build up bulging surfaces, as if something alive lived within and was pushing outward. In the areas of these panels that remained flat, he created a similar optical terrain by layering paint to be scratched into with a horizontal line that gathers and parts to suggest shadows and protrusions. Elsewhere, this technique worked to reveal those lower levels with the visual effect of TV static or an EKG flat line, suggesting that to glimpse that inner being would reveal only a darkened void.

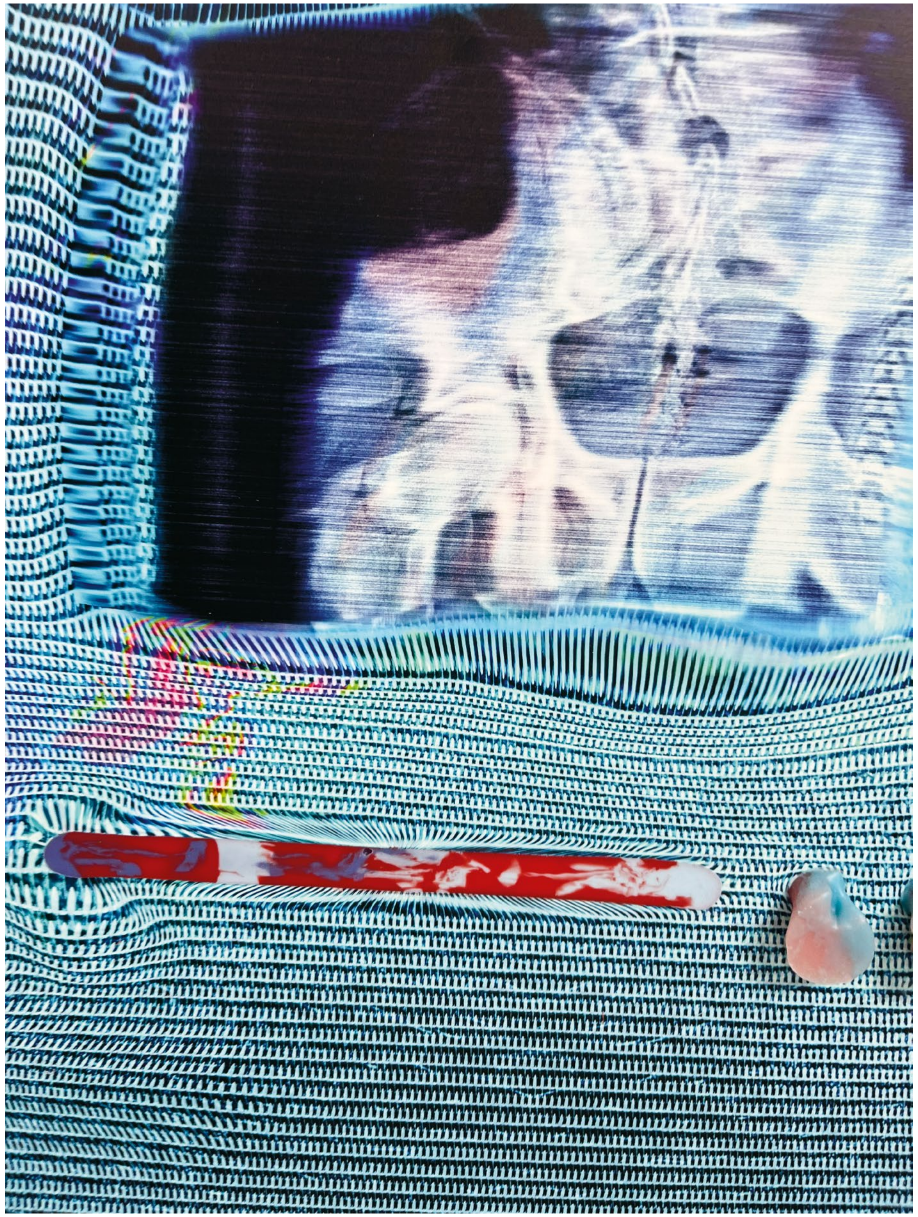
From the beginning, Hsu's work suggested consciousness as something holographic. The world exists because we perceive it to; all we can really know is this one continuous surface that we see, hear, and press against. We can therefore conceive only a vast, colorless zone behind this material extent of our knowledge. With titles like *Plasma*, *Cell*, *REM*, and *Ooze*, in the first decade of his making Hsu also introduced industrial, architectural, and modular elements like ceramic tiles, cart wheels, and steel grip bars.

Signifying something bodily as well as something *familiar to* the body, Hsu's ambiguous compositions sometimes also contain actual imagery of mouths, eyes, bellybuttons, and x-rayed insides. In the '90s he started transferring this photographic information through silkscreen, adopting an even finer mesh to produce a flatter surface and smoother image, still containing those swells and contours. By design, at a larger scale the silkscreen is limited to an image that meets in panels, again and always returning us to the modular elements, like the tile or the cell, through which we repeat and multiply.

Around this same time, silicone began to appear in the works, at first like miniature recollections of those large-scale bodily topographies embedded as fleshy elements of sculptural works also consisting of glass and steel. This silicone also appears in smaller protrusions that suggest nipples or, more abstractly, flesh squishing through the mesh. In 2000, Photoshop 6.0 was released—the first version intended for broader public use—launching features like the Liquify filter and new blending tools. At this time Hsu dedicated a sabbatical year to immerse himself in the medium. At this juncture, the three decades of Hsu's advancement through various material technologies and experiments with their effects were now made available, immediate, and fluid inside the screen, just as he had been pushing toward all along. Indeed he has always contained an uncanny, clairvoyant sensibility in seeking to comprehend the implications of the technologies we make in our image.

III

With the arrival of accessible raster graphics editing technology, in the early 2000s Hsu's decades of experimentation with material and image came to



a meeting point with the phenomena they had anticipated in the world. This signaled a turning point and crystallized the double-helix running through the work, which today approaches proprioception as it responds more and more specifically and immediately upon external stimuli. If Hsu's work before this point was materially more static and conceptually more abstract, today's technology has advanced to the point where the tools and mediums used to create the work themselves become integral to its enquiries.

Evolving from the material fixity of cement compound, ceramic tile, or the silkscreen image, the work now takes as its ground a high-definition, UV-cured inkjet print of digitally manipulated fields of texture and color. Through its materials and materiality, finally the work starts to evidence the *actual encounter* of the living, human organism with the technology through which it interfaces and communicates. The digital smudge allows a direct translation of the physical movement, as well as its speed, involved in its application. Silicone, at first liquid, settles into the shallow webbed crevices of the human epidermis and, as it dries, also resembles its texture to the touch.

Any technology at hand—by default human-developed—is inherently and inescapably made in our image. Thus formed by the same bounds of our human comprehension while at the same time designed to exceed the human brain's computational capacity, this *image* leaps between mimesis and mutation. We see and feel this with the development of Artificial Intelligence which, on the verge of sentience, when attempting to mimic flourishes of humanity (such as writing or image-making) can never quite meet a perfection of the *real thing* without a return to direct human input.

Indeed, it is of crucial consequence that what might appear to be AI-generated imagery in Hsu's work remains in fact generated through the "hand-eye creative process."[3] Joining the double-helix, a renewed sense of contingency emerges between artist (and therefore artwork) and technology, spiraling continually in both directions. As notated by their titles, ideas of *screen*, *body*, and *data* become transmutable into *camera-screen-skin* or *phone-breath-bed*. A new ontology occurs. The body becomes the camera at the same time as it is scanned by it. Surveillance takes on its logical extreme, as all-one-body.

We live alongside an intelligence that is no longer our own—that takes place because of us but no longer through us. It slips around us into an irrevocable being-everywhere. Cool but not cold, these are the conditions that Hsu's work of the 2020s swims through. Up close, the skin of Hsu‘s works today seems to breathe with a mesh of undulating apertures. In some, this surface layer peels open, only to reveal its self-same image underneath (from *breath* to *double-breath*). As it always has, Hsu's work wraps around the zones of our not-knowing.

Up closer, activating a fourth dimension, the surface might also be physically perforated with a matrix of small holes that seem to lead to a blank nowhere. Each dilation signals a moment of collapse. Like miniature black holes, we arrive at a rapid technological flow only once imagined, and with it the dissolution of the core principles of our physical reality. And yet here we stand, in the interim, in front of a strange and beautiful work of art. We are gifted an intimate moment like skin touching skin—in the way architecture or textile forms a skin—with space to move in between. Grass grows inside this in virtual space and fleshy silicone seeps out of it. We arrive now to a place more than a thing.

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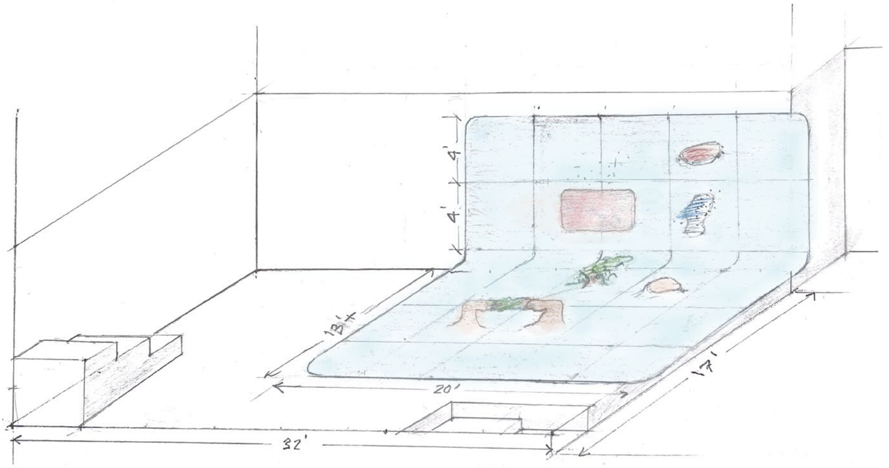
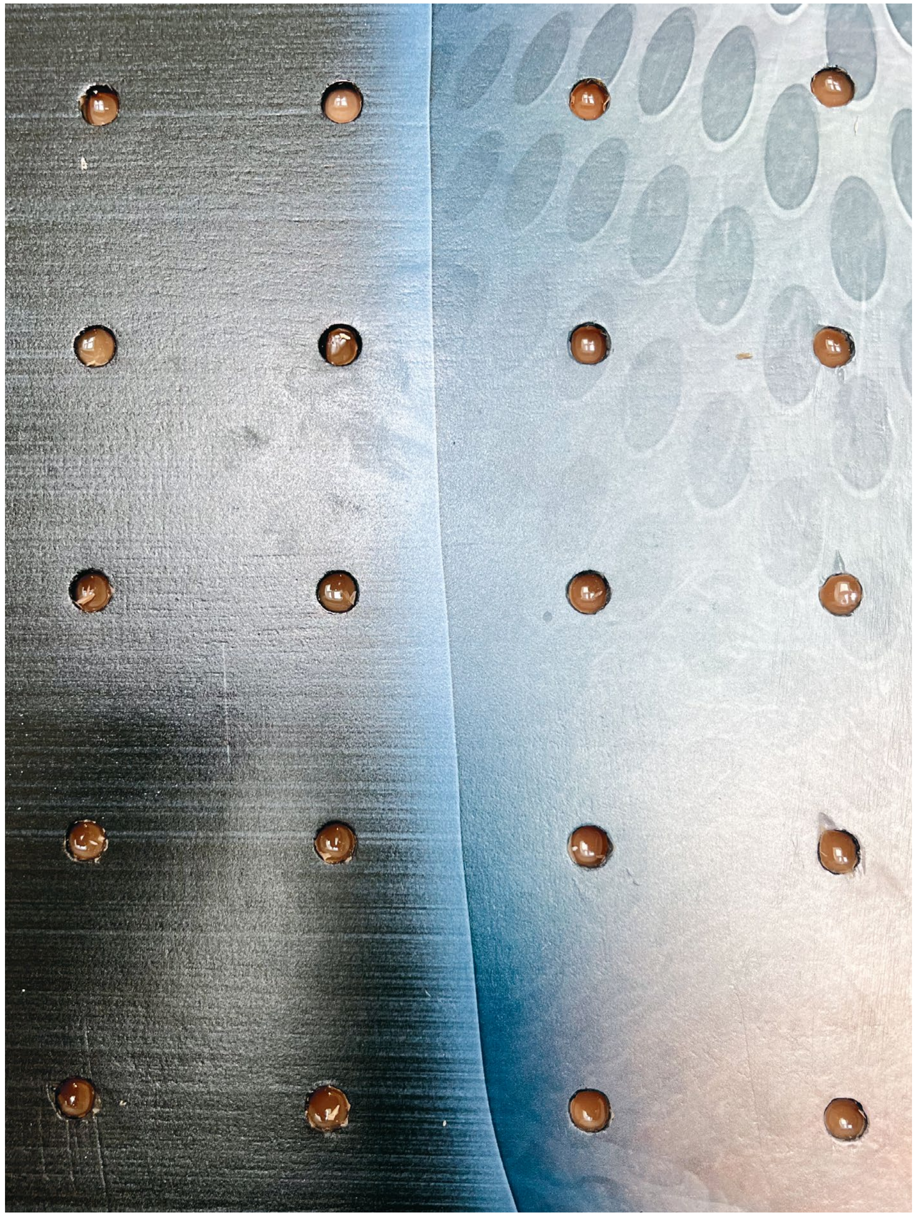
[1] See the uncanny *Closed Circuit II* of 1986, composed of acrylic, alkyd, Styrofoam, and vinyl cement compound on wood, 59 x 59 x 4 inches. Twenty-four years early!

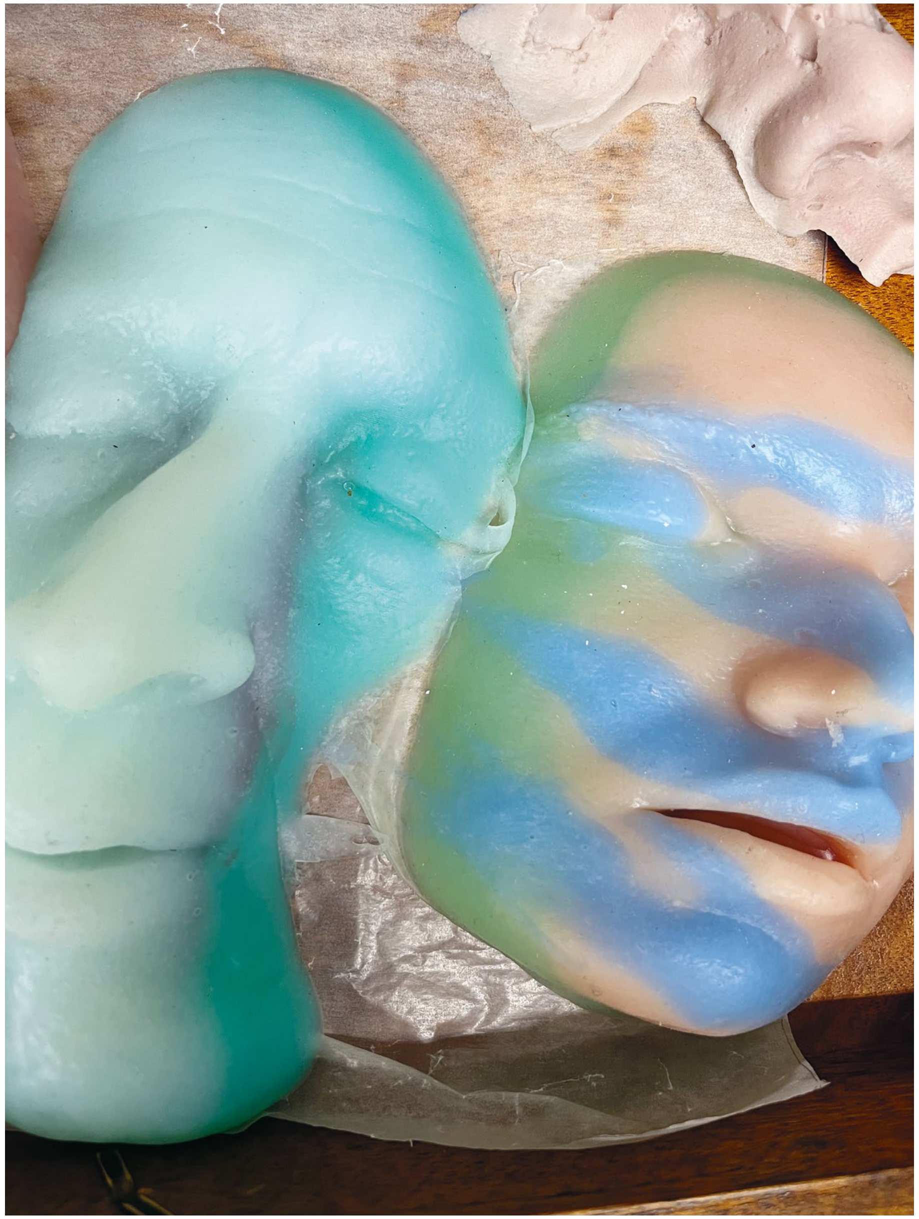
[2] “I felt that minimalism was a kind of beginning, though it felt like an end for a lot of people.”—Tishan Hsu

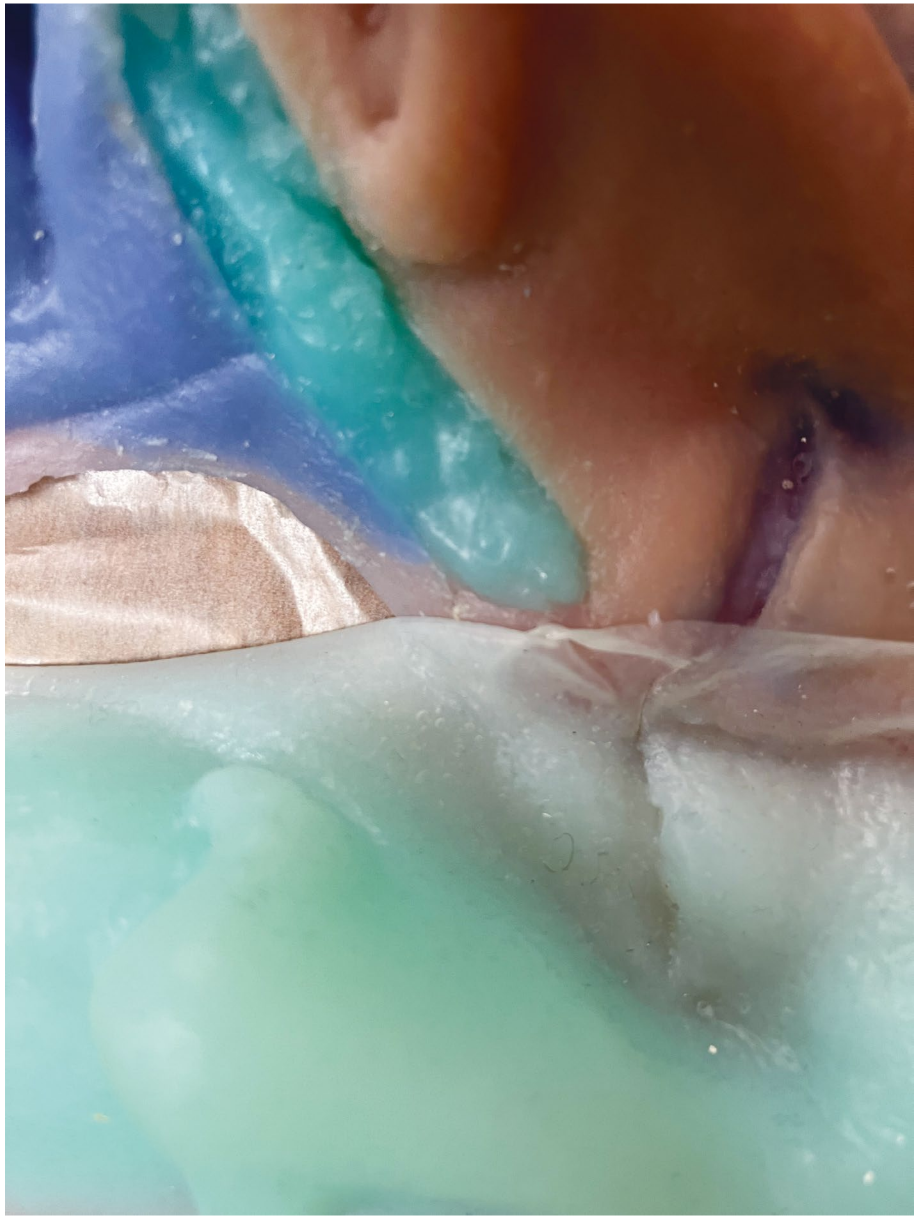
[3] “The hand-eye creative process [is something] I am not willing to give it up. It is intrinsic to what I’m trying to talk about.”—Hsu

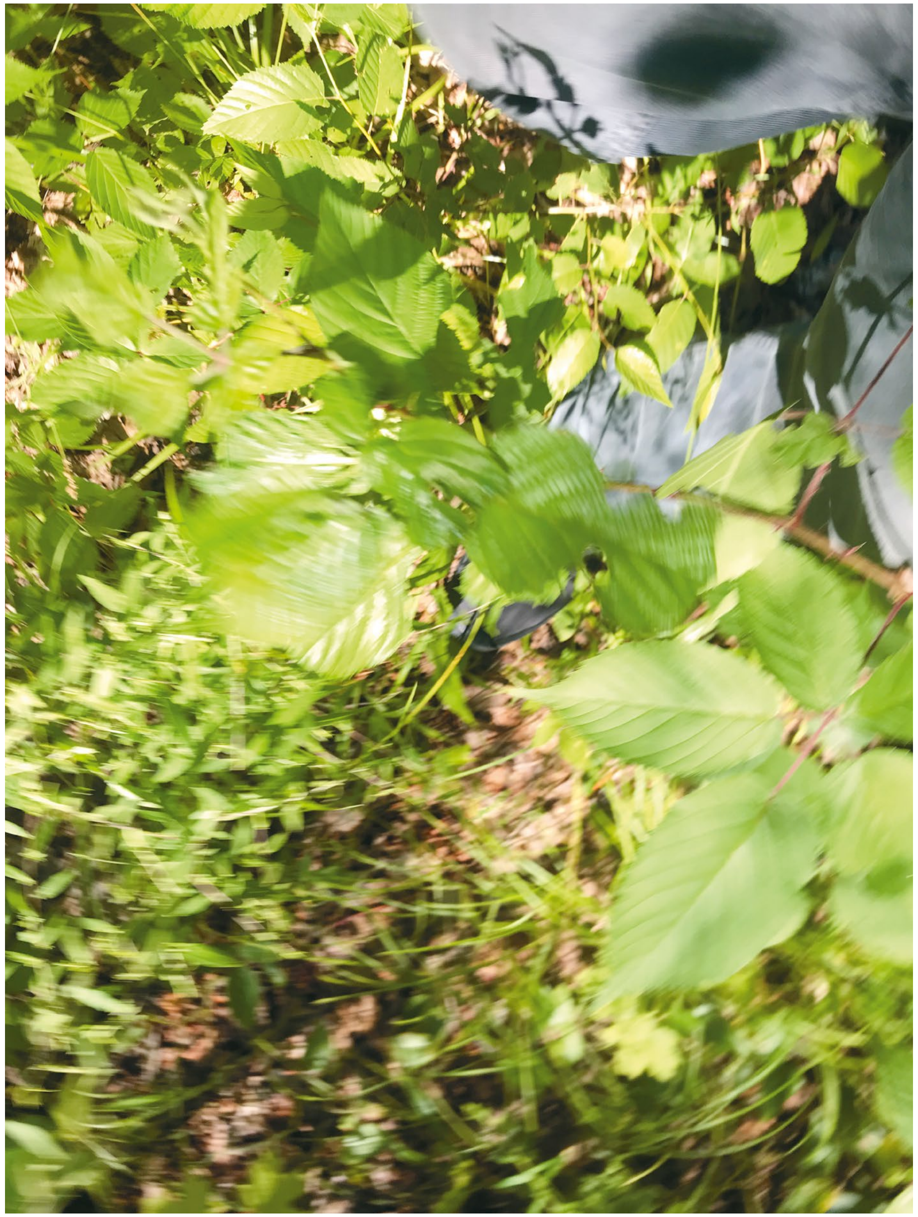

4'
4'
13'
20'
17'
32'

TISHAN HSU PREL. SKETCH / M.MAYER GALERIE INSTALL. SCALE: 3/16" = 1'-0"
12/22







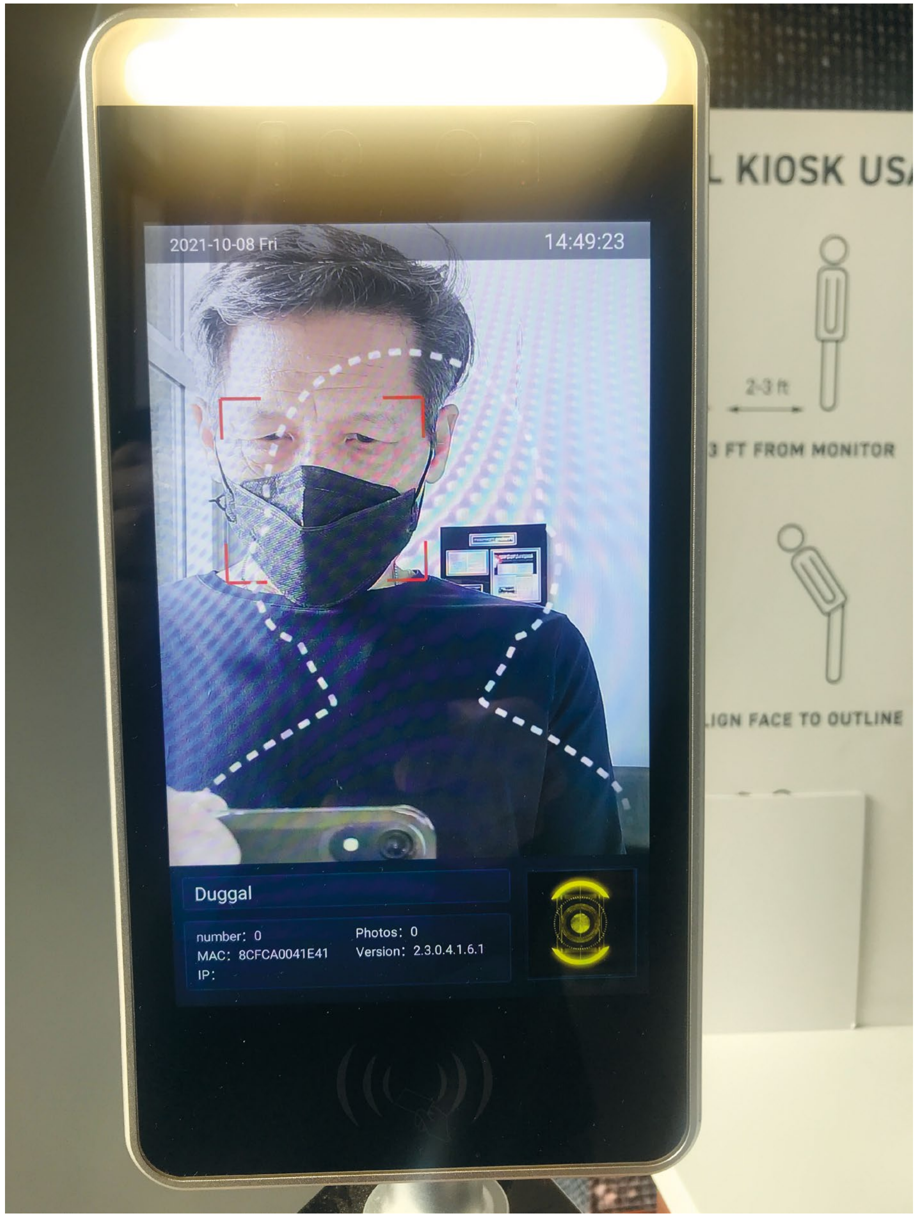


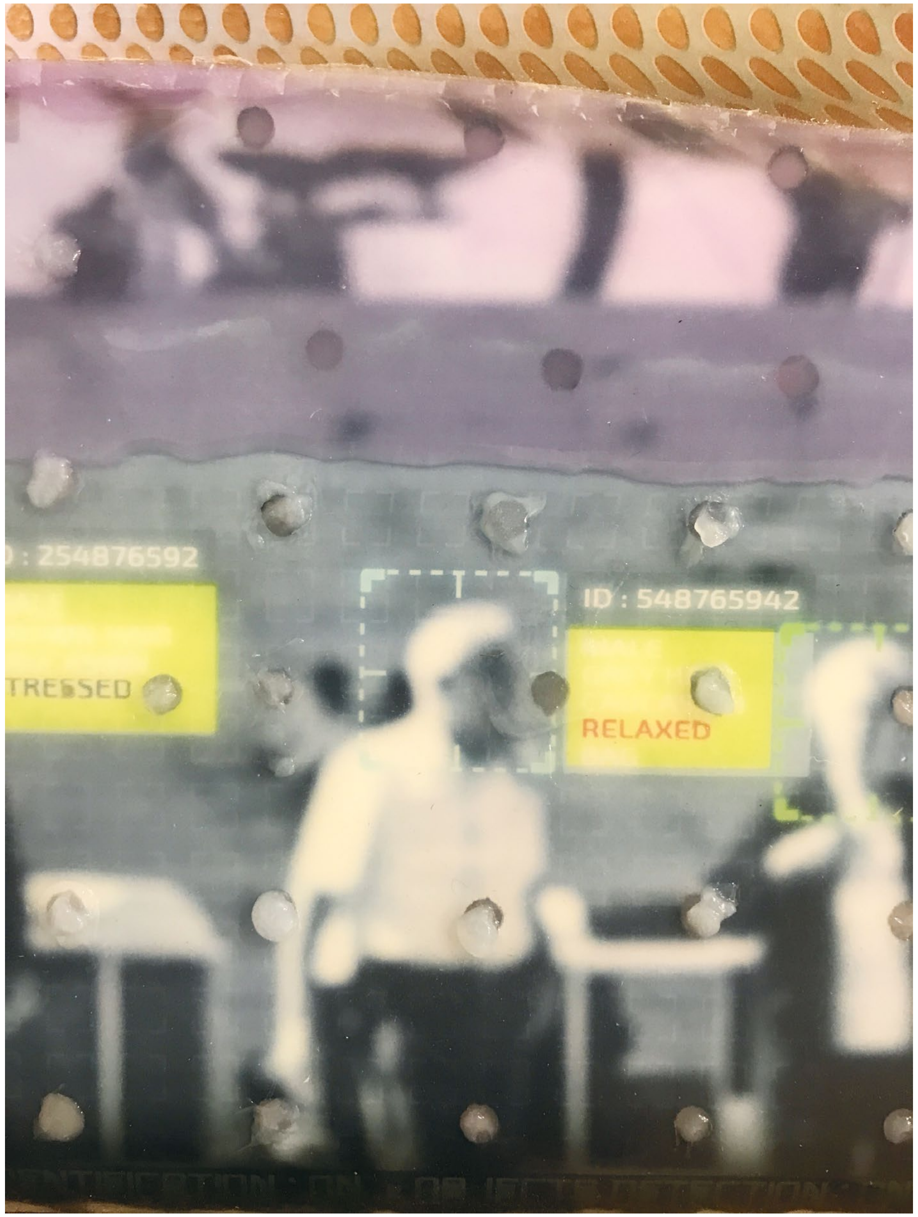
Tishan Hsu in conversation with Martha Schwendener

Martha Schwendener
My enthusiasm for your work comes not just from what's going on in the present, but also in terms of the longer history of the art of technology, of bodies, of sculpture, of object-making and photography. I first encountered your work at the SculptureCenter in Long Island City in 2020; it was your first survey show, focusing mainly on work from the 1980s and 1990s. Your work was highly celebrated, but then it became a bit quiet and people like me who came into the art world later, weren't aware of it. Can you talk about your process in terms of your background in architecture? And studying painting as well. How does it synthesize in your practice?

Tishan Hsu
In retrospect I have a very different sense of this body of work than when I was making it. I didn't have any kind of explanatory text which I think made it difficult for people to understand the work. I emerged at a time when critical theory was being discussed at length in the contemporary art world. I was aware of the texts and of the discourse and I could see lots of parallels to what I was concerned with. But at the same time, I felt intuitively that there were a lot of things the texts were not addressing. I think that's partly why the initial reception was strong but people didn't know what to do or where to go with it. At the same time, as another context for this work, I could see that the market was really beginning to accelerate as a driver in contemporary art in a way it had never done before. The pressure of the market was beginning to interfere with the much slower internal process that I had started out with.

My concerns were about the body and technology; it was very simple. Many people asked me if I was trying to imagine a future. I felt I was responding to what I saw in the present. Coming to New York, I was surprised to learn that the context of the contemporary cultural world was to go into the past by appropriating it. I understood this approach, as many of the world's older cultures have appropriated the past for centuries as a method of cultural production and often with wonderful results. For me, the past was not something I could connect to as a driver for my work, the past



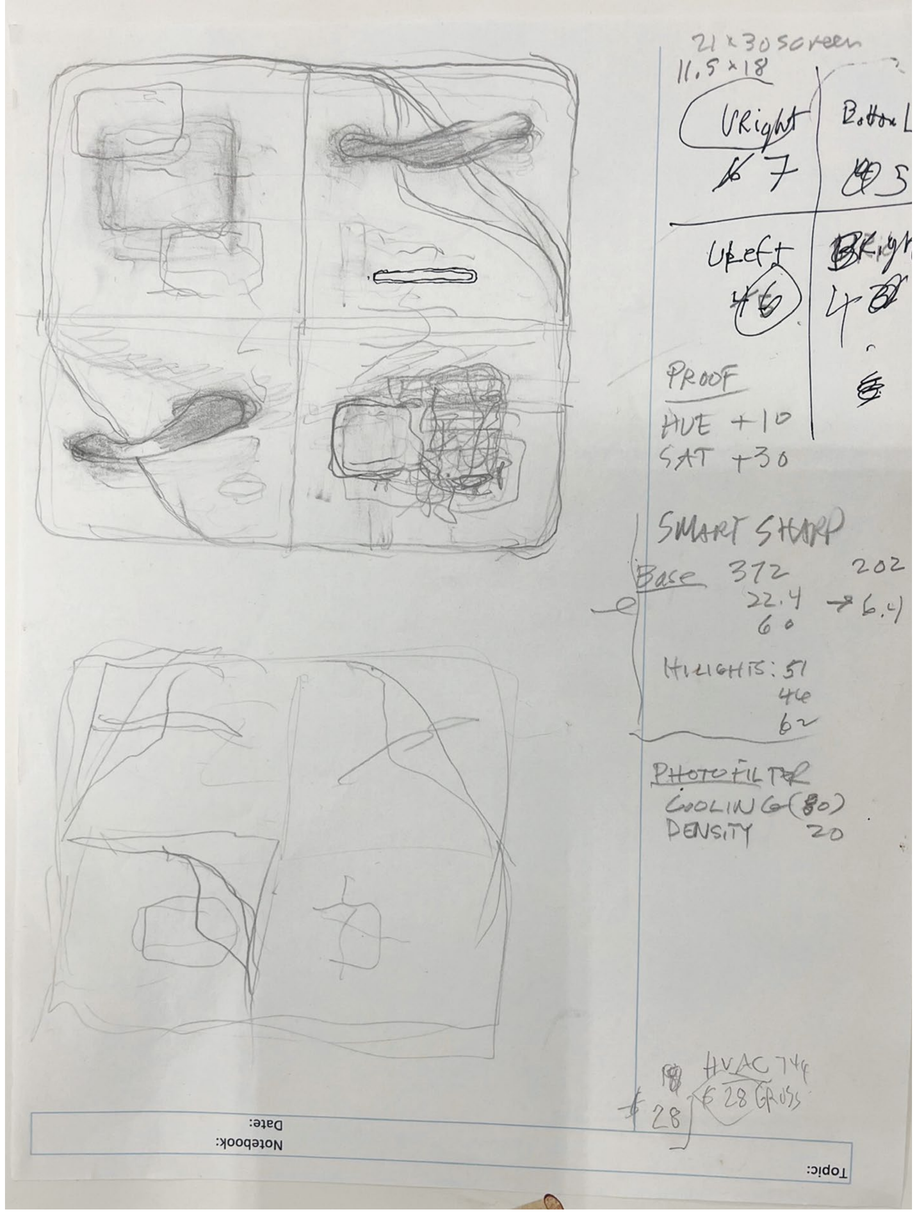


couldn't address the issues that I was seeing in the present. Another factor may have been my experience as an "other," in that the American media and consumer culture I grew up in wasn't something I connected to strongly enough to drive the work. In the '80s, I thought music and literature were ahead of what was going on in the art world, in trying to capture a sense of the present-future. Science fiction at that time had a lot of techno-body qualities to it, where the body was being infused or inserted into technology. So, there were definitely active currents, but less so in visual art. With that as the background, I was trying to figure out a way to infuse technological consciousness with the body.

MS How did your education inform your early work?

TH My background was traditional Western painting, and I had a pretty rigorous training in studio art from very early on. Although I studied architecture and film in college and grad school and learned about media, form and design, the real impact was gaining a sense of a technological world that was being created all around me, and my response to it. I wanted to understand how this strange new world felt. What was the context like? This was at a time when the tech nerd was at the fringe of society and the farthest from the world of art and the humanistic tradition. Technology was also an "other," but one I felt was important to embrace rather than avoid, as I sensed the world was going to become technological whether we wanted it to or not. There was this paradox between the illusionary world of the screen and the physical reality of my body, and that I wanted my work to account for both. I felt that my body in front of that screen still really counted. And that by somehow maintaining a sense of the body in the work, I would be able to address the political, while also addressing the technological, because on a sort of ontological level it's the body and specifically the body in pain that really creates politics.

I wanted to break away from that paradigm of painting where we're looking at a window of a world that's an illusion. I wanted these things to be objects on the wall, coming from the issues that were raised with Minimalism and Post-Minimalism where contemporary art began to be more in the room that we're in without



21 x 30 screen
11.5 x 18

URight
~~6~~ 7

BottomL
5

ULeft
~~4~~ 6

BRight
4 8

PROOF
HUE +10
SAT +30

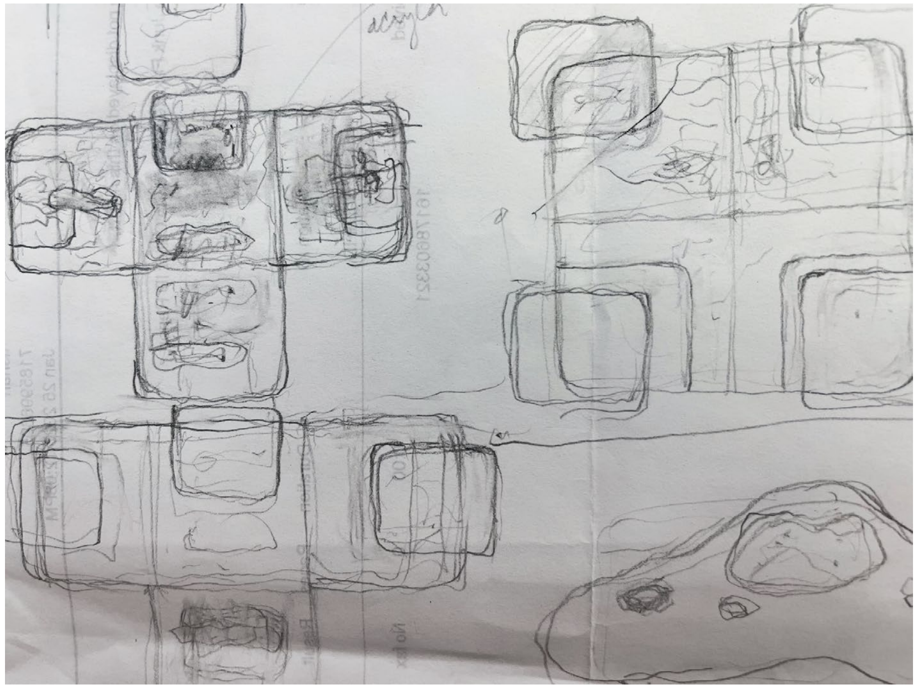
SMART SHARP
Base 372 202
22.4 → 6.4
60

HILIGHTS: 51
46
62

PHOTOFILTER
COOLING (80)
DENSITY 20

HVAC 744
$28 GROSS
$28

Topic:
Notebook:
Date:



any illusion. That sense also drove my interest in architecture. That's partly what led to the idea of the rounded corners, and that these flat boards are away from the wall so they appear to float on the wall. It's an illusion of some materiality, along with painted forms that may look like concrete, for instance. It was about both maintaining an object and creating an illusionary affect instead of a world, as in an imagined world. People were often surprised that the works were painted as an illusion, because at first glance (or in reproduction) they looked like they were all made with materials in space. The two and three-dimensional create a kind of hybrid experience. It was this close responsiveness between the illusionary aspect and the physical object that is in front of you. I think that relation is paradigmatic of the interactivity of digital media itself.

MS How about photography? In the '80s there was this movement from chemical to digital photography and now we're beginning to see that photography can be printed in three dimensions and that includes: organs, skin, weapons—that kind of thing.

TH Photography became a key aspect in the evolution of the work. And that happened in the period from the '80s to the '90s, when the work was executed in traditional media, oil on wood. I felt from the response that people weren't getting it at all. I needed to really clarify that I was dealing with the body and dealing with technological affect. So, I began working with silk-screening, as an image that you printed and which is manufactured, and at the same time I could use photographs of the body. That made things very clear.

MS Like in the work *Cellular Automata 2*?

TH Yes, so here I'm just experimenting with black and white silkscreen. The way it's made, is modular which is a structural paradigm in all my work, in that technology is designed and produced modularly. The square module was done by hand and then photographed and printed with silkscreen. I could create the work by just duplicating one module. I also inserted medical images that really pin this kind of painted illusionary organic body-like or tissue-skin-like image onto something we know right away is about the body. Maintaining

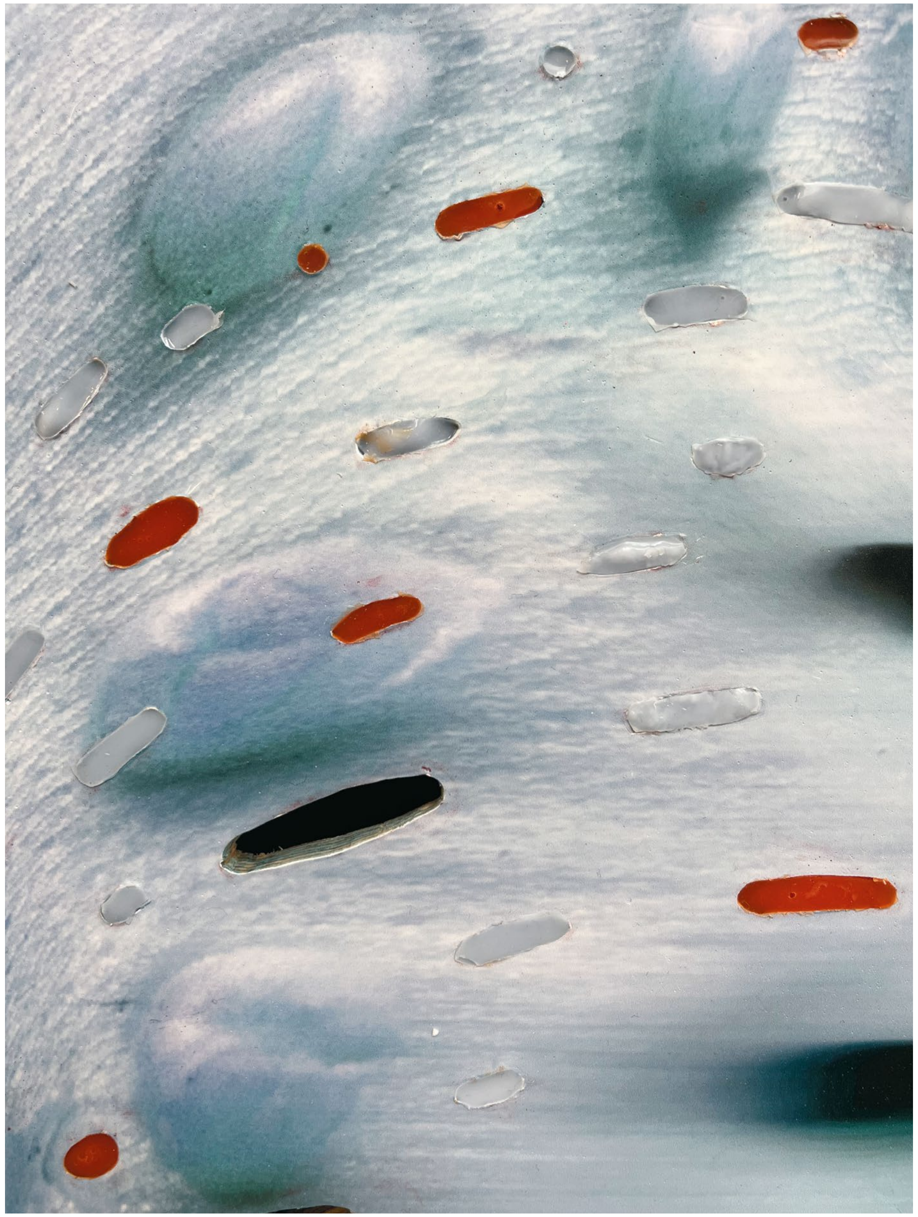
a continuum between the affect caused by traditional handmade techniques of art making and the more technological production of images was very important to me.

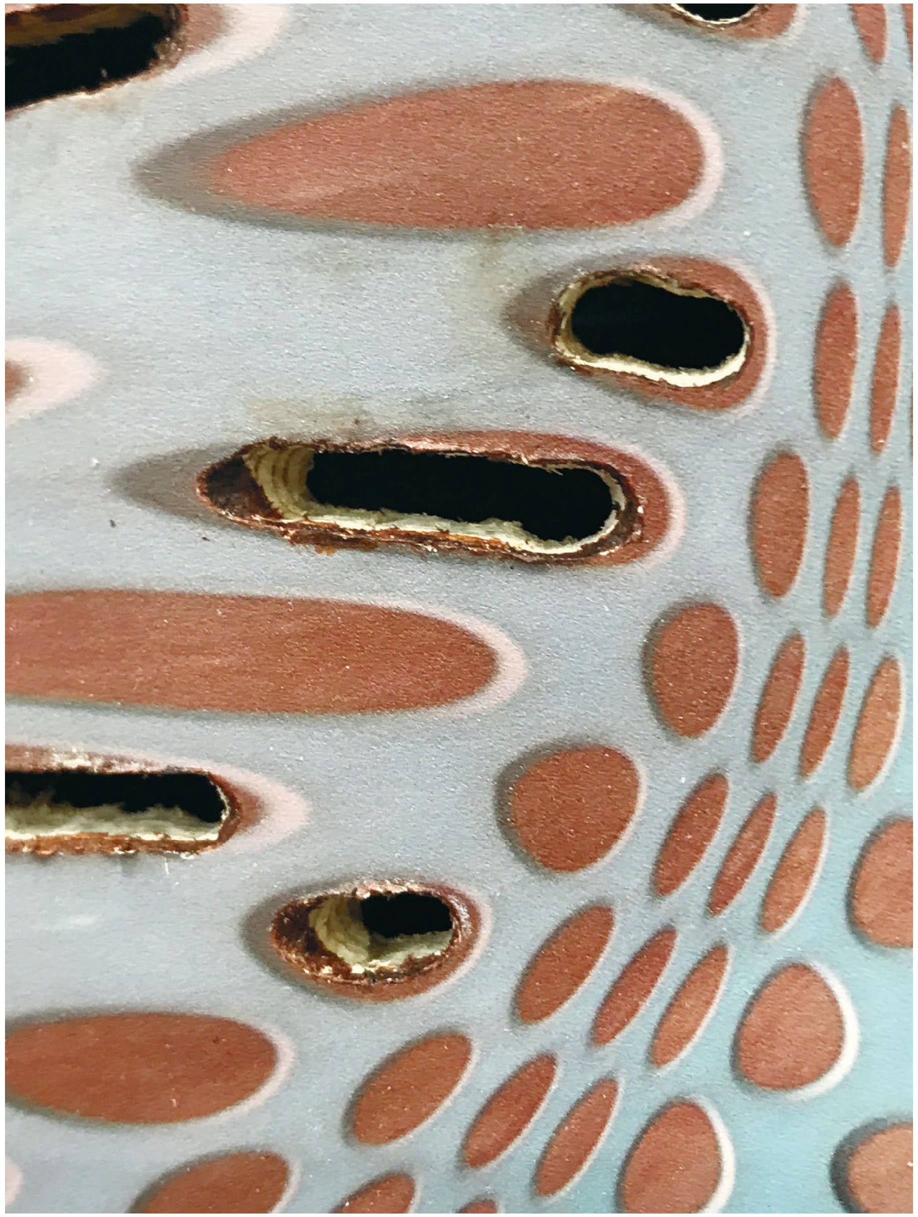
MS How about *Fingerpainting*? What changed?

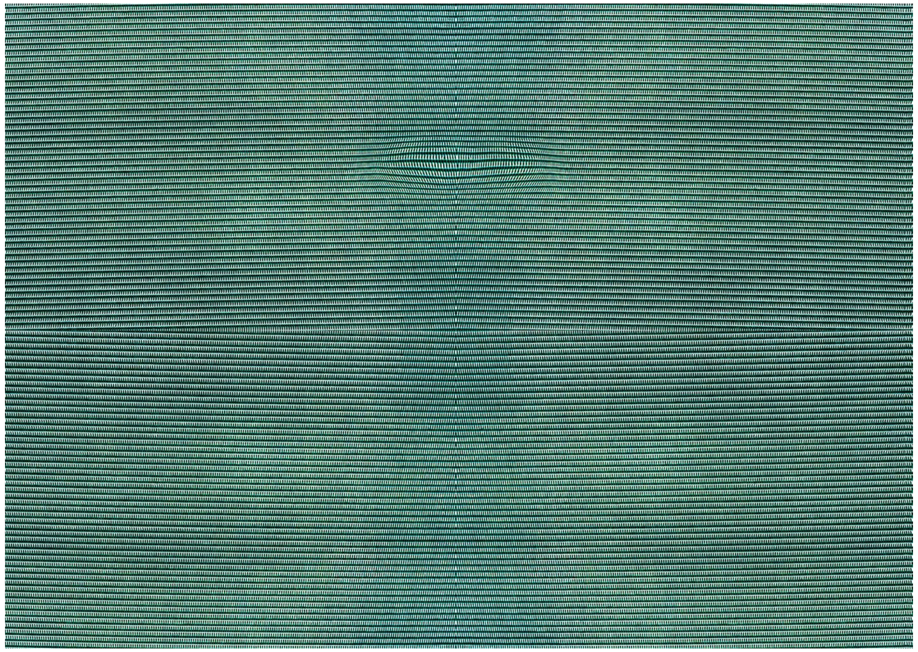
TH This is five years later and I wanted to get rid of the grid and the modular and to put things together in a very crude way. This was really just a technical and conceptual visual experiment about my sense of the body and the technological world. Could I create modular images with almost invisible lines so the affect you get is not this gridded modular flatness but this continuous surface in which images—whether they're actual images of the body or created ones—emerge in an infinite moving flatness of space? That for me was a metaphor of the web. There was a lot of discussion about the web at that time, what it was going to be like, what it would do. Nicholas Negroponte's *Being Digital* was published, and I was imagining the sense of infinite space that was virtual, and that's what drove not just the imagery but also the scale. I was not trying to do big paintings to impress, but to see what would happen if these modules could just keep going and going in a continuous way.

MS In the mid-'90s, the media theorist Lev Manovich said that we don't know whether we're the society of the spectacle or not but we're definitely the society of the screen. I'm also interested in how the modernist idea of the grid is moved aside in the '80s and shifts into this notion of a matrix. There is this idea of the grid becoming something else in the digital age. In one of your interviews, you mentioned your interest in early Bakshaish rugs, which made me think of the relationship between the jacquard loom and the early computer.

TH It's great you bring up the rugs. That has been a kind of private passion as I realized that to me they were sculptures. When you study them and look at the backside, they're grids. The rugs were handmade using a loom, which is an early technology. It is a hybrid production of the handmade with technology. The other worldly patterns are multi-dimensional. The way color





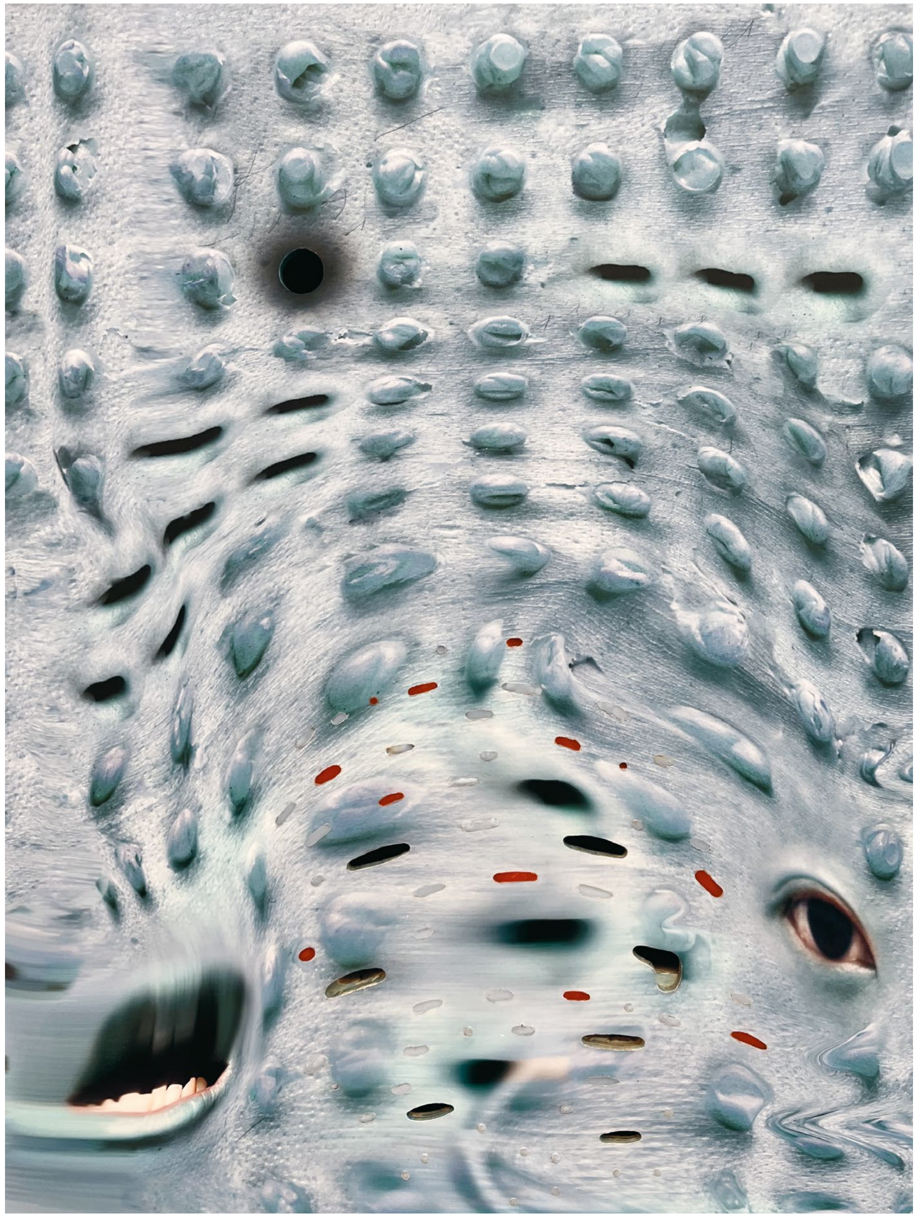


is handled is extraordinary and almost digital. And the sheer, almost technological flatness of the soft, fuzzy material feels minimalist, so cool, as affect.

But to go back to the grid: for me it went beyond the kind of modernist grid of minimalist conceptual work—I'm thinking of works by Hanne Darboven or Sol LeWitt; for me, it was the next step in how space would be defined. When I was a student at MIT, I happened to be working next to Nicholas Negroponte's architectural machine with which he was inventing a 3D software. The computer he needed to do that with and which he was creating from scratch, was the size of a 10 by 10 feet room. I was able to observe the screen he was working with and that he was defining the space on that screen as a grid. My flat tile pieces really were about this kind of technological space of data. I was trying to do it in what may seem a retro way, using actual physical materials, rather than just hopping onto the computer and going with it. The works also float. So, when you see the work, it's off of the floor and there's no sense of base to it. That was an affect I wanted in all of the work, whether it's hanging on the wall, or eventually on wheels. What I liked about traditional media, versus technology itself, such as film or media, was that it was slower, and thereby elicited a different kind of awareness of affect that only a slower meditation can elicit. That was important to me. It wasn't about trying to declare we are now in a technological world. I was trying to get at some sense of what the feeling of all this technology was/is. What we are going through is unprecedented in human history. And that's what was driving my interest in trying to visualize these physical attributes in the work.

MS My favorite book is *The Posthuman Glossary*, which I'd like to bring up in terms of this idea of an affect and the embodiment that we're seeing and why your work from the '80s and the '90s looks just so incredibly canny. We are thinking in terms of questions like: What is the body in front of the screen? Also, what happens when you start to have the screen inside the body? I also wanted to talk about your early Photoshop works.

TH When Photoshop appeared for the consumer and for the artists to work with, I took a year off from



teaching just to learn Photoshop, to see whether it was something I really felt like I could invest myself in as a new way of making an image. In the beginning, I thought it wasn't going to work, but by the end of the year it was just so automatic. I felt a connection to that mouse as I do to a pencil.

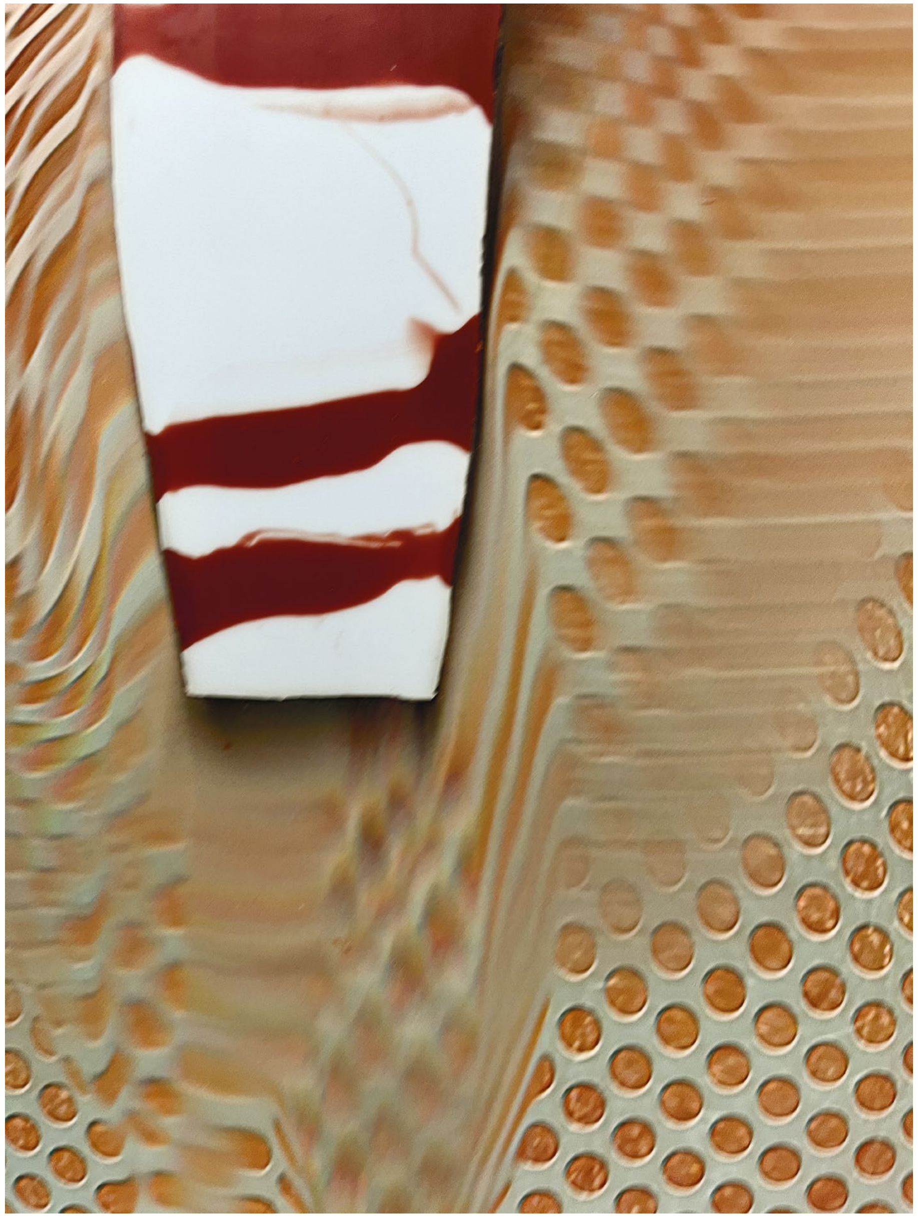
MS That's interesting. And how about more recent photographic work?

TH In the late '80s, I explored photography because I wanted to include something more clinical in the work, as opposed to the hand-created images. I was trying to get people to see I'm dealing with the body. At this point, the technological advance of photography was startling. And it was an ontological change. Maybe it was Baudrillard who said the public will become private and the private will become public. Our private lives are becoming so transparent and public. At the same time we know almost too much about the world. I felt that in spite of the control we have with technology, the sense of accident and risk going on in the world continues, and that's part of what the body is. I wanted to bring back a more traditional medium that could work with the technological. I could not just paint on the printed canvas, because once I started painting, I was bringing in the whole history of painting and that was kind of antithetical to this kind of technological sense that I was going for. I spent a number of years trying to figure out a way of bringing back materiality but one, which has a technological affect. With photography, and the affect of clinical reality, I felt ready to move the work more into the real world and to address issues coming from that. My '89 show with Pat Hearn was about surveillance and security, the medical environment, and the sense of how bodies are extracted through data. These are contexts in which the body is interfacing with technology in society. The use of photography enabled me to use the syntax of body and technology and address these more specific, real-world contexts. And that's what drove the work after 2005.

MS I do almost all my writing on the philosopher and author Vilém Flusser who was writing in the 1980s. His idea was that we need to stop talking about images per se, and instead talk about apparatuses. For Flusser, the idea of photography in the digital realm and biotechnology were completely linked. So, when you start talking about "skin" in photography, for Flusser that could be something like photographic paper. He would treat skin as a technological interface. And what I see in your work is this convergence of how to talk about technology in the body, and not just as augmentation, or artificial intelligence. Flusser actually called his work "science fiction philosophy" because it was speculative as opposed to the idea that we know what we're talking about. No, we don't always know what we're talking about, and this is particularly true in terms of art, in terms of bodies, in terms of technology and joining them all together.

TH Flusser was so prescient. People always ask if I'm interested in science fiction and I always have to say not in the sense that I'm trying to create an imaginary world. For me, my process focuses on what I perceive as the real world, or the world that I experience as emerging. What's interesting to me is that science fiction has really grown as a literary genre. It's taking up much more space now as serious literature, and I think that's partly because the world is moving so fast that before you can even think about it, we're already there. The world we're living in right now is science fiction, it's wackier than much of the science fiction I've read. I think the sense of time and future-past is collapsing because things are moving so quickly. A lot is driven by the speed of technology and the speed of capitalism, frankly. We can hardly keep up. I feel like the implications of Flusser's writing are providing directions on how to make sense of the world we are in right now, because I cannot make sense of it anymore. I don't feel there's a present. There's a kind of anticipatory future that assists with speculating on what is going on right now, because all my past ways of organizing the world are not working anymore.

This is a significantly abridged version of a conversation between Tishan Hsu and art historian and critic Martha Schwendener. It was originally published in *Brooklyn Rail* in February 2021 on Hsu's first major retrospective exhibition *Liquid Circuit* at SculptureCenter New York, from September 24, 2020 through January 25, 2021.



I would like to thank the Board of the Friends of Secession for the invitation to create this exhibition and the following individuals who participated:

Bettina Spörr
Mariam Bachmann
Hans Weinberger
Sabo Day
Odette Steinert
Ava Maria
Kai Hsu
Francis Louvis
Jürgen Findeisen
Mitch Meisner
Dante Capone
Stephen Cheng
Miguel Abreu
Max Mayer

In memory of Alina

Tishan Hsu
2023

**This book is published
on the occasion of the
exhibition Tishan Hsu.
recent work 2023
at the Secession,
December 1, 2023 –
February 11, 2024.**

Publisher:
Secession
Editor:
Bettina Spörr
Publication manager:
Tina Lipsky
Series design concept:
Sabo Day
Graphic design:
Sabo Day
Design assistance:
Augustinas Milkus
Photo credits:
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Copyediting & proofreading:
Jacqueline Csuss

Printed & produced by:
Medienfabrik Graz
Print run:
400

© 2023 Secession, Tishan Hsu,
the authors, and Verlag der
Buchhandlung Walther und Franz
König, Cologne

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Courtesy Miguel Abreu Gallery
New York & Empty Gallery
Hong Kong

Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther
und Franz König
Ehrenstr. 4
D - 50672 Köln

Distribution:
Buchhandlung Walther König
Ehrenstr. 4,
D - 50672 Köln
Tel: +49 (0) 221 / 20 59 6 53
verlag@buchhandlung-walther-koenig.de

ISBN 978-3-7533-0571-4

Printed in the EU

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Secession

**Exhibition
Tishan Hsu
*recent work 2023***

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Installation crew:
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Hans Weinberger
Andrei Galtsov
with
Said Gärtner
Tristan Griessler
Eric Kressnig
Desiree Palmen
Christian Rasser
Christoph Voglbauer
Marton Zalka
and others

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The Board of the Secession would like to thank the Friends of the Secession for supporting the project with their research.

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