Jim Cunningham:
This is Artists in the World, a joint podcast brought to you by Carnegie Museum of Art and WQED in Pittsburgh. I'm Jim Cunningham, WQED-FM's artistic director, and I'm joined by my co-host, Dana Bishop-Root, the Director of Education and Public Programs at Carnegie Museum of Art.

Dana Bishop-Root:
Hi, Jim. This episode invites us into a conversation between artists Tishan Hsu and associate curator of the 58th Carnegie International, Ryan Inouye. The conversation was recorded with a live audience, and in it, you'll hear Tishan and Ryan reference artwork that Tishan has made. And if you're interested in seeing that artwork along with the listening, please go to cmoa.org/artists-in-the-world.

Jim Cunningham:
Dana, after hearing the live conversation, what can you not stop thinking about?

Dana Bishop-Root:
So much. And I could listen to this episode again and again. So Tishan speaks to the ways that his art practice, both in content and in material, are in direct relationship to the technological space that continues to get closer to us. It was incredible. He starts off by telling this story about his early job, working in word processing, and Tishan was noticing the way that technology was framed as the other, so far outside of us.

But Tishan sensed very early on that whether we want it or not, whether good or bad, technology is coming towards us like a wave. So he chose to go toward it fully, with illusion and the formal constructs of grids, and the organic movement of our bodies. Tishan's work mirrors, asks, projects and opens up the ways in which art broadens our consciousness about technology and how we locate ourselves, each other, and social and political constructions within it.

Jim Cunningham:
It seems there is a lot to unpack in this episode. Let's turn our attention to the conversation, beginning with an introduction by Ryan Inouye.

Ryan Inouye:
(2:11) Tishan Hsu was born in 1951 in Boston and spent his early years in Zurich, then grew up in Ohio, Wisconsin, Virginia, and New York. Early on, he received what he describes as a rigorous training in painting before he undertook graduate studies in environmental design and architecture at MIT in the 1970s.

While in Cambridge, Massachusetts, he also studied film at Harvard's Carpenter Center. Although he saw that film video would be the media of the future, he was more interested in examining how people interacted with screen space and technological objects. He explains, "I felt that there was something perhaps more traditional media could address." Reflecting on Tishan's practice over the past 40 plus years, one sees that he kept to his word, working across the range of traditional media such as painting, screen printing, photography, sculpture, and installation. We also see that he has always found his own way of working through these art historical traditions.

In his early works from the 1970s and '80s, he sought to change the syntax of painting, working against the idea of a canvas as a window to an imagined representation of the world. Instead, he painted on...
canvases with rounded corners that appeared to float in front of walls. Viewers confronted these works as physical things, encounters with objects that depicted illusionary imagery, but spoke to the human body's interaction with the emergent screen space of word processing and 3D software.

(3:58) In subsequent bodies of work, Tishan portrays a body transformed by the use of technology. His more recent work encourages us to think about how our interaction with technology, such as medical scanning or facial recognition software, produces unfamiliar representations of a fragmented or distributed body.

Significantly, Tishan's approach to illusion in his work is resolutely connected to an embodied experience in the world. He has understandably refused comparisons to mainstream science fiction's penchant for fantasy and surrealism's association with dream worlds. However, tonight, I'd like to go out on a limb, to perhaps situate his work in relation to some artists of color who have worked in these fields. I think of the novels of the late science fiction writer Octavia Butler, for example, who used speculative aspects of the genre to throw into relief the grave injustices perpetuated by modern regimes of racism and patriarchy.

Similarly, the co-editors of a book on non-western surrealists called Black, Brown and Beige, described an approach to depicting the world that is not anti-reality or invested in the absurd, but rather committed to an open realism. One that advocates for the perception of more reality, and an expanded awareness of reality, including aspects and elements of the real that are ordinarily overlooked, dismissed, excluded, hidden, shunned, suppressed, ignored, forgotten, or otherwise neglected. So it is in this wider tradition of critical cultural production that I hope we can address Tishan's work tonight.

Thank you. (Applause)

(6:03) So just a note on how we will structure this evening's event. Tishan has requested that, could it be a Q&A with the audience? And so I think maybe I will start us off with a question or two, and then please feel free to jump in. Just, I guess, raise your hands. There are microphones that are circulating, so it'd be good to capture your question, miked, if possible.

So Tishan, I wanted to start out by maybe loosely thinking about your work within the context of the international, in which many artists are really engaged with their social, political, and environmental surroundings in a range of mediums and aesthetic approaches. So I wanted to ask you to speak a little bit about, on the one hand, this idea of illusion as it relates to your practice, and on the other, your commitment to making work that is really tangibly connected to an embodied experience in the world.

Tishan Hsu:

(7:11) Okay. Well, first I wanted to thank the Carnegie for having me here this evening. I'm glad to be able to talk a little bit about the work. To address your question, Ryan, first, I think that the issues of the social, the political or environmental surroundings, is not separate from what my work is trying to do. So it's not that I'm interested in embodied technology as opposed to those issues, I think those issues are central to what is urgent today.

But my practice over my life has really been to first create some kind of visual language, or depiction, in which I could talk about a lot of these issues, but to place it in what I saw as, and see, as a new kind of embodied technological world. So it's the early work for instance, like the tile piece that I just had up on the screen, was the beginning of just trying to formulate this kind of... For me, it's like a DNA of how I want to talk about the world, whether it be political, social, or environmental. And that has taken a long time.

And so, I can show you later, a few key works where the early work was quite formal in that sense. Although the key components of being an embodied object, or an embodied technology, were...
beginning to form there. But it was, in some ways even for me, a little bit out of the world that we're living in. There was this kind of distance to it. And people often reacted that way to the work, which is why people sort of felt they didn't know where I really was, in terms of the real world issues.

(9:08) But it's taken me to this point where now, I can address issues, but I feel that I'm not avoiding. What I see, in some ways, as unprecedented change in the context in which we are living, in which issues of race or the politics or environment are being played out. And what I see is that this embodied technology that we are interacting with, or that we are of now, every day, is actually influencing how we're dealing with these issues of the social, the political or the environment. And will continue to do so. And even more so. So that's just a response to that binary, in a way, that's being set up here. It's not.

(10:02) In terms of illusion, so the tile piece that we just looked at was the beginning that was from 1980. And I was coming from architecture. And so that's why it began with a sculptural language. I did a lot of painting before I went to college. I had a very rigorous training in fairly traditional painting practices. And then I jumped to architecture. So this sculpture was coming back into the world of studio art. And at the time, I was looking at what I felt was a dual world, a dual dimension in the world, which is one of illusion and then one of a concrete reality. A physicality, in the world.

And so that tile piece is not just about tiles. The grid, when it was laid out physically, gives you a sense of distance. It's like when you're in a vast landscape in the desert, that you stand there and you see a sense of the grid line like the highways, but then there's this object in front of you. It's just a sculpture. And so another example could be, for instance, when you look at the surface of the water, it seems to go onto infinity, in the distance, perspectively. But at the same time, you can go into the water.

(11:27) So I was looking for situations where we have two dimensions going on. The reason being, at the time I was working on Wall Street as a word processor. And that was a very new field, a transition from the secretary who worked with paper and typing, to the word processing operator. And when I was sitting there, interacting with this machine in an interactive way, which was key, it suddenly was responding to me as I was generating documents. This world I could go into for hours and hours, at the same time, I was sitting there in my body sitting in front of this machine. So for me, this was a dual dimension that I was moving in, here. It was a paradoxical situation of illusion, and yet there's a very concrete... I mean, I'm sitting there for my job, seven hours, whatever it was. I could really feel my body there. I might want to leave, but I can't. So I was looking for some equivalent in a formal way, in something as traditional as sculpture, to convey this duality. And that's how that first piece emerged.

(12:44) Now, the reason I chose the tile, and the reason I actually selected that, is because that relates, that's kind of the early, early impulses that led to the piece out on the plaza now. As you can see. And the piece that the Carnegie really allowed me to do, was to completely transform from the tiles, or to evolve the tiles into these four-by-four steel modules. And I had no idea how it would turn out until the end, because it was fabricated. So it was not in my studio. I've never worked that way. It's kind of an all or nothing thing. It was like sudden death, it felt like.

And my fears were that it would just be a whole bunch of steel plates, and then you'd have this body part coming out of it, and it would not coalesce into something more organic and more whole. And I feel that it actually does. And so for me, that's where it worked, so that it becomes something else. So that sense of space that goes on and on, for me was a metaphor, was a sculptural metaphor, for the feeling of looking in that screen where you go on and on. And I was aware that this sense of screen was going to emerge in a much bigger way. Already, there was a lot of conversations about the internet. So I was imagining how that was going to feel. And that's what I started working with, with what I had, which is these tiles creating this grid, a sense of distance, and yet it's very physical in front of you.
(14:22) The one other component of the tile piece was that, as opposed to just a typical bathroom tile, these were just American Olean, two-by-two tiles, is that it’s flat and then it curves. Those curved pieces were critical. And what that allows is that, then this geometric technological topography that’s used in, at the time, for people who were drafting, and architecture. But then in 3D space, for people doing 3D graphics now, is the curve then becomes organic.

And so I was able to use the curve pieces, and the tile company, they make these parts also for swimming pools. And to make these, you’ll see later in some of the work, these kind of organic appendages. There was still very much tile, but you felt this kind of organic-ness, beginning to emerge. That was very important to me, so I wanted to somehow convey this technological space, that it was going to become organic in some way. And that was just very intuitive. It wasn’t that I could see, there was going to be an iPhone, or that we’d be holding it in our hands every day, all day. I just felt this technology was going to get so seamless, it was going to actually get closer to us, and not get further away.

So the feeling at the time was that technology was an “other”, and that we wanted a humanistic world. And that we should just ban... The nerdy technologists, the computer people, were just in their own little world. And the human world was separate. I felt whether we wanted technology or not, it was going to be coming, it was going to emerge very big, and it was going to transform things. And that I wanted to go towards it, and try to get a sense of how this might feel. In a bigger picture, whether it’s good or bad, I didn’t make any judgment really. It’s going to come like a wave, whether we want it to or not.

And I thought it was important or something important that art could begin to examine, to look at, and to convey or to broaden the consciousness of what this transformation was about. So for me, that was something that motivated me, and something that was worth doing. To try to go into this area, as a topic.

Ryan Inouye:

(16:41) Can you maybe unpack that move from... You're thinking about screen space, this term that I think is really interesting. And then you're thinking about the grid, kind of moving away from the grid. Also in our history as well, these moves are being made, and then to the modular. And then this moment where you decide you're going to try to blur the lines between the modular elements, to see what you can make of that, to make this as a whole. Can you walk us through that space?

Tishan Hsu:

(17:17) That's a long way to walk.

Ryan Inouye:

Yeah, I know.

Tishan Hsu:

So I'll try to touch on some of the issues.

Ryan Inouye:

Take it in steps. Baby steps.

Tishan Hsu:
And you might have to intuitively get a sense of it.

Ryan Inouye:
Okay. Yeah.

Tishan Hsu:
Remember, I've spent a lot of my life dealing with this, so it's hard to just explain it.

Ryan Inouye:
Well, you laid out the screen space, and the word processing.

Tishan Hsu:
(17:33) So I'm going to give you just some points in my life. I'm not going to go through the whole thing, how it all connects, but I think you'll get a sense of it.

So when I was studying architecture, the architecture studios were right... And at that time, I was actually studying handmade architecture, like handmade villages. They could be Ethiopian villages, Greek hillside villages, beach houses in California on the coast. So the philosophy was to somehow go to these kinds of architectural spaces that are really wonderful to be in, and bring that into this very technological, architectural world that was emerging. In other words, these architectural materials that, in fact, you can see all over Pittsburgh now.

But next to the studio, you go through two white double doors. And it was a little bit like The Matrix or something. There's this super white, high tech environment in which Nicholas Negroponte, who wrote Being Digital, was literally inventing the 3D graphics, with a computer. He was programming it himself. And the computer took the whole size of a classroom. It was that big. And I wanted to work with him, but he said, "I only want to work with programmers." And I wasn't a programmer. And I was disappointed, because I thought this was graphic and visual, but he did show me what he was working on the screen. And I saw this image of a city and this plane flying through the city, and it could go to wherever it wanted. He could control it. It's basically your video game. But he was kind of before that. And that space it was in, was a grid, it was a growing grid. And so that filtered in, I think, in some way. And that was modular.

(19:25) Now, I was also studying architecture, and I think the origins of the grid came with a Bauhaus, beginning of the 20th century. And so, in the art world, in the work of the '70s, in sculpture and post minimalist, artists started using the grid more as a space, rather than just either an object in space or renaissance perspectival space. So it was in that period that the grid appeared a lot in contemporary art, as in for instance, Sol LeWhitt, classic example.

(20:05) So my using the grid was nothing really new, but I did very much want to work modularly, because it has a flexibility. I was studying in architecture where the modular, the system, can grow and it can be flexible. Like Legos, a classic example. So it can kind of plug and play. So this is the beginning of thinking in that way, of a system, when we interact with the world. Rather than just objects, like you have a table and then a chair, and then you have a building.

So the modular is a kind of structure that can grow and build and take down, and then be something else. It's a system that then generates the buildings, the environment, or whatever. So in a way, the architect's job was to design the system. So that was a very powerful idea for me. So in a way, for me, in the work, I'm really working modularly. And these squares, like this for instance, where I can add two or three together to make a large piece. And that also helps just practically, because I can get them
through the door, when in exhibitions. And I'm not worrying about these huge, huge canvasses. And that was not just a passing thought. I was very aware of that, coming from architecture, how wide doors are and just the practicality of moving through space.

(21:29) So in terms of the fusing of the modular, this is a much more recent work. This is called Watching 2, and Watching 1. This is a UV print on wood. And then I have silicone, that is applied to that object. But the reason I'm showing it to you is that this is no longer a gridded space, but this comes from a grid that has fused through software to create this continuous surface. But I'm able to insert things because of the structure of this grid and that, from software, even when you go onto your computer and software.

So there are many transitional states to get to this that I worked in silk screen, and even from regular, more traditional material. But the software enabled me to do what I imagined, but it did it so much easier and faster and more seamlessly. And so now, it looks very organic and that's kind of where I wanted to go when I mentioned the organic of the curve of the tile. If you can imagine the curved tile, and the lines disappear, and then it just fuses. And then you have this topographical service that I have here.

Now here, I'm also talking about the screen, as I'm referencing the technology that we use. This almost more explicitly references the iPhone. That wasn't really intentional, it just kind of emerged, and I realize these are now can be iPhones. But behind this mesh screen is all human skin. You can't really see it so well in the slide. And so I'm still inserting the body, and the skin now, into this technological visual device.

Ryan Inouye:
Yeah. Maybe we can take a cue from this work, and you can talk a little bit about the thing-ness of these kinds of works, versus the flatness of the surface?

Tishan Hsu:
(23:35) Good.

Ryan Inouye:
Yeah.

Tishan Hsu:
Let me just switch the image...

Ryan Inouye:
Sure.

Tishan Hsu:
... and I'll go back to an early one. So this is like 1986, or 1987. And at this stage of the work, I was still interested in talking about this paradoxical space of illusion and physicality. And yet, I was trying, making a painting or a sculpture, is to somehow get away from the idea of the canvas being a window in which you look into a world.

(24:13) Now, certainly in abstract painting, whether it be, let's say... I'm trying to think, let's say William de Kooning, or even go to Frank Stella Black Paintings. Painting in the 20th century was moving more
towards the object. And that's actually, at that point, when Stella did Black Paintings, in a way, there began to be thinking about just everything as an object. And so this idea of just paint on a canvas, to be very honest with that, and just put paint on a canvas and then that's it. There's no illusion.

(24:44) I felt that this non-illusionary reference, which made certain sense at that time, was not where things were going to go. That paradoxically, the world actually was going to get more illusionistic now, in a really strange way. So we thought, in a way... I could, because I experienced that and many of you have not, but in the late 20th century that this sense of abstraction was the future. And we were just going to move away from representational painting, like a still life or a portrait. And so this abstraction of minimalism was just going to point towards something that's continues to be more and more abstract.

But sitting there in front of the computer and thinking about this illusionistic world, I'm saying, "Wait a minute, this is like going back to illusionism." This is like you go back to a Renaissance painting. They projected religion and religious figures in this illusionary world through this window, and I'm saying, "We are in a very secular world, but we're moving into this very illusionary world, as well. It's just very different."

(25:50) And so I began to think, "How can I elicit illusion, without referencing past historical European western painting?" Because then, that's just not where I wanted to go. So there was a paradox here. It needed to be an object in front of me in a very concrete kind of minimalist, post minimalist, the concrete world we live in, where we sort of feel that we're moving away from illusion, and yet insert illusion into that. So these were the early works, this was called Closed Circuit. And here I'm referencing literally the screen, but also you can see this undulating flatness, is an illusion. If you haven't seen the work, the silver is projecting out, it's made of concrete compound, painted silver. All the illusionary organic quality is completely flat, like in let's say, a Renaissance painting. Where it's completely flat.

(26:53) And so, I was trying to get a sense of this illusionary space that's organic, but it refers to the square still. It doesn't go beyond it. There's no sense you can go into a window somewhere else. That's just it. So people often have said to me, they never imagined the work to look the way it does once they see it, because when they look at this they think that this whole thing is just all painted. When in fact the whole silver thing is actually, it's a very physical object, very heavy actually. So that's how I began to deal with illusion.

(27:28) In the work we were just looking at, you can see now with the software now and Photoshop, which I never imagined. I never imagined ever working with a computer for my work. It actually is totally illusion, though. And so once I got into photography, the whole thing, I mean in Photoshop now, I'm in this apparatus of the cloud with Adobe Stock, with the software and then the printing. It's a very illusionistic world. And yet I'm making these objects, eventually, that go on the wall and you're standing in front of an object. And I want the work to recognize your own physicality, there. And that's why I've introduced, I work with silicone, but also just the round corners, because then it's very physical object in front of you. And it's very important for me that when you experience the work in real, it feels different than looking at an image of it, to assert its physicality.

Maybe we should ask some questions of the audience.

Ryan Inouye:

(28:30) Yeah. Are there any questions from the audience, or?

Speaker 9:

We have mics.
Tishan Hsu:
I hear that people have prepared questions. Yes?

Speaker 5:
You slip in this reference to human skin.

Tishan Hsu:
Right.

Speaker 5:
I mean, really? Actual human skin?

Tishan Hsu:
(28:48) Well, okay, so...

Ryan Inouye:
Okay. This is a lot. Yeah.

Tishan Hsu:
(28:52) ... this, I was working with just oil on wood. And in a very abstract, I've described, this is more conceptually what I'm trying to do here. It's not so much literally the skin, it's the topology. So it's the topology of something that's flat, and underlays. And the reason I say that, and this is how I was thinking about it at the time, is if I look at the world, the landscape is a flatness that underlays. And the human body is a similar kind of flatness that underlays, through the skin. At the time, I was looking at the media screen, and when you used to watch television, if the television connection went bad you had this rolling image on the screen. And it would still be this sort of flatness in that TV screen that was rolling. So I thought as a formal device, to work that way would allow me to speak about the body, the technology, and the landscape. And still using that iconography.

That's a very abstract kind of conceptual, formal thing I'm describing to you. But once that was established, then in the more recent work, and this I didn't quite predict. Is, I'm still using this format of the one we just saw, but because of the power of digital imaging... This is a gridded mesh, you can see, and I've morphed it with the software, but actually underneath it's all skin. And if you look at it, the work, you'll see it's completely human skin. So the skin is rolling under the mesh. And that's very important to me. I mean that's what I dreamed of when I first started this thing to actually get this skin. So I'm kind of skipping over decades of work where I went to silk screen, began to photograph skin, but then to get a technologically just printed on the canvas, so there was no hand to get it more manufactured. And then when Photoshop emerged, which was a total surprise to me, I took a whole year just to learn Photoshop, to determine whether this was going to be viable, whether I really could invest in it. And by the end, it felt like a pencil. And for me it had to be that simple. I told my students, when you get something down to Photoshop for dummies, then I'm ready to start working with it.

And so with Photoshop, I was able to bring in photography, and then I could literally clone the skin. And here I'm going to show you my first experiments with that. So this was done just as Photoshop was emerging, and wide format printing. This was like 2000, 2002. So suddenly, this was able to do what I
was trying to do with handmade materials, but much faster, much more graphically and more seamlessly. So this is my first really, as Ryan your question is, merging the grid.

Ryan Inouye:
Right.

Tishan Hsu:
(31:50) So here it's very grid-like, but if you really saw it, in... This is all skin, between these dots, that I've cloned. Now this, I'm using the function actually from Photoshop, they have the cloning tool which shocked me when I saw it. I said, "They're designing the software that literally has a cloning tool, and I've been trying to clone material human skin through much more traditional means." So I was able to take a photograph of skin and just do the cloning tool, and literally by hand, go between every one of those bumps and make the whole thing skin. So it's both body and yet it is a field, a gridded field, but it's much more implicit now. It's not so overt, which is what I wanted because you see that it has now fused into some other whole, which I can't describe. That's why I do the work.

So the way I made this may give you a sense of how it actually looks, the image. Is, I took a Lego board and I was playing a lot with Lego because I was raising my son. And so we'd just play Lego all the time, and I loved Lego. I said, "This is exactly what I'm trying to do here. I could take the head, and put it on the board, take the leg and stick it over here." And so I took the Lego board and used just mold making material, like urethane, but I did not try to make a perfect Lego board. I just pushed it a little bit, so it'd be rounded and organic rather than a perfect Lego dot. And then I took that and photographed it. And then, through the power of photography, I multiplied the image. And then took that whole image and put the skin in between. So now you get a sense of what you're seeing here.

(33:34) Now, because I was able to move into photography, which I did not expect, this was all just kind of slowly, incrementally, as the industry began to introduce these things, I could then insert literally photographic body parts. And that really fused it, so I could depict the body, but in a very different context. And that is really what I was wanting to do, because I felt that as technology was going to become closer and closer to us, not further away, the technology was going to bring it in closer to us. The way we depicted the body will have to change. And this was my first experiment with that.

Ryan Inouye:
(34:15) Tishan, can you also talk about skin in a more metaphorical sense? So the architects refer to skin, in their professional vernacular, but also you're also thinking about the skin of a painting. So canvas is skin.

Tishan Hsu:
(34:36) Well, skin is a very powerful metaphor, particularly in the world we're living in. I mean certainly, having studied architecture, we always talked about the skin of the building. And the idea of structure, and then you build, they literally call it the skin of the building. And those systems, when you design a building, you think of it as a skin. So you're first designing the use space, and you do the structure, and then the skin could be something completely different. So you have the same structure. You could put it on a really beautiful, slick, expensive facade, or you can put a much cheaper one. And then now, with the environmental systems, it's all with what that skin is doing. So it's becoming much more dimensional. It can be sensitive to the weather, it can be all these kinds of things, or even environmental artwork where the skin of the building could be sensitive or could be a whole screen.
So this skin now, is really growing organically. I'm really talking about it now in the world we're living in, which is the metaphor of what these images are doing. This grid now has become whole, and then it's beginning to grow into this new kind of technological, organic, if you will, or embodied technological. So that's one metaphor of the skin.

The other of course, is the human body. So the building metaphor is a metaphor of the body, which is a structure, and then we have our skin that goes over it. And so the bones, the skeleton, is like a structure. And then we have the skin that is this surface that underlays, that has negative and positive form, or whatever. That just happens to be the way we are, physically.

Ryan Inouye:
(36:14) Yeah. No, I mean I think maybe, can you also back up a little bit and talk about that transition from painting to the introduction of photography, and screen printing?

Tishan Hsu:
Yeah.

Ryan Inouye:
Because that seems pretty...

Tishan Hsu:
I'm trying to remember if I have a picture.

Ryan Inouye:
... to kind of think about how you started to, quite literally, bring in machined or processed imagery into the work.

Tishan Hsu:
(36:40) So I'll just quickly talk about this. So this piece was coming out of the same as you question. "Well, is this really the body?"

So here, I agree with you. This looks very techy, and there's just this kind of organic stuff, but it's not really yet the body. Here, this is an attempt to be more explicit. And when my work first showed in the '80s, the reaction was just so all over the place. I knew I had a problem, that people said, "Are these violins, are these musical instruments or are these landscapes?" So my whole focus was how to make the body much more explicit, so people could not just free associate like that. And this was my first attempt. So clearly, the use of the reference of blood, pins it down. But it's a little garish, or it's a little...

Oh, I guess I didn't put the silk screen work here.

So what I did was go into, when I did them as works, as paintings, the image really was this infinite space. So that this printed canvas could go really large. And at the time, I didn't really have the resources to do that. And it was only in this recent show at the Sculpture Center in 2020, which was about 15 years later that the curator, Sohrab, said, "Okay, let's do it." And so they supported, actually, doing a whole wall of this stuff. And so the point is that the relation to you, the viewer, now is much more expansive. So for me it's getting closer to the feeling of this, the web, the internet, the space, of just the digital.
(This is the very first one of the early, early... You can see I'm almost explicitly trying to stuff this body into this frame, in a way. I never imagined an iPhone or an iPad, or any of that. This was just a very crude, trying to make this body screen.

(38:45) I felt I really need to get much more explicit about the body. And also, I needed to not necessarily be working by hand. If I wanted to talk about technology, I needed to be working technologically. And so that's when I began to explore the use of silk screen. So silk screen, it's modular, you print, but also it allowed me to retain the quality of the handmade. Meaning, this piece here is about seven by seven feet. The squares are actually hand painted on wood. And then I photograph that, and take that photograph through silk screening to multiply, to make the larger image in this modular composition.

And then because I'm using silk screening, silk screening comes from the advertising industry, and I can use photography. So it was the first time I'm now using photography that allowed me to literally go into medical textbooks, and start taking parts of bodies. So when I showed this work, there's no question anymore what I'm trying to deal with. Clearly it was the body, and that was very satisfying.

(39:51) So here, I'm still using this sense of this undulating flatness. There's the cavity, the hole, however you want to see it. And then there's the eye, but then it goes elsewhere. It's not just a figurative body. So what I had was, the figure ground or the Renaissance body, or you have a more abstract, like an abstract work where the body disappears. And I was looking for something that was in a way, a kind of hybrid, something that was a physical thing on the wall, but somehow the body is there. But it's in a different format.

So here, you can see these bumps, the whole piece recognizes the square or that thing on the wall. It's like a thin slab, on the wall. And the skin is, it's almost like you wrap the skin over this thing. Here is more, this is where now, I'm beginning to try to fuse the modules. You can see I'm using screen images to create this kind of expansion, and then fusing. And this was just before I started doing the digital, Lego kind of work that we just saw.

Speaker 6:

(41:07) So you have been witnessing this digital era from the very beginning since they were processing internet, video and smartphone. So this era has multiple periods that have challenged the imagination. So the pieces outside, they seem to be merging the grid, the old technology, which no we longer have, right? In my opinion, the grid is gone. There is no longer grid when we have the smartphone, it's now the power of the smartphone is just, it's a continuum. Like Han described this, as the polished sort of art. Where there are no boundaries, there are no edges. And then you combine that grid outside with the new piece, this futuristic, smooth car. Do you think that you are sort trying to bridge the old technology with the new, in some sense?

And to what extent your art has been changing, together with these eras, with these periods, that we are changing as a society?

And perhaps if you can talk also about the political and environmental impact that also is changing, alongside, and how that impacted and changed your view of acquiring the technology into your creative process?

Tishan Hsu:

(42:43) It's a complicated question, and a lot of questions, within the question. But I just want to clarify... So when you talked about, I think the vehicle out on the plaza, and you said it's sort of the mixture of the old and the new. So where do you see the old, in that?)
Speaker 6:
The grid, to me, is old.

Tishan Hsu:
The grid of the mesh. That covers it?

Speaker 6:
You started with this notion in 1980...

Tishan Hsu:
Got it.

Speaker 6:
... where our computers, our terminals, were literally grids.

Tishan Hsu:
Yes. Okay.

Speaker 6:
Now, the power of the retina screen is, you cannot see the grid.

Tishan Hsu:

So the one reason it's very complex, because you're talking about the passage, these eras of the evolution of technology. And then you're introducing also the political, and social, and how that also... That's a very complicated experience, and I totally relate to it, and we have to talk about it in parts a little bit here.

So I want to go back, I think I already said that the early work, I really couldn't handle everything. And I always tell my students, "If you can handle five things, work with one." And that's what I sort of told myself, to understand really what I'm trying to do.

So if we go back to this piece, so I did this piece during the Black Lives Matter protests, in New York City. And it was a very powerful moment of what was happening. And I was able to use this iconography, that I spent years working with, to basically talk about my experience of that moment. And I experienced that moment through my iPhone, and to a certain extent my computer, through the news. That's how I experienced it. I was not in Manhattan when it was happening, or these protests, or even in Brooklyn actually. So for me, this is talking about, these images are literally from security cameras that are taking those movements of people during that time. And on the bottom, you can't tell, but it's more images of that with the police charging in and the protestors. That's all in there.

(45:14) But I'm able to also hear, you can see in the middle, there's that round circle. That's a security camera. And then up above, you see the little circles in the work, those are all security cameras that are everywhere now. I even have one on my building. And then I'm putting in the screens, the screen within the screen. So that's the common thing we have here, is the screen within the screen, but the screen
around the screen is a skin underneath that screen. So it's a skin within the screen, and then within that, is more screen.

I could not talk about that, using the more traditional imaging language that I'd had. I can talk about that because of where this work has gone. And then I can put it all together as one experience. So it's our phone, it's our screens, it's our security cameras, it's racial protest, and it's surveillance. And it's all happening at once. And that's the complexity you're talking about.

(46:24) And for me it was important, that experience that's all happening at once, is what I felt was important to really get at it. We could parse it down, I could do a work just about protesting, or just about the body, or just about technology. But I don't think that really captures what it feels like right now. It's just, everything is going on all at once. And that's where this early work was trying to create that underlying sort of... Frankly, it's a formal underpinning to the work, but that formal underpinning was designed to be able to address these certain kinds of issues. To deal with the body, which deals with the political. To deal with technology, which deals with the screen, which deals with surveillance, what have you.

Speaker 7:

(47:12) So Tishan, thanks for your explanations. I'm glad that I get to ask this question, at this point of Q&A. My question concerns your remarks on embodiment of a technology, as you're talking about Black Lives Matter and its impact on your world view. A paradigm shift, body doesn't exist in a vacuum, but often technology or to a certain extent medical science, assumes that we're dealing with a body in some sort of a neutral form, which doesn't really exist in the real life experience. So in that sense, it's antithetical to physicality that you spoke about in relation to the works from the earlier decades of your work.

And the most recent work when you talked about surveillance cameras Black Live Matter and police, and the brutality, I felt like something was shifting in the way that you think about the body in your creative process. When you look back now at the work you've done in the '80s, do you now see different things in relation to your conceptions of the body...

Tishan Hsu:

Completely.

Speaker 7:

... of technology and embodiment?

Tishan Hsu:

(48:40) Yeah, completely. So for most of my practice I was never very satisfied with the work. And I didn't show for many, many, many years. And it's partly because when I would do some work, I just didn't feel confident enough in what was going on there, that I could generate 15 paintings or whatever, sculptures, to make some statement about what it is. It always was problematic. And so if you look over, that's why these silk screens, if you look over the 20 or whatever years it was, it's like there's bodies of work, here and there. And it always felt very disparate. I was always envious of artists who could just make this huge, striking show and it's just all one thing, or one statement. And it just couldn't resolve. And much of this work was stored for 30 years. I never saw it. The works did sell in the '80s and stuff, and so it was in collections. So I never really saw it, it was just in images.
(49:42) And when Sohrab gave me the show at the Sculpture Center, it was the first time I saw all of the work together, and it was an amazing sort of creative experience to see it all together. And the biggest shock to me was that it cohered, that everything that I thought was so different, actually it all connected. Which I didn't know, consciously, doing the work. And that coherence then began to tell me really what the work was trying to do, or is trying to do. And the use of the term embodied technology, that only came after that show, frankly. I've never even heard of the word, embodiment, used in that sense. I know it was used in text.

So all of the little details and stuff that I focused on, actually didn't matter. It didn't matter, because it got me to the work, but the underlying sense of the work was this embodied technology. And so that now makes me see the '80s work actually more for just a sense, it's not the particular works really, it's just this effort to try to get these two seemingly very opposite qualities together.

(50:59) You mentioned something about disappearing I think, or where it's going more towards the virtual. You're sort of implying that, or something about the physical body, in the '80s work. So I do see an evolution where in the '80s work, it is very physical, very tactile, and I was very weak in trying to get even the body sense. Just by doing it, by hand. Where now, as I've shown in this work, you can see the digital is very powerful. It uses the Photoshop, I can literally just take images of the body. And now also, because of technology, the images of the body now are amazing. Because I go on Photoshop... Not Photoshop, Adobe Stock, and you just type in, "ear," and you'll get so many views of the ear. You couldn't even imagine it. If you tried to take someone's ear, you wouldn't imagine that you could take it in so many different ways. Close up, microscopically, every angle. You have the whole world taking pictures of ears.

(51:59) So that is part of my database now. So it's really imaginatively expansive, because of other people in a way, because we're in this common world through the digital. But that's also kind of what the work intuitively was trying to describe, a kind of fusing of multiple bodies into some kind of space. I'm reaching out now, because it's the reason I do the work, because it's so intuitive I don't really know how to talk about it. So I'm trying to describe it, even in the work. I don't really know whether the work really succeeds, even. It's where it is, now. That's all I can do. I know from the beginning when people were talking about it, it's a lot clearer now, because what they're talking about is closer to what I've been trying to talk about. That's all I know.

(52:44) Otherwise for me, seeing the work all now together, it's really just posing a question. It's really just asking, "What is really going on here? What are we really experiencing in this unprecedented transition of a technology, that we as humans, as human species, created for ourselves? And is now completely overtaking what we think of as human. What is it?" That's just mind blowing, when you think about it. And may supersede us by some definition. So it's really just trying to ask, or pose the question. I always imagined that I might not succeed in doing it, in succeeding to make clear what I'm trying to get at. But it was worth it to me to just try it, and to open the question. And maybe someone else or some other group of people would then go on with that same question, and do something that's much more compelling than what I'm doing.

But for me, if I'm going to in a way dedicate my life to this, it had to be a question that I was curious. And that question was curious enough, or it was motivation enough for me to continue to do the work, even when it wasn't being shown.

Speaker 8:

(54:02) Hi. So I actually first experienced your work in Hong Kong, and I'm particularly interested in your use of images of your family in particular. So I was wondering if you could speak more on that topic, in
terms of your relationship in your work to ancestors, family, et cetera. And what it was like for you to, I guess in a way, return to a foreign motherland?

Tishan Hsu:
Return to what?

Speaker 8:
A foreign motherland.

Tishan Hsu:
(54:30) Okay. I don't think it was my motherland, but okay.

Speaker 8:
Call it close.

Tishan Hsu:
(54:45) Okay. That's a good question. I'll just run two pieces by here, this is one, and we'll hold it on this one here.

In 2012, my mother died, and I'll try to make this story kind of short. So as a result of that, extended family, were trying to pass pictures around. And I have extended family all over the US, and some in Asia. And because of technology, people could pass pictures around instantly. It never happened before. And I think everybody's doing that now. And this whole thing about genealogy, everything, this is all coming from technology. And it is just strange because, the one thing she said at the end of her life was, she was sorry she didn't bring more pictures from her early life to this country when she came as an immigrant. And it was amazing that, if you put the whole family together, all their collected pictures that they never even looked at, it was an amazing collection of family photos. That's one part.

At the same time, China was opening up and there was an interesting contemporary art world going on there. And I thought, "I really would like to, I'm curious to see what it was like." Also, I had never been in China myself. I don't speak Chinese. So I decided that I wanted to try going there, and just working for a year or two. I had done that in Germany. I had spent two years working in Germany. But to do work there, I said, "I'm not going to bring all of this stuff about technology of the body there, it doesn't make sense." I said, "I'll just clear the slate, and just walk around the streets, and then just see what happens." I had visited maybe a couple times. I knew this place is so bizarre, that just processing all of that, something would be happening.

(56:23) But because of these photographs going around, one of my relatives who grew up in Taiwan, she said, "Tishan, I need to take you to this place in Shanghai." And this is like a cousin, my uncle, who was a doctor in Shanghai and stayed there during the revolution. And we went to the house, and he had these family photos and she said, "You should just see these photos." And they never looked at them, either. And he said, "Sure, you can go over in this old bookcase and just look through them." And I started looking through them and I saw that a lot of the photos were missing. And I said, "What is going on here? Why are these missing?" And he said, "That's when the Red Guards came into the house and they took every photo that had anything to do with bourgeois life."And I said, "This is ridiculous."

And that is the level. That was my first real sense of what actually had happened historically. So it was a very powerful experience, and when I saw that page, I said, "Forget everything else. This is what the
work's going to be about. And it's not going to be about the photos anymore. It's going to be about that page, about the absence." (57:31) And because I had done all the work with photography, silk screen, et cetera, it was all there ready for me to do this. So I knew right away, I could just see how I was going to do this. I'm going to photograph it, I could then go on to Photoshop, I could then put it together, print out the whole thing.

(57:49) So, I wanted to be really up and running fast, when I went there. I wasn't going to stay there a long time, so I wanted to get going, and I already knew how to do this. So the project ended up being about my family history. And the particular images of this was, I have a great uncle who was a doctor in Shanghai, and he founded the first TB clinic in China. And the photos revealed how, when the revolution came, the French and the English, people were fleeing. So all these houses were suddenly available at very low cost. And so the doctor said, "This is a good time to buy houses." And they created this street, it was called Doctors Row. And so there was this house that still is there, and his grandchildren still live there, which was extraordinary, because he was a doctor. They allowed them to do that.

(58:55) So there's this kind of longitudinal history here that was... How should I say it? It was like an embodiment of this history that I did not experience, and that I only heard from stories, vague stories. My parents didn't talk about it that much, because they didn't know themselves. So that was very compelling for the work.

Anyway, so by the end of the project, I did about two years there. When I went there, I thought, "If no one really wanted to show this work, is it really worth doing?" And I thought about it and I said, "Yes." I felt I wanted to do it, anyway. And the reason I thought, "if no one wanted to show it," because it's too politically fraught to be shown there, and who would want to show works about China in New York? Or is this history? But when I finished the project, it turns out Empty Gallery did want to show it, which I was surprised. But also, I realized it really wasn't about my history, it was really about absence. And it was really about, what I realized, the magnitude of the absence that I experienced growing up in America. And I suddenly saw the world that my parents had left. And so the next phase of the project, if I ever get back to it, is to really try to deal with absence, which is a much harder topic in a way.

(1:00) But the final story there is, it really wasn't that much of a departure, because this whole thing couldn't have happened without the technology. That it's kind of a way of retrieving some lost history, but the technology is really enabling it.

Jim Cunningham:

(1:00:40) Thank you for listening. This has been Artists in the World, brought to you by WQED, and Carnegie Museum of Art. This season of podcasts has been created alongside the 58th Carnegie International, the longest running exhibition of contemporary international art in North America, and was recorded on November 2nd, 2022 at Carnegie Museum of Art Theater by Jesse Soracco.

Dana Bishop-Root:

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