

EAST CITY ART REVIEWS

Hsin-Hsi Chen's *Liminal* at VisArts

By Eric Hope on March 14, 2018



PHOTO FOR EAST CITY ART BY ERIC HOPE.

Liminal. Installation view.

Physical space, and the ways in which artistic materials can be used to transcend their two-dimensional boundaries to create such space, have long fascinated Hsin-Hsi Chen. The Taiwanese-born, Rockville, Maryland-based artist's solo show *Liminal*, now on view at VisArts in Rockville, showcases Chen's desire to continually challenge her abilities to capture volumetric forms with "flat" materials. Building upon her carefully crafted pencil works that blur the lines between sculpture and drawing, Chen's latest exhibition reduces the gallery walls to mere backdrops for

fully three-dimensional forms to extend into space, grow along the walls and even begin to crack the fourth dimension of time.

Chen manipulates her pencils in a manner similar to painters applying brushstrokes to canvas. Rather than discrete lines, gradations of grey hue imbue her constructions with complex shadows that give depth to the multitude of surfaces within each piece. In works composed strictly of paper and wood, the notions of depth and space are mostly ephemeral as Chen's manipulations trick the viewer's eye into seeing volume where none

exists. With *Liminal*, the artist solidifies volume and depth as core components of her investigation by introducing gesso, foam board and 3D printed materials to create ever-more complex forms that imply geologic and in some cases even organic properties. These works build in their complexity, displaying an increasing fervor to test the materials' limits, culminating in a video work that integrates the three-dimensional forms present in the gallery into an experiential format that unfolds over time. While differing in size and materials used, the works are extremely cohesive in their use of a limited color palette and intent to create volumetric forms.

Chen's *Threshold* and *Meta* series act as formal studies of form whose ideas function as precursors to more intricate works on display. The *Threshold* series is the more pictorial of the two, with formal compositions encased in a solid form reminiscent of a picture frame. Those frames take the form of parallelograms, adding a counterbalancing constraint to the energetic shapes within. *Threshold Series #4* for instance, features crystalline shapes that take the form of vertically-oriented prisms distinguished by their varying shades of grey. The outer edges of the work keep these forms in check, ceasing their ability to divide further or move beyond the



Hsin-Hsi Chen, *Threshold Series #4*, 2018. Pencil, charcoal, ink, spray paint, gesso, foam board, wood, 15" x 9.5" x 7".

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constraining the materials, allowing the wall hangings to take on characteristics of origami as the materials begin to protrude from the surface in planes and folds. *Meta series #3* displays over eight planes that protrude into space, culminating in two points that form the outer edge of the materials' reach. With fewer incorporated planes than *Threshold* series works, *Meta series #3* evokes more topological properties, as if Chen is trying to recast fictional terrain using only shades of gray.

Her actions become more frenzied with the introduction of the *Hedrons* series, where she moves from gradual planes to multi-surfaced—almost crystalline—objects that burst off the wall without regard to any traditional, pictorial composition. Here the artist's use of graduated hues becomes less important to delineate actual shape; rather the varying shades of gray work to heighten the voluminous aspects of the work, adding to the solidity of the object and giving it a certain heft. In breaking free of the wall (or in the case of *Hedrons Series #1*, the corner), Chen emphasizes the sculptural aspects of the work, affirming their existence in a three full dimensions as she seemingly endows them with weight and mass.



Works from Hsin-Hsi Chen's *Meta* series.

PHOTO FOR EAST CITY ART BY ERIC HOPE.

perimeter of the work. *Threshold Series #2* echoes this encasement, keeping the potential energy of its horizontally-framed forms from shifting above or below the fixed, black bands that form the its outer edges.

Works in the *Meta* series display a similar attention to formal composition but lack the fixed-firm borders seen in the *Threshold* constructions. While the edges of each work are clearly delineated, the artist's emphasis here seems less on

Hedrons Series #1-#4 act as a visual stepping stones to her other, larger works on display and underscore a conceptual transition from viewing space in the abstract to considering space in more cosmological terms. *Liminal 1* and *Liminal 2* share the same abstracted planes and materials as hanging works but these works



Hsin-Hsi Chen, *Hedrons Series #2*, 2018. Pencil, charcoal, ink, spray paint, gesso; dimensions variable.

PHOTO FOR EAST CITY ART BY ERIC HOPE.

almost alien architectural forms in their masses that cantilever off the wall.

Several of these forms make appearances in *Spaceship Project II*, an interactive digital projection that dominates the gallery's larger room. When viewed from the back of the room, the viewer sees the 3D ovular construction from *Space Project I* moving through black space alongside other forms that resemble rudimentary, fragmented helmets or possibly brains. Moving towards the viewer from an indiscernible horizon point are smaller shapes similar to those from the *Hedrons* series; in this context they function as asteroids rather than amorphous forms. As the viewer moves forward (stepping into a box delineated on the gallery floor), the larger, alien constructions come to life, moving forward in the visual field as they react to the viewer's movements. The interaction suggests some form of rudimentary intelligence, either biological or mechanical, exists within the forms. Coupled with the *Hedron* shapes travelling toward, then past the viewer, the overall effect is to create a feeling of physically occupying limitless (outer) space.

PHOTO FOR EAST CITY ART BY ERIC HOPE.

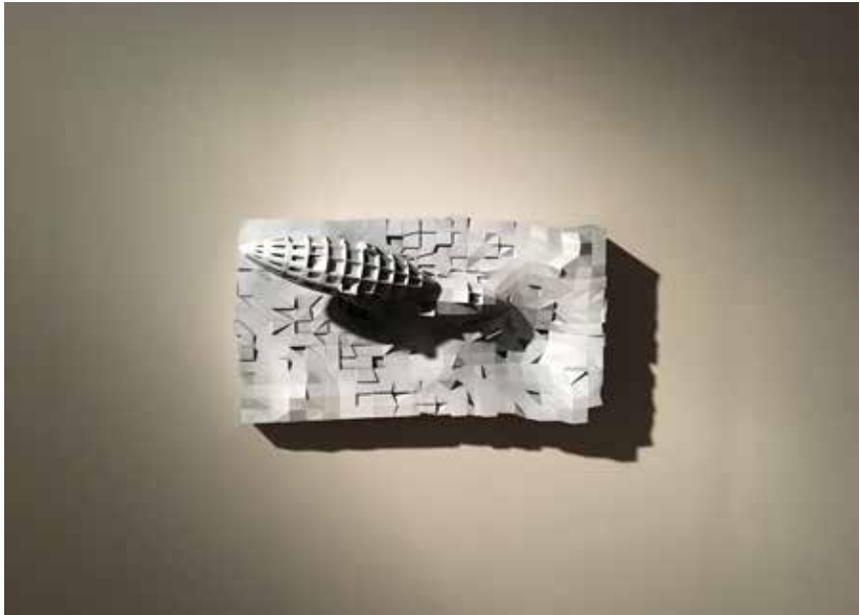
If *Spaceship Project II* were exhibited independently from the rest of the works in *Liminal* the effect would be novel, but would perhaps miss some of the intellectual concerns that Chen wishes to contemplate. Shown together, the video piece alongside the physical constructions highlight the ways in which the artist is playing with two complimentary yet distinct themes. First is the concept of space as a mental construction: how does the human brain process



Hsin-Hsi Chen, *Liminal 1* (foreground) and *Liminal 2*, 2018. Foam sheet, spray paint, gesso; 30" x 36" x 16". Foam sheet; 136" x 96" x 40".

seem almost organic in nature. This could be attributed to the much more spare color palette or the fact that Chen is using the same basic triangular shapes to form a series of masses which

seemingly grow inside the gallery. Elsewhere the artist has introduced three-dimensional printed forms that inject even more complexity into her designs. *Crumbling Tale III* and *Space Project I* incorporate



Hsin-Hsi Chen, *Space Project I*, 2018. 3D print, PLA, spray paint, gesso; 34.5" x 18" x 12".

PHOTO FOR EAST CITY ART BY ERIC HOPE.

of the computer-generated forms suggests that with the passage of time, fictional fantasies may become reality; a thorough examination of motionless, geometric constructions is as good a place as any to start.

Shown individually, any of these bodies of work would provide the viewer with an interesting glimpse of Chen's thought process with regard to how we conceive of the space around us. When viewing them together, we are able to watch her ideas evolve, bringing abstract concerns into the realm of physical possibility. It is exciting to experience, for just as she challenges herself, so too does she encourage viewers to broaden their own understanding of the space around them.



Hsin-Hsi Chen, *Spaceship Project II* (video still), 2018. Interactive video projection.

PHOTO FOR EAST CITY ART BY ERIC HOPE.

Liminal is on view through April 1 at VisArts in Rockville, MD.

the visual information depicted in Chen's (mostly) two-dimensional forms and perceive the appearance of solidity and depth where none may physically exist? Second is the concept of space as a physical place, albeit a zone of infinite

possibilities. In this instance, the artist is challenging us to broaden our understanding of space—the *final frontier* as it were—all the while knowing that the infinity of the universe is still incalculable to our modern minds. The movement