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Big Art, Big Money

Julie Mehretu's "Mural" for Goldman Sachs.

by Calvin Tomkins (March 29, 2010)



Mehretu in her New York studio. "Why would that be interesting?" she asked of the commission. Photograph by Ruven Afanador

Eighty feet long by twenty-three feet high, Julie Mehretu's "Mural" dominates the entrance lobby of Goldman Sachs's new steel-and-glass office building, in lower Manhattan. Its abstract forms and high-velocity, intersecting colors accompany arriving employees on their long walk from the security turnstiles to the elevators, and catch the eye of passersby on the corner of Vesey and West Streets, which is where I had arranged to meet the artist on a frigid, windy morning in early January. She was waiting for me across the street, a slim, light-skinned African-American woman in jeans, a parka, and a knit cap, waving with both arms. We hurried inside, out of the wind. Mehretu picked up my visitor's pass, and we stood for a few minutes with our backs to the row of twenty-foot-square windows, gazing silently at the most ambitious painting I've seen in a dozen years.

Hundreds of precisely defined abstract shapes in saturated colors—small dots and squares, straight and curving lines, larger geometric or free-form shapes ranging from several inches to several feet in length—move across it in an oceanic sweep, from left to right. Areas of dense activity give way here and there to more open sections, and the flow is interrupted by vertical or diagonal elements, but the sense of movement is constant and enveloping, and orchestrated with bravura authority. "It took me a long time—six months or so—to decide I wanted to do this," Mehretu said, pulling off her cap and running a

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hand through her short, dark curls. Mehretu is thirty-nine, friendly, and open. “What would be the reason to make a painting for a financial institution, you know? Why would that be interesting? One reason was this wall, which is so clearly visible from outside the building. It’s not so often that a painting has a chance to be public art. I was thinking about that, and about how I could never make a painting on this scale anywhere else.”

Financial institutions have been taking a lot of hits lately for their role in precipitating the fiscal crisis. The behavior of Goldman Sachs, in particular, has infuriated nearly everybody, from Congress and the Federal Reserve to the New York *Times* editorial board and *Rolling Stone*, which described the firm as “a great vampire squid wrapped around the face of humanity.” Goldman’s practice of selling bundles of troubled mortgages, and then privately betting against its own clients by selling them short, has come under scrutiny, and its international transactions have been implicated in the near-collapse of A.I.G., the insurance giant, and, more recently, in the fiscal troubles of the Greek government. (“We participated in things that were clearly wrong, and we have reasons to regret and apologize for,” Goldman’s C.E.O., Lloyd C. Blankfein, conceded last fall, to no one’s perceptible benefit.) None of this was in the air in 2007, though, when Goldman commissioned Mehretu to do the painting. The firm paid five million dollars for “Mural,” about eighty per cent of which went into fabrication costs (including salaries for up to thirty studio assistants) during the two years she spent working on it. The German artist Franz Ackermann had been commissioned at the same time to do a painting that covers three walls in the building’s back-entrance lobby. Since Goldman’s employees began moving in, last fall—eight thousand of them will eventually work there—a great many people see the two paintings every day, but the firm has done nothing to announce or celebrate them. The beleaguered public-relations people at Goldman, it appeared, had taken a vow of corporate *omertà*. I had been told first that Timur Galen, the Goldman executive who was responsible for the new building project, including the art commissions, would be happy to talk with me about Mehretu’s painting, but then I was informed, without explanation, that this would not be possible.

The question of who supports art has always been a murky one. Museum boards are amply stocked with real-estate moguls and with what Bernard Berenson used to call “squillionaires,” and the Medici were not always averse to poisoning their rivals. Like most artists, Mehretu is primarily concerned with her work. In the eleven years since she began showing at galleries and museums here and abroad, she has become known as a highly original artist who is pushing abstract art in a new direction, opening it up to social and political content. Goldman Sachs, a worldwide enterprise with thirty-two thousand employees, offered her the chance to do a monumental work that would reflect her fascination with global networks and geographies, and the challenge proved irresistible.

We moved closer to the painting. From here, I could see what I had missed from farther back: a vast network of highly realistic architectural drawings underlying the abstract surface elements. Mehretu builds her paintings in layers. When she finishes one layer, she sprays it with a clear silica-and-acrylic solution, sands that to a smooth finish, and starts on the next. Some of the markings on the lower layers may be covered up by subsequent levels, but many of her colors are transparent; you can look deep into the paintings, which carry a sense of embedded time. There are four layers of markings in “Mural,” and many of them implicitly refer to the history of finance capitalism—maps, trade routes, population shifts, financial institutions, the growth of cities. Mehretu pointed to several bold, curving, orange and blue lines. “They’re in the first layer,” she said, “part of a maplike network shooting through the whole painting.”

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The architectural drawings came next—two layers, clearly visible and meticulously drawn in pen and ink. She identified a few: an early Massachusetts bank, the New Orleans cotton exchange, the façade of the New York Stock Exchange. “There are some much earlier things,” she said, waving toward the upper part of the painting. “London stock exchanges where pigs and cows were sold, and a market gate from the ancient Greek city of Miletus, which I saw in the Pergamon Museum, in Berlin.” She was very close to the surface now, pointing to a colonnade that had taken one of her assistants two weeks to draw. A uniformed guard across the lobby started toward us, calling out, “Don’t touch the painting!” “It’s O.K.,” Mehretu called back, laughing. “I’m the artist.” The guard nodded, and waved. A little later, he came over and explained that once or twice a day somebody tries to touch it.

When the first three layers were finished, Mehretu dismissed her assistants and spent two weeks alone in her large studio in Berlin, staring at the painting. “I wasn’t sure I’d do more to it,” she said, “but I decided it needed this other layer, of my own handwork. All the little black marks—you see them?—were done with *sumi* ink and a brush.” Mehretu often populates her paintings with what she calls “characters,” very small markings that cluster together in formations that suggest human activities—migrations, crowds, battles. The calligraphic marks here are scattered over large sections of the painting, which is so big it had to be done on five adjoining canvas panels. “Once I started drawing, I was going very fast,” she said. She worked through the spring and summer of 2009, with her deadline looming, and then, when the five canvases had been removed from their stretchers, rolled, crated, sent by air to New York, and installed on the wall at Goldman Sachs, she spent the month of September on a ladder in New York, working with several assistants to add new shapes and change others. Deeply buried elements were isolated with masking tape and airbrushed with a different color that pulled them up to the surface. (There are two hundred and fifteen colors in “Mural,” each one numbered and listed in her Berlin studio.) She inserted veiled references to works by other artists—Calder, Brancusi, Warhol, Lichtenstein. “Those blue shapes are from the stained-glass window in the old American terminal at J.F.K., remember?” she said. “I was thinking back to the modernist tradition of painting as part of architecture, and I was also thinking about the narrative of lower Manhattan, how this was the source of the city and the core of how New York became what it is. All these many layers.”

Two weeks earlier, Mehretu had been in Ethiopia. She was born there, in 1970, the first child of an Ethiopian college professor and a white American teacher. They had met in Washington, D.C., when he was going to graduate school at Johns Hopkins. “A year later, he went back to Ethiopia, and my mother went to visit her parents in Huntsville, Alabama, and told them—this was in 1969—she was moving to Ethiopia,” Mehretu said, laughing. They fled the country in 1977, when Julie was six and a half. A revolution three years earlier had produced a brutal Socialist dictatorship, and to escape it they moved to East Lansing, Michigan, where Julie’s father, Assefa, had been offered a position teaching economic geography at Michigan State, and Doree, her mother, found work in a Montessori school. Julie had been back to Ethiopia once, for a brief visit, but this time the whole family went, to celebrate her parents’ fortieth-wedding anniversary. The group included Julie’s brother, David, a lawyer in California, and his wife; her sister, Neesham, and her two young sons, who live in East Lansing; and Jessica Rankin, Julie’s Australian-born partner, and their four-year-old son, Cade.



A detail of "Mural." Mehretu said, "I was thinking back to the modernist tradition of painting as part of architecture, and I was also thinking about the narrative of lower Manhattan." Photograph by Jason Schmidt / © Julie Mehretu / Courtesy of Julie Mehretu and Goldman Sachs.

After a few days in Addis Ababa, they all piled into a yellow minivan and headed north, to retrace Assefa and Doree's honeymoon tour, in 1969, of ancient cities of the Ethiopian empire. They went to Aksum, the capital of the emperors who ruled from the first to the sixth centuries A.D., with its rows of ancient obelisks still standing, and to Adwa, where Ethiopians destroyed an Italian invasion force in 1896—the battle said to mark the beginning of the end of European colonialism. "My dad wanted to find his grandfather's grave in Adwa," Mehretu told me. "He was the great patriarch of our family, a Coptic priest who travelled in Europe, became a convert to Protestantism, and founded the first Protestant—Lutheran—church in this area, and a school in Adwa. We went to that neighborhood and found the church, and my father introduced himself, and the people there took us to his grandfather's grave. He had died before the revolution, in 1959. On the grave was a photograph of him, and it was the same photograph we had at home."

The trip to Ethiopia was something that Mehretu had wanted to do for a long time. "It brought up a lot of things that maybe she didn't even know were unresolved about understanding who she is and what she came from," Jessica Rankin told me. "I've never seen a country where the people are so self-possessed. Even in the poorest areas, there's no sense of their being beaten down by life. And the kids there are so loving—they all give each other three kisses hello and three kisses goodbye." When I asked Mehretu how the trip had affected her, she said it was too early to know. "I haven't yet looked at the pictures—I took thousands of pictures—or the logs or notes we made," she admitted. "I need to be in a space where I can go through that."

From the age of seven, Mehretu has seen herself as a negotiator between cultures and expectations. She picked up on being an American very quickly, as most kids that age do. "I felt comfortable right away," she told me. Bursting with energy, adventurous and outspoken, ready, in a family of debaters, to argue any issue with humor and passion, she got a lot of support from both parents, and did well in school—not the top of her class, but close. In her junior year of high school, she "came out," as she put it. (For a ridiculous moment, I thought she was talking about a white-gown *début*.) She didn't tell her parents until she was in college, but, when she did, she explained it so cogently that they both became stronger enthusiasts for gay rights. "Julie taught me a great deal," Assefa said recently.

Mehretu had always been very good at drawing, but it was not until her senior year at Kalamazoo College, a small liberal-arts school in Michigan, that she began to think she could be an artist. She had spent her junior year abroad, at the University Cheikh Anta Diop, in Dakar. "That was important," she said. She learned the language (Wolof), studied batik-making with local artisans, and re-affirmed the

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sense of her African heritage. When she returned to Michigan, she persuaded the Kalamazoo authorities to let her spend two semesters in Ann Arbor, taking no courses and doing a series of figurative portrait paintings of female friends as her senior project. By then, she was sure she wanted to be an artist. If that didn't work out, she'd do something else.

The summer after her graduation, in 1992, Mehretu and two college friends went to San Francisco. "Two of us were gay, and alternative, and we thought that was the place to be," she said. "But within a week we'd decided it wasn't. San Francisco didn't have the edge, didn't feel like a place that was making culture in a way that interested us." They reversed field and went to New York instead, where Mehretu lived for the next three years. She shared low-rent apartments in Brooklyn and the East Village, waited on tables at the Coffee Shop, on the corner of Sixteenth Street and Union Square West, zipped around the city on Rollerblades, and painted every day. The paintings were messy and abstract. "They were the kind of thing you do when you think you're making art, but you're not," she said. "I finally realized I needed to go back to school." She applied to several graduate art schools, and was awarded a full scholarship at the Rhode Island School of Design.

Benjamin Edwards, a painter who shows with Greenberg Van Doren, in New York, was in her class at RISD. "I was in an administration building, during our first week," he recalls, "waiting for hours to get a form filled out, and Julie sails in on her Rollerblades, charms everyone, and somehow gets her form signed and leaves while I'm still in line." She and Edwards soon became good friends, shared an apartment, and had their lives changed by the same charismatic teacher, Michael Young. "Michael wouldn't even talk to you about what you were working on," Mehretu remembers. "He'd talk to you about who you were as a person. I found that frustrating at first, but without him I don't know if I would have found my practice in the way I did." Young told her to make drawings, hundreds of drawings—to get lost in the process. Mehretu stopped trying to paint. She drew compulsively, in black ink, forging a language of abstract marks—straight or curved lines, circles, cones, arcs, stars, directional arrows—and putting them together in groups. "I began thinking of them as little communities," she said, "and then they started to look like maps, or aerial views of cities." Her father's work as a geographer was an obvious influence, but "I don't think there was an aesthetic link," she said. "It was more a subconscious awareness of his way of dissecting the world, to try to make sense of it." In her second year at risd, she spent six months on a large black-and-white painting, using her new vocabulary of marks. It had nine layers, separated by clear acrylic—an internal world made in a language of her own invention.

Figurative art had come back into favor in the previous decade, and the more gifted RISD students—Kara Walker had graduated a year earlier; Shahzia Sikander was two years ahead of Mehretu—were experimenting with new approaches to representation. Mehretu wanted to make abstract paintings with a narrative content, one that reflected her interest in geography, architecture, history, and urban life. "By the time she graduated, I knew Julie was going to be successful," Michael Young told me. She was chosen for the core program at the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston, a residency that provided a studio, a stipend, and an exhibition at the museum. She began doing much larger paintings there, and using architectural drawings as part of the layering process. Once she discovered the computer as a primary drawing tool, she could take images of buildings off the Internet, alter and reshape and combine them digitally, and convert the results into transparencies, which she projected onto canvases and copied in acrylic paint and ink. Her Houston paintings were six feet high and seven feet wide. The Barbara Davis gallery, in Houston, showed her new paintings and drawings, and sold a number of them.

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Mehretu moved back to New York in 1999. Shahzia Sikander was helping to curate a group show that year at Exit Art, in SoHo, and she put two of Mehretu's paintings and some of her drawings in it. Several dealers displayed immediate interest: CRG Gallery, which bought the two paintings; Jeffrey Deitch; Mary Boone; Jeanne Greenberg Rohatyn. (Greenberg put Mehretu in a group show at Greenberg Van Doren, and bought her work for her own collection.) Mehretu was in several group shows in 2000, including the Museum of Modern Art's "Greater New York," at P.S. 1, in Queens. Jay Joplin, of the White Cube gallery, in London, came to that one, and eventually became her London dealer. The rush of attention confused her. "I was just starting," she said, "and everything was happening too fast."

Christian Hays, a young black art critic, had opened a gallery in Harlem in 1998. He called it the Project, and his idea was to show artists who were "taking things in a completely different direction"—different, that is, from the largely figurative, pop-culture extravaganzas and ironies of Jeff Koons, Richard Prince, and other art stars. Hays and Mehretu met in 2000 at an opening. He put her in a show that year with two other artists. Mehretu asked him for advice about galleries; they discussed a number of them, and decided that she should show with Hays. The next year, she had her first New York solo show at the Project. There were four paintings in it, and all of them sold before the opening, to art-world insiders, for between fifteen thousand and sixty thousand dollars apiece. "Her success came so fast that there was no time to even doubt it," Hays said. For Mehretu, showing with Hays helped to keep the money-and-publicity-drenched art world at bay. "I loved the whole vibe of it," she told me. "Christian was a visionary, he was in Harlem, and we had a very strong connection. I could just focus on the work, and not pay attention to the noise."

On Easter night in 2000, Mehretu met Jessica Rankin, a transplanted Australian artist, at a gay bar. "She was so charismatic," Rankin remembers. "She gave me a hard time about the situation of white Australia and the indigenous population. We had both recently been in rather intense relationships, so we were wary, but also incredibly happy right away. I just remember laughing all the time—that was the summer of laughter." Rankin's father is a well-known Australian painter. In her struggle to make art that didn't look like his, she had given up painting, tried other mediums, and arrived at a spare, poetic technique of embroidering words and images in colored threads on linen. Soon after meeting Julie, she began showing her work at the Project, and at White Cube.

Mehretu's paintings grew bigger and more complex. "Retopistics: A Renegade Excavation," in her November, 2001, show at the Project, was eight and a half feet high by eighteen feet wide. It was wildly colorful, almost violent, with several tower-like forms partially obscured by marks that resembled explosions. ("I did that before September 11th," she said. "I felt weird about it afterward.") She worked slowly, producing only six or seven pictures a year on average, most of which Hays sold to museums or to serious collectors. A succession of artist-in-residence appointments—at the Studio Museum in Harlem; the Walker Art Center, in Minneapolis; and the Headlands Center for the Arts, in Sausalito, California—helped to keep her out of the New York art scene. The Walker Art Center bought "Transcending: The New International," a nine-by-twenty-foot, mostly black-and-white painting with an underlayer of architectural details representing the capitals of every post-colonial African nation. Kathy Halbreich, the museum's director then (she is now the associate director of moma), felt that Mehretu was doing something new with abstraction. "Her work is muscular, warlike, and very much of its time," she told me. "Without being pedantic, or politically naive, or ideological, it deals, I think, with anxiety—the promise and despair we live with now." Mehretu's abstract compositions derived from an immense range of visual sources: military fortifications, sports stadiums, airport terminals and flight patterns, corporate logos, flags of all nations, maps, shopping malls, pop-culture icons, comic strips, photographs

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of the protesters in Tiananmen Square; there were also frequent references to art history—Russian Constructivism, Kandinsky, Malevich, Mondrian, Picasso. Her work was shown widely in Europe. She was in the Whitney Biennial in 2004. The curator Laura Hoptman, who had put her work in “Greater New York” in 2000, featured it in the museum’s “Drawing Now” show, in 2002, and in the 2004 Carnegie International. In market-obsessed New York, however, not many people knew her name.

“Julie is not a market artist,” Jeffrey Deitch, who has continued to follow her work closely, said last month. “She belongs to the museum part of the art world.” (Deitch now does, too; in January, he was named director of the Museum of Contemporary Art, in Los Angeles.) Her large paintings brought half a million dollars or more on the primary market, but they almost never appeared at auction, because the owners—collectors or museums—had no intention of selling them. She has not had a painting show in New York since her first one, in 2001, with Christian Hays. In 2004, riding a wave of prosperity, Hays moved from Harlem to West Fifty-seventh Street. He was facing legal troubles, however; a European collector, Jean-Pierre Lehmann, had sued him for breach of contract, claiming that new paintings by Mehretu, which were supposed to have been offered to him first, had been sold to other people. (Hays maintains that Lehmann did not have an exclusive agreement.) In 2005, the New York State Supreme Court awarded Lehmann a whopping \$1.73 million in damages. Although Hays says that this had no effect on his business, the gallery ceased to function as before, and it closed last fall. Mehretu’s loyalty to her friend never wavered. She only recently entered into discussions with other dealers, plenty of whom would love to represent her.

Her life and her career have expanded. Rankin gave birth to their son, Cade Elias Mehretu-Rankin, in the spring of 2005. The name Cade had come to Rankin in a dream—they looked it up, and found it was Celtic. By then, they had bought a two-story house in Harlem, not far from the original site of the Project. (It had previously been the headquarters of a motorcycle club called the Black Unicorns.) When the MacArthur Foundation awarded Mehretu one of its “genius” grants, in 2005, she used part of the money to build an outdoor patio in back.

In the fall of 2006, Mehretu got a call from Jeffrey Deitch. He had put together a curatorial committee to advise Goldman Sachs on art for its new office building, and Mehretu was on the short list for a major commission. The timing could hardly have been worse. She was getting ready for a major exhibition at the Detroit Institute of Arts in 2007, and she had also accepted a commission from the Guggenheim Foundation’s Berlin branch, the Deutsche Guggenheim, to make a series of new paintings for a solo exhibition in 2008. The American Academy in Berlin had awarded her its Berlin prize, which included a six-month residency. When Mehretu, Rankin, and Cade left for Berlin in January, 2007, she was still undecided about the Goldman Sachs commission. Undertaking another big project at this point seemed like madness to Rankin. “But I could see straight away that Julie was very excited about it,” Rankin said.

Berlin is the new mecca for artists of all nations. They are drawn by its vibrant cultural life and cheap rents, and by an ambience that is more relaxed and less competitive than the art scene in New York or London. Mehretu and Rankin lived and worked at the American Academy. Mehretu’s painting took an unexpected turn. She was working on a canvas with a lot of colors in the second layer, washes of color, but one day she came in and found she “absolutely hated it.” She said, “The color had destroyed all the black-and-white drawing underneath. So I sanded out a whole section in the middle of the painting, and walked to the back of my studio to look at it, and the painting was—done! The erasure had become the main action, the void was making all these other things happen. My Guggenheim series came out of this painting, which I called ‘Vanescere,’ disappearance. I knew right then that I could do those paintings.”

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Mehretu decided to go for the Goldman Sachs commission soon after she moved to Berlin. Six other artists were on the final list for two sites, the front lobby and the back one, but when Mehretu saw the plans she knew she wanted the big wall in front. Goldman Sachs imposed no restrictions, and promised complete artistic freedom. Each artist was asked to submit a detailed proposal, though, and Mehretu realized she would need help with that. She got it from two close friends: Laurence Chua, a doctoral candidate in architectural history at Cornell, and Beth Stryker, an artist and architect in New York. The three of them spent several months on the proposal, which outlined her plans for a visual history of capitalism in abstract terms—what the document described as “the layered confluences and contradictions of the world economy in a mural.” That summer, Mehretu gave a PowerPoint presentation to a group of Goldman Sachs executives in New York, complete with illustrations, historical sources, and citations from Fernand Braudel’s magisterial “Civilization and Capitalism.” Deitch called her a few weeks later, to say that she had the commission—for the long wall in front.

Mehretu and Rankin had recently moved back from Berlin. They spent the summer in New York, and then went to stay with Mehretu’s parents in East Lansing, because they wanted Cade to know his grandparents and his cousins, and to attend the Montessori school where Doree was still teaching. Mehretu and Rankin found studio space in what had been a gymnastics school. It had a wall that was nearly as big as the lobby wall in the new Goldman Sachs building, on which she projected the images she was already starting to develop on her computer. Mehretu had discussed the Goldman site at length with Henry N. Cobb, the building’s architect, after getting the commission. Cobb, who is a founding partner of Pei Cobb Freed & Partners, is a strong supporter of art in architecture (unlike some colleagues in his profession). He had designed his building to be “a good citizen,” as he phrased it, responsive to its surroundings, and he felt that the art in the entrance lobby was an essential element. Mehretu’s proposal had impressed him, and so had Mehretu. “She’s very, very strong,” he concluded, “and very confident. We both wanted the painting to completely fill the wall—to become the wall.” That winter, living in Michigan and multitasking like a corporate C.E.O., she had her show at the Detroit Institute of Arts, made five new paintings for the New Orleans biennial, and engaged a four-person team to work with her on the Goldman Sachs commission.

Unable to find a big enough, affordable studio in New York, where she had planned to execute the painting, she sent Harmony Murphy, her project manager, to scout locations in Berlin. Murphy found an enormous, relatively inexpensive space in an old arms factory that used to make Luger pistols. Mehretu’s team moved to Berlin in April, 2008, to set up the studio, and she and Rankin joined them in June, when Cade’s school let out. Mehretu had fourteen months to finish the big painting; if it wasn’t done in time, the last installment on her contract would not be paid. Sarah Rentz, her studio manager, and Harmony Murphy were in charge of hiring various assistants (most of whom were German or American art and architecture students); Mehretu started each day by projecting the images she wanted on the canvas and specifying exactly how to paint them—what to leave out, what to retain, what colors to use. Her core assistants then supervised the process while she went to another section of the studio to work on her Deutsche Guggenheim paintings, which she still hadn’t finished. A lawyer told her that she could avoid having to renew her work visa every three months if she and Rankin were married—Rankin, whose father is British-born, had a European Union passport—so they flew to Edinburgh in September for the ceremony. Their witnesses were Christian Hays and Semir Alschausky, his German partner, who got married themselves six months later. While in Edinburgh, Mehretu visited the National Gallery of Scotland and saw Nicolas Poussin’s great cycle of paintings, “The Seven Sacraments,” which made a deep impression on her. “The Poussins made me rethink the Goldman painting when I got back,”

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she said, “because of the movement of certain shapes and colors throughout the series—his way of constructing with color. I realized he was also an abstract painter.”

Working all day and often into the night, Mehretu still found time to see friends on weekends. She and Rankin went to hear Obama speak, in the Tiergarten, when he came to Europe during the 2008 election campaign. Both of them had been Hillary Clinton supporters, but they stayed up all night when Obama was elected. “That was one night I wished I’d been in Harlem,” Mehretu said. “I felt proud, as an American, that we had done something the Europeans could learn from. They can handle women in power, but people of color—that’s an issue Europe hasn’t sorted out yet.” The night before the Goldman Sachs painting was taken apart and shipped to New York, in August, a large segment of the Berlin art community came to a party in Mehretu’s studio. Jochen Neurath, a musician friend of Semir Alschausky, had composed a piece for the occasion, and invited all the assistants on the project who played instruments to bring them and participate—his piece, he said, was also about Mehretu’s ability to inspire these young people. Two months later, Neurath arranged another concert, at the Deutsche Guggenheim, where “Grey Area,” Mehretu’s cycle of seven new paintings, went on exhibition (a year late).

The Berlin paintings, which will be shown at the Guggenheim Museum here from May through October, are primarily black-and-white, with empty places where markings have been erased, or partially erased. Muted colors run through some pictures, but the mood throughout the series is spare, evanescent, and mysterious. “This happened without me directing them in a particular way,” she explained. The experience has made her want to work more intuitively in the future. The Goldman Sachs “Mural” was very different. “That was more like bringing all my past work together and taking it to a new place,” she said. “But working on that scale taught me a lot, too, and it shifted something in my understanding of abstraction. I don’t think of it as past tense, but as the beginning of something else. So there’s a lot of fertile space to explore.”

Mehretu went to Los Angeles last month to work on a suite of large-scale etchings at Gemini Press, and while she was there my interview with Goldman Sachs’s Timur Galen came through after all. He was surprisingly candid in discussing the complexities of commissioning art that spanned the boundaries between public and private spheres. (Goldman has a substantial private collection of art works, acquired over many years and installed throughout its many different offices, but it had never before commissioned something new.) Although the building was not public, he said, Goldman had wanted to endow it with art works that would benefit the public. At one time, he indicated, the company had plans to “position” the two commissioned works more prominently within New York’s cultural community—presumably, by inviting people in to see them. Why hadn’t that happened? “We would really like the work of people like Julie, and Franz, and Harry Cobb to be judged on its own merits,” he replied carefully—with the unsaid implication that in today’s anti-Goldman climate they might not be. Fair enough, I guess. If art were judged by the company it keeps, much of the High Renaissance would go down the drain.

Knowing what we now know about Goldman Sachs, I asked Mehretu, would she have taken on the commission? “Without hesitation,” she replied. “I don’t see it as an evil institution, but as part of the larger system we all participate in. We’re all part of it. And, anyway, for me it was about making something—it was about the art.” As she had said earlier, “I was more concerned about participating in the legacy of painting. You just hope it will feel O.K. over time.”