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The New York Times

Unused Harlem Church, a Towering Work of a 'Genius'

By Hilarie M. Sheets (August 3, 2017)



Michelangelo really could've used one of those: Julie Mehretu in her temporary studio, at a decommissioned church in Harlem. Credit Nathan Bajar for The New York Times

The artist Julie Mehretu has been flying awfully close to the sun.

Soaring midair on a mobile platform inside an unused Harlem church, she has been working and reworking two towering paintings taking shape on opposite walls, a monumental commission for the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.

For the last 14 months the vaulted neo-Gothic nave has served as Ms. Mehretu's temporary studio as she executes the most physically demanding, politically charged and collaborative work of her career. Later this month, her paintings will be installed in the museum's atrium, where they will remain on view for more than three years.

"These are my most American paintings," said Ms. Mehretu, 46, running her hand through her crop of dark curls as she contemplated the two radiant and complex canvases, each stretching 27 feet by 32 feet.

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Ms. Mehretu made her first marks on the canvases in the days right after the November election. It was her shock that moved her to rapid action and she said the current “miasma” informed her improvisational language of roiling calligraphic brush strokes and erasures. She is interested in what “gestural abstraction” — her intuitive and personal expression — “can conjure in this political moment,” she said, adding that the works “are trying to make sense of where we are in our country right now.”

Ms. Mehretu won a MacArthur Foundation “genius” award at the young age of 34 for her sprawling abstract paintings that reflect the velocity and fragmentation of contemporary life. With her auction record of \$4.6 million and transcontinental biography — born in Ethiopia and raised in Michigan — she is one of the top-selling living female artists and bona fide stars in the art world that prizes multiculturalism.

Her 2009 commission for the lobby of the financial behemoth Goldman Sachs could have been viewed as cozying up to the one percent. She chose the opportunity to work at a scale unprecedented for her and on a wall visible to a broad public, including service workers in the building. Measuring 23 feet by 80 feet, “Mural” maps the whirl of global trade and communications and was deemed “the most ambitious painting I’ve seen in a dozen years” by Calvin Tomkins of *The New Yorker*.

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Ms. Mehretu is one of the top-selling living female artists. Credit Nathan Bajar for The New York Times

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All of that is a lot to live up to as Ms. Mehretu faces her new commission.

While the history of art is punctuated with epic painting projects by men — from Giotto to Michelangelo to Diego Rivera — the director of SFMoMA, Neal Benezra, said he was “hard-pressed to think of another woman painter working at this scale in a public place.”

At regular intervals during the completion of these new paintings, the jazz composer Jason Moran, Ms. Mehretu’s friend and Harlem neighbor, set up camp on the balcony of the church. He made the formerly sacred space reverberate with compositions spun off his electronic piano while she painted.

“Jazz has always been the form of music that marks these temperature changes in America,” said Mr. Moran, who will perform the result of their collaboration this fall in Performa 17, a visual art and performance biennial in New York. “It’s turbulent now, as America has always been. Julie and I are making this response in concert with each other.” Mr. Moran, who is the artistic director of the Kennedy Center in Washington, riffed directly off the markings in her paintings as though he were reading a score.

Ms. Mehretu searched throughout New York for a space big enough to make these paintings before striking a deal with real estate developers to use the church, just down the street from where she lives with her spouse, Jessica Rankin, and their 12- and 6-year-old sons. Being able to duck out for lunch at home or parent-teacher conferences has made her grueling work schedule more manageable.

Graceful and coolheaded, the artist is prone to speaking in elliptical phrases that build on one another, in a way that echoes her artwork.

Ms. Mehretu, who received her M.F.A. from the Rhode Island School of Design in 1997, has always layered her canvases with diagrams and information as a starting point: architectural plans of arenas or fortified cities underpin her small dashes and shapes that move in swarms across her early paintings. In 2004, her works were prominently featured in the Whitney Biennial, the Carnegie International in Pittsburgh, the São Paulo Biennial and the Museum of Modern Art, spurring collector and institutional demand. In 2019, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art is scheduled to give her a retrospective.

As a departure point for her SFMoMA commission, Ms. Mehretu turned to 19th-century paintings by Albert Bierstadt and Frederic Edwin Church, layered with recent photos of civil unrest in cities including Ferguson and Baltimore.

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Ms. Mehretu's mural for Goldman Sachs. Credit Jason Schmidt

When Ms. Mehretu visited the San Francisco museum, its two looming white walls and the luminous California location led her to think about American landscape paintings, bathed in glowing light, that commemorated the dream of this country's westward expansion in the mid-19th century.

“But at the same time this was a landscape of horror,” she said, drawing the connection to the contemporaneous struggle for emancipation as enslaved people moved through America's immense land on the underground railroad, charting another kind of migration.

“I was attracted to these landscape paintings that were trying to describe a really intense moment historically, of what this country was becoming, on all these different levels,” Ms. Mehretu said.

On the computer in Photoshop, she merged two majestic landscapes by Bierstadt and another by Church with blurred news images of riots and protests in the wake of fatal shootings of black men. These composites were inkjet-printed onto the bare canvases, then stretched on the walls of the church and encased in 20 layers of clear acrylic to create the hard surfaces on which she would paint.

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Ms. Mehretu spent much of last October just staring at the panels, trying to determine how to begin. “This scale is no joke,” she said.

Her brush strokes, in ink, are now much looser than in previous works and evoke scrawled graffiti. “It’s exhilarating when you make a mark that crosses 10 or 12 feet and get it right,” said Ms. Mehretu, who moved with growing agility on a manually operated scissor lift. She showed off her huge archive of brushes, many of which she’s modified with extended handles.

When she’s made a line that suggested figuration, she’s intuitively pushed it further, a development that first surfaced in her exhibition last fall at the Marion Goodman gallery. Pelvises, limbs, a tongue seem to emerge from the morass and then break apart again. Ms. Rankin, who is also an artist, on a recent visit to the studio perceived an Atlas figure in the sinuous contour of a sloped back and leg “carrying the burden of it all.”



Ms. Mehretu’s “Stadia I (2004). Credit Julie Mehretu/Collection of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art

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“Eighty percent of the marks I put down I wipe or sand away,” said Ms. Mehretu, explaining why she builds the surface up so much. Only the golden haze from Bierstadt’s Lake Tahoe, for instance, or the greens, yellows and reds of sirens, fires and traffic lights in the nighttime riot scenes are still visible through Ms. Mehretu’s dense accumulation of strokes.

Across the surface, she has silk-screened hundreds of details from the computer composites — enlarged into patterns of colored, pixelated squares. The embedded references “make these canvases extremely rich to look at,” Mr. Benezra said.

For Ms. Mehretu, sharing her creative zone with another artist was initially a challenge. (RoseLee Goldberg, Performa’s director and founder, called Ms. Mehretu’s suggestion of a collaboration with Mr. Moran “a gorgeous idea.”) During the biennial in November, Mr. Moran on piano, accompanied by musicians on drums and cornet against a video backdrop of her art, will perform his joyously mournful score.

When they both were working fully in the flow, Ms. Mehretu described the sensation of “actually hearing your drawing somehow, the mixture of the hand, eye and ear at the same time.”

Mr. Moran, who has followed Ms. Mehretu’s work for years, said it took a lot of courage for her to flirt with disaster at such a large scale. Ms. Mehretu took a big risk late in the game, after she had ostensibly finished one canvas. She had the idea to airbrush three sides of a huge diamond shape in flaming orange across her vortex of dark marks that seem to ascend upward. “I drew it into the computer and thought, nah, that’s crazy,” she said. Her 12-year-old son cheered her on to do “the rainbow thingy,” as he called it.

“It’s like a crescendo,” she said.

Does the giant form suggest a rainbow emerging from the political chaos she sees embroiling the country — or a conflagration threatening to destroy all progress toward equality?

The installation artist Sarah Sze dropped by for a visit and was dumbfounded by the addition, calling the canvas an “Icarus painting.”

“I couldn’t have made these 10 or 15 years ago,” Ms. Mehretu said.

“I feel much freer in my approach to painting right now,” she continued. “I’m excited about being open to intuition and influence, trying to keep pushing without falling on my face or maybe allowing myself to fall on my face.”