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# RAIN

JULIE MEHRETU wearing Noir Kei Ninomiya, photographed by DAVID MOLLE

## Julie Mehretu Outer Limits

Jaeden Martell Patrick Schwarzenegger Krow Lanvin Sander Lak  
The Wants Matthew Williams Basquiat Warhol

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Interview by Mark Benjamin  
Photography by David Mollé  
Styling by John Tan

Hair: Juan Jaar  
Makeup: Kyo Sudo  
Special thanks to: Artifact New York

# Julie Mehretu: The Mark of an Artist

To discuss the work of the artist Julie Mehretu (b. 1970) is really to discuss the inner workings of society's cultural psyche. Both are very complicated and require an almost surgical-like approach. Over the past 20 years, using the medium of abstraction, Mehretu has outlined, investigated, and retraced histories on a scale that would only be appropriate for the sheer weight and importance of the topics she contemplates.

The study of mark making, political conflict, and the history of abstraction inform her practice, but also the voices that were excluded from cultural dialogues. These perhaps speak loudest in Mehretu's work. She has investigated the horrors of the stadium throughout Western history (*Stadia I, II, III*, 2004), the complexities of the western front during the United States' expansion (*HOWL eon (I, II)*, 2017), and in her recent work has created what we interpret as powerful extrapolations from current events and our collective subconscious.

While the New York abstract expressionist painters of the 20th century were principally concerned with the *individual*, Mehretu's focus seems to be on the *collective*, and negotiating oneself within it. With the exponential rise of the internet and its ever-shifting uses (and abuses), there seems to be something about Mehretu's abstraction that captures the overwhelming cascade of information we are constantly subjected to, or a subject of. Her work expresses the interconnectedness, complexities, and even the contradictions within our social fabric. She often describes it as negotiating, as mediating history and sociopolitical conflicts.

This fall, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art opened a traveling mid-career survey of her work that will, in June, come to exhibition co-organizer the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York and, later, the High Museum of Art in Atlanta and the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis. Featuring more than 70 pieces, the show uses its immense scale to mirror its ambitions to chronologize the historiography contained in Mehretu's output. With our third—no, fourth—eye open, we met with her at her studio in Manhattan to discuss and understand her nuanced approach to mark making and how she is capturing the zeitgeist of the 21st century. —————>



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Mark Benjamin: You once said that you're "interested in painting our current situation, political, historical, or social, how it informs me, my context and my past." Fellow artist Glenn Ligon once described you as a social abstract artist. Would you agree?

Julie Mehretu: One of the reasons I have always been interested in working within the limits of abstraction is because there is the capacity of chance, possibility, and opacity. There is a deep history of the semiotics of representative work, and the cultural specificity in it is undeniable.

For example, if you're looking at a Poussin painting, you can read it in lots of ways. There are many layers of information in those paintings and, in a sense, a good deal of abstraction, if you will, or a place for all kinds of forms of thinking. But there is a cultural specificity that is inescapable. The same can be said for a Kerry James Marshall painting. These are both master painters I love.

And some argue this cultural specificity is true in abstraction as well, but it's absolutely not so. For me, abstraction afforded a whole other space of exploration, experimentation, and possibility, because it is not necessarily tethered to specific kinds of cultural meaning. There have been efforts to hold particular gestures of abstraction hostage to forms of cultural specificity, particularly white male angst, but that is easily unraveled when one digs deep.

One thing I have been investigating within the language of abstraction from early on has been, "How does one deal with that history?" I don't take anything for granted, and I'm interested in taking apart the semiotics of historical abstraction and mark making as much as any other form of sign or symbol. I play with that language and its historical bondage. The contradiction is that there are all kinds of gaps in there. Nothing has been closed. There is no closed circle or circuit. There's all this space for us to find these breaks and gaps in what can be possible and invent something else within those.

MB: I know a lot of your art highlights or draws inspiration from political conflicts. Do you see yourself as forming a new role for the artist, one of connecting social happenings to the public through art? Or has this been happening forever?

JM: It has been happening forever. For me, it's about negotiating oneself and contemporary existence through aesthetics and the politics of our social reality.

If you think back on certain moments, such as the late 1950s to 1960s, there are artists such as Norman Lewis or Alma Thomas who were working with abstraction as a form of negotiating something else, between their specific cultural experiences and their interest in the possibilities of modernism.

One of the most modernist gestures of the last century was the effort of liberation. Creative work is not just about representation, or creating a cultural mirror, an explanation of a condition. Creation, whether in writing, music and visual making, has also been about inventing a form or space to exist, especially if the world didn't let one be free. I think that has been lost in a meta-narrative of looking back at modernism through a particular lens.

MB: Are there any artists in particular you look to?

JM: I looked at everybody in the past, I look at everybody now. I look at all kinds of painting. I look at all forms of making art. I've been studying art and painting since I was a young kid. I go and see as much as I possibly can. I go to the Met regularly. I travel to cities

and countries to look at specific works of art, to see particular paintings. In terms of the history of abstraction, there are so many artists I revere.

MB: People used to say pop killed abstract art. Toward the end of his life and career, Andy Warhol started to embrace abstraction through his oxidation paintings, the Rorschachs, and his shadow paintings. I feel he must have picked up on something, perhaps the way that the media or the dissemination of information was changing at the time.

JM: Warhol is an artist who was negotiating himself inside the state of the culture and times he was living within. He lived on the fringes of an impactful, evolving culture in New York, the particular ideas of that moment and the larger collisions of cultures, of post-segregation USA. Warhol was working within all culture, from mainstream American design to the fringes of queer and alternative communities. He was negotiating and working within a new form of aesthetics dominated by ferocious civic and cultural change. Warhol didn't pretend to work in a cultural vacuum of pure whiteness. American capitalism abounded, people were being executed by the electric chair, while Marilyn entranced, Elvis held a gun, car crashes mashed bodies, police violently terrorized black civil rights protesters, and race riots ensued. It was hell a complicated. Of course he built on the language of abstraction.

MB: I think a lot of headlines, too.

JM: Yeah, all of that. I think it's interesting that his work, including his films, became more and more abstract. I think it's an interesting proposition that as things disintegrated more and more, from the gains from the civil rights era in the 1970s to the reactionary conservative politics that abounded in the 1980s, and the Aids crisis spun a different reality of health politics. It messed everything up in a way. Warhol's abstract work comes from a very confused and uncertain cultural moment when he was trying to negotiate something else. It's really interesting that he went into this place where his abstract images hold another kind of power.

MB: You're interested in headlines and conflict. I was wondering, how do you go about which ones to choose?

JM: I work with images that haunt me, they nag at my core. Right now we are negotiating the beginnings of a global immigration crisis. It's a core part of our political reality. We have detention camps imprisoning innocent people right across the Hudson River, just there [SHE POINTS OUT THE WINDOW], outside Newark airport. Parents being taken from kids, and kids being taken from families. It's happening right here. Hurricanes, fires, Mediterranean Sea crossings that kill many, horrific occurrences like Gericault's *The Raft of the Medusa*. Ethnic cleansing, Grenfell Tower burning in central London, nativist, fascist rallies, instantaneous protests to Trump's Muslim ban...

It's all a part of our daily reality and aesthetics. There are certain key images that I am especially drawn to and work with. They reside within a sort of cultural consciousness in a different way.

MB: I bring this up about the headlines because I found the style of your work to foreshadow the future. For example, your earlier abstract works foreshadowed what we're living in now in terms of interconnectedness, an explosion of information—living through digital media, and the way we are tethered to the internet. John Galliano wryly called the phenomenon "neo digital natives" for one of his collections for Maison Margiela. Your work has gone through a darker period over the past four or five years—that makes me nervous. Is this what's on the horizon for us?

JM: I don't know. I'm responding to what I'm making and developing in my own language and my intuitive creative interests in painting and where I am with that in the studio. The world is not outside that.

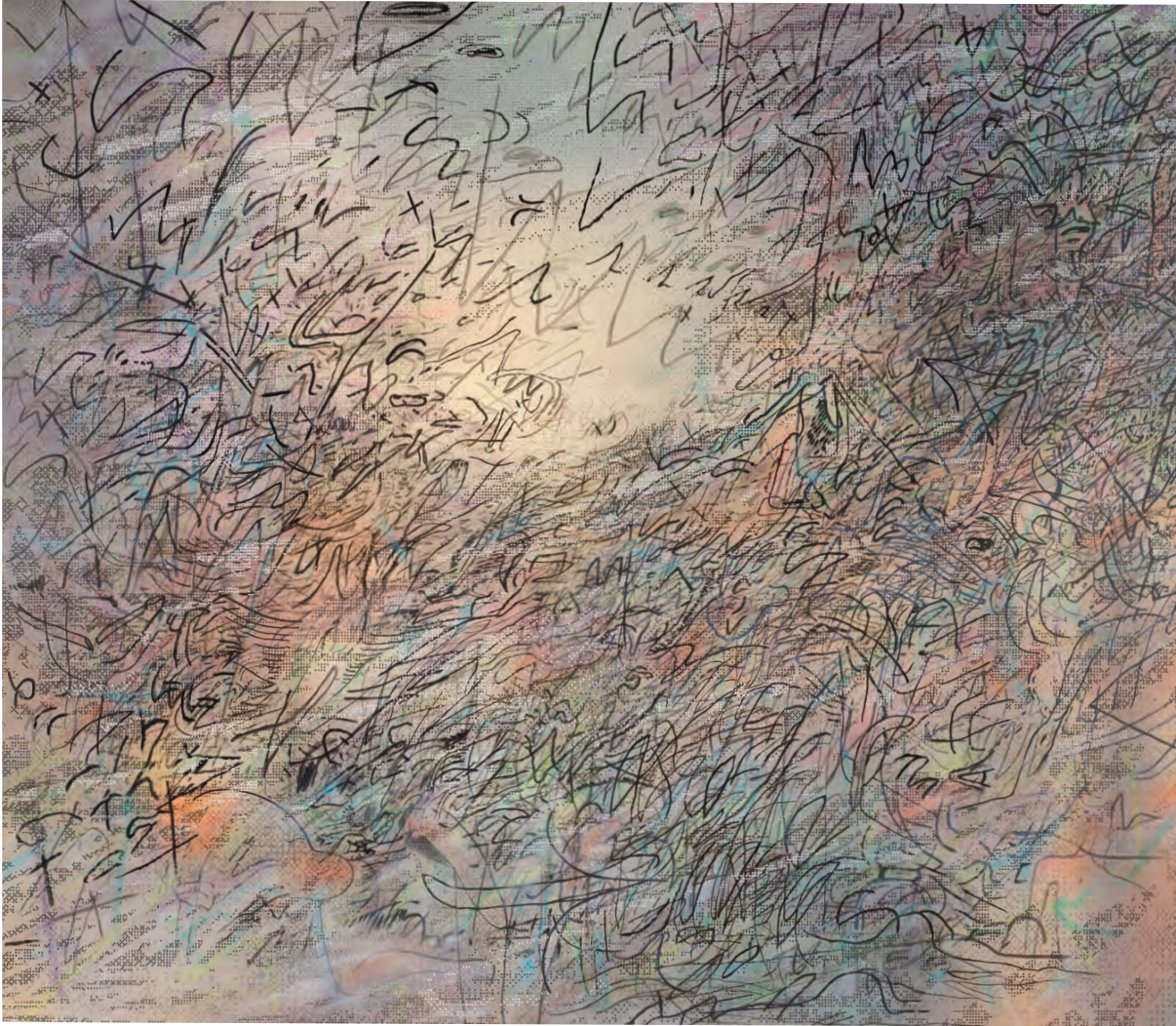
MB: There's a caveat to my previous question. There was a recent show of yours at White Cube in London. There were paintings, such as *Hineni* (E. 3:4) [2018], as well as works on paper—for example, *Six Bardos: Transmigration* [2018]—that were a lot brighter, and I believe that one of them was inspired by the Buddha paintings found in the Mogao Caves in China.

JM: After the *HOWL eon* [I, II, 2017] paintings, the big paintings at SFMOMA, I started to use the blurred photograph a lot more. I became interested in what else could be turned up and made from those images. *Hineni* was a blurred photo of the 2017 northern California wildfires. To me the painting feels almost as if one is a witness to an exorcism, a trance type of event unfolding. They seem charged with possibility and the trace of action at the same time. A haunting other emerges from within.

"I don't take anything for granted. I'm interested in taking apart the semiotics of historical abstraction and mark making as much as any other form of sign or symbol. I play with that language and its historical bondage"



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Julie Mehretu, *HOWL eon I*, 2017  
Ink and acrylic on canvas; 27 x 32 feet  
Courtesy the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery, © Julie Mehretu  
Photograph by Tom Powel Imaging

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Julie Mehretu, *HOWL eon II*, 2017  
Ink and acrylic on canvas; 27 x 32 feet  
Courtesy the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery, © Julie Mehretu  
Photograph by Tom Powel Imaging



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MB: There's something else about them, too. This reinsertion of the hand, a sort of calligraphy, as some art commentators have described it. The mark of the artist—like in *Six Bardos: Last Breath* [2018], for example, what's going on there?

JM: In early modernist abstraction and certain iconic modernist gestures, like the suprematists' works—such as Malevich's *White on White* [1918]—white squares, or if it's white, yellow, or red, you think Mondrian or Frank Bowling, or black square and it's Malevich, or an orange color-field painting, if done in a particular way, you think Rothko. It's the same thing with a Twombly scribble or a Basquiat hand or a David Hammons handprint, a Kara Walker silhouette, a Philip Guston eyeball or head.

All these marks have these social indicators in them and they become something in our visual language. I keep thinking that, in the way I'm working, my mark making kind of evolves out of gesture. It mimics all of this history of mark making, whether it's prehistoric or really recent. All of that informs how I keep working, how I keep imagining, how I keep seeing. There are moments when I look at something that looks somewhat like this Guston arm, but it morphs into the vitriolic tongue of Bacon. Part of it is like a Hammons body print that stretches into a Giacometti, or is it a Noguchi figure?

You see all this stuff evolving and painting pulls from all of these languages in our history. I think of them all as visual neologisms. A neologism comes around when you need to invent a new word because the language you have at hand is not enough. It doesn't describe fully a new emergent culture that's being formed on the fringes. We invent new names for new songs, new forms of music, or new ways of thinking or new ways of being in the world, so that's kind of how I play with the marks. They're being stretched and formed and pulled to mimic certain parts of early Renaissance paintings in terms of space, but also prehistoric moments in terms of marks, protruding into extreme forms of Afrofuturist possibilities. Then there are all these other elements that are fused back onto them.

MB: Is it a place of acknowledgement or negation?

JM: Or reinvention. It's like quoting something but then twisting it and shifting it into something else. When you make up a new word, you're actually using part of the meaning of that word, but you're making something new up as an indicator, a signifier of something else, the way any neologism does.

MB: That makes a lot of sense. Your work makes me think of Derrida and Baudrillard, because a lot of it is about signage and emancipation from meaning, that meaning being derived only in relation to other signage. That's frequently in your work and, like you say, forging something new from all that signage.

JM: Yeah, and liberating preconceived ideas, taking them apart but then also finding new space there. It's complicated. I'm most interested in finding a space of being able to work in a way that mines toward liberation.

MB: Your mid-career survey will be traveling from LA to New York, Atlanta, and Minneapolis. How do you imagine someone walking through the show? How do you think they might experience it?

JM: I don't know how someone else will experience it. We designed the space with a particular form of architecture that mimics the folding of space in a painting. It is laid out in a way that when one first

walks in, you can look at the earliest paintings and the first "cycle" of paintings, and the most recent paintings all in the first impression. It is an elliptical hang that clearly has a beginning, but it also inverts the idea of a clear linear narrative of development, it is more cyclical. From each "room," or vantage point, one can always go deep into an experience with one painting of the moment but can turn and look back and see glimmers of what preceded in the work while at the same time peeping at what comes next. There are several rooms that delve into a cycle of work developed over a few years and then other rooms that span 9 to 12 years of time. There is a central, diamond-shaped room that we think of as the generator, it holds the first cycle of paintings made over a few years just before and after 9/11. In a sense it generated a way of making and thinking about how to approach new ways of painting for the next decade. These were my first large paintings.

We also show some of my earliest drawings that led to the development of my work, my early paintings, where I was trying to understand myself and how I could find a way into mark making and abstraction. We laid out the show to explore these momentary kinds of shifts in the work and to then allow some space to really look at a series of paintings that were made during particular moments. It's like the show has the different components and one can negotiate them individually, yet they all fold into one another. One can see where the early work started, where fissures occurred and where new shifts broke through and a different form of language emerged. For me, it's interesting how that has changed and the possibility of painting for me has changed, but I'm also fascinated by how much in the new work has ricochets from the past.

MB: And your *HOWL* works—they're too large to display in the retrospective. They're installed at SFMOMA. Is the title inspired by Allen Ginsberg?

JM: Yes, those *HOWL* paintings can't fit in the show. But we were able to include Tacita Dean's film *GDGA* [2011], which she made of me working on *Mural* [2009] in Berlin. So, in a sense, *Mural* is there in miniature, the largest painting I've made. It's incredible to see how much it formally boomerangs into my newest work.

I got the title from Ginsberg's poem, for sure. The title came way after I'd finished the painting. [From] his epic poem and its effort to capture a particular moment of extreme, brutal, acute social/political change and flux. The point of departure for the painting was informed by ideations of the American expansionist project into the American west, history of 19th-century American landscape painting, the colonial sublime, Silicon Valley and the digitization of landscape, and contemporary race riots that emerged from extrajudicial murders by police. When I thought of the title, I was thinking about that poem and it kind of worked as another name for what the paintings were digesting and conjuring. The paintings have this somewhat weird thing that happens between them, *HOWL eon I* and *HOWL eon II*. It fits.

MB: Something that hasn't really been talked about is this notion of your paintings having or addressing memory. For example, the book *Sing, Unburied, Sing* by Jesmyn Ward is about a ghost that inspired one of your paintings. I was also thinking about how you sketched photographs of buildings using a projector in your earlier works. Architecture is also a kind of ghost for a city.

JM: That book is incredible, I loved it. Ward has myriad ghosts in it. She describes an image of a tree, it's almost like looking back in time at every soul there, looking back at a horrific, immense social violence through this image. But she pulls out a different future through a character that emerged from within the image—the reason I chose that title as an indicator to that gesture in the painting.

I work continuously negotiating this moment through the idea of the repeat, replay in past time, historic time, so the past or the immediate past is part of what I'm working with. They become part of the indicators. In that way it's collected, it's made from the resource of memory.

MB: I look at your work and there are so many different angles of approach, as many possibilities as there are abstractions.

JM: We are constantly negotiating ourselves in this world, as well as a projected digital mimeograph of it, that is completely contradictory and confusing and complicated. It's a constant reorienting. Today, there are many ways to think about everything, which just as quickly morphs and flattens into a kind of weird reflecting mirror, twisting completely into something else. That's part of our contemporary moment.

Twitter: @JulieMehretu

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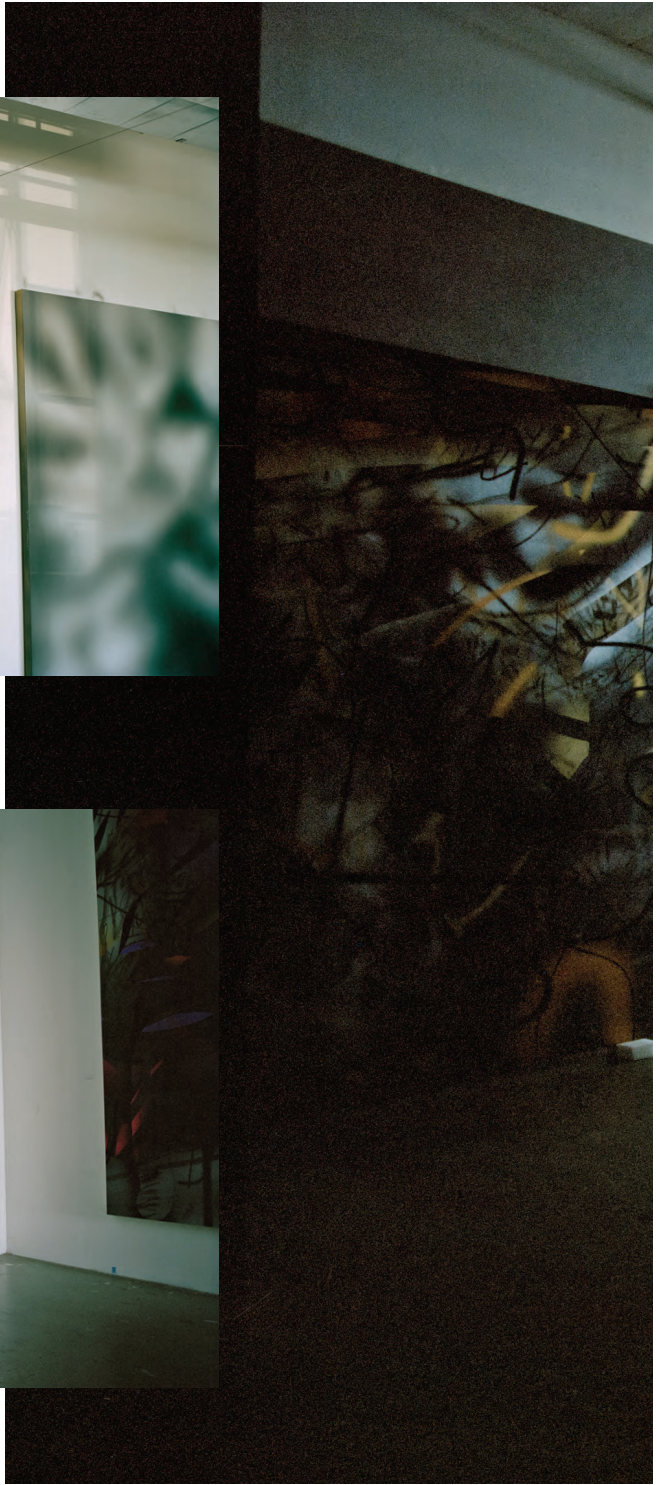
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Julie Mehretu, *Hineni (E. 34)*, 2018. Ink and acrylic on canvas; 96 x 120 inches  
Centre Pompidou, Paris, Musée national d'art moderne/Centre de création industrielle,  
gift of George Economou, 2019, © Julie Mehretu. Photograph by Tom Powel Imaging

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Julie Mehretu, *Conjured Parts (eye)*, Ferguson, 2016. Ink and acrylic on canvas; 84 x 96 inches  
The Broad Art Foundation, Los Angeles, © Julie Mehretu. Photograph by Cathy Carver

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Julie Mehretu, *Being Higher II*, 2013. Ink and acrylic on canvas; 84 x 60 inches. Collection of Susan & Larry Marx, courtesy Neal Meltzer Fine Art, New York, © Julie Mehretu. Photograph by Tom Powel Imaging

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Julie Mehretu, *Six Bardos: Transmigration*, 2018. 31-color, 2-panel aquatint; 98 x 74 inches. Courtesy Gemini G.E.L., LLC, © Julie Mehretu and Gemini G.E.L., LLC. Photograph © White Cube, by Ollie Hammick

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Julie Mehretu, *Mural*, 2009  
Ink and acrylic on canvas; 22 x 80 feet  
Courtesy the artist and Goldman Sachs, LLC. © Julie Mehretu  
Photograph by Tom Powell Imaging  
Installation-view photograph by Jason Schmidt

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