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In the Abstract

Julie Mehretu's richly layered paintings reference everything from global mobility to racial inequality to sociopolitical change. A retrospective at the Whitney Museum places it all in context. By Jori Finkel

Photographed by Nick Sethi

Last March, as New York City prepared for lockdown, the painter Julie Mehretu left her home in Harlem for a six-bedroom farmhouse known as Denniston Hill, which she now owns with friends. Her studio packed up a U-Haul with seven large canvases she had just begun working on, and she loaded her car with some food and clothes for herself and her kids—on spring break from third and ninth grades—and the family dog, Luna.

Set among 240 acres in the Catskills, Denniston Hill has, for the past two decades, been Mehretu's personal refuge and, increasingly, a quasi-utopian artists collective with an agricultural bent, drawing on the former dairy farm's natural beauty, gardens, pond, and river—an "idyllic space for queer people of color up in the hills of the borscht belt," Mehretu said. She arrived at Denniston Hill on Friday, March 13. The property was in between residency cycles and empty, apart from the caretaker, and Mehretu ended up staying through mid-July. While there, she made a breakthrough series of paintings based on deliberately blurred black-and-white photographs of cataclysmic recent events, including the Grenfell Tower fire in London, the Hong Kong protests, and refugee confrontations at the U.S. border.

In each case, the underlying airbrushed painting of global upheaval was covered with a clear acrylic before Mehretu added red and blue gestures to the surface, also sanding and wiping away pigment. The resulting paintings, shown at Marian Goodman Gallery this past fall, are dark and cloudy to the point that digital cameras have a hard time focusing on them. "A lot of that was coming from this place of precarity and uncertainty," Mehretu said over Zoom recently from her sunny Chelsea studio, referring not just to the pandemic but to the environmental and social ills it has exposed. "There was something about that pause, when everything stopped. I had friends I was in touch with in Egypt and Europe and South Africa and Kenya and Australia, and everyone everywhere was in the same predicament. The sound of the world changed."

This year, Mehretu made an even larger blurred painting, haunted by political unrest, for the Whitney Museum of American Art, where her midcareer survey runs from March 25 to August 8. The under-

painting of this work, done through a mix of halftone screen printing and airbrushing, consists of blurred color images of anti-immigration rallies in Germany and the U.K. "They're basically fascistic images with riots and fires," Mehretu said. "There's a lot of oranges and reds. I don't know why, but these nationalists seem to love fire; their torches were in the images and inform the color palette."

She created the new 15-foot-long artwork for what's arguably the most visible place in the museum: the fifth-floor wall facing floor-to-ceiling windows that overlook the Hudson River. Collectors won't let their Mehretus be displayed there because of the direct light, so she decided to make a new work instead, trusting that her materials are stable. (She even signed a conservation release to that effect.) "I really wanted to use that wall because you can see it from the sidewalk and the water. It's always amazing when you look up, and it's a work of art—it changes your engagement with the institution," she said. She was also thinking about the view to Ellis Island and, more broadly, about dangerous waters and national borders. One point of reference was Géricault's 1819 masterpiece, *The Raft of the Medusa*, showing the chaotic aftermath of the shipwreck of French soldiers en route to colonize Senegal. Another was a recent photograph of an inflatable boat in the Mediterranean overloaded with refugees desperate to escape their home countries.

Spanning the past 25 years of her work, the Whitney exhibition is an eye-opener. Anyone who thinks of Mehretu as a one-note abstract artist good at exploding gridded, maplike images is going to be surprised. Some works are intimate, with gestures that recall Cy Twombly's; others are ambitious history paintings made in and for a century when metanarratives no longer hold and collapse into multiple perspectives, with hints of human figures here and there. Above all, the show, which originated at LACMA, reflects the sense of an artist constantly and inventively grappling with the challenge of finding one's place in the relentless international flux of global capitalism, information networks, migration patterns, revolutionary political dynamics, and more. "Julie's layering of multiple painting techniques also mirrors the way we live our everyday

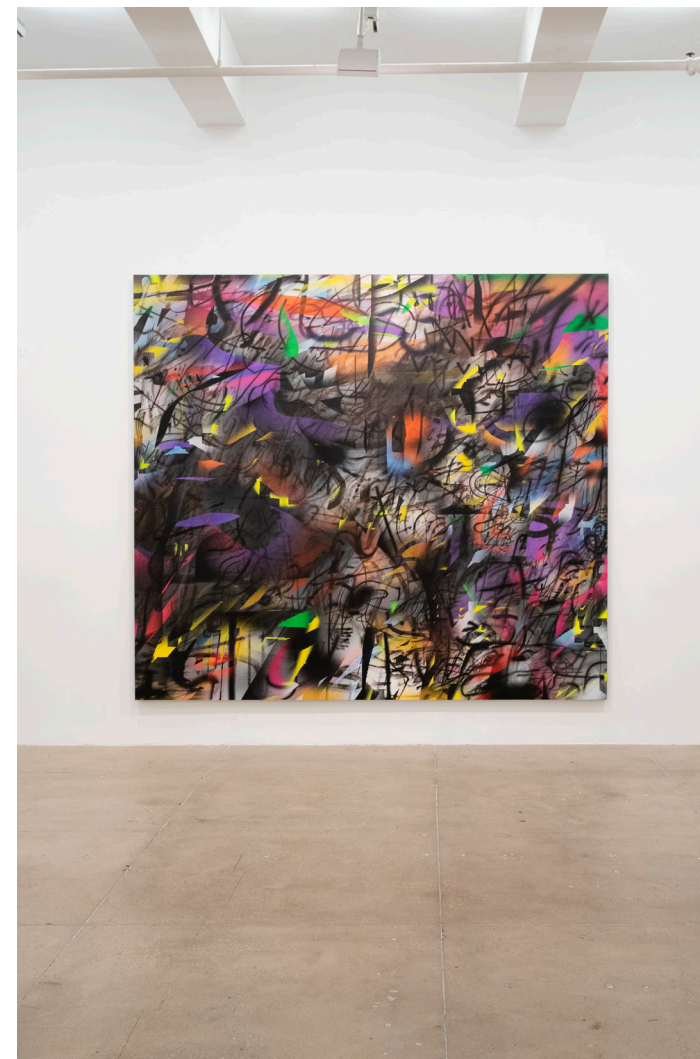
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Julie Mehretu photographed at Marian Goodman Gallery in front of (from left) *About the Space of Half an Hour (R. 8:1) 1*, 2019–2020, and *About the Space of Half an Hour (R. 8:1) 2*, 2019–2020. Mehretu wears a *David's Road* sweatshirt and pants; *Prosteel* earring; *Newtro* chain; *Dr. Martens* boots; all other jewelry her own. Styled by Keita K. Lovelace.



Clockwise from top left: The artist painting in her studio at Kalamazoo College in Michigan, 1992; the original studio barn at Denniston Hill in Woodridge, New York, in 2001, which eventually collapsed from snow; Mehretu working on the painting *Retopistics: A Renegade Excavation*, outside the barn at Denniston Hill, 2001; taking a picture at Denniston Hill, 2020; drawing at Denniston Hill, 2001. Background artwork: *About the Space of Half an Hour (R. 8:1) 7*, 2019–2020.



From left: *Orient (After D. Cherry, Post Irma and Summer)*, 2017–2020; a detail from *Rise (Charlottesville)*, 2018–2019.

lives, as you scroll through your feeds while a melody plays in your head, a fire engine siren blasts in the street, the aroma of roast chicken fills the room, and you talk to your teenager, feeling the weight of the day or joy from good news,” said LACMA curator Christine Y. Kim. These paintings, as much as any other abstract canvases being made today, contain worlds.

Mehretu’s life trajectory also crosses continents. She was born in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, in 1970, to an American mother and Ethiopian father. Her parents met in Washington, D.C., where her mother had moved after a stint in the Peace Corps in Colombia, and where her father, having finished a Ph.D. in geography at Johns Hopkins University, was doing a postdoc. The couple soon moved to Ethiopia, and Julie was the first of three children. The family fled to the U.S. for political reasons in 1977, after Julie finished first grade. “There was this military dictatorship in Ethiopia, and it was a hairy moment where the government was eradicating intelligentsia and intellectuals. We were lucky we got out,” she said, describing how they landed in East Lansing, Michigan, because her father, a geography professor at Addis Ababa University, found work at Michigan State University. Her mother taught in a Montessori school—the hands-on early-learning method that values what Mehretu calls “play and creative space.”

Mehretu herself liked to make things and draw growing up, but she didn’t start thinking about art as a career until her last year at Kalamazoo College. In 1997, she got her MFA from RISD, where she began making abstract drawings that looked like maps, and within a few years, museums recognized her as a leading voice of her generation. Curators at MoMA, the Whitney, and the MFA Houston quickly acquired her work. She remembers the turning point occurring when the artist Shahzia Sikander included two of her paintings and some drawings in a group show at Exit Art in 1999, and “these dealers swooped in.” The next year, she did a residency at the Studio Museum in Harlem and started showing with critic turned dealer Christian Hays of the Project, an early, now-defunct gallery in Harlem. “He was a poet, a thinker, and I miss his energy in the mix,” she said.

Mehretu is now one of very few women, let alone women of color, to be awarded huge commissions, such as a \$5 million Goldman Sachs lobby work that she boldly called—like the Jackson Pollock painting by the same name—*Mural*. The 80-foot-long artwork prompted the art critic Calvin Tomkins in 2010 to write one of his celebratory *New Yorker* profiles, calling it the “most ambitious painting I’ve seen in a dozen years.” Mehretu went on to make a pair of paintings for the SFMOMA lobby in 2017 that are so large—each bigger than Leonardo da Vinci’s *The Last Supper*, one critic pointed out—that she had to rent a cathedral in Harlem to serve as her studio. It’s called *HOWL, eon (I, II)*.

Mehretu also serves as a trustee on the board of SFMOMA, which gives her a front-row seat to the dramatic reckoning that American museums are now undergoing in the wake of George Floyd’s death and Black Lives Matter protests. How can art museums, which historically have been shrines for colonial trophies, fight systemic racism in their own institutions?

“When I was coming up, we didn’t have the number of Black curators or curators of color that we have now. My issue is that most are not at senior levels where they can get the support they need,” Mehretu said. “I think we will really start to see a difference in what happens when we have more diversity on museum boards and executive teams—that has to be the first phase of change.”

Mehretu said she was not involved in the “explosions and decisions” last year that prompted SFMOMA to lay off dozens of employees and led senior curator Gary Garrels to resign after being condemned by social media campaigns for making racist comments. But she followed the controversy closely. Refusing to reduce Garrels’s situation to one of either unchecked racism or cancel culture run amok, Mehretu discussed the importance of both of these sorts of reckonings and his career, calling him “an important leader and curator. My work is there at SFMOMA because of him.”

“He was really a champion for many of us and has a long record of having done that for many years. So it’s sad that those kinds of casualties

OPPOSITE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT, COURTESY OF JULIE MEHRETU; COURTESY OF JULIE MEHRETU STUDIO (4)



From left: *Rise (Charlottesville)*, 2018–2019; Mehretu in front of *Rise (Charlottesville)*. Mehretu wears a Rick Owens jumpsuit; her own jewelry.

happen in these kinds of battles, because these battles are normal and important,” she continued. “It’s much deeper than what social media and the noise of the moment allow it to be. I think you see the same thing with any cross-generational revolutionary or social-change project. Usually the younger generation is pushing for different change, and when that happens, there’s a different language. And when you’ve been a champion of those types of changes all your life, it’s hard to find the ability to recognize that there might be a place of self-criticality ever.”

HOWL, eon (I, II) was originally slated to be a three-year installation at SFMOMA, but it remains in the atrium of the museum, a space that’s free to the public. SFMOMA spokesperson Jill Lynch says that “as of now, we have no plans to deinstall it”—an example of how something truly monumental becomes something of a monument; persistent, if not permanent.

Mehretu’s history of scaling up and taking on bigger and bigger spaces is also rooted, in a way, in Denniston Hill. The first time she stayed there was in the summer of 2001. She was in the early days of a relationship with the Australian-born artist Jessica Rankin, whom she married in 2008 (they have since separated, but quarantined together with their kids upstate last summer), and she was working out of a studio in Bushwick, Brooklyn, when her friend the architectural historian Lawrence Chua, whom she met through Christian Haye, invited her to come up and rent a room. She and Rankin outfitted an old barn (which later collapsed under the weight of snow) as a studio, building two walls to accommodate their canvases. There she made *Retopistics: A Renegade Excavation*, an 18-foot-wide whirlwind of an abstract painting—her largest at the time—that captures something of the expansive or entropic nature of energy itself.

“The Catskills are beautiful in the summer. There was a swimming pool, a river that we could go swimming in, and an incredible amount of land we could go hiking through. Something opened up for me,” Mehretu said. “I couldn’t believe we could live that life instead of hustling art in Bushwick.” Mehretu, Chua, and Paul Pfeiffer, an artist who also showed with the Project, teamed up to create a nonprofit organization in 2008 and began a residency program, inviting mainly

artists, curators, and writers. (In 2007, Mehretu and Pfeiffer bought the 10 central acres containing the main house and the pond.)

But over time, the residency and public talk program, developed in part to secure grants, felt less exciting. “The vitality and potency that we wanted wasn’t happening. It was basically like any other artists residency,” Mehretu said. They came to a crossroads: Pull the plug, or reinvent? “Paul spearheaded one of the ideas,” she said. “What if Denniston Hill became a production company? Not just a space that hosts artists-in-residence, but that made stuff, working on creative projects collectively?”

The new project closest to launching is Exodus Media Workshop, designed to bring artists and high school students together to do research, culminating in a collective film, about what Pfeiffer—who once made a 75-day-long durational film about a flock of chickens at Denniston Hill—calls our “hypermediated culture.” Another initiative involves partnering with Mary Ellen Carroll of Public Utility 2.0 to bring broadband Internet access to the area. A third aims to open the property’s gardens to the community with an educational “food justice” mission. “One idea that really ties this together is that food and images are things that people in our culture consume without thinking about it,” Chua told me by phone. He said the aim is fostering “critical thinking, so we’re not tyrannized by commercial approaches.”

Mehretu said that the projects share hands-on, collaborative learning models: “I’m not interested in becoming a teacher to high school students, but I am interested in learning by studying with them this form of TikTok or Instagram Live, and all these mediated images. This is a really intense space that nobody fully understands.”

In this way, Denniston Hill has become not just a creative escape but a means for Mehretu to work more directly on the social inequities the paintings gesture toward. Or, as Mehretu puts it, her painting is “a space for possibility and for invention. In terms of actual social change, it will not alleviate many systemic problems we have, such as our really shitty education system or poverty or hunger. But I think there’s room for many levels of working on social change.” ♦

HAIR AND MAKEUP BY WARYA TYCHYSKAWA, OPPOSITE; CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: COURTESY OF JULIE MEHRETU STUDIO; TOM POWELL IMAGING, COURTESY OF JULIE MEHRETU STUDIO; COURTESY OF JULIE MEHRETU STUDIO



Clockwise from top: Mural, in process at Mehretu’s studio in Berlin, 2009; Mehretu working on *HOWL, eon (II)*, at the former church of St. Thomas the Apostle in Harlem, 2017; Mehretu working on *Black City* in her Harlem studio with her son Cade, 2007. Background artwork: *Rise (Charlottesville)*, 2018–2019.