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The New York Times

*Julie Mehretu's
Long Journey Home*

Wildfires, refugee camps and the Arab Spring might be her primary sources. But a retrospective at the Whitney affirms she is an abstract painter, first and always.

by Jason Farago (March 25, 2021)



"Ghosthymn (after the Raft)," 2019-2021, from Julie Mehretu's major survey at the Whitney Museum of American Art.
"Her disquieted art has only grown in pertinence and power," our critic says.
Credit: Julie Mehretu and Marian Goodman Gallery

After 12 months of inactivity, now you can feel it in springtime New York: the reanimation, the flow and flux, the lives again in transit. There's movement once more in the city, and action of high velocity at the Whitney Museum of American Art, where the roiling midcareer retrospective of Julie Mehretu has finally made it to view. It opened in November 2019 at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, and surveys 25 years of rumbling paintings, drawings and prints. It's arrived nearly a year late in her hometown, but her disquieted art has only grown in pertinence and power.

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Mehretu came to prominence in the early 2000s for large, multilayered paintings that incorporated architectural diagrams and cityscapes. Then, about ten years ago, her art took a profound and thrilling turn — painting gestural, calligraphic abstractions, bristling with unsettled tensions that evoke the dislocations of war and the disorder of the climate. She'd won fame early. She faced a market that preferred she stick to one style. Mehretu kept moving, and in the process forged a new sort of decolonial abstraction right inside the tradition of Western art.



Installation view of "Julie Mehretu," from left: "Retopistics: A Renegade Excavation," 2001; "Stadia II," 2004; "Dispersion," 2002; "Untitled 2," 2001; "Mogamma (A Painting in Four Parts) (2 of 4)," 2012. Credit: Ron Amstutz

Meaning lies in motion. Culture never sits still. Trade, conquest, reproduction, translation, displacement, intermarriage: Art partakes of these movements, mutates en route, gets new identities as it circulates and resettles. Mehretu's peripatetic art has all the drama of these global circulations — the flights of people and capital, the spread of viral infections and political uprisings. And this retrospective, spanning the Whitney's largest floor and accompanied by a spectacularly learned catalog, is a testament to how abstraction can embody multiple flows, without ever settling down, and open new vistas of freedom.

Mehretu was born in 1970 in Addis Ababa, to an Ethiopian father and an American mother. They immigrated to Michigan later that decade, after the military junta known as the Derg began a campaign of terror. While studying at the Rhode Island School of Design, she made maps and charts that suggested some kind of demographic analysis, but whose dashes and squiggles never disclosed what was being graphed.

Two intriguing pencil drawings here, both titled "Migration Direction Map" and dating to 1996, comprise dozens of cells and circles overlaid with arrows in all directions. What's migrating? Birds, people, illegal weapons? All and none of them. What Mehretu was beginning to picture were the dynamics of systems on the move.

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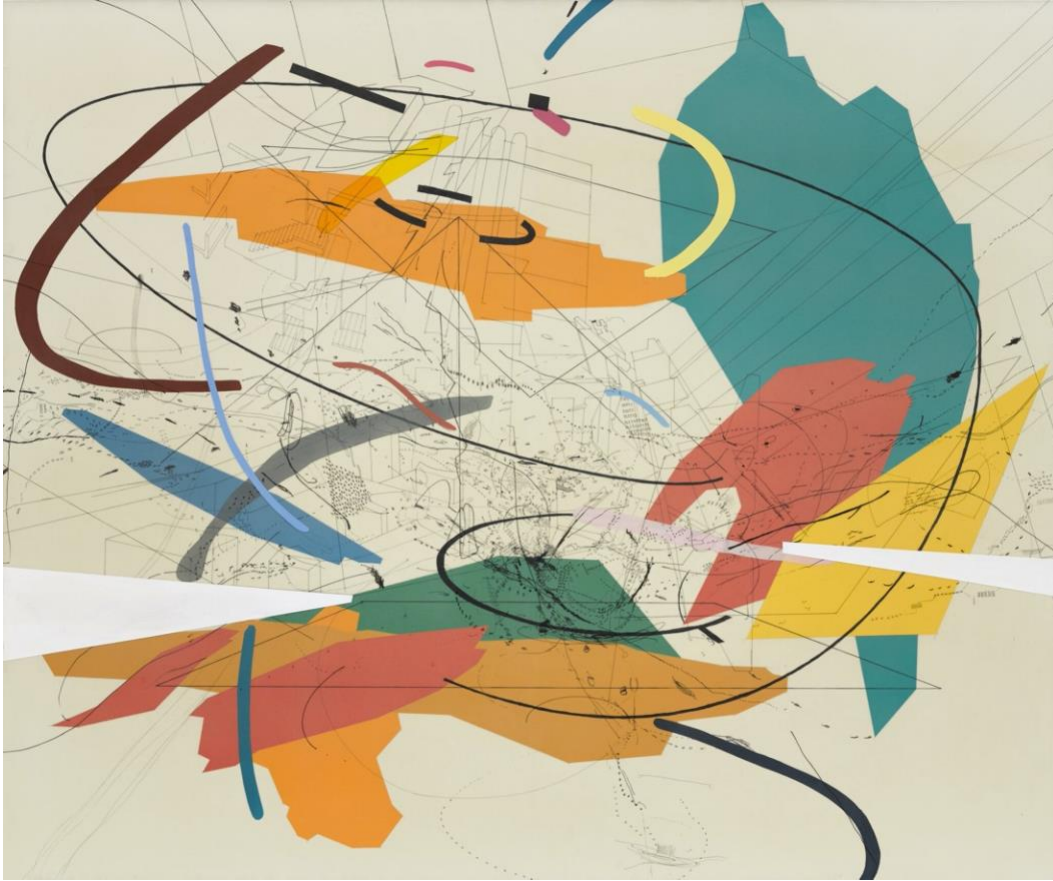
"Migration Direction Map (large)," 1996. Credit: Julie Mehretu

She came to New York at millennium's end, taking up an artist's residency at the Studio Museum in Harlem. Her work grew larger, more architectural and more explicitly occupied with mapmaking and urbanism. Lines accreted in an essentially radial configuration, with large arcs orbiting an absent central axis, and orthogonal spokes sprouting from the core.

Street plans of African capitals, or wire frames of housing blocks and highways, commingled with sweeping curves and vivacious scratches. Rectangles and diamonds overlaid the compositions like flags at a stadium, or signs at an airport terminal. In places she interpolated cartoonish clouds and explosions.

Ambitious, intricate and proudly global, these dense paintings and drawings made Mehretu the breakout star of a maverick Harlem gallery called the Project, and a standout in "Freestyle," the Studio Museum's hotly debated 2001 show of "post-Black art."

Now, at 20 years' distance, I've got to say that the early works look pretty mannered. The overelaborate surfaces seem to evoke globalization as a simple excess. Many seem like remnants from a circa-2000 vogue for recondite, inscrutable maps and diagrams, produced by artists like Matthew Ritchie, Mark Lombardi and Franz Ackermann.



"Untitled 2," 1999. Her work grew more architectural, and more explicitly occupied with mapmaking and urbanism. Lines accreted in a radial configuration, with orthogonal spokes sprouting from the core.
Credit: Julie Mehretu and White Cube

But spending time with them again, I still appreciated the seriousness with which she built a whole painterly language (she wasn't even 30 at the start), and how she engaged with hybridity, diaspora and violence without leaving the terrain of abstract painting. She did this above all through an innovative layering technique, revealed at the Whitney in two films of her in the studio, shot by her friend, the artist Tacita Dean. Mehretu usually began by drawing wire-frame outlines across the whole canvas, which she then shellacked with a clear acrylic layer that would be sanded down to create a new painterly surface. She'd repeat the process three or four times, saturating each layer with radial lines and geometric shapes. You get a vertiginous sense of depth — as if the one-point perspective of Renaissance painting had collapsed, from a "window on the world" into a whirlwind of motion and migration.

It took some time, but around 2011 — triggered, significantly, by the Arab Spring, which seemed so hopeful that year — Mehretu started to push into new territory. First in her tremendous panorama "Invisible Line," and then in the dramatic "Mogamma" quartet, she eliminated the orbital axis that structured her early works. She instead overlaid wire-frame drawings of New York, Cairo and Addis Ababa with forests of short, sharp, freely drawn lines, made with a watery black sumi ink used in East Asian calligraphy.

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In "Black City" (2007), Mehretu interrogates cities and stadiums, their undercurrent of chaos and violence. But her paintings are abstract, first and always. Their force and furor derive from uncountable inputs.
Credit: Julie Mehretu and Pinault Collection



Two paintings from the artist's series "Mogamma (A Painting in Four Parts)," from 2012. Triggered by the Arab Spring, Mehretu started to push into new territory. She overlaid wire-frame drawings of New York, Cairo and Addis Ababa with freely drawn lines made with calligraphy ink. Credit: Ron Amstutz

Now freed of the early paintings' strict radial structure, the countless watery marks coagulated into swarms, which seemed to be blowing from one corner of the painting to the other. The marks were bodies in Tahrir Square, or seized-up financial markets. They were murders of crows; they were clouds of tear gas.

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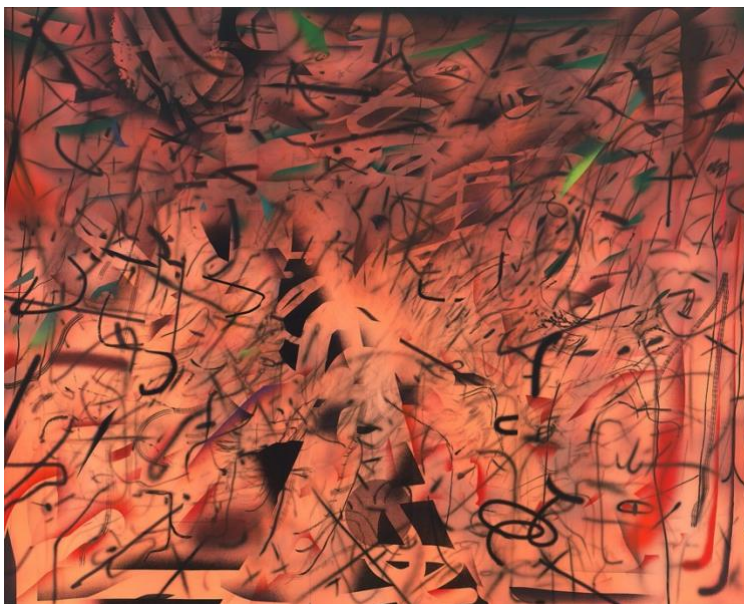
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She was painting current crises as a bodily experience, free from the obligations of narration, and as she did so she grew confident enough to let the architecture disappear. The pictures got darker, more tremulous. The marks got bolder, more corporeal; even her own handprint appeared. In the breakthrough series “Invisible Sun” (2014), longer and more calligraphic black lines mustered into raven-like migrations, flocking through evocative gray erasures. (The Mehretu black line is a thing of wonder, as confident and unmistakable as Schiele’s trembling contours.) It’s as if she discovered, after years translating cities and buildings into abstract form, that whole urban systems were already embedded inside her strokes.



“Invisible Sun (algorithm 7, spell form),” 2015. The artist grew confident enough to let the architecture disappear. Calligraphic black lines muster into raven-like migrations. Credit: Julie Mehretu



“Hineni (E. 3:4),” 2018, is a fiery inferno with shards spiraling into a vortex. The artist began this piece by reworking photos of California wildfires and the burning of Rohingya homes in Myanmar. “She was painting current crises as a bodily experience,” our critic says. Credit: Julie Mehretu and Centre Pompidou

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There's something dramatic in how this show, curated by Christine Y. Kim of Lacma with Rujeko Hockley of the Whitney, builds to the abstractions of the last seven years. Now the backgrounds begin as JPGs from news websites — catastrophic pictures, of riots or wildfires or refugee camps — that are blurred to illegibility in Photoshop. She covers these turbid, hot-colored grounds with those deft black lines and smudges, plus airbrushed spumes of white or red, and also multicolored halftone dots that form a bridge between image and information.

No less invested in movement and mixing than the early work, these churning new paintings present much more volatility. The clean, centripetal choreography that once stood for the global has given way to contaminated streams and surges. And their deep layering of printed, stenciled and handmade marks suggests how data, as much as ink, can be a painterly tool. That's a concern she shares with numerous abstract painters, such as Jacqueline Humphries or Keltie Ferris, and one that builds on the explorations of Jack Whitten and Albert Oehlen, who both translated brush strokes back and forth between the canvas and digital tools (Whitten with a Xerox machine, Oehlen with an early laptop).



Detail of "Ghosthymn (after the Raft)," 2019-2021. You get a vertiginous sense of depth — as if the one-point perspective of Renaissance painting had collapsed from a "window on the world" into a whirlwind of motion.
Credit: Julie Mehretu and Marian Goodman Gallery

The Whitney's wall texts lean hard on Mehretu's hidden source material, disclosing that this one began with a document of ethnic cleansing, that one with a white-supremacist demonstration. They aren't "about" riots or wildfires, though, any more than Monet's haystacks are "about" farm feed, and they shouldn't be treated as a game of Magic Eye. They are abstract paintings, first and always. Their force and furor derive from uncountable inputs, and in these paintings the burning Grenfell Tower and the gestures of Chinese calligraphy can't be easily sundered.

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It may sound strange, but for all her success, and all the attention to her cosmopolitan sources, Mehretu has been consistently underestimated as an abstract painter. Her achievement passes not only through urbanism and protest, but through acrylic, ink, spray guns, tracing paper. Yet in the catalog, the artist justifiably grouses that “my work was largely left out of conversations about abstraction, out of ‘Painting 2.0,’ out of the dialogue with other abstract painters, even outside the story of queer abstraction.”

Even as her art has sold for millions at auction, she has had to contend with the minimizations that attend certain artists. We still afford full creative freedom, and a full reckoning with images and ideas, first to the unmarked artist (white, male, straight, native — none of which get designated as an “identity”). The marked artist (Black, female, queer, immigrant) usually gets a lesser job, tasked by our museums and collectors to deliver cheery uplift of her assigned group, or digestible criticism of previous wrongs.



From left, “Six Bardos: Transmigration,” 2018; “Six Bardos: Luminous Appearance,” 2018; “Of Other Planes of There (S.R.),” 2018-19. Credit: Haimy Assefa

If the Whitney retrospective has one value above all, especially for young artists, it’s Mehretu’s absolute refusal to accept a role so reduced. The new paintings reveal their workings more slowly than before. They’re more haunted, and far more difficult. Their mass overpowers all attempts to fix the artist’s own position within some neocolonial matrix. They demand attention to form, and long minutes of looking. And even then — here is their pleasure, and their political potency — they will not give up all their secrets.

Julie Mehretu

Through Aug. 8 at the Whitney Museum of American Art, 99 Gansevoort Street, Manhattan. 212-570-3600; whitney.org. Advance tickets required.