

ARTFORUM

Julie Mehretu

LOS ANGELES COUNTY MUSEUM OF ART (LACMA)

by Julia Bryan-Wilson (February 2020)



View of "Julie Mehretu," 2019–20, Los Angeles County Museum of Art. From left: *Stadia II*, 2004; *Babel Unleashed*, 2001; *Untitled 2*, 2001; *Retopistics: A Renegade Excavation*, 2001.

FILLING TWO FLOORS of the Broad Contemporary Art Museum at lacma with more than seventy-five paintings, prints, and drawings, Julie Mehretu's midcareer retrospective is a muscular, exuberant knockout. Expertly curated by Christine Y. Kim with Rujeko Hockley, the show brings together works made over the past two decades to argue for the artist's central place within contemporary art, tracing the development of a politics of abstraction—an abstraction that is insistently black, insistently feminist, and, I contend, insistently queer. Mehretu practices a form of history painting, with some of the grandiose scale and a nod toward the storytelling typical of that genre, but reinvented from a minoritarian perspective to account for the dizzying dissolutions and ideological clashes of the present. Her canvases, richly layered and replete with visual incident, evoke a number of urgent themes: the simultaneous decentering and consolidation of power, the frenzied temporalities that cannot be captured by simplistic narratives of progress or regression, the continuing ascendance of ethnonationalism, and the possibility that many small, accumulated gestures might gather momentum and propel change.

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These are complicated phenomena, ones that are not easily represented, which is why Mehretu's persistent deployment of abstraction feels both so motivated and so canny. And her heady interest in tackling complex dynamics does not eclipse her work's impressive presence or its sheer physical force. In reproduction, her large paintings can appear deceptively slick or frictionless, but in person, their subtle variations of texture and tactility afford them a kind of vulnerability. The exhibition makes clear that Mehretu's art is tempered by sensual tenderness and intimacy, and that intuition and care guide her acts of making. When she describes a suite of paintings as just big enough to put your arms around, this attention to the fleshly dimension of her canvases, and to the bodily labors of marking, encapsulates some of the black, feminist, queer potential of her art.



Julie Mehretu, *Being Higher II*, 2013, ink and acrylic on canvas, 84 × 60".

Born in 1970 in Addis Ababa and raised in Michigan after her family left Ethiopia seven years later, Mehretu received her MFA in printmaking and painting at the Rhode Island School of Design in 1997. The exhibition begins with early drawings and ink-and-acrylic canvases produced while she was still a graduate student. In notebook sketches from her "Inkcity" series, 1996, densely clotted black marks swarm on white surfaces, sometimes with escaping vectors careening out of the crowd to make their own way across the page. A few of these works on paper are reminiscent of scores or notations, indicating Mehretu's long-standing dialogue with music. (She has collaborated with jazz composer Jason Moran.) Her ink-on-Mylar *Migration Direction Map* and *Migration Direction Map (large)*, both 1996, bespeak her restless impulse to chart the unchartable, to generate meaning out of the surging chaos of population flow by placing it within a graphic system, however opaque.

Throughout her work, Mehretu queers the mark.

The exhibition tracks how Mehretu's practice has evolved and expanded, emphasizing painting but giving due consideration to her significant forays into intaglio, watercolor, and color aquatint. Two works included in this monographic survey were not made by the artist. The first is a 1643 etching by Rembrandt, *The Three Trees*, paired with Mehretu's similar-size work in the same medium, *Haka*, 2012; though the juxtaposition is intended to suggest Mehretu's consummate skill as a printmaker, it feels superfluous to compare her to an old master. The second, *GDGDA*, 2011, Tacita Dean's installation of silent films showing the painter in her studio, more helpfully illuminates Mehretu's working process.



Julie Mehretu, *Stadia II*, 2004, ink and acrylic on canvas, 9 × 12'.

The catalogue, which features essays by the curators along with a laudably majority-black roster of writers that includes Andrianna Campbell-LaFleur, Adrienne Edwards, Thelma Golden, Fred Moten, and Dagmawi Woubshet, all of whom engage deeply and thoughtfully with various aspects of Mehretu's oeuvre, is excellent. (Sadly, Okwui Enwezor died before he could complete his contribution.) Kim's catalogue essay convincingly outlines four partly overlapping phases of the artist's career, starting with her early drawings. The next phase, which dates roughly to the 2000s, encompasses Mehretu's engagement with architectural plans and cartography and is exemplified by *Stadia II*, 2004, with its corporate logos and flags converging in a riot of vertiginous spectacle and fascistic choreography. The third includes a large body of work in gray that uses distortion and erasure to grapple with war and the catastrophes wrought by global inequality—sometimes resulting in a hands-on confrontation between artist and canvas in which the latter serves as a repository of rage, as in the potent and sorrowful *Being Higher I* and *Being Higher II*. Thick with desperate palm prints, they were created during the Syrian refugee crisis of 2013.

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In the past few years, Mehretu has commenced a striking new body of work in which she uses digital techniques to incorporate photographs of recent events as underpaintings. These images catalogue some of the extraordinary, yet constant, horrors of our moment—migrant detention centers, violent social unrest, disasters of climate and capitalism—which the artist processes in Photoshop, blurring them until they're unrecognizable and then painstakingly working, reworking, layering, using any method that suits her (airbrushing, screen-printing, stippling with a brush) to layer even more. *Hineni (E. 3:4)*, 2018, is a searing-orange maelstrom of scattered black and green and deeper-orange shapes; the news photos on which it is based depict fiery conflagrations of California forests and Rohingya homes in Myanmar. The work is structured by a productive tension: It hurts the eyes, but it's hard to look away. Here, history—that is, the continual rupture of the past into the present—is both intensely manifest and submerged. It haunts the final work and sets its tone.



Julie Mehretu, *Hineni (E. 3:4)*, 2018, ink and acrylic on canvas, 8 × 10'.

With a repertoire of marks that spans the entire history of human inscription from cave paintings to blinking cursors, Mehretu is above all indebted to abstraction as a method of black and feminist improvisation—as “inseparable from an improvised life” (to quote Moten’s essay). And her wily formal vocabularies, flickering in and out of legibility, also signal a queer tactic. Stable meanings disperse, and mark-making, from scratch to scrawl to speckle, resists binaristic gendering. A mascara-like smudge coexists with stubble. Her fields of repetitive gestures can be seen as akin to sewn stitches, surgical sutures, stick-and-poke tattoos, or the diligent analog entries of a fastidious bookkeeper.

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In other words, throughout her work, Mehretu queers the mark. No object or action is queer in and of itself—queerness only comes into being in relation to a set of standards or norms. If a line can be understood as a policed border, a demarcation between this and not-this, her lines fissure that logic, tracing a meandering path that leads elsewhere. Even her initially straight lines frequently end up bending, veering off course, skittering askew. They move with a nervy energy, in concert with her dots and hazy ellipses, becoming animated elements within the often tightly compressed space of her surfaces. Some of her lines top the others, vying for attention within her overlapping webs as they rise up to the level closest to the viewer's own skin; others bottom, sinking back or down toward the painting's support.

In addition, she is a superb queer colorist: The gaudy, alarming orange of *Hineni* (E. 3:4) was also present sixteen years ago in *Stadia II*, a mixture of the safety orange of hazard signs and flamboyant kitsch. Occasionally, her pigments glimmer with a faint sheen in the gallery light. Mehretu's most recent paintings have smoothly viscous surfaces, touchable almost, in which are suspended strata of strokes and smears; this exhibition importantly establishes a genealogy for these marks within the artist's own distinctive world-making.

"Julie Mehretu" is on view at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art through May 17; travels to the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, June 26–September 20; High Museum of Art, Atlanta, October 24, 2020–January 31, 2021; and Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, March 14–July 11, 2021.

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