

## Painter Julie Mehretu's Intellectual Ambitions

*A new retrospective in November at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art traces Julie Mehretu's career creating epic, lyrical works that are literally ripped from the headlines*

by Ted Loos (October 2, 2019)



DIFFERENT STROKES Julie Mehretu in her Chelsea, New York, studio in front of *Of Other Planes of There (S.R.)*, 2018–2019. PHOTO: CLEMENT PASCAL FOR WSJ. MAGAZINE

There are few artists who follow the news as closely as the painter Julie Mehretu does, and fewer still who directly mine it for their work. But not all viewers of her immense abstract pieces realize it.

“Usually it’ll be something like an earworm—it doesn’t leave you alone,” says Mehretu, 48, of the events that infuse her canvases. The California fires of 2017, for instance, formed the foundation of the bright-orange work *Hineni (E. 3:4)* (2018), a canvas that, like many of her works, is densely packed with shapes, forms and marks.

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Mehretu works with her assistants to digitally manipulate news photos of these scenes. Then an assistant airbrushes the heavily distorted image onto a canvas as a beginning gesture—Mehretu calls it “melting” the image onto the canvas.

The same is true of *Haka (and Riot)* (2019), an ink and acrylic work with bursts of color that interrupt a jumble of black shadows and calligraphic lines. The work incorporates news images of U.S. government detention centers for immigrants.

Disruptions are something personal for Mehretu, who was almost 7 when her family left Ethiopia for Michigan, because “things got really bad there,” she says, referring to the civil war and famine that decimated the country in the 1970s.

Her friend Tacita Dean, the artist, traces some of the forces in Mehretu’s work to those early events. “It goes very deep in her and is part of her makeup as a person,” says Dean. “What artists work with is what was put in there in their first 10 or 11 years of life. You can’t separate Julie from what happened to her.”

Mehretu’s unusual trajectory and talent will be on display—along with *Hineni (E. 3:4)* and *Haka (and Riot)* and 73 other works—in her first comprehensive retrospective, which goes on view at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art on November 3. Next year, it travels to the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York, which co-organized the show.

It will give viewers, and Mehretu herself, a chance to look back at her career thus far, including her MacArthur “genius” award and her unusual position in the art world as a successful gay woman who is also Ethiopian-American. The market values Mehretu’s work highly—*Black Ground (Deep Light)* (2006) went for \$5.6 million at Sotheby’s Hong Kong in April, her record high—and she is consistently listed among female artists producing the most valuable works.



PHOTO: CLEMENT PASCAL FOR WSJ. MAGAZINE

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The news is only the first layer in works like *Hineni (E. 3:4)*. After the first stage, Mehretu goes to work painting on top of the manipulated images. “I’ll do a whole bunch of marks, and then I’ll take away all the ones that I feel are too self-conscious or just don’t feel right,” she says, sitting in her sunny Chelsea studio. Lately, she has been using vibrant black strokes, which impart a sense of urgency. “So there’s selection, and dismissal or erasure, and then conjuring again.”

Mehretu has conjured quite a few different styles over the years, and her art has fairly distinct periods. “It’s an unusual quality that she has, that she can come up with a whole new visual language,” says her gallerist, the veteran dealer Marian Goodman, who represents painting greats like Gerhard Richter.

Early spare abstractions gave way to dense later canvases. She began her career using color, then it largely disappears for years, returning with a heated vengeance more recently.

One of Mehretu’s best-known pieces, *Mural (2009)*, is not in the show because it hangs in the lobby of Goldman Sachs’s Manhattan headquarters. It was commissioned by the financial giant. The 80-foot-long, multicolored assemblage of geometric shapes and arcs feels precise and maplike, and Mehretu calls it “the big, symphonic painting where all of this geometrical abstraction that I had been working with came together.”

And then her work changed. “Her gestures have become looser over the last few years,” says Christine Y. Kim, the LACMA curator who curated the show with Rujeko Hockley of the Whitney. “There’s an incredible volatility of stroke.”

That’s evident in another well-known work, 2017’s *HOWL, eon (I, II)*, from what could be called her gray period. The two enormous panels, each measuring 27 feet high and 32 feet wide, hang in the entrance hall to the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. She created them in a former church in Harlem where she has had several studios (she still lives in the neighborhood). The size of the canvases required Mehretu to paint while standing on a construction lift. Working at that scale intimidates some artists, but not Mehretu. “Her ability to take charge and organize things is matchless,” says her friend Paul Pfeiffer, a fellow artist.

The intellectual ambition behind the works was just as big. Mehretu says she was taking on manifest destiny and landscape painting and the Great West, and updating it to reflect on Silicon Valley’s current gold rush. To that, she added a meditation on police brutality and the protests and riots that have ensued in places like Ferguson, Missouri.

Mehretu, Pfeiffer and several artist friends opened Denniston Hill, a residency program in upstate New York that focuses on artists of color and those from the LGBTQ community. She also supports causes such as the Brooklyn Community Bail Fund and Art for Justice.

The daughter of a Michigan State University professor and a Montessori schoolteacher, Mehretu was raised in East Lansing, Michigan. “I didn’t grow up with a family that was constantly going to contemporary art galleries,” she says. Her parents were supportive of her career, though, she adds, “They wanted to make sure that I had a way to live if it all fell apart.”

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It didn't fall apart. After attending Kalamazoo College and later the Rhode Island School of Design for graduate school—with some stints in New York waiting tables—she quickly made her way in the world, forming a network of like-minded artists and dealers, getting a solo show at Minneapolis's Walker Art Center in 2003.

Winning the MacArthur in 2005 anointed her as a major talent. The same year saw the settlement of a complicated lawsuit between her dealer at the time and a collector, involving the right of first refusal to buy her paintings (which the collector eventually won). It proved that she was a hot commodity and got her name in the news, but she considers it a low point in her career. "It wasn't fun, and it wasn't about the work," she says now.

Mehretu had moved back to New York from Houston in 1999 and met her partner, artist Jessica Rankin, in 2000; the two have now split up, but they remain close friends and are co-parenting their two sons, ages 9 and 14. They still share a family home while Mehretu works on a new house a block away.

Instead of being overwhelmed by having children, Mehretu calls her sons mentors, who, with their own imaginative projects, have "opened me up creatively." She adds, "They inspire me to work harder, and their inventiveness has liberated me somehow."

She even let her older son, Cade, put a "secret" in one painting, allowing him to add his own strokes to the composition. "He was so free with how he did it," she says. "I remember feeling like, Whoa. I was being much more uptight."

For Mehretu, it was yet another lesson about the power of her chosen medium. "A painting can transform you," says Mehretu. "You can actually have a physical experience, in your belly."