

# **BROOKLYN RAIL**

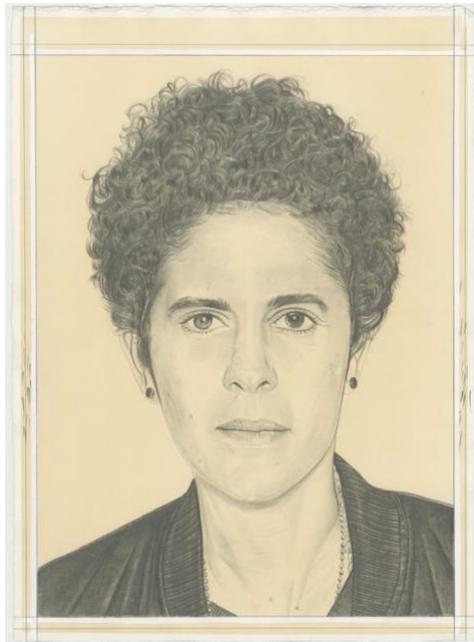
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## *Julie Mehretu with Phong H. Bui*

*“Just as the marks behave, they also make sound. Some stomp, some swim or blow in the wind, many march upright in staccato formation, but always with some kind of rhythm.”*

(June 2021)



Portrait of Julie Mehretu, pencil on paper by Phong H. Bui.

I’ve always felt among immigrant artists over the last few decades, especially those whose countries had been marred by political turmoil—for example Alfredo Jaar (b. 1956 in Santiago, Chile), Shirin Neshat (b. 1957 in Qazvin, Iran), or say Ai Weiwei (b. 1957 in Beijing, China)—all from the same generation, have explored various distillations of the critical, re-deployed language of minimal and conceptual art, tempered by the complex relationship between post-modernism and economic globalization after the Cold War in 1991. Painting had not yet been explored as effectively with this similar global-politically driven content until the arrival of Julie Mehretu (b. 1970 in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia). This is not to say Mehretu is the only exception among the painters of her generation who rediscovered painting as a poetical means to embody social and political content, but rather she is a rare artist who has managed to reinvent the alchemy of drawing as a thinking process into painting, especially in the language of abstraction.

On the occasion of the artist's traveling mid-career survey, curated by Christine Y. Kim and Rujeko Hockley at the Whitney Museum of American Art, I finally had an opportunity to welcome an in-depth conversation with Julie about her work. The following is an edited version of the conversation we had for the *Brooklyn Rail's* 278th New Social Environment on April 16, 2021.

**Phong H. Bui (Rail):** After having seen your survey recently, Julie, I was reminded again how drawing has been an indispensable function of your thought process, mediating between inner activities and external stimuli, from reasoning, imagining, remembering to making judgement, problem solving, and so on. I came to realize, at the end of your show, that it's been 19 years since a group of your drawings were included in Laura Hoptman's show *Drawing Now: Eight Propositions* at MoMA in 2002. I still remember how she stated, in her text, that drawing has been a central focus for you, and your peers, including John Currin, Chris Ofili, Elizabeth Peyton, Laura Owens, Shahzia Sikander, and Ugo Rondinone, just to name a few, and that drawing was seen as a noun, not a verb as in the case of Richard Serra. Looking back, I realize how Laura was partly right in that drawing has been functioning as a "noun" consistently from the very beginning until now. My first question is, has it ever occurred to you that you've been making painting through the pictorial means of drawing all along, for we normally think of painting as associated with applied color pigments and texture applied with and through visible brushstrokes to various degrees of viscosity and solubility and whatnot?

**Julie Mehretu:** For me, the paintings evolved very organically out of the earlier drawings, which became a way of thinking about how to liberate drawing from its own constraints. It was intense, even the intention to start painting with the drawing was an effort to invent a way of working that could allow me to create several layers, by drawing on mylar, which naturally built up a geological history, as well as a sense of time. In other words, if you were to layer four pieces of mylar on top of one another, the transparency would turn opaque, therefore you can't see through to a certain level. The earliest paintings in the exhibition right now are paintings where I was trying to find a way to be able to build that transparency and not lose the layers of drawing. And then in some of those, you'll see that the drawing gets smeared and that technique of matte medium, or golden molding paste, didn't work as well, so I started to explore other materials, including fixative, which didn't work because it would over time darken the color. The goal was simply finding ways that would allow me to make the painting process as close to the way I make the drawings as possible, one step at a time. It was a slow evolution early in the work, which was the subject of my first museum show at the Walker Art Center. It was called *Drawing into Painting* (2003). That was at a point where the drawing and painting were becoming more infused and began relating to this kind of layering of the history of different types of language in abstraction, especially the evolution of geometric abstraction, how it evolved from Cubism, Suprematism, Futurism, Abstract Expressionism to artists like Peter Halley and Matt Mullican, just to name two, in terms of the playfulness with symbols and signs, like flags, maps, and other kinds of social indicators that could be built into systems of knowledge or forms of signification. I had a similar intention to create my own process of painting where drawing is an essential part of the making.

**Rail:** I guess the reason I'm asking that specifically is because there have been cases of painters whose drawings don't translate so fluidly into paintings, say Wols's intricate networks of lines, from dotting to scribbling, from dripping to blotting, and so on, as his own practice of the Surrealist Psychic Automatism, however much the drawings are capable of evoking an incredible sense of fragility, poetry of the ethereal, the paintings are the opposite: they embody raw emotions, a sense of isolation or even anger through various scripted, rubbed, stained, scrawled marks on the painted forms. The same can be said of Henri Michaux, the poet turned painter whose drawings resemble a form of asemic writing, which

simply means they are wordless, and have no specific semantic content, and above all they seem more urgent, more fluid, capable of being free from words he intended them to be. He was, in fact, making this kind of drawing under the influence of mescaline. While the result was obsessively detailed, showing organic, delicate little columns or slender forms filled with downward or upward strokes or dashes that butt against each other in such a compressed, claustrophobic space, he couldn't simply translate this same naturalness and fluidity that appear in his drawings into his paintings. Again, my question is, within one year—between 1996 and '97—you made a body of small and modest sized drawings, which seemed to explore possibilities of minute and repeating lines and mark-making referred to as "Inkcity." What were you thinking at this time? Was there any specific idea, particular motivation that lay behind these drawings, or was it simply a matter of trusting your hand to do the work and let the thinking follow at a later time?

**Mehretu:** Well, before making these small drawings, I was making these gestural marks that were on bigger pieces of paper. I was just trying to do one mark on each sheet, and then put it up on the wall and do another mark. It was like taking apart everything that I had done previously, which were very derivative, gestural, abstract paintings. Like most young artists, I was copying ways of painting, learning technique, while listening to a lot of other writers, artists, and poets, talk about their work. I was absorbing that form of self-mining, which was precisely to enable me to make sense of what I was doing. Although I must say I was so committed, so insistent on my own preferences on abstraction, even back then. Not that I hadn't made representational work in college, but it was this desire to find a way to work differently but to work within the language of abstraction was so strong and clear.

One of the ways I started to try and make sense of that attraction was to take my work apart into these marks, to try to understand them, see them differently. And then I made the "Inkcity" drawings on a winter session program that I had in Mexico in an etching class, which was part of my MFA in painting and printmaking at RISD, even though as painters, we were very frustrated that we had to study printmaking at the time. However, it was absolutely instructional and very formative for me to learn how to work with an etching needling, which led to the use of Rapidograph pens, especially when I was traveling and drawing in sketchbooks. So they were very small drawings. Still, I began to apply the same concept from what I was doing with these drawings in the studio prior: I made one mark or one gesture then started to repeat it in different and particular ways which would eventually lead to a certain density. Even if they overlapped in a particular way, they would create something else totally unexpected. In other words, I was interested in how, say, a circle, an oval form, or some unnamable shapes, would operate differently in each drawing. I realized these marks took on meaning in their context and became something because of the content which they made. I've mentioned this a few times before, but still it is an interesting idea to think about identity, how to make sense of oneself, how all language evolves, how the semiotic evolves something to signify something else. In any case, they began to look similar when many different marks started to interact with each other, they became map-like configurations, so then I started to investigate this new discovery. It was really through the intuitive act of making and getting lost and making work in that place of unknowing that I arrived at something, and then it was the questioning of that, of what had happened. In the end, the whole process was about trying to understand what the hell I was doing.

**Rail:** I love how you refer to them as a "social gathering." What about the *Migration Direction Map* from 1996? I noticed there was a change from paper to mylar and the increase in sizes.

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Julie Mehretu, *Migration Direction Map (large)*, 1996. Ink on mylar, 22 x 15 inches. Private collection. Photo: Cathy Carver © Julie Mehretu.

**Mehretu:** As the marks evolved and behaved differently, I began to think of them as social agents. And then as they appeared more and more like maps and clustering in different social gatherings, different directions, I started to take pieces of mylar and put it over those drawings, tracing over those different clusters. There tends to be certain kinds of formal structures that emerge similarly in the early paintings, whether they're clustered around a vortex, whether it becomes an entropic system, or as I saw somebody put in the chat "the Cloud of Unknowing", it all evolves and gets honed by intuition that responds to different space differently. I really think of intuition as an ontological congregation of of resistance, of the ancestral and the embodied. I remember thinking of those early drawings and the paintings as psychic spaces of knowing, as they embodied experiences of time, past and present, and spaces of ancestry and culture, and so one, all of which seem to co-exist simultaneously. I'd now describe what I was doing at the time as maps of the subconscious.

**Rail:** Which is to say they're maps of the territory of the in-between, neither belonging to your own culture, where you once came from, nor here where you're trying to make sense of it all through your work. This implies of course a resistance to be read, to be understood in a certain way, which you and I had talked about how this resistance seems to be given greater possibilities in abstraction than in modes of representation.

**Mehretu:** Yes, it was at our conversation with Kelly Baum about Jack Whitten's drawing survey, *Transitional Space*.

**Rail:** That's right. In regards to drawing as a noun, not a verb, were you at all thinking of Richard Serra's famous *Verblist* (1967–68) when you were making the series of drawings in 1997 that include *Conflict Location Index*, *Timeline Analysis of Character Behavior*, and *Index of Integrated Character Settlement*?

**Mehretu:** I appreciate you put them in the context with each other, but I wasn't really thinking of Serra's *Verblast*. I was trying to build an evolution of marks, how each would interact with the others organically and then studying them through these kind of Cartesian methods I was creating for myself. They were all based on this one thesis painting I made that was basically nine layers of drawing, *Untitled (thesis)* (1997). And in each layer, there's a mark in the timeline. I essentially selected a group of characters that were in the drawings, some are more common than others. I think of them as my indexes of migration, settlement, and even extinction. They're charts based on concepts in modernist reductionism. I found there was a sense of absurdity as much as criticality to this process. I think David Hammons is a great artist who really understands that history and how to use that reductive language to actually subvert and challenge and recode them as reductive gestures, his own even more reduced gestures. And with such precise effort of removal, he shows how impossible and problematic that cultural erasure is. When I think of Richard Serra's *Verblast*, I see the words like "of gravity"; "of tension"; "of entropy"; "of grouping." His work may appear with planetary weight and gravity as a group, but they flirt with lightness when they're seen as single pieces.

**Rail:** I couldn't agree more!

**Mehretu:** I feel that all of those verbs describe the characters as much as the gestures, the forms, or marks evoke. They're different aspects of behavior in our societal construct.

**Rail:** I noticed in them two things: first, you organize your marks as an archeologist would organize fossils. Second, I see those same marks finding their way into the paintings, whether it's conscious or subconscious, it'd be hard to tell either way. But given the multitude of mark-makings of your so-called "social gatherings," and drawing as a noun not a verb, take an early painting, *Apropos* (1998) for example, in addition to having recognized the architectural elements of an interior-like area and the meandering marks that float on top and across the surface, I can see how the ink can be drawn on top of some sort of glazed surface without being absorbed into the fiber of the canvas. I assume this was a big discovery for you, no?

**Mehretu:** Yes, it took me a long time to develop. I used to pour the material on the smaller paintings. But to work at a larger scale I had to come up with another way to apply the paint. It was with the help of a friend of mine at the time, the artist Paul Whiting, who I met at the Core Residency Program at the Glassell School of Art. Paul taught me how to work with a spray gun and air compressor used for painting cars. I was able to figure out that by thinning down the emulsion I could spray it in layers. And once it dries, I would wet sand the surface smooth at the very end. This coated surface has enabled me to work with the radiograph of various nib sizes, where the ink couldn't be absorbed by the canvas's fiber below. The ink adheres quite wonderfully on this transparent surface, and especially in larger scale. *Apropos* was painted along with another work at the end of the residency. Both reflected the room from different angles of the gallery where they were shown. These first two paintings were made in response to the actual space of the gallery. What was so interesting for me was how to explore endless possibilities in bringing together various concepts of aerial maps, architectural maps, axonometric projection, among other perspectival ideas so they all could participate in one space.

**Rail:** Which materially and technically was made possible by the use of the spray gun and air compressor, which provided the thin layers of transparent matte medium, your first important discovery. The second discovery seems to be the spatial collapse between what is considered interior and exterior space, which is evident in *Back to Gondwanaland* (2000)—a painting that is a new kind of

social and global space. In Pepe Karmel's excellent book *Abstract Art: A Global History* (2020), he reaffirmed something that the late art historian Meyer Schapiro believed deeply, that abstract art is always rooted in the experience of the real world. In the chapter "Landscape," one of the five chapters, Pepe argued in the context of Leonardo's early 16th century drawings of deluges, torrents of clouds, tornados, waves, vortexes of water and air intermixing, which shows the world in various forms of primal chaos, a fearful view of nature's powerful capacity for awesome destruction remains a persistent motif on and off until the 18th century, be it Turner, Caspar David Friedrich, or even Thomas Cole and his other Hudson River School proponents. But by the 20th century, images of vortexes, storms, and so on were seen as allegories of social transformation, as cited in the beginning of the World War II by Walter Benjamin's famous passages from his *Theses on the Philosophy of History* (1942), in referring to the intense sense of dislocation of violence inextricable from the experience of progress. He thought of the event of modern history as a violent storm blown from Paradise. Were you thinking with that similar immersive historical context in your work?

**Mehretu:** Absolutely. *Back to Gondwanaland* was shown in the first Greater New York in 2000 at PS1. It was one of the first paintings I made in my new Bushwick studio. If you look at the first layer of the painting, you would recognize fragments of geometric shapes that look like a stadium or an arena, but they're actually the early plans of LaGuardia Airport, which you can find when you look at the plans in the magazine or at the airport where you're trying to find out where you go in a specific terminal. They are the terminal plans, even the colors and everything else were taken from those airport maps. I've similarly explored other airport plans, Chicago's O'Hare Airport, for example. They can be seen as historical spaces, as well as forever unfolding spaces. If you look at Altdorfer's famous painting *The Battle of Alexander at Issus* (1529) at the Alte Pinakothek in Munich, where there's a zillion different layers of battle taking place on the ground below, seen from perspectives from the foreground to the background. The same is seen in the sky above where aspects of the natural sublime mix with violence. I was thinking how such constructions of the past continue to inform and instruct the world that we were emerging into after the end of the Cold War. *Back to Gondwanaland* was the first painting that took almost one year to make, partly because I had to figure out the whole process from the beginning to the very end, involving all aspects of the drawing, drawing by hand in different layers, the making of the shapes overlapping each other, again all painted by hand in different layers. It was also at the time just before internet use began to explode. We were on the precipice with this new technological invention, which I was very interested in. I remember in the four years leading to working on this painting, we didn't yet have our emails or personal computers. Cell phones didn't exist in the same way that they do. It was a pre-technological moment, in which the emergence of the internet and globalization began to take place. It's because of the Americans' exaggerated sense of optimism of and for technological utopias that we had experiences in the past like the Manhattan Project or the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. I also am very interested in the sublime and the violence—the maelstrom—as the liminal space. What was the cost of technology and war combined? What were really the dynamics around such enterprises? How should and could I investigate these structures and within the social realm that's implied within the architectural drawings, the various functional characters, and the marks in the map and so on? This liminal space, I feel, lies between also a cityscape, a landscape, and the cosmos.

**Rail:** Can you share with us the genesis of *Retopistics: A Renegade Excavation* from 2001? As you told Calvin Tomkins in his profile of you in the *New Yorker*, Julie, it was made just before September 11, and invokes a sense of monumental destruction so eerie in anticipation.



Julie Mehretu, *Retopistics: A Renegade Excavation*, 2001. Ink and acrylic on canvas, 101 1/2 x 208 1/2 inches. Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art. Photo: Edward C. Robinson, III. © Julie Mehretu.

**Mehretu:** Well, again, this painting was made in that moment when we recognized 9/11 as the seismic shutdown of that globalist technological utopianism, that form of optimistic international engagement by the United States, especially in the framework of globalism and neo-capitalism. I was working at Denniston Hill, in upstate New York, and it was the first painting of this scale. There are about three layers of acrylic emulsion sprayed over painted shapes and forms with various colors and drawn lines in each layer, so at the end they all became one, a unified and embedded surface. The attempt to create this interconnected possible space, where all of these references—from airport plans, maps, subway charts, skyscrapers, to interiors and exteriors of buildings from various cities, and I should mention also the intense clash between architecture and drawing, and so on—are being questioned, digested every step of the way.

I'm thinking of each work as a constant battle. Where and how might parts of the painting potentially rebel? Where would they be exposed? Where would the bombs be dropped? How quickly would they destroy these buildings? What's the relationship between these agents and the space? When did the space work for the agents? Or when did it not? And if architecture is a social manifestation of power, how did the agents participate in its making or falling apart? And what agency do they have in that space? That moment in time we all felt as though we didn't have any capability of effecting change of agency under neo-capitalism and neo-liberalism, which created these gigantic power structures that began to swallow and destroy any kind of individual agency. For me, the years following the Reagan administration were full unfolding of the gains of the civil rights movements of the '60s and '70s, and my way to negotiate the insistence on individual agency is through painting.

**Rail:** And we should be reminded that it was the so-called Reaganomics that seduced Gorbachev to put an end of the Soviet Union, and its communist party, which led to the end of the Cold War in 1991. Anyway, since you're so invested in any form and shape of public space that offers multiple functions, dating as far back as one of your references, the Amphitheater of Aphrodisias in Turkey, which like many of its functions as spectacle was violence—I mean spectacular spectacles of violence, like the invention of gladiators, comprised of mostly enslaved people, condemned criminals and so on, who were trained to kill each other, along with wild animals at times. Its purpose was to illustrate the real violence that takes place elsewhere, really, outside of the Roman Empire, but created here as a spectacle of violence, only to amplify the safety of the audience, no more or less than the bombing of Baghdad, the so-called Shock and Awe on March 28, 2003. We all remember how the fixed vantage point looked—a display of spectacle that evokes as much violence as the sublime.

**Mehretu:** And in creation various forms of theatricality, of propagandistic spectacles, which was and is always based on lies, our perception of whatever exists in the in-between is heightened, be it power and powerlessness, those who were opposed to the war and those who supported it, and so on. In some ways, we're imprisoned by such controlled spectacles.

**Rail:** More so than we think certainly! Can you share with us the impulse behind the series of paintings which with the exception of the occasional few lines of color, were made with a black and white palette on a spectrum of gray, like the painting *Invisible Line (Collective)* from 2011, for example?

**Mehretu:** They were made with a simple goal: by removing colors, which are signifiers of other things, I could focus more again on the drawing and the architecture and how they interacted with one another, and also how the varieties of marks floating in different directions do or don't participate with the architecture or act as its contagion, clogging the system. They often take on their own urgency, creating their own forms of storm, participating in a larger idea of the colonial sublime. I think, not only have we created this immense force of technology and media as a spectacle, but how we ourselves have become subservient and lost to the force of that spectacle, and we no longer have control of that history.

**Rail:** What can you share with us about how Delacroix's famous 1830 *Liberty Leading the People* became one of your important references? As we know the figure Liberty is viewed as a symbol of France and the French Republic, and despite the fact that the painting is often confused as depicting the French Revolution, it inspired Frédéric August Bartholdi's *Liberty Enlightening the World*, known as the Statue of Liberty, given as a gift to New York City right after the Revolution.

**Mehretu:** The immense contradiction in that women did not have any political freedom, capability, or power, and yet she's the symbol of liberty. There's the contradiction of the colonial reality of France, as the entire revolution was co-opted, reinventing another way to enact forms of economic oppression that existed before with the monarchy and aristocracy. For me, I look at all these history paintings because they're instructional, not just conceptually, but also how they're formally and structurally made. I'm interested in this perpetual display of repeating patterns that keep occurring in particularly overt gestures, or less overtly embedded in the liminal space of the revolution, which in turn created mythologies. And once these myths become codes that we take as cultural assumptions, it feels almost impossible to decode them. How do we take them apart? What does such an effort entail? For me, the compositional and structural issues in my work are directly tied to the desire to take up arms and lead revolution. But my own effort is to question these gestures, to take these myths apart. Being a child of a failed revolution has a great deal to do with this insane desire.

**Rail:** You don't have a choice on this matter.

**Mehretu:** Maybe not, but I'm constantly aware of the intense co-option in this process. Just when you think it can't get worse, it always gets worse. In this reality that creates those ongoing disastrous situations, to question those in power is essential, especially for those of us who had left our own countries to be here. It's the insistence on using hard power over soft power, which, as we'd experienced with the Trump administration, simply meant to exercise any form of authority to make the oppressed even more oppressed. This is where we are at this moment, dealing with this really horrific crisis in our country.

**Rail:** Be it Liberty leading the people or the Goddess Colombia leading the frontiers to fulfill Manifest Destiny, I've always been perplexed by this notion of the psychological differences between soft and hard, female and male, for example, why do we refer to Mother Nature and the Fatherland. At any rate, what was your decision in deploying zillions of layers of ink drawing to create paintings such as *Project* from 2006?



Julie Mehretu, *Black City*, 2007. Ink and acrylic on canvas, 120 x 192 inches.  
François Pinault Collection. Photo Courtesy of The François Pinault Collection. © Julie Mehretu.

**Mehretu:** First of all, the white shapes and lines emanating from below the drawing is an underpainting. I basically took a similar drawing I had made in the *Black City* (2007) painting, but whereas in the *Black City* painting, the drawing was informed by the underpainting, under the tectonic of the first layer in the painting, and it was all done in grays and blacks. The *Project* painting is essentially a reversal of *Black City*, painted with a very light gray airbrush over the masked areas of the white gesso. I wanted this ephemeral space with very subtle grayscale, that is focused on the relationship built between the drawing and the underpainting, which would perhaps mimic and have interplay with the city being constructed in this entropic space. It began with drawings of this series of bombed sites of standardized housing and buildings that were built at the end of the 1800s and early 1900s, seen in countless plazas in Germany, created as attempts to create cultural assimilation towards a proto-fascism, with a very particularly german form of design embedded in them. It's hard to believe but many of the plazas, or "platzen" are now gone. The idea came from when I was living in Berlin in 2008, a few years after shock and awe bombing campaign where we had witnessed nothing short of complete criminal destruction in Iraq. Again, the few paintings were based on the idea of intertwined space from this haunted past of Berlin, and what was happening in Baghdad. On every corner you see these squares that had to be bombed, all post war construction juxtaposed next to the many remaining buildings that survived the bombs. There's some strange optical occurrence that happens when you physically walk around these rather big paintings, especially *Berliner Platz*, which is 10 feet by 14 feet, partly due to the optical illusions of the white and grey mixing with the black drawn lines, which start to actually expand and contract around you and create this vertiginous viewing experience, which became super interesting to me in the creation of the dizzying space of the haunted past, where there exists a possible desire for some other kind of future.

**Rail:** Which is clearly revealed in the painting *Looking Back to a Bright New Future* (2003).



Julie Mehretu, *Ghosthymn (after the Raft)*, 2019–21. Ink and Acrylic on canvas, 144 x 180 inches.  
Photo: Tom Powel Imaging. Courtesy the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery, New York. © Julie Mehretu.

**Mehretu:** That was painted just two weeks before George Bush’s Shock and Awe bombing campaign. It was meant to play with the language of propaganda and what was happening at the time, along with the failures of utopian desires, and so on. It’s a painting of a map of another painting that I made, it’s again playing with the language of mapping. What I did was to take the large panoramic drawing schema from the painting *Transcending: The New International* (2003) and map all of that in photoshop. I then drew over the maps with all kinds of various forms of utopian architecture, whether it was the plans for the development of the city Brasilia in Brazil, or the Guggenheim, among other buildings of similar aspiration. This painting is reminiscent of propaganda posters and signage, of futurist dystopic mapping of as the title says, “Looking Back to a Bright New Future.”

**Rail:** From map-like structures, seen from above, to seeing the spectacle of the space from the inside of a stadium-like proscenium in the painting *Congress* (2003), which seems to evoke a sonic boom from the center. Is there a sound component in your painting, and I don’t mean just *Congress* as one example?

**Mehretu:** Just as the marks behave, they also make sound. Some stomp, some swim or blow in the wind, many march upright in staccato formation, but always with some kind of rhythm. They operate as notations, but also as beats, long horns, notes. But yes I feel that my paintings play with sound and are created listening to sound. It’s interesting that you recognized that sonic element, as this painting led to a collaboration with the composer Sam Shepherd, he told me he repeatedly looked at congress as a score for his album *Promises* featuring jazz saxophonist Pharoah Sanders and the London Symphony Orchestra, which was made into a film *Promises: Through Congress* by my friend Trevor Tweeten. It’s a continuous piece of music in nine movements, which was composed around the experience of looking at the painting. The film begins with an extreme closeups of microscopic details in the center of the painting, then slowly and methodically pans out to the edges of the whole painting, and then the gallery beyond it. The world premiere was last April, so it’s been out online. I highly recommend it.

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**Rail:** I'll watch it as soon as possible! Meanwhile, while I was looking at the two paintings in the exhibit, *Being Higher I* and *Being Higher II* (both 2013), I couldn't help but think of Paul Klee's monoprint *Angelus Novus* (1920), owned by Walter Benjamin. As Benjamin wrote in his famous Nine Theses, the print "shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something, he is fixedly contemplating."

**Mehretu:** I am actually using that very quote as part of a proposal that I'm thinking of for a new project, specifically when:

"[the angel's] eyes are opened wide, his mouth is open and his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history, his face is turned towards the past, where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe, which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage, and puts it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing in from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such a violence that the angel can no longer close them. The storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress."

**Rail:** Thanks for the reading, it was as powerful for us now as it was for Okwui Enwezor in his 2015 Venice Biennale, *All the World's Futures*.

**Mehretu:** I was thinking of Hammons's body prints and Okwui while I was making those two paintings, the claiming of space, the sublime and magic.

**Rail:** And you're still thinking of Okwui, as you'd memorialized him in a painting *Black Monolith, for Okwui Enwezor (Charlottesville)* (2017–2020) in your last exhibit *About the space of half an hour* at Marian Goodman Gallery in 2020.

**Mehretu:** Yes, for the same reason that Jack Whitten made his amazing memorial paintings, which we love.

**Rail:** Yes indeed. One thing anyone who has followed your work long enough to know is that whatever the subject may be, themes of urbanism, geopolitics, migration, and other forms of conflict are all embedded very concretely in your abstraction. For example, the wildfires in California providing the predominant red color and sense of heat in the painting, *Hineni (E. 3:4)* from 2018.

**Mehretu:** Yes, that was a very hard painting to make. The underpainting was maybe a year or two before, I couldn't figure out how to paint into it, the red was such an intense color, making that work with the blur, and so on. It was a challenge, in that space of mining and unknowing I was able to evolve and bring the painting to life. The title "Hineni" came from the Book of Exodus when God calls Moses at the burning bush and he responds to God "hineni" which means "here I am," and from which point Moses's life and trajectory changes forever. To me, the burning fire is also a metaphor, as we're living in this moment of those constant fires, including deliberate fires that forced hundreds of thousands of Rohingya Muslims to flee from Myanmar's persecution in November 2019. What became really interesting to me in the painting *Ghosthymn* is how red as a color and as an infrastructure for a particular kind of space, context, and dynamic, but then what the marks insist on and what pushes through and can evolve in me there becomes this apart yet storm reality that I'd already reference

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in *Haka (after riot)* from 2019. In other words, after the underpainting gets sprayed and blurred, which in some cases it's digitized and screen printed onto the painting with two different conflicting halves come together in the middle. It's definitely a challenge to integrate these two sides, but the longer I let the gestures work into the painting as a dance, the better the painting becomes at the end. It's a matter of trusting the rhythm between myself and the painting.



Julie Mehretu, *Hineni (E. 3:4)*, 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. Photo: Tom Powel Imaging. © Julie Mehretu.



Julie Mehretu, *Haka (and Riot)*, 2019. Ink and acrylic on canvas, 144 x 180 inches. Los Angeles County Museum of Art; gift of Andy Song. Photo: Tom Powel Imaging. © Julie Mehretu.

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**Rail:** Which isn't easy to say the least. Julie, you spoke in the past of abstraction being the most congenial language to your work, partly because it corresponds to your own in-between condition, where control and spontaneity can coexist, where rational thinking and momentary impulse, contradiction, and confrontation can all be deployed as equal contributions. What about your sense of mediation with the subject of speed, which is the engine of destruction that we just experienced with Trump's use of Twitter, which is not that different from what Hitler or Mussolini did with radio as their preferred method of communication. In Paul Virilio's famous book *Speed in Politics* (published in 1977) building on the works of Morand, Marinetti, and McLuhan, he focused on technological advances that were made possible through the militarization of society. Speed is simply power, or shall we say speed equals power?

**Mehretu:** Speed is what dictates the militarization of our society, leading to the edges of fascism. Speed is the voracious momentum that drives capitalism and neoliberalism. And as we've been talking about the spectacle of power, and the idea of safety, one of the points of departure for the few last paintings in the exhibit is my own thinking about how to mediate our current moment of global catastrophe, global climate crisis, as we're slowly coming out of a pandemic. How do we invent and radically imagine other futures on the edge of precarity? What are we to do with these vertiginous times, especially after having barely survived the Trump administration? What we see in Europe does not look promising with Brexit being the first indicator, then the EU and the United States in their failures of getting the vaccines to Europe. We'll likely see the rise of the National Front party and Marine Le Pen in France. What will the reality be in Germany now that Angela Merkel won't run again? We are fracturing ourselves into these isolated parts of conflict with one another, all the while the rise of ethnic nationalism is everywhere in the world. As Benjamin warned us, the view from the angel of history doesn't look good. I think people are feeling very fatigued right now, with these endless bouts of violence, including the recent senseless killing of Daunte Wright in Minneapolis, the mass shooting at the FedEx warehouse in Indianapolis, the shooting in Boulder, not to mention the rise in Anti-Asian attacks everywhere. How are we to work together in bringing more cohesive integration locally and globally? It seems like our cycle of resistance, our desire to end war, to end incarceration, our desire to heal the earth and be mindful of climate change has just begun. We need to keep focused on working together to solve these urgent issues. As a painter, I am trying to negotiate all that is happening in the world through my work. Speed is driving the momentum of the structure in which we're all caught, as both a social reality, mediated reality, and an aesthetic reality. One of the most essential parts of being an artist is to make works of art that have the power of slowness against the deployment of speed.