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ANSWERED PRAYERS

When her own Manhattan studio proved too small for a blockbuster commission, artist *Julie Mehretu* found room to create in the lofty nave of a deconsecrated Harlem church

TEXT BY **JULIE L. BELCOVE**
PHOTOGRAPHY BY **JASON SCHMIDT**

ARTIST JULIE MEHRETU TEMPORARILY MOVED HER STUDIO INTO THE FORMER CHURCH OF ST. THOMAS THE APOSTLE IN HARLEM. SHE IS REPRESENTED IN THE U.S. BY MARIAN GOODMAN GALLERY (MARIANGOODMAN.COM).

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CLOCKWISE FROM BELOW MEHRETU WITH ONE OF THE MONUMENTAL NEW CANVASES. PLOVER'S WING, 2009, FROM THE ARTIST'S FORTHCOMING SOLO SHOW AT CENTRO BOTIN IN SANTANDER, SPAIN (OCTOBER 11–JANUARY 28; CENTROBOTIN.ORG). INSIDE THE CHURCH.



It's a sunny spring morning, and inside a deconsecrated Harlem church, artist Julie Mehretu's assistants are riding hydraulic platforms up the face of one of two towering paintings—canvases so monumental, at 27 feet tall by 32 feet wide, that Mehretu's Chelsea studio could not house them. As the team painstakingly screen-prints tiny black squares in places, Mehretu stands below, parsing the frenzy of gestural black marks that she herself has stroked on. Some resemble a mythical alphabet, others parts of the human figure.

"There's no plan," she says, running a hand through her short, dark curls. "It's all intuitive." Commissioned by the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (SFMOMA), Mehretu—a favorite of both curators and the market—has created a study in tension, works at once abstract and rooted in history. As SFMOMA director Neal Benezra says of the paintings, which go on long-term view September 2, "They're beautiful to look at and wonderful to think about."

The museum's only parameter was that the works would bookend the staircase that the AD100 firm

Snøhetta recently added to architect Mario Botta's iconic lobby. After she visited the space, Mehretu says, her mind zigzagged from 19th-century American landscapes (Eadweard Muybridge's photographs of Yosemite, the Hudson River School's romantic vistas) to Silicon Valley's ascension as the epicenter of technological innovation. "That's part of what that place is and part of what's making the museum what it is today," she explains.

Though her initial idea was to create a gray underpainting, Mehretu had recently used the world's biggest digital printer, in Germany, to produce opera sets for Peter Sellars and realized it could do the trick. Digitally reducing landscapes by Hudson River painters Albert Bierstadt and Thomas Cole into eight-bit snippets, she created an abstract base layer. She then blurred photographs of riots that erupted in the aftermath of recent police killings and embedded those whirls of color. "Over there, that's a big flame," she says, pointing to a shock of orange. "The greens are sirens."

Her team spent the summer of 2016 spreading 20 coats of clear acrylic on the canvases. Then, Mehretu recalls, "it was really just me, by myself, for months." But the world intruded, politics blocking her creativity.

ARTWORKS FROM TOP LEFT: COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND MARIAN GOODMAN GALLERY, NEW YORK; COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND COLLECTION SFMOMA

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STADIA I, 2004,
FROM THE
PERMANENT
COLLECTION
OF SFMOMA.

“The most interesting work confounds, confuses, and creates headaches,” says *Julie Mehretu*.

“I was in here all of October trying to figure out what to do. Hours just staring at the canvases, then getting bored. After the election I started drawing into them.”

Using her signature sumi ink, Mehretu finally cut loose. “I was trying to find myself in the paintings, but I was also being lost in them,” she says. “Everything feels so lost right now, at least for me, especially since the election. That feeling of being displaced and not having a real language for how to deal with any of this stuff has also been a big part of the work.”

Born in Ethiopia to an Ethiopian father and an American mother, Mehretu was almost seven when her family fled the country’s repressive regime and settled in Michigan. While earning her MFA at the Rhode Island School of Design, she hit on the concept of using tiny pen drawings as a foundation of her work. Later, during her residency at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, those drawings evolved into architectural renderings, a structure she long relied on but moved away from a few years ago, she says, amid the world’s growing chaos.

She considers the SFMOMA commission perhaps her most American work to date. “The paintings are very focused on the history of this country, the

landscape and aspiration of that—and the limit, failures, and horrific side of that aspiration.” Mehretu shrugs off any concerns that, since the canvases read as abstraction, allusions to Manifest Destiny or emancipation may be lost on viewers. “I’m not at all interested in whether you can decipher a political intention,” she says. “The most interesting work confounds, confuses, and creates headaches.”

Mehretu often listens to political podcasts while working, but some days jazz musician Jason Moran provided live accompaniment as he composed a piece inspired by the paintings. She describes the canvases as sonic: “I think you hear them.” Her method, not unlike jazz, embraces trial and error. “I draw then erase, draw and erase—a lot.” The job, she adds, requires pushing past failure. “I want them to be paintings that I keep coming back to. I don’t want to be disappointed in them in five years.”

Working at the church has given her a one-block commute from her Harlem home. But she’s looking forward to returning to her Chelsea studio with its view of the Hudson River, where the sun lingers. “That changes my life in the city,” she says, “to have that little bit of orange light at the end of the day.” ▲