

BAZAAR

Julie Mehretu Makes Her Mark

For one of the most influential painters working today, abstraction is not an escape from the world but a way to reckon with it more fully

By Stephen Mooallem (August 18, 2026)

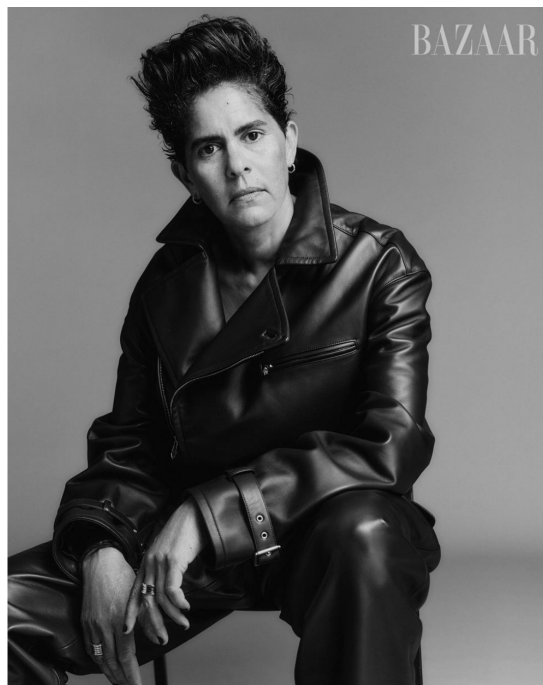


PHOTO: CASPER KOFI
Jumpsuit, Hermès. Tubogas earrings and B.zero1 rings, Bulgari.

There's an art, it has been said, to getting lost. Not lost as in confused or defeated but lost as in absorbed and activated—a freedom that can come from surrendering to the moment.

That's part of what makes Julie Mehretu's paintings so compelling: They ask you to embrace the uncertainty that seems to surround us all these days—to rip off your Oura ring and find a way to live with it long enough to imagine something new.

"That is, to me, really important about the work," Mehretu, 56, tells me. "It becomes this very experiential kind of thing, and you take from it as much as you want. Maybe you catch the paintings start to change and then you notice that and then you get lost looking for all of that. But the paintings choose their audience in that way."

It's early June when Mehretu and I are speaking. The following day, she will travel to Chicago to see the just-completed Obama Presidential Center in Jackson Park and the work she was commissioned to

create for it: *Uprising of the Sun*, an 83-foot-tall “ascension window” embedded in the north facade of the museum building. The piece was inspired by former president Barack Obama’s 2015 remarks at the 50th anniversary of the Civil Rights marches from Selma to Montgomery, which the former president framed as a pivotal chapter in the ongoing struggle over democracy, citizenship, and what America is and represents.

Mehretu wanted the work to connect Obama’s legacy, African American history, Ethiopian stained glass, and the experience of rising through the building and looking out at the city. Her references ranged from an image of the Obamas crossing the Edmund Pettus Bridge with John Lewis to Robert S. Duncanson’s 1861 painting *The Land of the Lotus Eaters*, Jacob Lawrence’s 1975 screenprint *Confrontation on the Bridge*, and Afewerk Tekle’s stained-glass windows in Addis Ababa, where Mehretu was born.



PHOTO: CASPER KOFI

Shirt, Jacquemus. Trousers, Hermès. Octo Finissimo watch and B.zero1 ring, Bulgari.

The way visitors experience *Uprising of the Sun* changes based on the time of day and the external and internal light. The exterior panels are opalescent, so their colors remain visible from outside; at night, when the building is illuminated, Mehretu says, the work becomes “this reverse painting ... this little beacon for the building.” Inside, viewers see translucent color as they rise from floor to floor. “You’re literally going up through the museum on the escalators, two and a half feet from the window, so you climb by the window and you’re looking out at the city,” Mehretu says. “It was really thinking about light as a material.”

For most of its history, painting has depended on a simple arrangement: The work is hung on a wall, a viewer stands in front of it, and meaning is made somewhere in between. Mehretu has spent three decades making that arrangement feel inadequate. Her large, abstract works metabolize maps, architecture, fire, uprising, migration, capitalism, and power without illustrating them in any classically

representational way. They swarm, fracture, blur, collide—and somehow capture the experience of living in a world that often feels like it’s taking shape and coming apart at the same time.

“For me, abstraction became this place that I found to be really potent because I couldn’t commit to one type of image, necessarily,” Mehretu says. “It provided this place of a very speculative kind of uncertainty and subjectivity.”

“If you want this CULTURE to be something that we can really GRAPPLE WITH, then INSTAGRAM is NOT that PLACE. It has to be in these SPACES where this ART LIVES and where it’s ALIVE.”

At the center of Mehretu’s practice is mark-making: the basic human act of making a line, stroke, smear, scratch, or gesture. In her early paintings, marks often functioned like vectors, projected through dense fields. Over time, her marks have become looser, smokier, and more varied, incorporating airbrushing, sprayed pigment, erasure, and different paints and materials. More recently, she has moved beyond the surface of the painting altogether, playing with space, motion, and even perception as part of her work.

At a show this past spring at Marian Goodman Gallery in New York, a series of works Mehretu refers to as “TRANSpaintings” were displayed on sculptural armatures that leaned and pivoted, created in collaboration with the artist Nairy Baghramian. Viewers couldn’t just stand in front of the works; they had to move around them, catching them from different perspectives as shadows and the environment became part of the encounter.

Another group of works, which Mehretu refers to as “Black Paintings,” incorporated interference paint, an automotive paint she stumbled upon in 2023 while working in Berlin that shifts in color, depending on the angle and light. Two people standing in the same room could look at the same painting and never quite see the same thing.



© JULIE MEHRETU/NAIRY BAGHRAMIAN, COURTESY OF THE ARTISTS AND MARIAN GOODMAN GALLERY, PHOTO BY ALEX YUDZON
Julie Mehretu and Nairy Baghramian, *TRANSpaintings (night seam)/Upright Brackets*, 2024

Mehretu's partner, Ariel Osterweis, a dance and performance scholar, introduced her to the choreographer John Jasperse and his use of abstraction in movement. Mehretu asked Jasperse to choreograph a series of performances among the paintings. "After each performance ended, the reverberation of what, at least for me, I experienced continued in the paintings," she says. "You felt the aftereffects."

It's all part of Mehretu's drive to expand what a painting can hold or do. "There's a different kind of freedom I feel that has been, in a sense, earned by working," she says. "Painting is really, in the end, a slow thing. It evolves slowly, but it evolves step by step. And then there are the moments where it feels like there are these huge shifts. But really, they're coming out of these kinds of explorations and experiences."

Mehretu grew up in East Lansing, Michigan, after her family moved from Ethiopia to the United States when she was a child. She attended Kalamazoo College before earning her M.F.A. from the Rhode Island School of Design. After a residency at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, she came to New York and, around the turn of the millennium, became immersed in a transformative moment in Harlem where the Studio Museum and the Project, a small but influential gallery started by poet and critic Christian Hays, helped create an ecosystem for artists whose work didn't fit into neatly defined categories. She was an artist in residence at the Studio Museum in 2001. That same year, she appeared in "Freestyle," the landmark exhibition curated by Thelma Golden that brought together the work of 28 emerging Black artists—Mark Bradford and Rashid Johnson among them—who were pushing beyond outmoded expectations around identity, representation, and form.

"It was a really special moment in Harlem, those days," Mehretu says. "I had just started to be able to have some work sell, and I was just able to make ends meet. ... There were all these amazing artists—and I was a young artist, just emerging into this scene and learning from all of them."

That strong sense of community she felt—and the way it expanded her own conception of what she could make and do—was one of the inspirations for Denniston Hill, the artist-run residency and cultural organization in the southern Catskills that she cofounded in 2004 with a cohort that included Lawrence Chua and Paul Pfeiffer.

At the turn of the millennium, Chua had been looking for an escape from a city that was becoming more expensive and more intensely gentrified when friends acquired a Sullivan County estate with an old barn being remade as a studio. When he was leaving for a stretch in 2001, he mentioned the open room to Mehretu and her then-partner, Jessica Rankin. "She and Jessica got very excited," Chua remembers.

"If we're not COMFORTABLE with the DISCOMFORT of trying to FIND some other SOLUTIONS, we're going to be STUCK in this ECHO CHAMBER of just constant WAR."

Mehretu and Rankin moved upstate for the summer, and Mehretu began working on the larger paintings that would shift the course of her practice. "I think we were all kind of drawn to this place as this refuge and also just this very different kind of atmosphere for creating," he says. "I think having this

huge 18th-century barn but also not having visible neighbors really contributed to the growth and scale of Julie’s work.”

Pfeiffer had also started visiting the estate. Over time, as the property became more central to their lives and work, he, Mehretu, Chua, and others stepped in to formally inaugurate Denniston Hill as a place where artists and writers could work, experiment, and engage with one another.

“It became this laboratory for all of us trying to figure out what is important to us. Who are the artists we want to be in dialogue with? Who are the writers?” Mehretu says. “In the end, I think we’re all working in community, and we’re all working in discourse with each other.”

“In various ways, Julie and Lawrence and I are all part of global diasporas,” Pfeiffer says. (Pfeiffer spent part of his early life in the Philippines; Chua was born in Malaysia.) “There was a shared sensibility that came from either being born outside the U.S. or having moved here growing up between various cities in the U.S. and Asia and Africa—a kind of common understanding about living in a world and traveling in it from an early age and experiencing things from different perspectives.”

Much of Mehretu’s work outside the studio has been an extension of that ethos.

In 2017, she joined artists Rashid Johnson, Adam Pendleton, and Ellen Gallagher in buying Nina Simone’s childhood home in Tryon, North Carolina, which was at risk of being demolished. The house has since been designated a National Treasure by the National Trust for Historic Preservation and restored, with plans to transform it into a site for education and programming.

A similar impulse has informed Mehretu’s work around access. At the Whitney Museum of American Art, where she serves on the board, she made a \$2.25 million gift in 2024 to help make admission free for visitors 25 and under for three years. “If you want this culture to be something that we can really grapple with, then Instagram is not that place,” she says. “It has to be in these spaces where this art lives and where it’s alive.”



© JULIE MEHRETU/NAIRY BAGHRAMIAN, COURTESY OF THE ARTISTS AND MARIAN GOODMAN GALLERY, PHOTO BY ALEX YUDZON
Julie Mehretu, *Our Waste Places*, 2024–2026

To Mehretu's friends, she is a true believer in the most infectious sense. "She just loves art—and it's true love with Julie," says artist Tacita Dean. "She loves talking about art. She loves artists. She loves other people connected to art. She loves what she does, and she doesn't slip into cynicism ever, really," she explains. "I think the most dangerous thing about being a successful painter—and let's not pretend that she isn't that, because she is—is that you can slip into a thing where you are just making currency, in a way. But she is always evolving."

This past May, Mehretu delivered the commencement address at one of her alma maters, RISD. In her speech, she made reference to Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing's book *The Mushroom at the End of the World*, about the matsutake mushroom, a rare fungus that grows in disturbed forests and damaged landscapes. For Mehretu, the matsutake is not a sentimental symbol of resilience. It doesn't erase devastation or create beauty amid ruin. Its power lies in the fact that it grows precisely because the ground has been disrupted.

It's an idea she finds particularly resonant right now, when really looking at the world for what it is, in all its complexity, might be the first step toward imagining a different future. "We're in the midst of this quagmire of enormous violence and extraction, and in the mix of all that, how do we invent something else, and how do we feel like something's possible?" she says. "If we're not comfortable with the discomfort of trying to find some other solutions, we're going to be stuck in this echo chamber of just constant war," she explains.