Artist Resources – Julie Mehretu (American, b. 1971)



Mehretu, 2009
Photograph: Nicole Benjiveno

Mehretu at the Marian Goodman Gallery Mehretu at White Cube

Mehretu spoke with *BOMB Magazine* in 2005 about the role of architecture in her practice and generating creativity when living between cultures, languages, and in a time of upheaval. "I'm not so interested in being critical. What I'm interested in, in painting at least, is our current situation, whether it be political, historical or social, and how it informs me and my context and my past. I am trying to locate myself and my perspective within and between all of it," she reflected. "There are so many other ways to make paintings about these conditions that I'm drawn to. But there's something that's hard to speak about that abstraction gives me access to."

"I refrain from trying to explain what's going on in the paintings because they're not these rational descriptions or efforts to articulate something in that way. I'm not trying to spell out a story," Mehretu told Art21 in a 2009 video interview on identity, influence, and process as her studio prepares for upcoming exhibitions and installations. "[I want to] make you feel the painting. The reason you read the mark is because you also feel the mark."

Speaking with ArtsATL in 2014, Mehretu explained the immersive quality of her work: "because of their scale, they still require you to physically negotiate with them and move through them and travel through them, but it's not as if you can ever get a full perspective…[if you] think of painting as a kind of time-based experience, a time-based media, then you can really participate with it ."

"There's a lot of intuitive, very loose, investigative drawing that takes place…these marks couldn't exist with just rational thinking" Mehretu told the *Louisiana Channel* in 2013 discussing her exhibition, *Liminal Squared*, at Marian Goodman.

In 2017, Mehretu embarked on an unprecedented commission of two monumental site-specific works at SFMoMA. Titled *HOWL, eon (I, II)*, the multi-media paintings explore and express the inextricable relationship between landscape and political expansion in the U.S. "There is no such thing as just a landscape," she told Art21 in a video interview, "the actual landscape is politicized through the events that take place on it." She elaborated on the works in an artist talk at the unveiling.

Artsy spoke with Mehretu in her New York home and studio about her practice, working process, conceptual inspirations, and art activism as she prepared for her 2018 show at the White Cube in London.

Mehretu's first comprehensive retrospective debuted at LACMA in 2019. The self-titled show displayed 75 drawings, prints, and paintings from the past twenty years of her career and will travel to co-organizers, the Whitney and the Walker Art Center, in addition to other venues through 2022. Mehretu discussed the process behind the layered printmaking techniques in her six-panel print, *Epigraph, Damascus*, acquired by LACMA and on view on the show. A panel of artists, architects, and scholars also honored Mehretu and her work in response to the themes of place, space, and abstraction in a gallery talk at LACMA.



Mehretu at work on *HOWL, eon (I, II)*, 2017
Photograph: Tom Powell

Julie Mehretu (American, b. 1970)
Our Waste Places, 2024-2026
Ink and acrylic on canvas

Private Collection; L2026:57.1

Painter and printmaker Julie Mehretu was born in Ethiopia and raised primarily in the United States. She is fascinated by history, geological time, and social identity, creating her own abstract language inspired by archival maps, grids, and architectural plans. **Our Waste Places** was recently featured in an exhibition at Marian Goodman Gallery in New York, which grappled with the global political landscape since Donald Trump's election in 2016. The artist described: "The language that emerged in the political arena was shocking and scary, but it was also haunting. It re-opened histories we've been through in this country that are complicated and uncomfortable. I'm not thinking of history as a positive or negative condition. Every day is a transient, fleeting, and precious experience."

On view July 29 – November 6, 2026





Julie Mehretu (American, b. 1970)
Among the Multitude VI. 2020-2022
Ink and acrylic on canvas

Private Collection; L2022:36.1

"As a painter, I am trying to negotiate all that is happening in the world through my work." Painter and printmaker Julie Mehretu has always been interested in architecture and the urban environment, but her recent works add themes of migration, revolution, social justice, and climate change. Mehretu's newest paintings are based on news photographs of world events that are digitally modified, blurred, and airbrushed onto canvas before the artist adds ink and acrylic linework. **Among the Multitude VI** is part of this series of chaotic, dense compositions with vibrant and contrasting colors. The painting was recently on display in an exhibition of Mehretu's work in Paris, which was accompanied by an audio recording of a poem by Robin Coste Lewis, *Intimacy (for Julie):* "Sometimes, the small girl in me wonders/if all of our universes are a roux roiling inside/a large stone cauldron"

On view August 24 – November 27, 2022

Julie Mehretu (American, b. 1970)
Untitled 1, 1999
Ink and polymer on canvas mounted on board

Private Collection; L2021:190.1

Born in Ethiopia and raised in Michigan, Julie Mehretu now maintains studios in New York and Berlin. She is interested in cartographic signs and symbols, power structures, graphic systems, urban planning, and technical drawings – themes that manifest in paintings and prints that span the history of human civilization. **Untitled 1** was created at a turning point in the artist's career. After completing a residency at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, Mehretu first began working with architectural drawings, maps, and blueprints to explore her interest in urban and social history. When asked about this type of work, she responded: "The characters in my maps plotted, journeyed, evolved, and built civilizations. I charted, analyzed, and mapped their experience and development: their cities, their suburbs, their conflicts, and their wars."

On view April 27 – July 31, 2022





Julie Mehretu (American, b. 1970)
Rise (Charlottesville). 2018-2019
Ink and acrylic on canvas

Private Collection, Los Angeles; L2021:9.2

Julie Mehretu honed her creativity, curiosity, and empathy as a child in Ethopia and Michigan, raised by a father who was a geography professor and mother who followed work in the Peace Corp with teaching at a Montessori school. In her mature practice, Mehretu frequently combines mediums and sources of inspiration, beginning with a photograph or map, which she blurs to the point of erasure through airbrushing and sandpaper. Layers of screen print, ink, acrylics, and drawing are added until she achieves her idiosyncratic method of gestural abstraction that memorializes temporal, social, political, and physical space. Between 2018 and 2020, Mehretu began work on series of monumental paintings in which auras of color pulse beneath streaks, flecks, and symbolic marks inspired by historical events, Bible verses, women artists, and seminal Black authors. As in **Rise (Charlottesville)**, the restrained structure beneath the maelstrom of movement speaks to a collective trauma—past, present, and future—of natural disaster and climate change, race relations and humanitarian crises, mythic narratives and dystopian landscapes.

On view April 14 – July 18, 2021

Extra Resources
Rise (Charlottesville) on view with 2020 works at Marian Goodman

Julie Mehretu (American, b. 1970)
Mumbaphilia (J.E.), 2018
Ink and acrylic on canvas

Private Collection; L2020:88.5

Julie Mehretu fuses visual and conceptual reference points of art history, geographic and social topography, politics, war, and American history in vibrant and chaotic mixed media canvases. Her early work responded to architectural and urban space, dramatically reimagined in dizzyingly complex, two-dimensional forms. Mehretu's recent work – made in collaboration with master printmaker Case Hudson – exchanges the cartographic and architectural foundations of her earliest paintings for images of the natural disasters, social unrest, and political protests that make up the daily news cycle.

Mumbaphilia – which was showcased during the 2019 Venice Biennale – belongs to a concentrated series in which Mehretu brings in conceptual inspiration from other Black artists, writers, singers, and musicians, who she indicates with titular parentheticals following titles that quote an important work. **(J.E.)** refers to composer, musician, and dancer Julius Eastman (1940-90), a pioneer of minimalist, pop, and experimental fusions he called "organic music." He composed *Mumbaphilia* in 1972 for a solo musician and an accompaniment of dancers. Paired with Mehretu's journalistic source imagery and the graphic tumult of her mark making, the opaque titles bring to fruition a creative vision of a world in crisis, on the brink of dissolution yet with the potential for harmony and consolidation.



On view September 16 – December 27, 2020

Extra Resources

Mumbaphilia on view in *SEXTANT,* White Cube Gallery, 2018

Case Hudson and master printer collaborations



Julie Mehretu (American, b. 1970)
Six Bardos: Luminous Appearance, 2019
Two-panel aquatint

Private Collection; L2019:136.1

Born in Ethiopia, Julie Mehretu studied in Dakar, Senegal, and Michigan before receiving her MFA from the Rhode Island School of Design. She now lives and works in New York. In the paintings and drawings for which she is best known, Mehretu explores history, geological time, social identity, and the psychology of space by combining abstract gestures of color and line with careful studies inspired by archival maps, city grids, and architectural plans.

Six Bardos: Luminous Appearance is from a three-year series made in collaboration with master American printmaker Case Hudson after Mehretu visited China. Each print refers to one of the six transitional states of consciousness, or *bardos,* that the soul moves through between death and rebirth as described in the *Bardo Thödol* (known in the West as the Tibetan Book of the Dead). Luminosity is the fifth state, *Chönyid bardo*, which occurs the moment after death and manifests in auditory and visual phenomena accompanied by sensations of profound peace and awareness. Mehretu's complex colorful interpretation can be seen as a blueprint for viewers to explore who or what they might become through their own cycles of physical and spiritual renewal.

On view February 26 – May 31, 2020

More resources for this work

2019 Exhibition of *Six Bardos* Series at the Los Angeles artist workshop Gemini G.E.L.

Case Hudson and master printer collaborations