

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



Mehretu, 2009
Photograph: Nicole Benjiveno

[Mehretu at the Marian Goodman Gallery, New York](#)

[Mehretu at White Cube, London](#)

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, a mid-career survey, [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](#), 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 discuss Mehretu and her work in response to the themes of place, space, and abstraction in a [gallery talk at LACMA](#).



Mehretu at work in San Francisco on [HOWL, eon \(I, II\)](#), 2017
Photograph: Tom Powell

Julie Mehretu (American, b. 1971)

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.

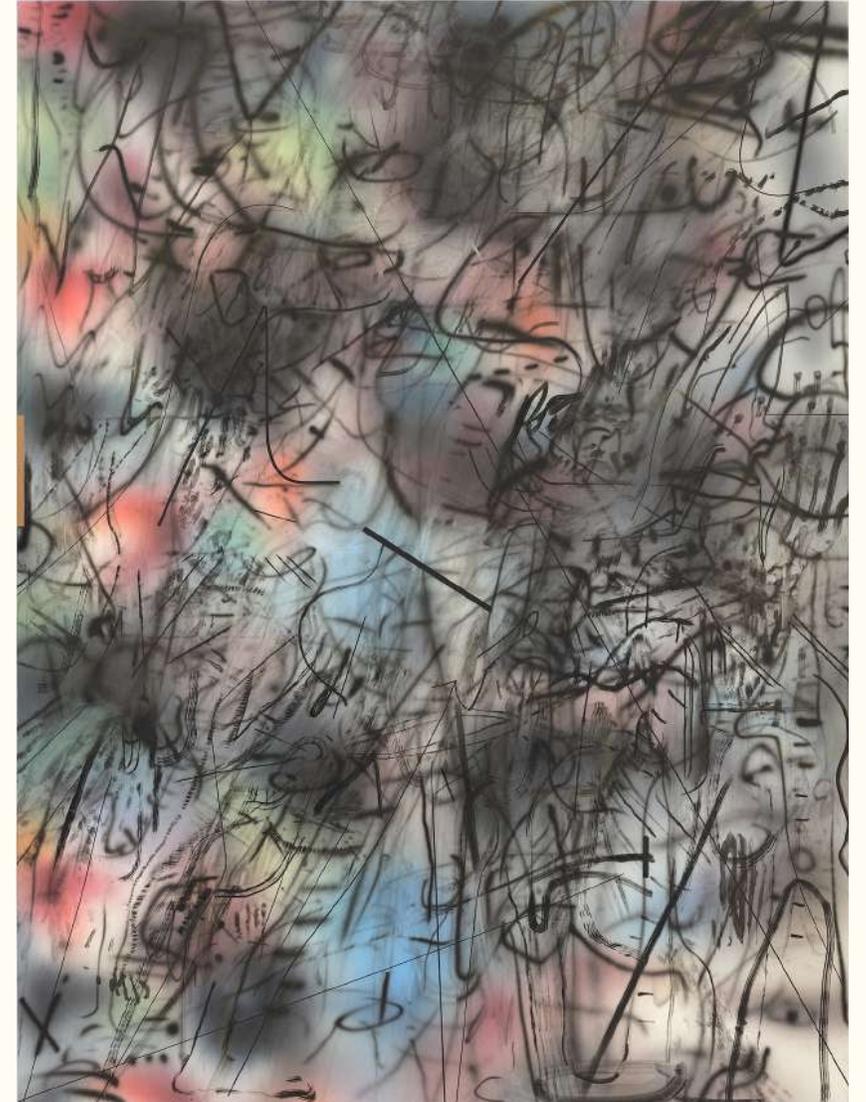
Mumbaphilia – which was showcased during the 2019 Venice Biennale – belongs to a concentrated series in which Mehretu brings in conceptual inspiration from other Black artists, writers, singers, and musicians, who she indicates with titular parentheticals following titles that quote an important work. **(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](#)