

Julie Mehretu



Julie Mehretu was born in 1970 in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. She studied at University Cheikh Anta Diop, Dakar (1990–91), earned a BA from Kalamazoo College, Michigan (1992), and an MFA from Rhode Island School of Design, Providence (1997). She was a resident of the CORE Program, Glassell School of Art, Museum of Fine Arts, Houston (1997–98) and the Artist-in-Residence Program at the Studio Museum in Harlem (2001).

Mehretu's paintings and drawings refer to elements of mapping and architecture, achieving a calligraphic complexity that resembles turbulent atmospheres and dense social networks. Architectural renderings and aerial views of urban grids enter the work as fragments, losing their real-world specificity and challenging narrow geographic and cultural readings. The paintings' wax-like surfaces—built up over weeks and months in thin translucent layers—have a luminous warmth and spatial depth. Their formal qualities of light and space are made all the more complex by Mehretu's delicate depictions of fire, explosions, and perspectives in both two and three dimensions. Her works engage the history of nonobjective art—from Constructivism to Futurism—posing contemporary questions about the relationship between utopian impulses and abstraction.

Among Mehretu's awards are the Berlin Prize (2007), from the American Academy in Berlin; a John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation Award (2005); and the American Art Award from the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York (2005). Her work has appeared in major exhibitions at the Museum of Modern Art, New York (2007); Detroit Institute of Arts (2006); Walker Art Museum, Minneapolis (2003); and Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo (2003); among others. Mehretu has participated in the Sydney Biennale (2006); Carnegie International (2004); Bienal de São Paulo (2004); Whitney Biennial (2004); and the Istanbul Biennial (2003). Julie Mehretu lives and works in New York.

Julie Mehretu additional resources:

Bio:

Julie Mehretu makes large-scale, gestural paintings that are built up through layers of acrylic paint on canvas overlaid with mark-making using pencil, pen, ink and thick streams of paint. Mehretu's work conveys a layering and compression of time, space and place and a collapse of art historical references, from the dynamism of the Italian Futurists and the geometric abstraction of Malevich to the enveloping scale of Abstract Expressionist color field painting.

In her highly worked paintings, Mehretu creates new narratives using abstracted images of cities, histories, wars and geographies with a frenetic mark making that for the artist becomes a way of signifying social agency as well suggesting an unraveling of a personal biography. Mehretu's points of departure are architecture and the city, particularly the accelerated, compressed and densely populated urban environments of the 21st Century. Her canvases overlay different architectural features such as columns, façades and porticoes with different geographical schema such as charts, building plans and city maps and architectural renderings, seen from different perspectives, at once aerial, cross-section and isometric. Her paintings present a tornado of visual incident where gridded cities become fluid and flattened, like many layers of urban graffiti.

Mehretu has described her rich canvases as 'story maps of no location', seeing them as pictures into an imagined, rather than actual reality. Through its cacophony of marks, her work seems to represent the speed of the modern city depicted, conversely, with the time-aged materials of pencil and paint.

Mehretu was born in Addis Ababa in 1970 and lives and works in New York. She has exhibited in several important group exhibitions including 'Poetic Justice', 8th Istanbul Biennial (2003), Whitney Biennial (2004), São Paulo Biennial (2004), Carnegie International, Pittsburgh (2004) the Biennale of Sydney (2006) and the Museum of Modern Art, New York (2006), Prospect 1, New Orleans (2008) 'Automatic Cities' MCA San Diego (2009). Solo exhibitions include Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, REDCAT, Los Angeles and Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo (2003), St Louis Art Museum (2005) and MUSAC, Léon, Spain (2006) 'City Sitings', Detroit Institute of Art and 'Black City' Louisiana Museum, Denmark (2007), North Carolina Museum of Art, Raleigh, (2008), 'Grey Area', Deutsche Guggenheim, Berlin (2009), Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York (2010).

<http://www.berggruen.com/artists/julie-mehretu>

Art 21 videos:

<https://art21.org/artist/julie-mehretu/>

See also:

<https://www.culturedmag.com/julie-mehretu-highpoint-center-for-printmaking/>

HANNAH JOHNSTON ON JULIE MEHRETU

The abstract marks of Julie Mehretu's *Auguries* (2010; see pp. 200–201) fill the paper, swarming from left to right like an ominous storm fast approaching. Monochromatic, aside from the faintly multicolored arcs and lines that loop in and out of the densely textured mass, it bears the marks of its fabrication—scratches and acid burns on metal—and is jagged, fluid, and meticulous.

The artist (born 1970) has long been concerned with maps and mapping—a conscious or unconscious deference, perhaps, to the work of her father, the geographer Assefa Mehretu, who plotted demographic and economic patterns across Africa—and a profound cartographic influence spans her work across different media, including graphite, paint, and ink. Working to create what she has termed “story maps of no location,” the artist layers found architectural diagrams, infrastructure blueprints, and details taken from photographs of public buildings and urban landmarks to produce complex records of the built environment.¹ Mediated, contextualized, and interpreted through Mehretu's framework of personal connections and references, these sources are compounded to produce dense, computer-generated grids of information that draw parallels between individuals and the spaces they inhabit while tracing the artist's own memory and lived experience.

Despite their debt to cartography, Mehretu's works curiously refuse the inherent purpose of a map—a guide that serves to navigate a particular location—as well as the mathematical principles according to which it is typically produced and decoded. Rejecting the notion of a singular viewpoint or consistent scale, *Auguries* expands the aerial position assumed by schematic diagrams with a multiplicity of fractured viewpoints that reveal themselves as the viewer approaches, forcing his or her attention in different directions. The work is also the result of an inherently distillatory process, in which imagery from forty-eight printing plates was superimposed and condensed onto twelve panels. Composed of broken lines and a distorted pictorial space that challenges and destabilizes the clarifying properties of traditional perspective, it is a map to nowhere in particular that cannot really be translated.

While Mehretu is perhaps best known as a painter, printmaking has been an integral part of her practice for twenty years. She was introduced to the medium in a printmaking class at the Rhode Island School of Design, where she earned an M.F.A. in 1997. The time she spends in the printing workshop is an innovative vehicle for exploring a range of mark-making techniques, and she has described her purpose there as being “about trying to see fundamental things . . . and how different techniques give different results and affect the way the image can look. It usually was, and is, in the printmaking that new things are invented, which I then want to bring into the painting and drawing.”²

Inextricably linked, in its treatment of surface and source material, to the artist's wider investigation of painting as a medium, *Auguries* toes the line between paint and ink. Characterized, despite its one-dimensional, printed surface, by the simultaneous rigidity and gestural fluidity of her canvases, the work celebrates an extraordinary precision and sensitivity to line and texture. Viewed as an archive of almost indecipherable remnants of cities and communities, past and present, *Auguries* embodies a state of vagueness or indeterminacy, acting as the representation of something that eludes form. More than this, when considered in the context of its title—an omen or sign of what will happen in the future—it suggests a darkly transformative force that will not be contained, as well as a dark and brooding vision of things to come.

1. Catherine de Zegher, *Julie Mehretu: The Drawings* (New York: Rizzoli, 2007), p. 13.

2. *Excavations: The Prints of Julie Mehretu*, exh. cat. (Minneapolis: Highpoint Center for Printmaking, 2009), p. 10.