

Exhibition: *Julie Mehretu*

On View: November 3, 2019–March 22, 2020 (BCAM, Level 1)
November 3, 2019–May 17, 2020 (BCAM, Level 3)



Image captions on page 7

(Los Angeles—September 16, 2019) The Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) presents *Julie Mehretu*, a mid-career survey co-organized with the Whitney Museum of American Art. The exhibition unites nearly 40 works on paper with 35 paintings dating from 1996 to the present by Julie Mehretu (b. 1970, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia); along with a print by Rembrandt and a film on Mehretu by the artist Tacita Dean. The first-ever comprehensive survey of Mehretu’s career, the exhibition covers over two decades of her artistic evolution, revealing her early focus on drawing, mapping, and iconography and her more recent introduction of bold gestures, sweeps of saturated color, and figurative elements. Mehretu’s examination of the histories of art, architecture, and past civilizations intermingle with her interrogations into themes of migration, revolution, climate change, global capitalism, and technology in the contemporary moment. Her play with scale, as evident in her intimate drawings and large canvases and complex techniques in printmaking, will be explored in depth.

Julie Mehretu is curated by Christine Y. Kim, curator of contemporary art at LACMA, with Rujeko Hockley, assistant curator at the Whitney Museum of American Art. Following its presentation at LACMA, the exhibition will travel to the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY (June 26–September 20, 2020); the High Museum of Art, Atlanta, GA (October 24, 2020–January 31, 2021); and the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, MN (March 13–July 11, 2021).

“LACMA is very pleased to present this mid-career survey of the artist Julie Mehretu,” said Michael Govan, LACMA CEO and Wallis Annenberg Director. “Mehretu’s work acknowledges history as she draws on past media clippings, Paleolithic cave etchings, non-Western artifacts, architectural renderings, and Eastern calligraphy,

which resonate with the images and objects that constitute LACMA's encyclopedic holdings."

"Mehretu's unique form of abstraction is connected to a deep meditation at the crossroads of mapping social and political sites and actions, shifting points of entry, new visual languages, mediated images, and corporeality. Her compositions are at once all-encompassing and destabilizing, offering a radical incoherence, which can trigger multiple experiences and senses," said Christine Y. Kim. "This exhibition lays out this development, articulation, and connectivity of her work over the past 23 years."

Exhibition Organization and Highlights

Julie Mehretu is organized in loose chronological order: 37 of the 39 works on paper will be located on the bridge of BCAM, Level 3; and 35 paintings will be on view in BCAM, Level 1 and BCAM, Level 3. The exhibition will also feature *GDGDA* (2011) on BCAM, Level 3, a film on Mehretu by the artist Tacita Dean.

Mehretu has worked in printmaking since she was a graduate student. The BCAM, Level 3 bridge explores the artist's methodical process of making prints, which includes decisions about line, weight, color, and layering, and further informs her painting practice. While painters often use drawing as a preliminary tool, Mehretu insists that the conventions of her applied drawing remain exposed, a practice that extends from her drawings to printmaking, and from collage to canvas. These works on paper range in medium, and include collage, watercolor, ink, graphite, and colored pencil on paper and Mylar, as well as etching, aquatint, and engraving.

The galleries in BCAM, Level 1 and BCAM Level 3 present the artist's work in painting from 1996 to the present. For Mehretu, painting begins with drawing. She develops the works by incorporating techniques such as printing, masking, digital collage, erasure, and painterly abstraction. Mehretu is inspired by a variety of sources, from cave incisions, cartography, and Chinese calligraphy to architectural renderings, graffiti, and news photography. Drawing on this vast archive, Mehretu reformulates notions of how realities of the past and present shape human consciousness.

In other early works such as *Untitled (two)* (1996), *Map Paint (white)* (1996), and *Untitled (yellow with ellipses)* (1998), Mehretu explores how to represent the cumulative effect of time by layering materials. In these paintings, she has embedded drawings between strata of poured paint, creating fossilized topographies.

In *Stadia II* (2004) and *Black City* (2007), Mehretu interrogates sports and military typologies to disrupt modern conceptions of leisure, labor, and order. The coliseum, amphitheater, and stadium in *Stadia II* represent spaces that are designed to situate and organize large numbers of people but also contain an undercurrent of chaos and violence. While *Stadia II* is filled with curved lines and a panoply of pageantry such as flags, banners, lights, seating, *Black City* is more linear and contains references to the military and war, such as general stars and Nazi bunkers. Both works call attention to the ways in which modern culture and the spectacle of contemporary wars, such as the War on Terror and the Iraq War, are connected to imperialism, patriarchy, and power.

Mehretu's most recent paintings introduce bold gestural marks and employ a dynamic range of techniques such as airbrushing and screenprinting. The works draw on her archive of images of global horrors, crises, protests, and abuses of power, which she digitally blurs, crops, and rescales. Mehretu uses this source material as the foundation for her paintings, overlaying the images with calligraphic sweeps and loose drawings. For example, *Conjured Parts (eye), Ferguson* (2016) links disembodied anatomy with a site of violence and political strife. The painting began with a blurred photograph of an unarmed man with his hands up facing a group of police officers in riot gear, which was taken during the protests that followed the fatal shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri. Mehretu layered color over a blurry, sanded black-and-grey background. Fuchsia and peachy-pink areas rise from below, while toxic green tones float above like distant skies drawing near. Outlines of eyes, buttocks, and other body parts appear within the graffiti-like marks and black blots that hover over smoky areas, suggesting human activity obscured.

In *Hineni (E. 3:4)* (2018), Mehretu addresses the environmental blazes caused by climate change, and the intentional burning of Rohingya homes in Myanmar as part of a campaign of ethnic cleansing. The painting is based on an image from the 2017 northern California wildfires, while the word "hineni" in the title translates to "here I am" in Hebrew, which was the biblical prophet Moses's response to Yahweh (God), who called his name from within the burning bush to tell him he would lead the Israelites to the promised land. By interrogating three types of fires in this painting, one environmental, one intentional, one prophetic, Mehretu explores the contradictory meanings of a single elemental force.

Installed alongside paintings, *Epigraph, Damascus* (2016) is a major achievement in printmaking for Mehretu, representing a new integration of architectural drawings and

painting overlaid with an unprecedented array of marks. Working closely with master printer Niels Borch Jensen, Mehretu used photogravure, a 19th-century technique that fuses photography with etching. She built the foundation of the print on a blurred photograph layered with hand-drawn images of buildings in Damascus, Syria, then composited that together with a layer of gestural marks made on large sheets of Mylar. On a second plate, Mehretu executed her characteristic variety of light-handed brushstrokes, innovatively using techniques known as aquatint and open bite.

A number of the Mehretu's monumental paintings are on view in BCAM, Level 1. The artist periodically creates large horizontal canvases full of layered drawings to work out complexities of scale, size, detail, and expanse. These panoramas often take on monolithic or compressed themes and histories, such as African liberation movements. For example, for *Transcending: The New International* (2003), Mehretu began with a map of Ethiopia's capital city, Addis Ababa, which she fused with maps of every African economic and political capital, creating a vast network of aerial views of the continent. In subsequent layers she included drawings of both colonialist architecture in Africa and iconic modernist buildings erected there during and after liberation. In the center of the painting Mehretu layered drawings of the many African plazas of independence with idiosyncratic markings she has called "characters." Here, these characters stage battles, migrate, form alliances, congregate and ultimately participate in a system of entropy.

Also on view in BCAM, Level 1, the four-part painting, *Mogamma* (2012) took major inspiration from the 2011 Egyptian revolution, part of the "Arab Spring" of uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa. The work was named after a government administrative building on Tahrir Square that was seen as a symbol of modernism and the country's liberation from colonial occupation when it was first built in 1949. It was later associated with government corruption and bureaucracy before eventually serving as a revolutionary site. Mehretu began work on *Mogamma*'s four vertical canvases by exploring the densely layered environment of Tahrir Square, where an array of architectures—including structures built in Islamic, European, and Cold War styles—coexist. She then created a web of drawings that combined the Brutalist architectural style of the Mogamma with details from other public squares associated with the revolutionary fervor of the Arab Spring, such as the amphitheater stairs and spiraling lights of Meskel Square in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, and the mid-century high-rise buildings surrounding Zuccotti Park in New York. Over this she layered drawings of global sites of public protest and change, such as Red Square in Moscow, and Tiananmen Square in Beijing. *Mogamma* was installed in Documenta in 2012 and

again in London in 2013. This exhibition marks the first time the work has been shown in its entirety in the U.S.

About Julie Mehretu

Mehretu was born in 1970 in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, and immigrated with her family to Michigan in 1977. She received a BA in art from Kalamazoo College, Michigan, studied at Université Cheikh Anta Diop, Dakar, Senegal, and received an MFA from the Rhode Island School of Design in 1997. Her select solo exhibitions include traveling show *Julie Mehretu: A Universal History of Everything and Nothing*, Serralves Museum of Contemporary Art, Porto, Portugal (2017); *Julie Mehretu: Grey*, Deutsche Guggenheim Museum, Berlin (2010); traveling show *Julie Mehretu: City Sightings*, The Detroit Institute of Arts, MI (2007), traveling show *Currents 95: Julie Mehretu*, St. Louis Art Museum, MO (2005); traveling show *Julie Mehretu: Drawing into Painting*, Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, MN (2004); and *Julie Mehretu*, Artpace Foundation for Contemporary Art, San Antonio, TX (2001).

Her group exhibitions include *Actions: ‘...the image of the world can be different,’ Kettle’s Yard*, University of Cambridge, Cambridge, UK (2018); *I am you, you are too*, the Walker Art Center, MN (2017); *An Incomplete History of Protest: Selections from the Whitney’s Collection, 1940–2017*, Whitney Museum of American Art, NY (2017); *The Serial Impulse at Gemini G.E.L.*, LACMA, Los Angeles, CA (2016); *Variations: Conversations in and around Abstract Painting*, LACMA (2014); *The Forever Now: Contemporary Painting in an Atemporal World*, Museum of Modern Art, NY (2014); *Yes, No, Maybe*, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. (2013); *The Bearden Project*, The Studio Museum in Harlem, NY (2011); and *Freestyle*, The Studio Museum in Harlem, NY (2001). Additionally, Mehretu has participated in numerous recurring international exhibitions, including the Venice *Biennale* (2019), Sharjah Biennial (2015), Dak’Art (2014), Biennial of Contemporary Art of Cartagena de Indias (2014), Documenta (2012), Prospect New Orleans (2008–9), Sydney Biennial (2006), Whitney Biennial (2004), São Paulo Biennial (2004), Carnegie International (2004–5), Busan Biennial (2002), and Istanbul Biennial (2003).

She has received international recognition for her work, including the U.S. State Department’s National Medal of Arts (2015) and a MacArthur Fellowship “Genius Grant” (2005). Mehretu lives and works in Harlem, New York.

Exhibition Catalogue

Julie Mehretu

Hardcover | \$65

Edited by Christine Y. Kim and Rujeko Hockley with contributions by Andrianna Campbell, Adrienne Edwards, Thelma Golden, Mathew Hale, Rujeko Hockley, Leslie Jones, Christine Y. Kim, Fred Moten, and Dagmawi Woubshet

Related Programming

Julie Mehretu Opening Celebration

Wednesday, October 30, 2019 | 7–10 pm

Smidt Welcome Plaza | Free, tickets required

Please note: A free ticket is required to attend this event. Entry is first come, first served with ticket reservation. Some galleries—including Julie Mehretu—may be subject to capacity control with lines to get in.

In advance of the public opening of *Julie Mehretu* on Sunday, November 3, join us for a special evening celebration of the exhibition, featuring music and dancing, cash bars, and after-hours access to galleries in BCAM and the Resnick Pavilion.

Credit

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About LACMA

Located on the Pacific Rim, LACMA is the largest art museum in the western United States, with a collection of nearly 142,000 objects that illuminate 6,000 years of artistic expression across the globe. Committed to showcasing a multitude of art histories, LACMA exhibits and interprets works of art from new and unexpected points of view that are informed by the region's rich cultural

heritage and diverse population. LACMA's spirit of experimentation is reflected in its work with artists, technologists, and thought leaders as well as in its regional, national, and global partnerships to share collections and programs, create pioneering initiatives, and engage new audiences.

Location: 5905 Wilshire Boulevard, Los Angeles, CA 90036. lacma.org

Image captions: (Left) Julie Mehretu, *Black City*, 2007, Pinault Collection, © Julie Mehretu, photograph courtesy The François Pinault Collection; (Right) Julie Mehretu, *Epigraph, Damascus*, 2016, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, gift of Kelvin and Hana Davis through the 2018 Collectors Committee, © Julie Mehretu, photo © Museum Associates/LACMA

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