

Julie Mehretu at the Whitney Museum, NYC March 25 through August 8, 2021

By Jennifer Vignone

The 40 works on paper and 35 paintings that comprise the exhibit, “Julie Mehretu” at the Whitney Museum of American Art are steeped in historic and timely topics permeated with architectural, political, and psychological themes. They also show the development of Mehretu’s own unique abstract language. Considering the events of the last few years, the timing of her show could not be better.

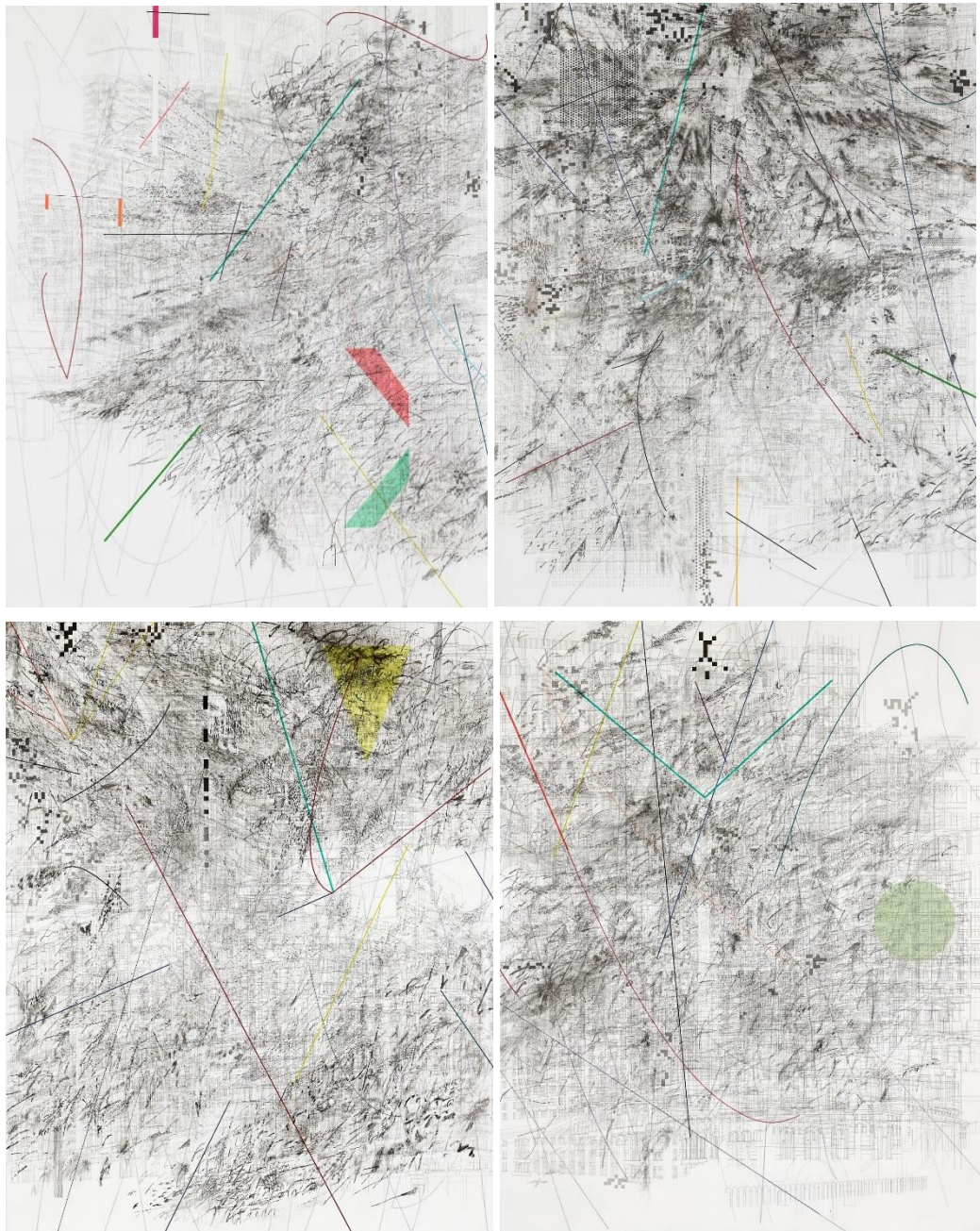
The works take an energetic look at the world, swirling with fragments of nature, ancient architecture, flags, places of worship, government, stadiums, and tokens of modern living. Mehretu’s breaking down and abstracting creates a layered map where overlapping and interplay integrate the components into a new reality and its impact on culture through time.

The show exhibits Mehretu’s evolution from 1996 to today. Artistic reference points maintain a foothold in the representational and abstract realms from traditional to contemporary work, seen in the focusing in and shattering of form.



Julie Mehretu, “Stadia II”, 2004. Ink and acrylic on canvas, 107 3/8 x 140 1/8 in. (272.73 x 355.92 cm). Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburg; gift of Jeanne Greenberg Rohatyn and Nicolas Rohatyn and A.W. Mellon Acquisition Endowment Fund 2004.50. Photograph courtesy the Carnegie Museum. © Julie Mehretu.

In the early monumental work, "Stadia II" (2004), brightly colored flags blow wantonly around the circular space of an amphitheater structure. Round shapes of windows, eyes, and heads view the activity that engulfs them. The colors are primary like the branding of big financial firms and corporations. There are elements of Futurists like Gino Severini, and Abstract Expressionists such as Jackson Pollock, Al Held and William Conlon. It is a considered, vigorous chaos. The largeness of the piece invites the viewer to step into it and be swept up into its force.



Julie Mehretu, "Mogamma (A Painting in Four Parts)" (1 through 4), 2012. Ink and acrylic on canvas, 180 x 144 in. (457.2 x 365.76 cm). Guggenheim Abu Dhabi. Photograph © White Cube, Ben Westoby. © Julie Mehretu.

"Mogamma: A Painting in Four Parts" (2012), are four giant canvases inspired by the government building called 'Al-Mogamma', in Tahrir Square, Cairo. It is a structure representative of Egypt's colonial and revolutionary history. The word 'mogamma' means 'centralized' or 'complex' in Arabic and therefore seen as a multi-purpose gathering space. The works express the energy of people engaged in a variety of activities and the ensuing results of their interaction as the architectural planes explode into pieces. The four-part construction adds to the sense of individuals coming together. Color is used sparingly. Its placement imparts special meaning as the viewer must consider its choreographed location. It becomes a visual metaphor for one standing in front of the piece, in the piece, and outside of the piece.

Ms. Mehretu's work is informed with the challenges of a world grappling with political unrest, crime, protest, and human rights. The work, "Of Other Planes of There (S.R.)", (2018–19) is inspired by photographs of the insurrection in Ferguson, Missouri after the killing of Michael Brown as well as the ravages of the Syrian Civil War.



Julie Mehretu, "Of Other Planes of There (S.R.)", 2018–19. Ink and acrylic on canvas, 108 x 120 in. (274.32 x 304.8 cm). Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; purchase with funds from Anna and Matt Freedman and an anonymous donor. Photograph by Tom Powel Imaging. © Julie Mehretu.

The painting undulates with colors of the human body being pushed and pulled, beaten with bursts of dark patches that look like wounds. The colors are muted by a dark cloud that ominously drifts over them. The cartographic lines and marks are evocative of cave writings and graffiti. Shards of white appear as flying pieces of broken glass in a turbulent struggle.

Ms. Mehretu's work deals with powerful themes and asks charged questions about race, sexuality, government, and humanity. Her work is lush and sensuous. The viewer is drawn in by their sheer beauty. There is a need to get close and step away to interact with the forms. Space is broken apart so that one's sense of the painting's place on the wall, the space of the museum, and the viewer's physical being are impacted. In that regard they are disorienting and require effort to see the story the artist is telling. This is what makes the work seductive. The titles of the work are a critical part of the images, providing the inspiration of the pieces they name. The work is accessible on various planes of understanding and appreciation.

Co-organized by the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and The Whitney Museum of American Art, this mid-career retrospective of Julie Mehretu was opened at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art in November 2019. It is now at the Whitney Museum where it may be seen from March 25th through August 8, 2021. Visit it online at <https://whitney.org/exhibitions/julie-mehretu>.