

WHITNEY

PRESS RELEASE

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Julie Mehretu, *Sun Ship (J.C.)*, 2018. Ink and acrylic on canvas, 108 x 120 in. (274.3 x 304.8 cm), Pinault Collection.

COMPREHENSIVE SURVEY OF ARTIST JULIE MEHRETU'S CAREER OPENS AT WHITNEY MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART THIS MARCH

New York, NY, January 4, 2021—Co-organized by the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and the Whitney Museum of American Art, *Julie Mehretu* is a midcareer survey that will unite more than seventy paintings and works on paper dating from 1996 to the present, reflecting the breadth of Mehretu's multilayered practice. Born in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, in 1970 and based in New York City, Mehretu has created new forms and found unexpected resonances by drawing on the histories of art and human civilization. Her play with scale and technique, as evident in intimate drawings, large canvases, and complex forms of printmaking, will be explored in depth. Filling the Whitney's entire fifth floor gallery, the exhibition will take advantage of the expansive and open space to create dramatic vistas of Mehretu's often panoramic paintings. The first-ever comprehensive survey of Mehretu's career, *Julie Mehretu* is organized by Christine Y. Kim, curator of contemporary art at LACMA, with Rujeko Hockley, assistant curator at the Whitney. The installation at the Whitney is overseen by Hockley and on view from March 25 through August 8, 2021.

"Few artistic encounters are more thrilling than standing close to one of Julie Mehretu's monumental canvases, enveloped in its fullness, color, forms, and symbolic content. Mehretu's conviction and mastery of composition and brushwork—along with the sheer energy and full-on commitment of her execution—endow her works with a life force, presence, and presentness," said Adam D. Weinberg, Alice Pratt Brown Director of the Whitney. "The Whitney Museum is particularly pleased to co-organize this midcareer survey with LACMA, and we are thrilled to continue our longstanding and close relationship with the artist, who has been included in numerous group

exhibitions at the Whitney, beginning with the 2004 Biennial.”

Scott Rothkopf, Senior Deputy Director and Nancy and Steve Crown Family Chief Curator, added: “Since 1948, when the Whitney presented its first retrospective of a living artist, Yasuo Kuniyoshi, we have maintained a strong commitment to providing substantial, in-depth views on the most groundbreaking artists of our time. I am thrilled that Mehretu's show joins a sequence of midcareer surveys in our new building, which has featured Laura Owens, Zoe Leonard, and Rachel Harrison. Taken together, these shows reveal a wide variety of mediums and artistic approaches, but they are united in their emphasis on innovation and their shared concern for giving voice and shape to contemporary experience.”

Mehretu's paintings synthesize vast amounts of visual information and diverse cultural references, from Babylonian stelae to architectural drawings and from European history painting to the sites and symbols of African liberation movements. Spanning medium, scale, and subject, the exhibition centers her examinations of colonialism, capitalism, global uprising, and displacement through the artistic strategies of abstraction, landscape, and, most recently, figuration. Often drawing upon the twenty-first-century city for inspiration, Mehretu condenses seemingly infinite urban narratives, architectural views, and street plans into single unified compositions. While she employs representational elements through imagery or titling, her work remains steadfastly abstract. This approach, where abstraction and representation commingle within a single canvas or series, allows a simple hand-drawn mark to take on figurative or narrative qualities.

“In their resistance to a single interpretation, Mehretu's paintings encourage a nuanced reckoning with the true complexity of our politics, histories, and identities,” said Rujeko Hockley, assistant curator at the Whitney. “She often uses art as a means to frame social uprisings, including the Arab Spring, Black Lives Matter, and Occupy Wall Street, as well as specific events like the police killing of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri; wildfires in California; and the burning of Rohingya villages in Myanmar. Without being overly literal, Mehretu's work gives visual form to both the past and current moment. At its core, her art is invested in our lived experiences, examining how forces such as migration, capitalism, and climate change impact human populations—and possibilities. We look forward to bringing her brilliant explorations to Whitney audiences.”

Along with a film on Mehretu by the artist Tacita Dean, the exhibition brings together nearly forty works on paper and thirty-five paintings dating from 1996 onward to reflect the breadth of Mehretu's multilayered practice. The installation is loosely chronological, beginning with a gallery devoted to works from the mid-1990s, during which Mehretu developed her own idiosyncratic system of notation that includes “characters” such as dots, circles, crosses, arrows, barbells, and even organic forms like eyeballs, insects, wings, and beaks. She began to create drawings and paintings in which these characters gather to resemble migrating masses. In the gallery featuring her work from the early 2000s, Mehretu's work embraces the monumental scale of history painting as she begins to work in painting cycles, creating loose, interrelated narratives across different bodies of work. The increasingly large and complex visual planes in her work of this period suggest a dense multicultural metropolis, “full of migrants in transit, people walking by, through, past, and with each other.”

Between 2010 and 2016, Mehretu's visual language began to shift as the artist moved away from the detailed architecture and spectacular colored lines she employed previously. Instead, the works created during this period offer an intimacy and immediacy, with soft distorted blurs and smudges accompanied by gestural, emphatic marks and sometimes even the artist's own palm prints. The exhibition culminates with a gallery showcasing the artist's most recent works that explore current events and the unfolding histories that have long informed her practice. The base layers of these works are created by digitally blurring, rotating, and cropping photographs—of police in riot gear after the killing of Michael Brown, for instance, or fires raging simultaneously in California and Myanmar—and then marking over them. 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, she reformulates notions of how realities of the past and present shape human consciousness.

About Julie Mehretu

Born in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, in 1970, Julie Mehretu was raised in East Lansing, Michigan. Since 1999, she has lived and worked in New York, establishing herself as one of the most exciting artists working in the United States. 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 *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); *Julie Mehretu: City Sightings*, The Detroit Institute of Arts, MI (2007); *Currents 95: Julie Mehretu*, St. Louis Art Museum, MO (2005); *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 (2008–09), Sydney Biennial (2006), Whitney Biennial (2004), São Paulo Biennial (2004), Carnegie International (2004–05), 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).

Curatorial Credit

Co-organized by the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, *Julie Mehretu* is curated by Christine Y. Kim, curator of contemporary art at LACMA, with Rujeko Hockley, assistant curator at the Whitney. The exhibition debuted at LACMA, where it was on view from November 3, 2019 through September 7, 2020, and is currently on view at the High Museum of Art, Atlanta, through January 31, 2021. Following its presentation at the Whitney from March 25 through August 8, 2021, *Julie Mehretu* will travel to the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, from October 16, 2021 through March 6, 2022.

About the Catalogue

Designed to allow close viewing of Mehretu’s vast canvases, the exhibition catalogue features lush reproductions of her paintings in their entirety, as well as numerous full-page details. Long overdue, this 320-page, hardcover volume pays tribute to an artist whose work and process intermingle in a unique and important examination of painting, history, geopolitics, and displacement. Edited by Christine Y. Kim and Rujeko Hockley with contributions by Andrianna Campbell, Adrienne Edwards, Thelma Golden, Mathew Hale, Leslie Jones, Christine Y. Kim, Fred Moten, and Dagmawi Woubshet, *Julie Mehretu* includes 455 color illustrations and is published by the Whitney Museum of American Art and distributed by DelMonico Books and Prestel, Munich London New York.

Exhibition Support

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In New York, the exhibition is sponsored by



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About the Whitney Museum

The Whitney Museum of American Art, founded in 1930 by the artist and philanthropist Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney (1875–1942), houses the foremost collection of American art from the twentieth- and twenty-first centuries. Mrs. Whitney, an early and ardent supporter of modern American art, nurtured groundbreaking artists at a time when audiences were still largely preoccupied with the Old Masters. From her vision arose the Whitney Museum of American Art, which has been championing the most innovative art of the United States for ninety years. The core of the Whitney’s mission is to collect, preserve, interpret, and exhibit American art of our time and serve a wide variety of audiences in celebration of the complexity and diversity of art and culture in the United States. Through this mission and a steadfast commitment to artists themselves, the Whitney has long been a powerful force in support of modern and contemporary art and continues to help define what is innovative and influential in American art today.

Current and Upcoming Exhibitions at the Whitney Museum of American Art

The Whitney’s Collection: Selections from 1900 to 1965	Through May 2022
Making Knowing: Craft in Art 1950–2019	Through February 2022
Cauleen Smith: Mutualities	Through January 31, 2021
Vida Americana: Mexican Muralists Remake American Art, 1925–1945	Through January 31, 2021
Agnes Pelton: Desert Transcendentalist	Through November 1, 2020
Jill Mulleady: We Wither Time into a Coil of Fright	Through January 2021
Salman Toor: How Will I Know	November 13, 2020–April 4, 2021
Nothing Is So Humble: Prints from Everyday Objects	November 20, 2020–April 2021
Working Together: The Photographers of the Kamoinge Workshop	November 21, 2020–March 28, 2021
Andrea Carlson	On view February 2021
Julie Mehretu	March 25–August 8, 2021
Madeline Hollander: Flatwing	March 25–August 8, 2021
Dawoud Bey: An American Project	Opens April 17, 2021
Public Art Project: David Hammons, Day’s End	Spring 2021
Dave McKenzie: The Story I Tell Myself	Opens May 1, 2021
Jasper Johns: Mind/Mirror	September 29, 2021–February 13, 2022
My Barbarian	Opens October 22, 2021
Martine Gutierrez	On view September 2021
2022 Whitney Biennial	Opens Spring 2022

The Whitney Museum of American Art is located at 99 Gansevoort Street between Washington and West Streets, New York City. Adults: \$25. Full-time students, visitors 65 & over, and visitors with disabilities: \$18. Visitors 18 years & under and Whitney members: FREE. Current public hours are Monday and Thursday from 11:30 am – 6 pm; Friday from 1:30 – 9 pm; and Saturday and Sunday from 12 – 6 pm; with members-only hours on Monday and Thursday from 6 – 7 pm and Saturday and Sunday from 10:30 am – 12 pm. Admission is pay-what-you-wish on Fridays from 6 – 9 pm. The Museum closes at 5 pm on Christmas Eve, Thursday, December 24, 2020, and New Year’s Eve, Thursday, December 31, 2020. The Whitney is closed on Christmas Day, Friday, December 25, 2020. Beginning on January 7, 2021, public hours are 10:30 am – 6 pm Thursday through Monday; with members-only hours on Monday from 5 – 6 pm and Saturdays and Sundays from 10:30 – 11:30 am. Pay-what-you-wish admission will be offered on Thursdays from 1:30 – 6 pm. Reserve timed-entry tickets in advance at whitney.org. For more information please call (212) 570-3600 or visit whitney.org.

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