Julie Mehretu has been engaged in a deep exploration of painting and its possibilities for more than two decades. Born in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, in 1970 and based in New York, she has created new forms and found unexpected resonances by drawing on the histories of art and human civilization. Featuring over sixty paintings and works on paper from 1996 to the present, this midcareer survey reflects the breadth of Mehretu's multilayered practice, which moves nimbly across mediums, scale, and subject matter.

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. While she employs representational elements through imagery or titling, her work remains steadfastly abstract. This approach, where abstraction and representation commingle within a 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.

Mehretu sees her commitment to abstraction—and its relationship to freedom—as underpinned by this statement from French philosopher Édouard Glissant (1928–2011): "We clamor for the right to opacity for everyone." 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 (1996–2014) 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.

Hear from the artist and the curator of the exhibition at whitney.org/Guide.

500 Introduction

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