

In the mid-1990s, while earning her master's degree in fine arts at the Rhode Island School of Design, Mehretu developed her own idiosyncratic system of notation that includes “characters” such as dots, circles, crosses, arrows, barbells, and even organic forms like eyeballs, vulvas, breasts, mouths, insects, wings, and beaks. She began to create drawings and paintings in which these characters gather to resemble migrating masses. Mehretu's personal history and work have been shaped by the varied places she has lived, from Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, to East Lansing, Michigan; from Harlem to Berlin. She often incorporates maps into her work, exploring how political boundaries affect individual and collective identities. Maps—simultaneously real and imagined, rigid and fluid—have roots in physical geography, yet human history and interactions inevitably determine their outlines. According to Mehretu, they have helped her to “make sense of who I am in my time and space and political environment.”

Mehretu came to New York in the spring of 1999. The move brought about a new complexity and ambition in her practice. Her work from this time embraces the monumental scale of history painting, a term first used in the seventeenth century to describe paintings that depict mythological, historical, or religious scenes in a dramatic style (which was adopted by later artists to comment on contemporary politics and structures of power). During the early 2000s, Mehretu also began to work in painting cycles, creating loose, interrelated narratives across different bodies of work. These nods to established typologies of Western painting connect her to that tradition. Yet her expanded vocabulary of mark-making—layered imagery of human-made and natural disasters, mass-transit systems, wisps of smoke, and cartoonish imagery combined with bolder swathes and washes of color—challenges European perspectives, utopian ideals, and even linear concepts of time. The increasingly large and detailed 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. Much of the work in this gallery was created in the wake of the Arab Spring, protests and uprisings against authoritarian governments that unfolded across North Africa and the Middle East at the time. Grappling with both the promise of these movements and the subsequent armed conflicts and humanitarian crises that arose in places like Syria, Mehretu moved away from the detailed architecture and spectacular colored lines she had often employed previously. Instead, the works on view here emerge from a gray liminal space of indeterminacy and transition. They have 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 gray palette, with shades between black and white, alludes to other in-between states, encouraging us to contemplate what can come from such contested sites: potentiality and transformation, uncertainty and ruin.

Current events and unfolding histories have long informed Mehretu's practice. She describes her most recent paintings in particular as being propelled by a "subconscious terror that you feel, vibrating close to the surface." For the artist, this has become a defining condition of life in the United States. Faced with incessant images of violence, injustice, warfare, and environmental crisis, Mehretu chooses examples to archive and alter. She creates the base layers of her newest works by digitally blurring, rotating, and cropping photographs—of police in riot gear after the killing of Michael Brown in 2014, or of fires raging simultaneously in California and Myanmar in 2017—and then marking over them. Working on a large scale, Mehretu aims to forge a physical, time-based experience between the viewer and the canvas. Standing close to the work, viewers might imagine themselves integral elements of the painting, one of its many marks. In these layered, enveloping visual encounters, Mehretu places the individual within both the shifting dynamics of world events and the imaginative, and liberatory, possibilities of abstraction. She suggests, powerfully and intimately, our overlapping perspectives and intrinsic connections.