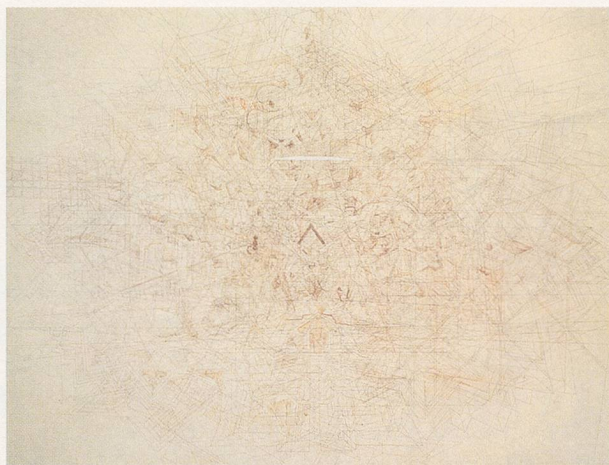


JULIE MEHRETU, CITADEL, 2005,
ink and acrylic on canvas, 6 x 8' / ZITADELLE,
Tusche und Acryl auf Leinwand, 183 x 244 cm.

(PHOTO: ERMA ESTWICK)



On the Painting of JULIE MEHRETU

We had planned to meet in Madrid. When I called, Julie Mehretu was on her way to the Prado. Later, as we sat together, she told me about the pictures she had seen there. She was passionately enthusiastic and yet still able to describe the minutest detail and the subtlest nuance of color with scalpel-sharp precision. Revisiting the works of Velázquez, Goya, and El Greco had touched and inspired her. We spoke mainly about Goya's late works. For all their emotion and drama, they are of an artistry that makes the subject matter almost secondary. Gazing at some detail

MADELEINE SCHUPPLI has been Director of the Kunstmuseum Thun since 2000. Before that she was curator at the Kunsthalle Basel. In 2003 she mounted an exhibition of works by Julie Mehretu (together with Nedko Solakov and Hans Stalder) at the Kunstmuseum Thun.

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MADELEINE SCHUPPLI

or other, individual areas dissolve into abstraction. Julie Mehretu is fascinated by the hand of this Spanish painter and by the way his colors seem to take on a life of their own.

When we look at Julie Mehretu's painting, we are faced with a similarly striking contrast between close-up and distance. In her case, however, the contrast is exactly the opposite of what we encounter in the late works of Goya. Seen as a whole, her paintings appear abstract, but when we focus on the details, narrative elements emerge. The perception of her paintings is

based on simultaneity. Viewed from a distance, everything converges. In close-up, the picture fragments into individual events. As a result, we have to keep moving in front of her paintings, for the process of perception is expanded and enriched enormously by stepping closer and stepping back. The fullness and complexity of these works make them hugely challenging and yet we gladly accept the invitation to immerse ourselves in them completely in order to read them. The effort is worth it: it gives us a kind of high. When I tell Julie Mehretu how I see her works, she explains that she feels much the same about the creative process. The viewing experience is directly related to the format of the painting—which can range from a relatively small canvas to a twenty-foot wide composition. The artist herself tellingly compares this effect to the difference between reading a novel and a short story. Large paintings are expansive, narrative gestures. They are theatrical; they invite the eye to travel. Small paintings are concise to the point of brevity—everything can be taken in at a glance.

This young artist is constantly exploring historical art. For her, it triggers a dialogue whose immediacy is both an inspiration and a challenge. The work of the “fathers” is one of the starting points for her artistic development but instead of conjuring up a collective art historical memory, she relates to them specifically and subjectively. Julie Mehretu is interested in the likes of Albrecht Altdorfer, Leonardo da Vinci, Caravaggio and Rembrandt, whose works are teeming with contradictions and conflicting energies. References to these and other artists crop up frequently in her work, though they are rarely immediately evident. Several works cite the febrile pen-and-ink drawings by Rembrandt that are vibrant with physical and psychological tension, while both the title and composition of her large-scale *THE SEVEN ACTS OF MERCY* (2004) are indebted to Caravaggio’s work of the same name. Even though it does not incorporate any biblical narrative, Julie Mehretu’s painting is imbued with a sense of drama equal to that of the Baroque master’s altarpiece.

The art historical references in Julie Mehretu’s work attract less attention than the way her art relates to contemporary life, with its borrowings from the arts of tattooing, comics and graffiti. In her latest

works, however, these influences have become less important than they once were. As ever, architectural and urban planning designs still form the undercurrent and starting point of her paintings. The artist deploys a wide range of drawings that she finds in a variety of sources. She constantly alternates between different types of architectural drawings—elevations, plans, and perspectival drawings. The result is a complex aesthetic warp and weft. The plans she uses are of buildings and structures that have immense social, political, and cultural significance as architectural systems and infrastructures that shape our everyday lives: places such as airports, urban spaces, sports fields or churches, where large numbers of people congregate. These are structures that channel the flow of human traffic and control the masses by bringing them together or keeping them apart. Plans from widely divergent contexts are deliberately juxtaposed and merged. In *BLACK CITY* (2005), for instance, Julie Mehretu sets up a dialogue between two architectural forms: a stadium and a fortress. On closer consideration, we realize just how apt it is to combine the worlds of sport and the military. Both are deeply nationalistic. In both cases, public participation in events is primarily through the media. Recent news bulletins from Iraq showed correspondents reporting on the latest events as though commentating on the score in a sports competition. At the same time, sports stadiums have become a kind of battleground where tensions run so high that neither the players nor the spectators can be certain of escaping unharmed. Sport and violence have become frequent bedfellows.

Julie Mehretu builds up her paintings in several layers. The architectural plans form the first stage in the process. Color fields, transparent layers, and drawings are then superimposed. Each layer has its own aesthetic language and specific meaning. Without going into detail about the working methods so exhaustively described elsewhere,¹ it is important, if we are to pinpoint the origins and intentions of her work, to take a closer look at another salient aspect: mark making. The marks in question are the little black strokes, arcs, and dots that populate her canvases in various formations. Sometimes these marks float against the background of the painting like a

flock of birds against the sky. At other times they swarm in dark clouds only to align themselves in a clear linear structure elsewhere. In the artist's imagery, these individual marks represent figures and crowds of people on the move. The individual appears as part of a social group, as part of a collective force with the potential to develop aggressive energies. It is these marks, in particular, that lend her paintings the energetic power of events. The picture space is an energy space in which elements influence each other and respond to one another: A force like a strong gust of wind seems to engulf the entire composition. At the same time, the marks form the narrative thread of the work. Although she does not refer to specific events, her drawings result from a close examination of current events. The artist addresses social and political topics that she hears about and sees in the news media every day. The signs stand for group dynamics, people on the move, crowds demonstrating or military formations. Mehretu then pours a transparent layer of acrylic and silicon over the drawing so that it is conserved like a fly in amber—images as time capsules.

Julie Mehretu describes architectural plans as the DNA of the picture.²⁾ This means that each work has its own distinctive code, like the genetic code of a living creature, inscribed into each cell of its being. This code—that is, the fragmented plans—is barely legible on the surface of the painting and, although it can at best be deciphered, indirectly, it is crucial to the work and can be sensed by the viewer. The conceptual link between the DNA and the artwork is especially relevant since it is the genetic code that makes the work unique and at the same time documents its links and relationships. Julie Mehretu's paintings are very much a "family," for they are clearly related to one another both in content and aesthetic. The topics develop from one work to the next so that no one picture says it all—none of them stands alone.

Douglas Fogle has aptly described Julie Mehretu's work as a new form of history painting,³⁾ in which the artist explores historical, political, and human events by sampling contents and images rather than by presenting examples. By drawing as she does from the deep quotidian wellspring of images and informa-

tion, her approach is akin to the widespread practice of tapping into the flood of media images and information to obtain raw material for an artistic exploration of our times. The stream of information is filtered and transposed to a personal archive—either in the form of a pedantically ordered filing system or as a collection of cuttings pinned to the studio wall. Selection and analysis are followed by situating the image in the new and alien context of art. Exploring the present is primarily a question of addressing the way our times are reflected in the media. But instead of breaking the topics down in minute detail, Julie Mehretu pursues a dialectical, even multivalent, approach. What makes her approach stand out is her painstaking analysis. Her linking of signs is not so much a game as a statement. Her merging of sources is deliberate and carefully considered.

By systematically addressing her own origins, Julie Mehretu focuses her attention not only on the outside world, but also on her inner self. This self-ethnographic examination⁴⁾ involves collecting and analyzing material about her family history with its European and African roots. Yet although the artist consciously explores her own identity, the biographical aspect is channeled only indirectly into her work. Even so, the issues that underpin her artistic explorations are those of identity, individual and collective cultural history, and geography. Her own multicultural background has undoubtedly fostered her wider view of the geopolitical situation and interaction. When asked whether she sees herself as a political artist, Julie Mehretu replies that she is a painter.⁵⁾ Her response highlights her identity as an artist and the way she works. She counters by asking whether I would describe Caravaggio as a political artist, since she feels certain affinities with the socially subversive agenda that this maverick Baroque artist pursued in his paintings. Julie Mehretu's work cannot be reduced to politics alone. The notion that art imitates life, or vice versa, is of no consequence in her work. Instead, Mehretu maintains a symbolic distance between her art and her convictions or interests. Her view of things is too richly faceted to pin down in an unequivocal painterly statement. She is committed. She is aware of the complexity of things. Without seeming to lecture or edify, she takes

into account that there are always different viewpoints, depending on the individual's personal situation or the point in time. History is a collection of different ways of seeing.

Julie Mehretu's work builds on both formal and substantial opposites: intuitive drawing versus deliberate structuring, subjective emotion versus analytical concept. And so one might conclude that her work draws a line under the conflict that raged in the 1960s between the subjectivity and autonomous gestural of Abstract Expressionism on the one hand and the depersonalized, analytical strategies of socially critical Conceptual Art on the other. Julie

Mehretu's work unites two approaches that seemed utterly incompatible forty years ago: physical-sensual expressiveness and socially relevant reflection.

(Translation: Flett/Schelbert)

- 1) See also Robin Clark, "Mapmaking is an endless quest for perspective" in: *Currents* 95, Saint Louis Art Museum, 2005.
- 2) Conversation with the author in February 2006.
- 3) Douglas Fogle, "Putting the World into the World" in: *Julie Mehretu: Drawing Into Painting*, exhib. cat. (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center Minneapolis, 2003), p. 5.
- 4) "Looking back. Email Interview between Julie Mehretu and Olukemi Ilesanmi, April 2003," *ibid.*, p. 11.
- 5) Conversation with the author in February 2006.

JULIE MEHRETU, UNTITLED (HELLION), 2006, ink and acrylic on canvas, 3 x 4' /

OHNE TITEL (TEUFELSBREITEN), Tusche und Acryl auf Leinwand, 91 x 122 cm.

(PHOTO: ERMA ESTWICK)

