JULIE WALKER
MEHRETU
Exhibition Guide for Teachers
Oct. 16, 2021–Mar. 6, 2022
Galleries 1, 2, 3, and D/Perlman

Julie Mehretu, Haka (and Riot), 2019 (detail); Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Gift of Andy Song, M.2020.65a–b. Photo: Tom Powell Imaging; ©Julie Mehretu
The artist’s visual language explores how “history is made: one layer on top of another, erasing itself, consuming itself, inventing something else from the same thing.”
—Julie Mehretu

TOUR OPTIONS
Virtual tours of the exhibition will be available for all K–12 groups. A limited number of on-site guided tours will be offered over the course of the exhibition. Please email tours@walkerart.org for more information or to schedule a tour.
The exhibition begins with Julie Mehretu’s early works from the late 1990s and early 2000s, some of which she created while she was still a graduate student at the Rhode Island School of Design. In many of these early works, Mehretu’s interest in geography and cartography is apparent, especially in her paintings and ink drawings. Over time, she began using bolder colors, geometric shapes, and broad curved lines, adding significant depth to her abstract landscapes for which she would gain widespread acclaim.

**ART IN FOCUS: UNTITLED (YELLOW WITH ELLIPSES)**

In the beginning of career, Mehretu developed her own distinctive system of mapping that included marks that she calls “characters.” These are made up of lines, dots, circles, and sometimes even organic forms, such as insects, wings, and beaks. She then placed these characters into compositions that represent migrating masses and movement.

In *Untitled (yellow with ellipses)* (1998), she introduced transparency, graphic elements, and multiple perspectives into her work for the first time. She started thinking of each mark “as having social agency,” or capable of acting by themselves to make plans, carry out actions, or make informed decisions, “[connected by] context.” She began to think about the paintings as being in their own terrain, and would then map out that imagined space: “this is the first painting where I tried to collapse the map and the drawing into one space.”

**DISCUSSION PROMPTS**

- Look closely at the map in *Untitled (yellow with ellipses)* and imagine the place that it depicts. What do you think the landscape might look like? Are there any clues indicating it may be more urban or more rural?
- What does the word “character” mean to you? Do you think marks, lines, and dots can be a character? Why do you think the artist chose to name her markings characters?
- *Untitled (yellow with ellipses)* is the artist’s first painting in which she combined maps and her drawings (or characters) into one painting. What types of marks can you identify in this painting? Can you easily distinguish the map from the characters?

“This is the first painting where I tried to collapse the map and the drawing into one space.” —Julie Mehretu

 وعدع (yellow with ellipses) 1998
ink and acrylic on canvas
42 x 60 in.
Private collection
Installation view, photo: Pierre Ware

As Mehretu’s career began to take off in the early 2000s, so did her interest in incorporating more architectural and structural elements into her art. These complex works are what Mehretu became well known for and she continued working in this style until the mid-2010s.

ART IN FOCUS:
TRANSCEnding: the new international

Still using maps and layering as the basis of her paintings, Mehretu began to focus on the idea of cities and their histories, specifically buildings located in urban African areas that had previously been colonized. As the landscape of these African cities changed, so did the people inhabiting them. The enormous scale of these works supports the movement, range, and groupings of her characters.

The Walker acquired the large-scale work Transcending: The New International (2003), following her first solo exhibition and residency at the museum in 2003. This painting began with a map of Ethiopia’s capital city and Mehretu’s birthplace, Addis Ababa. She then worked with three types of data to build the layers of her piece: maps of economically and/or politically important African cities; blueprints for different kinds of architecture found in Africa, such as indigenous, colonial, and modern structures; and her characters.

DISCUSSION PROMPTS

• Look closely at the map lines in this piece and describe what you notice. What types of marks is she creating? How are these marks and map lines different from those in Untitled (yellow with ellipses)?
• Mehretu’s family fled their home in Addis Ababa due to political turmoil when she was seven years old. Look at the painting closely: do you see anything that might show this experience in the work?

Transcending: The New International 2003
ink and acrylic on canvas
107 x 237 x 2 in.
Walker Art Center. T. B. Walker Acquisition Fund, 2003
Installation view, photo: Pierre Ware

Link to image: https://bit.ly/Transcending_Mehretu
Mehretu’s most recent works feature bold gestural marks and a dynamic range of techniques inspired by current global events and media imagery. Using her distinctive layering techniques, she digitally blurs, crops, enlarges, and shifts media images of political upheaval, wars, injustice, environmental crises, and abuses of power. For these works, she has used photos depicting current events such as Black Lives Matter protests, migrant detention centers, and the Arab Spring uprising. Along with her studio assistants, she then overlays the images with sweeping calligraphic lines, drawings, airbrushing, spray paint, and screen printing.

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,” which she sees as a defining condition of life in the United States.

ART IN FOCUS: HAKA (AND RIOT)

For *Haka (and Riot)* (2019), Mehretu began with photographs taken inside immigration detention centers in Texas and California, where undocumented migrant children have been detained. She blurred and abstracted these images using Photoshop and enlarged them on a massive scale. She then built layer upon layer of digital and physical drawing, painting, airbrushing, and screen printing. The end result is a disorienting and distorted space filled with vaguely identifiable shapes and objects. As the artist describes, “Part of my interest in the blurred image is how it offers the specter of the image, the ghost, and a haunting dynamic that was captured in the image.”

Mehretu has compared her process to trying to take a photo on an iPhone. At first, it’s blurry and out of focus, but “then there’s a moment where it comes into focus and you know exactly when that is, and you can take it.”

“Part of my interest in the blurred image is how it offers the specter of the image, the ghost, and a haunting dynamic that was captured in the image.”
—Julie Mehretu

Haka (and Riot) 2019
ink and acrylic on canvas
Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Gift of Andy Song, M.2020.65a–b
Installation view, photo: Pierre Ware
Link to image: https://bit.ly/Haka_Mehretu
In the last gallery, Mehretu’s four paintings that make up the massive Mogamma (A Painting in Four Parts) are reunited for the first time since they were shown together in 2013.

**ART IN FOCUS: MOGAMMA (A PAINTING IN FOUR PARTS)**

Mehretu made this four-part series of paintings in direct response to geopolitical tensions that emerged in the wake of the Arab Spring. These pro-democracy uprisings began in Tunisia in late 2010 and soon spread to Egypt, Libya, and Syria, among other nations in the region.

The word “Mogamma” in the title is a reference to a government building in Cairo’s Tahrir Square, a site of massive protests calling for the ouster of Egypt’s President Mubarak. When it was built in 1949, the Mogamma had symbolized the nation’s aspirations for modernism and liberation from colonial occupation, but it later came to signify corruption and bureaucracy. Centrally located, Tahrir Square is framed by a variety of structures built over time that reflect the layered histories of Egypt, including neo-Mamluk, Islamic, European colonial, and Cold War architectural styles.

In her Mogamma paintings, Mehretu connects this site to global experiences of uprising and occupation of public space. Across the four works, she combines many charged sites of protest, layering the Mogamma building with architectural references from spaces around the world, including Ethiopia, the United States, Russia, China, Cuba, and Saudi Arabia. Elements include the amphitheater in Addis Ababa’s Meskel Square, the mid-century high-rise buildings surrounding Zuccotti Park in Lower Manhattan, and the iconic buildings of Red Square in Moscow, Tiananmen Square in Beijing, the Plaza de la Revolución in Havana, and Firdos Square in Baghdad.

These drawings overlap and merge together in ways that make it difficult to distinguish one drawing from another. On top of the drawings, Mehretu has added her signature characters—curving and straight lines, colorful shapes, organic geometric forms—evoking the nature of the events that took place on these sites of resistance.

**DISCUSSION PROMPTS**

- Select one word to describe these paintings. Why did you choose that word?
- Take a look at these four paintings. While each one can be viewed on its own, they work together to form a single artwork. Why do you think Mehretu wanted to create four separate paintings for this work instead of one huge painting? What is the effect of seeing all four of these paintings together?
- What do you think these paintings tell us about the nature of the major protests and uprisings that have taken place around the world?
FOR ALL GRADES

You will need: iPads, pencils, black permanent markers, letter-size tracing paper, letter-size acetate sheets, masking tape or washi tape in various colors and/or sizes, and clear tape. Optional: double-sided tape and white cardstock.

STEP 1: Using an iPad screen, have students open a map of a location important to them. Students may either: 1) trace the roads, highways, and boundaries of their selected place with a pencil and tracing paper fully covering the surface of the iPad (a screenshot of the map is often easier than tracing in the Maps app), or 2) have students freehand draw their location by looking at the map on the screen. Students may also want to select more than one location to fill the page with more lines. Once they have finished tracing, put the iPads away and make sure everyone’s pencil lines are dark enough. Younger students may need assistance during this step.

STEP 2: Using a sheet of acetate and a permanent marker, have students create an abstract drawing of themselves moving through their chosen location or of the types of things they might experience and see there. Use clear or double-sided tape to attach the acetate sheet on top of the tracing paper map. It may be easier for some students to have the acetate fastened to the paper before drawing.

STEP 3: With another piece of tracing paper, have students use their pencil try to draw a building (or multiple buildings) from memory. This can be somewhere important to them, like home or school, or a place they have visited near their important location. Students can embellish their buildings and drawings with masking or washi tape as they go. Use the clear or double-sided tape to attach this layer on top of the previously attached layers.

STEP 4: Take a second sheet of acetate and a marker, and have students add the finishing touches to their composition. Do they want to add more abstract lines or tape? Or perhaps another place they love? Once they have finished, use the clear tape to seal the four layers together (optional: place a piece of white cardstock behind the bottom layer to make the artwork sturdier). Ask students to share their piece with another classmate and tell each other why the place they have chosen is so important to them.

ALTERNATE PROJECT

FOR GRADES 6–12

Using the instructions above as a jumping off point, have students complete a research project on an important world event of their choice and create a visual artwork representing it. Some examples could be the Olympics, the migrant crisis, recent wildfires, or other climate change disasters. Follow the same steps as above, but replace personal locations, buildings, and movements with pivotal moments and important locations from their chosen event.
RESOURCES FOR FURTHER EXPLORATION

Checkerboard Film Foundation, Julie Mehretu: Mid-Career Survey (artist interview), March 26, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Up-pmK6x_ul.
This eight-minute short offers a glimpse into Mehretu’s art, process, and inspirations, including behind-the-scenes footage of the painting Haka (and Riot) (2019).


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