

# GLOBAL VILLAGES

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## JULIE MEHRETU: CITY SITINGS

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IF 100 YEARS FROM NOW, A HISTORIAN needs an illustration of our era, one picture worth a thousand words to describe both the collaborative sophistication of the Internet and the random brutality of terrorism, they couldn't do much better than to select one of Julie Mehretu's abstract paintings. If you don't know her work yet, you should. Mehretu has shown work everywhere from South Africa to Germany and from New York to Istanbul and Brazil. In 2005 she won a MacArthur Fellowship—the "genius grant." The honor is deserved: Her jazzlike, large-scale paintings (8-by-12- and 12-by-18-footers) are philosophical, passionate, and dynamic. These paintings capture our particular zeitgeist through kinetic depictions of geopolitical forces and disruptions.

*City Sitings*, curated by Rebecca Hart (a Williams graduate) of the Detroit Institute of Arts, where it was first shown, collects recent works that speak of contemporary urban experience. Planners and poets dream up cities; later generations raze and rebuild (witness Albany or Troy). Mehretu's multilayered canvases mimic this layered history of cities. Calamities and natural disasters seem to erupt from calligraphic markings and yel-

low flames in *Dispersion* (2002), where symbols reference tattoo art and the language of maps. There are at least three layered elements: Girding the painting is an understorey of fine architectural lines, which you can make out most clearly in the empty space at the center, which functions much like the eye of a storm. In a layer of inked markings, one might see migration paths, fields, or smoke. Then on other planes, painted shapes attempt to impose order.

These are the kinds of paintings that reward multiple viewings, and viewings from different perspectives: There is always something new to notice. Like diagrams on a metahistorical PowerPoint (with way better graphics), the sweeping gestures of her compositions delineate opposition, occupation and merging.

Mehretu's international background informs her work. She was born in Addis Ababa to an Ethiopian father and American mother, both part of a generation that believed in hope for a new, decolonized Africa. (*Looking Back to a Bright New Future* (2003) is a direct comment on African politics.) She has lived in Dakar, Senegal; Berlin, and Kalamazoo, Mich. The questions that arise from such a history manifest in her paintings: What conflicts come from inhabiting a global village, and who is left out? What impact can an individual have on the epic scale of history? Mehretu's work is profoundly political, yet it resists easy conclusions.

As an artist, Mehretu is a meticulous researcher, and her paintings have refer-

enced baroque engravings, Japanese manga, graffiti, and Japanese and Chinese calligraphy. *Black City* (2007), which comments on American cities post-9/11, uses three-dimensional plans of military fortifications such as Hitler's Atlantic bunkers. Seen up close, a painting like *Black City* evokes a dizzying chaos of black lines dense as smoke. From a distance, the tight layering and symbols—stars in a military flight pattern, a satellite, colored dots and bars—suggest the claustrophobia of heavy surveillance and the erasures of war.

*Palimpsest (Old Gods)*, emphasizing more airy, fine lines, is just as remarkable for its overlapping drawings of buildings and bridges. It's as if all the cities of history merged into one beautiful whispery metropolis. In other paintings (*Dispersion*, *Black City*) architectural plans are more deconstructed or painted over. Both *Palimpsest* and *Black City* have areas that have been erased or sanded away; *Grey Space* (2006) has a more painterly surface.

In a recent lecture at Williams, Mehretu explained that as her artistic practice developed, drawing came first, as an organic process; then she started mapping her drawings by placing Mylar over them, creating more organized structures. This process gives her works both an intricate depth and an expansive monumentality that are rare to find together. The swirly, inked element of her work alone reminds me of Van Gogh's drawing style—it's that energetic.

The three knockout paintings in her *Stadia* series imagine city stadiums like the Coliseum in Rome and today's sports arenas, with all their baggage—think of the New Orleans Superdome after Katrina. Looking at *Stadia I, II, and III* (all 2004) hung on a wall that fits them perfectly, one can almost hear the crowds gone wild, a rainbow of banners and logos portraying groupthink through the ages. A canopy of symbols—the Jewish star, the Italian and Canadian flags, the NBC peacock logo, the Olympic symbol, and the hammer and sickle, among others—create a swirling cacophony of corporations and nations. Here, Mehretu's abstraction sees the forest more than the trees (although both elements exist in tension).

Where Mehretu shows us global gyrations, South African artist William Kentridge's prints, on the same floor, display a more visceral political sensibility (part of *William Kentridge Prints* is currently on view; the full show continues through June 21). With all the conflicts in our world, it will continue to take the full range of artistic engagement—from the rawness of a Kentridge to the geopolitical imagination of a Mehretu—to provide us with a legacy we might be proud of. ■



All the stadiums in the world: *Stadia II* (2004).

Erma Estwick/Carnegie Museum of Art