Julie Mehretu

Exploring “...the multifaceted layers of place, space, and time that impact the formation of personal and communal identity.”
Visiting MSU and East Lansing for the second time in five years, internationally renowned artist Julie Mehretu received an honorary doctorate of fine arts.

Mehretu was born in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia in 1970, the first child of an Ethiopian college professor and an American teacher. The family fled the country in 1977, moving to East Lansing, Michigan, where her father, Assefa Mehretu, was hired by MSU. An East Lansing High School graduate, Julie earned a bachelor of arts degree from Kalamazoo College in 1992, and a master of fine arts from the Rhode Island School of Design in 1997.

NEW YORK CITY STUDIO

Wanting to make abstract paintings with a narrative reflecting her interest in geography, architecture, history, and urban life, Mehretu moved to New York City in 1999, where she currently works and resides with her partner, the artist Jessica Rankin, and their two children.

Mehretu’s large, light-filled, high-ceilinged 14th-floor studio overlooking Chelsea Market in Manhattan includes current projects large to small; a few stacks of exhibition catalogues; shelves of reference works; various computers and projectors; a precise white foam-core mock-up of an upcoming exhibition including gallery walls lined with miniature paintings; a couple of comfortable seating groups; an open and functional kitchen area complete with notes and photos of family and friends on the refrigerator door; a bright blue scissor-lift tucked against one wall; various ladders; plants and, on the afternoon when MUSES magazine editor Mike Jenkins visited, two members of Mehretu’s staff including chief production manager Damien Young and designer Clara Klein.

CREATING GLOBAL NARRATIVES

Ms. Mehretu’s online biography notes that she is “best known for her densely layered abstract paintings and prints. In her highly worked large-scale paintings, she creates new narratives that are global in character and international in scope using abstracted images of cities, histories, wars and geographies.” Mehretu’s “frenetic mark-making”—using pencil, pen, ink and paint—“is a way of signifying social agency and suggesting an unraveling of a personal biography.”

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In June 2013, New York-based writer Jason Farago wrote in guardian.com, “Mehretu—without playing the art world’s exhausting social games—has become the most significant American painter of her generation.” He added she is already one of the priciest; this past May, at Christie’s auction house in New York, a Mehretu painting sold for a record $4.6 million.

Of her own work, Ms. Mehretu has said: “I don’t think of architectural language as just a metaphor about space, but about spaces of power, about ideas of power... I am interested in the multifaceted layers of place, space, and time that impact the formation of personal and communal identity.”