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HIGH MUSEUM OF ART ATLANTA

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**HIGH MUSEUM OF ART TO PRESENT
MAJOR JULIE MEHRETU EXHIBITION THIS FALL**

First-ever comprehensive survey of Mehretu's career covers two decades of the artist's work and features many of her monumental paintings

ATLANTA, Aug. 27, 2020 — This fall, the High Museum will present “Julie Mehretu” (Oct. 24, 2020-Jan. 31, 2021), a major traveling exhibition of work by Julie Mehretu (born 1970, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia) co-organized by the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) and the Whitney Museum of American Art. This is the first comprehensive survey of the artist’s career, covering more than two decades of her work, from 1996 to the present, and uniting nearly 40 drawings and prints and 35 paintings predominantly monumental in size and scale.

Mehretu’s work bears witness to the shaping of human consciousness through the combination and reconfiguration of sources and images that address history and its intersection with the present. Her process involves compiling a vast and diverse archive of sources, including diagrams and maps, cave markings, Chinese calligraphy, architectural renderings, graffiti, photojournalism and texts. The exhibition also reveals the centrality of drawing in Mehretu’s artistic practice, from her diminutive drawings made in the 1990s to her monumental paintings of the 2000s, and explores the abiding influences of indexing, diagramming, and mapping as well as their techniques, aesthetics, and ideologies.

Mehretu’s work of the past decade draws from present-day images of natural disasters, human rights atrocities and global conflicts. Her most recent work in the exhibition refers to the detention camps holding migrant children along the southern border of the United States and is often scaled to the size and reach of her body. This correspondence between the artist’s body and her distinctly physical application of paint (and erasure of objective imagery), in combination with fragmented images produced in drawing, printmaking and stenciling techniques, lend the recent work a palpable sense of urgency and poignancy.

A highlight of the exhibition is Mehretu's cycle of four monumentally scaled paintings titled "Mogamma (A Painting in Four Parts)" (2012). Reunited for the first time since they were last shown together in 2013, "Mogamma" interrogates themes of migration, revolution, global capitalism and technology at the dawn of the Arab Spring. Each painting in the cycle belongs to four different museums across three continents. The High Museum of Art acquired "Mogamma (Part 2)" in 2013.

"We are grateful for the opportunity to present this sweeping examination of Mehretu's dynamic, multi-faceted career," said Rand Suffolk, Nancy and Holcombe T. Green, Jr., director of the High. "The globally conscience themes in her work align strongly with our commitment to celebrating diverse perspectives through the High's collection and exhibition program. We look forward to offering our audiences a chance to experience a broad spectrum of her creative genius."

"Julie Mehretu is one of the most consequential artists in the first quarter of this century," said Michael Rooks, Wieland Family Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art, ". . . because she has managed to synthesize histories told and untold, and history in the making, with our present moment beset by dislocation and turmoil. Among the histories with which she contends is the history of visual culture, particularly the language of abstraction, which powerfully expresses the fragmentation, splintering, formation, and reformation of our present moment."

"Julie Mehretu" considers the artist's excavation of the histories of art, architecture, and past civilizations and addresses themes in her work such as migration, revolution, human rights, social justice, climate change and global capitalism. Additionally, the exhibition considers Mehretu's career in printmaking through a selection of works produced with such techniques as etching, photogravure, aquatint and engraving. In its combination of media, the exhibition draws attention to the artist's agility in radically shifting scale, moving from the intimate to the grand and from the personal to the universal. The exhibition will also include British artist Tacita Dean's 2011 filmic portrait of Mehretu titled "GDGDA."

Previously on view at LACMA (Nov. 3, 2019-Sept. 7, 2020), the exhibition will travel to the Whitney Museum of American Art (March 19-Aug. 8, 2021) and the Walker Art Center (Oct. 16, 2021-March 6, 2022) following its presentation at the High.

In early works such as "Untitled (two)" (1996), "Map Paint (white)" (1996) and "Untitled (yellow with ellipses)" (1998), Mehretu explores how to represent the cumulative effect of time by layering materials. In these paintings, she has embedded drawings between layers of poured paint, creating fossilized topographies.

In "Stadia II" (2004) and "Black City" (2007), Mehretu interrogates sports and military typologies to disrupt modern conceptions of leisure, labor and order. The coliseum, amphitheater and stadium in "Stadia II" represent spaces designed to accommodate and organize large numbers of people but that also contain an undercurrent of chaos and violence. While "Stadia II" is filled with curved lines and an array of pageantry such as flags, banners,

lights and seating, “Black City” is more linear and contains references to the military and war, including general stars and Nazi bunkers. Both works call attention to the ways in which modern culture and the spectacle of contemporary wars, such as the War on Terror and the Iraq War, are connected to imperialism, patriarchy and power.

The four-part “Mogamma” (2012) took significant inspiration from the 2011 Egyptian revolution, part of the Arab Spring of uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa. The work was named after a government administrative building on Tahrir Square that was seen as a symbol of modernism and the country’s liberation from colonial occupation when it was first built in 1949. It was later associated with government corruption and bureaucracy before eventually serving as a revolutionary site. Mehretu began work on the four vertical canvases by exploring the densely layered environment of Tahrir Square, where an array of architectures — including structures built in Islamic, European and Cold War styles — coexist. She then created a web of drawings that combined the Brutalist architectural style of the Mogamma with details from other public squares associated with the revolutionary fervor of the Arab Spring, such as the amphitheater stairs and spiraling lights of Meskel Square in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, and the midcentury high-rise buildings surrounding Zuccotti Park in New York. Over this, she layered drawings of global sites of public protest and change, such as Red Square in Moscow and Tiananmen Square in Beijing. “Mogamma” was installed in Documenta in 2012 and again in London in 2013. This exhibition reunites all four panels of the monumental painting and marks the first time the work has been shown in its entirety in the United States. Before traveling with the exhibition, “Part 2” had been on view at the High since the Museum acquired it in 2013.

Mehretu’s most recent paintings introduce bold gestural marks and employ a dynamic range of techniques such as airbrushing and screenprinting. The works draw on her archive of images of global horrors, crises, protests and abuses of power, which she digitally blurs, crops and rescales. She uses this source material as the foundation for her paintings, overlaying the images with calligraphic strokes and loose drawings. For example, “Conjured Parts (eye), Ferguson” (2016) links disembodied anatomy with a site of violence and political strife. The painting began with a blurred photograph of an unarmed man with his hands up facing a group of police officers in riot gear, which was taken during the protests following the fatal shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri. Mehretu layered color over a blurry, sanded black-and-gray background; fuchsia and peachy-pink areas rise from below while toxic green tones float above like distant skies drawing near. Outlines of eyes, buttocks and other body parts appear within the graffiti-like marks and black blots hovering over smoky areas, suggesting human activity obscured.

In “Hineni (E. 3:4)” (2018), Mehretu addresses the fires caused by climate change and the intentional burning of Rohingya homes in Myanmar as part of a campaign of ethnic cleansing. The painting is based on an image from the 2017 Northern California wildfires, while the word “hineni” in the title translates to “here I am” in Hebrew, which was the biblical prophet Moses’s response to Yahweh (God), who called his name from within the burning bush. By interrogating three types of fires in this painting — one environmental, one intentional and one prophetic — Mehretu explores the contradictory meanings of a single elemental force.

Installed alongside these recent paintings, “Epigraph, Damascus” (2016) is a notable achievement in printmaking for Mehretu, representing a new integration of architectural drawings and painting overlaid with an unprecedented array of marks. Working closely with master printer Niels Borch Jensen, Mehretu used photogravure, a 19th-century technique that fuses photography with etching. She built the foundation of the print on a blurred photograph layered with hand-drawn images of buildings in Damascus, Syria, then composited that with a layer of gestural marks made on large sheets of Mylar. On a second plate, she executed her characteristic variety of light-handed brushstrokes, innovatively using techniques known as aquatint and open bite.

Many of Mehretu’s large-scale works will be on view throughout the galleries. The artist is known to create large horizontal canvases full of layered drawings to work out complexities of scale, size, detail and expanse. These panoramas often take on monolithic or compressed themes and histories such as African liberation movements and the architecture of spectacle.

The exhibition will also feature “Transcending: The New International” (2003). The painting began with a map of Ethiopia’s capital city, Addis Ababa, which Mehretu fused with maps of every African economic and political capital, creating a vast network of aerial views of the continent. In subsequent layers, she included drawings of both colonialist architecture in Africa and iconic modernist buildings erected there during and after liberation. In the center of the painting, she layered drawings of the many African plazas of independence with idiosyncratic markings she has called “characters.” Here, these characters stage battles, migrate, form alliances, congregate and ultimately participate in a system of entropy.

“Julie Mehretu” will be on view in the Cousins Special Exhibition Galleries on the Second Level of the High’s Wieland Pavilion.

About Julie Mehretu

Mehretu (born 1970, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia) immigrated with her family to the United States in 1977 and was raised in Michigan. She received a bachelor’s degree in art from Kalamazoo College, Michigan; studied at Université Cheikh Anta Diop, Dakar, Senegal; and received a Master of Fine Arts degree from the Rhode Island School of Design in 1997.

In 2017, Mehretu unveiled a major new commission of two vastly large site-specific paintings at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, California. Her work has been shown in other recent exhibitions at Venice Biennale, Venice, Italy (2019); Kettle’s Yard at the University of Cambridge, United Kingdom (2019); Fundacion Botín, Santander, Spain (2018); Serralves Museum of Contemporary Art, Porto, Portugal (2017); the Modern Art Museu, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia (2016); the Guggenheim Museum, New York (2010); and a major traveling show that began at MUSAC (Museo de Arte Contemporáneo de Castilla y León), Spain, in 2006 and traveled to the Kunstverein Hannover, Germany, and the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, Humlebaek, Denmark, in 2007.

Her group exhibitions include Busan Biennial (2002); Istanbul Biennial (2003); Whitney Biennial (2004); São Paulo Biennial (2004); Carnegie International (2004-5); Sydney Biennial (2006); Prospect New Orleans (2008-9); The Studio Museum in Harlem, New York (2011); Documenta (2012); National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. (2013); Dak'Art (2014); Biennial of Contemporary Art of Cartagena de Indias (2014); Museum of Modern Art, New York (2014); Sharjah Biennial (2015); and Venice Biennale (2019).

Mehretu is a recipient of many awards, including The MacArthur Award (2005) and the U.S. Department of State Medal of Arts Award (2015). She is a member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters and is represented by Marian Goodman Gallery in New York, where she lives and works.

Exhibition Catalogue

The exhibition is accompanied by a 320-page retrospective monograph of Mehretu's work, featuring 455 color illustrations, that traces the development of one of America's most celebrated abstract painters. Edited and featuring essays by exhibition curators Christine Y. Kim, Curator, Contemporary Art at LACMA, and Rujeko Hockley, Assistant Curator, Contemporary Art at Whitney Museum of American Art, the book includes numerous contributions by leading scholars and writers including Andrianna Campbell-LaFleur, Adrienne Edwards, Thelma Golden, Mathew Hale, Leslie Jones, Fred Moten and Dagmawi Woubshet.

Exhibition Organization and Support

This exhibition is organized by the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. This exhibition is made possible by Premier Exhibition Series Sponsors Delta Air Lines, Inc. and Invesco QQQ; Exhibition Series Sponsor Northside Hospital; Premier Exhibition Series Supporters the Antinori Foundation, Sarah and Jim Kennedy, Louise Sams and Jerome Grilhot, and wish Foundation; Benefactor Exhibition Series Supporters Anne Cox Chambers Foundation and Robin and Hilton Howell; Ambassador Exhibition Series Supporter Rod and Kelly Westmoreland; and Contributing Exhibition Series Supporters Lucinda W. Bunnan, Marcia and John Donnell, W. Daniel Ebersole and Sarah Eby-Ebersole, Peggy Foreman, Mr. and Mrs. Baxter Jones, Margot and Danny McCaul, Joel Knox and Joan Marmo, and The Ron and Lisa Brill Family Charitable Trust. Generous support is also provided by the Alfred and Adele Davis Exhibition Endowment Fund, Anne Cox Chambers Exhibition Fund, Barbara Stewart Exhibition Fund, Dorothy Smith Hopkins Exhibition Endowment Fund, Eleanor McDonald Storza Exhibition Endowment Fund, The Fay and Barrett Howell Exhibition Fund, Forward Arts Foundation Exhibition Endowment Fund, Helen S. Lanier Endowment Fund, Isobel Anne Fraser–Nancy Fraser Parker Exhibition Endowment Fund, John H. and Wilhelmina D. Harland Exhibition Endowment Fund, Katherine Murphy Riley Special Exhibition Endowment Fund, Margaretta Taylor Exhibition Fund, and the RJR Nabisco Exhibition Endowment Fund.

About the High Museum of Art

Located in the heart of Atlanta, the High Museum of Art connects with audiences from across the Southeast and around the world through its distinguished collection, dynamic schedule of

special exhibitions and engaging community-focused programs. Housed within facilities designed by Pritzker Prize–winning architects Richard Meier and Renzo Piano, the High features a collection of more than 17,000 works of art, including an extensive anthology of 19th- and 20th-century American fine and decorative arts; major holdings of photography and folk and self-taught work, especially that of artists from the American South; burgeoning collections of modern and contemporary art, including paintings, sculpture, new media and design; a growing collection of African art, with work dating from prehistory through the present; and significant holdings of European paintings and works on paper. The High is dedicated to reflecting the diversity of its communities and offering a variety of exhibitions and educational programs that engage visitors with the world of art, the lives of artists and the creative process. For more information about the High, visit www.high.org.

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