



Making Connections with Julie Mehretu

Article and photo by Donna Dodson for Artscope magazine

It is inspiring when our world-class universities invite artists to have a seat at the table. On Monday April 8, 2019, MIT organized a panel discussion centering on the artist Julie Mehretu and her work as part of its ongoing Lecture Series at the Aga Khan Program for Islamic Architecture. Nasser Rabbat, a renowned architectural historian and Director of the AKPIA, welcomed the audience. The series focuses on art and the artist's ability to respond to the violent conflicts that have engulfed the Middle East, particularly since the Arab uprisings that began at the end of 2010.

This year's guest was Julie Mehretu who cites Rabbat's 2011 article in *Artforum*, titled, "Circling the Square" as a major inspiration for her work "Mogamma (a painting in four parts)." Julie Mehretu, a New York based artist, miriam cooke, Professor Emerita at Duke University and author of "Dancing in Damascus: Creativity, Resilience, and the Syrian Revolution", Asma Naeem, Chief Curator at The Baltimore Museum of Art and author of "Out of Earshot: Sound, Technology and Power in American Art, 1860-1900 (forthcoming), and Deen Sharp, AKPIA@MIT Post-Doctoral Fellow, co-editor of *BEYOND THE SQUARE: URBANISM AND THE ARAB UPRISINGS* discussed Mehretu's work in a broad context from within and beyond the art world.

Deen Sharp made the opening remarks and introduced the panel. Each panelist was tasked with responding to Julie Mehretu's two artworks inspired by the Arab Spring:

"Mogamma" a huge 4-piece work produced during the early days of the Tahrir uprising that forced Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak to step down and "Epigraph, Damascus" a 6-panel reaction to the Syrian Revolution in its fourth year of mortal struggle against the ruthless regime of Bashar Asad. Sharp's talk "Marking Moments: The actually Existing Third Space of Julie Mehretu" traced the progression of Mehretu's work in "Mogamma," "Cairo" and "Damascus, Epigraph." He outlined how her marks documenting the uprisings shifted to marks making meaning out of the social chaos. "Mehretu ... illuminates how we can see outwards by looking within; how tensions, contradictions and difference can exist together; how absences can create the most powerful presence; how the smallest mark can be the deepest," said Sharp.

Julie Mehretu was born in Addis Ababa in 1970 to an Ethiopian father and an American mother. She grew up in East Lansing, Michigan, and now lives in New York. She is well known for her abstracted images of social interaction on the global scale. Her paintings and drawings depict the cumulative effects of urban geopolitical changes through the layering of architectural renderings, road maps, aerial photography with distinctive mark making and a symbolic use of color. Her work often dwarfs the viewer, and it is impossible to see her paintings as a whole until the viewer steps back. Yet once the viewer steps back, the depth and the details of the paintings are lost.

Mehretu used a spoken word style in her presentation, using free- association, and citing quotes from many sources. Occupied territories. Chaos under the surface. Cultural diasporization. Expatriation. Erasure of architecture. Mapping power. Painting as performative time. Opacity as Radical potential.

Asma Naeem discussed political exiles, whose journey is one who never stops migrating, in contrast to Mehretu, whose work centers on displacement in socio-spatial terms. Naeem traced the visual language that appears and reappears throughout the work of Mehretu. Her talk provided context to the panel's overarching themes of the visualizations/translations of political/social events: violence, displacement and the diaspora.

The discussion that followed brought up essential questions for many artists and creative makers in today's world who seek to engage and translate the political present. In miriam cooke's talk, "Archiving the Syrian Revolution," she addressed the speed of response from artists to violent events and the "trope of hope." As we see the struggle for independent press resulting in a violent demand for a more democratic government one cannot escape the question: "How does an artist address our own nation's political vitriol and divided sense of self?"