



GEMINI G.E.L. ^{AT} JONI MOISANT WEYL

Gemini G.E.L. at Joni Moisant Weyl is pleased to present **Julie Mehretu: A Decade of Printmaking at Gemini G.E.L.** on view March 25th through July 30th, 2021. This survey presents every edition that Mehretu has created in collaboration with Gemini G.E.L., the renowned artists' workshop and creator of fine-art limited edition prints. The exhibition coincides with Mehretu's mid-career retrospective on view at the Whitney Museum of American Art, which was previously shown at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) and The High Museum in Atlanta.

Mehretu's engagement with the Gemini workshop began with a small drypoint etching created in 2008 to raise funds for Senator Obama's presidential campaign. Aptly titled *Amulets* – a good luck charm for the Senator - that print, along with another small-scale print benefitting the Guggenheim Museum published in 2010, were Mehretu and Gemini's equivalence of a "courtship." Ever since, the artist has challenged the technical and visual limits of the workshop, with three monumental bodies of work. This exhibition provides a comprehensive look at Mehretu's evolution as a dedicated and skilled printmaker, featuring *Auguries* and *Myriads, Only By Dark*, where the deconstruction of architectural imagery, maps, and diagrams are layered with abstract signs and symbols, and concluding with her latest series, *Six Bardos*, which utilizes layers of calligraphic marks, political graffiti, and colorful abstract forms.

Scholars have noted Mehretu's longstanding engagement with printmaking, most recently by Leslie Jones, Curator of Prints and Drawings at LACMA, in the catalogue accompanying Mehretu's retrospective. Jones contends that since Mehretu's early years in graduate school at RISD, intaglio printmaking has informed the line quality present in her paintings. Oftentimes prints by artists are treated as somehow separate from the rest of the artist's unique output; this is not the case with Julie Mehretu. Printmaking informs her paintings and the paintings inform her printmaking in a reciprocal and intertwined manner – explicitly in the use of screenprinting in her paintings, and implicitly in the way that printmaking forces a slowed-down deliberation and dissection of the personal mark-making for which Mehretu is celebrated. Mehretu states, "[it's] in the printmaking that new things are invented, which I then want to bring into the painting and drawing," and her insistence that her prints are included her many gallery and museum exhibitions is proof of this seamlessness. The technical parallels between constructing an image in layers, as is necessary with printmaking, and the way that Mehretu builds her paintings through a stratum of imagery that is blurred and transformed, underscores the symbiotic relationship between the two mediums.

Mehretu's paintings are usually large scale, but all her prints up until *Auguries* in 2010 were modestly sized. In working with Gemini, she knew she wanted to make a massive etching. The solution to the technical difficulty of producing such a scale was worked out with Case Hudson, Gemini's Masterprinter, and *Auguries* measures 7 x 15 feet in twelve panels, hung in a grid. The title alludes to the ancient Roman practice of interpreting omens from the study of avian flight patterns, and that reference is supported by the imagery – the dashes and daubs of spit-bite aquatint marks layered upon sweeping multi-colored lines. *Auguries*, in its scale and visual complexity, cemented printmaking as an essential medium in Mehretu's oeuvre. As Leslie Jones notes, "while references to architecture rarely appear in her prints, it is notable that diagrams – graphic renderings – form the basis of her paintings, while gestural marks – the language of painting – predominate in her prints. Mehretu's printerly paintings and painterly prints suggest the intermediary nature of her practice overall."

Mehretu's second large-scale project with Gemini, *Myriads, Only By Dark* (2014), is comprised of four 81x45-inch panels, each with three sections of embossments determined by the size of the copper plates. Originally conceived when press-bed limitations necessitated the abutting of separate sheets to achieve the desired large scale (as was the case with *Auguries*), the workshop acquired a larger press which would eliminate any divisions. Nevertheless, Mehretu elected to maintain the aesthetic of the division, even emphasizing it with thin white embossments to evoke the kinds of



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folds found in an oversized map. All of the imagery – except for the portion that was spit-bite directly onto the copper plates – was created on tall sheets of Mylar. The color lines, created using Adobe Illustrator, came first, and guided the artist as she painted imagery on subsequent Mylars. The inking of the lines is “à la poupée,” in which multiple ink colors are hand-applied and blended on one plate to create a multicolor appearance within a single etched line, and the other imagery is printed in a range of silver, gray and black inks. Mehretu employed a variety of drawing techniques, including airbrush and transfers from the patterning of paper toweling which suggest a newsprint image-pixilation. The handprints and even some of the graphic “swipes” that are apparent on several of the panels are the result of Mehretu dipping her hands and forearm in India ink.

The mark-making is loose, dynamic, and dense with layers obscuring each other, evoking “primordial expression.” Jones argues that the verticality of *Myriads* is reminiscent of portraiture, which is further suggested by the title, (*unfolding body map*), of the left-most panel. Reading *Myriads* as progressing from left to right, an expansion and contraction culminates in the central white voided shape in (*origin*). Mehretu has continuously explored her own identity, migration, and ancestral/political connections to geography as an Ethiopian American through repetitive mark-making and profound use of erasure.

Following a small etching, *Haka*, donated to President Obama’s 2012 re-election campaign, in 2014 and 2015 Mehretu and Gemini were asked once again to contribute editions, and examples of these are include in the exhibition. One, titled *vertiginous fold*, was given to FAPE for distribution to US Embassies worldwide, and one, titled *Achille (epoch)* benefitted Studio in a School, a visual arts organization partnering with public schools in the New York area. Complex and rich in their appearance, both measure 33x47 inches – a scale manageable for these two beneficiaries.

In 2017, continuing her desire to challenge herself and the Gemini workshop, Mehretu embarked on her most recent series of large-scale prints, *Six Bardos*. Influenced by a trip to the Mogao Caves in the Gobi desert, the title comes from the Tibetan Buddhist philosophy of the transition of consciousness from life to death. The titles of the six individual works, which follow the sequence of the Bardos, further the theme of migration and transformation present throughout Mehretu’s work. The prints are multi-colored aquatints, sometimes with as many as 31 different colors. Ink was applied “à la poupée”, requiring Gemini’s printers to reference a Mylar key that dictated the location of different colors on a single copper plate. Instead of printing by color separation, the colors are lightly dabbed onto the plate, resulting in a gradient of colors that blend the lines in a manner seemingly impossible in an aquatint. This extraordinarily complex technique, again overseen by Case Hudson, took three years to develop and complete. While four works from this series are comparatively modest in their scale (50x73 inches), two prints, *Luminous Appearance* and *Transmigration* are once again monumental, this time consisting of two abutting panels for a final dimension of over 8x6-feet. The profusion of colors and the mark-making has noticeably shifted in appearance from her prior projects, this time without the strict lines present in *Myriads* and *Auguries* to anchor the gestural strokes. The lines scribble and scrawl, forming recognizable shapes that dissolve, evoking stenciled graffiti on urban walls, sections of which appear to be partially wiped away, with marks that stubbornly refuse to be fully erased. Their immense visual complexity, as with all of Mehretu’s work, requires time to fully contemplate and comprehend. This process of looking, where the forms and ideas emerge slowly over time, creates a new kind of space for thinking about the possibilities of printmaking.

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All quotes sourced from Jones, Leslie. “Marks, Slowed Down: Julie Mehretu’s Intaglio Prints.” *Julie Mehretu* edited by Christine Y. Kim and Rujeko Hockley, Prestel Publishing, 2019, pp. 258-262