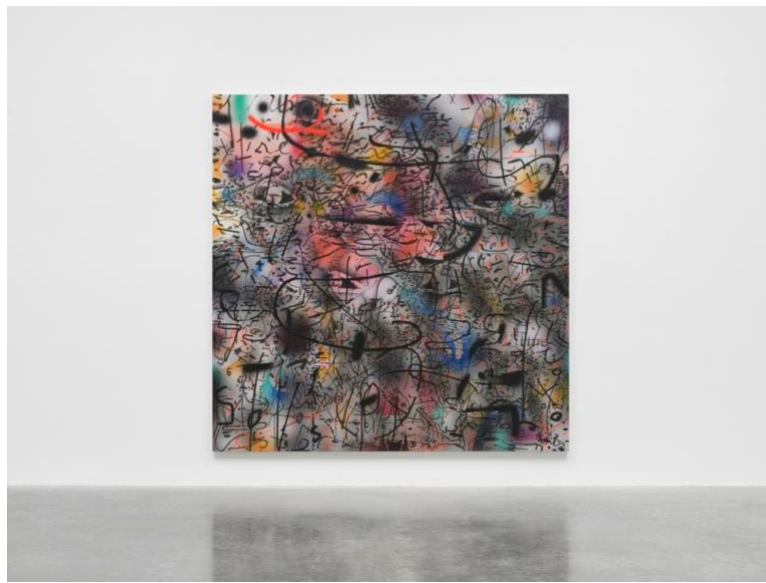


Forbes

After Calder, Stella And Lichtenstein, Julie Mehretu's BMW Art Car Takes On Le Mans And Puts Art In Movement

by Y-Jean Mun-Delsalle (June 1, 2024)



Julie Mehretu, *Everywhen*, 2021-23,
ink and acrylic on canvas, 120 x 120 in. Photo: Ollie Hammick.

Each of Julie Mehretu's paintings is a journey of exploration, a voyage into the unknown where layers upon layers of meaning come into play. Every stratum is buried under the one that came before and surfaces sporadically. Her ink and acrylic marks that densely populate the canvas are frenzied and tumultuous, disorienting the eye in dizzying visual experiences. Some parts overflow with signs, while others are left practically empty. Through a practice fueled by art, geography, history, social struggles, geopolitical violence and natural catastrophes, such as the California wildfires, Hurricane Katrina, the Arab Spring, the war in Ukraine, the global refugee crisis or Grenfell Tower burning in London, her turbulent landscapes echo the chaos of our world. "It's an effort to interrogate the conditions that we find ourselves in, and many times those conditions repeat themselves over and over in many different contexts, so we can think of rebellion, revolution or war as a kind of response that we keep resorting to," she explains. "We're not learning from history, so my work is an effort to understand and make sense of how humanity continues to evolve despite the effort of trying to keep us suppressed."

Born in Addis Ababa in 1970 to an Ethiopian father who was a geographer and a Jewish-American mother who was a Montessorian teacher, Mehretu had fled with her family from Ethiopia to Michigan at the age of six at a time of political strife. After studying at University Cheik Anta Diop in Senegal, she graduated from Michigan's Kalamazoo College in 1992, before earning a MFA from Rhode Island School of Design five years later. "Growing up in the '70s in the Midwest, there weren't many regional contemporary art museums," she recalls. "I majored in art because that was what I did the most. It was my path; it was my passion, I just didn't know I could build a life as a contemporary artist until after I finished college and moved to New York." In 2019, a mid-career retrospective that debuted at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art – then traveled to the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York, the High Museum of Art in Atlanta and the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis – followed by a world record for the highest sale price of any work by an African-born artist at auction when her painting "Walkers with the Dawn and Morning" fetched \$10.7 million at Sotheby's New York in 2023, confirmed Mehretu as one of the most prominent contemporary artistic voices in the US.



Installation view of the exhibition Ensemble with works by Julie Mehretu and Nairy Baghramian, which is presented at Palazzo Grassi in Venice until January 6, 2025.
Photo: Marco Cappelletti. Courtesy of Palazzo Grassi, Pinault Collection

Now Mehretu is being honored with the largest exhibition of her oeuvre to date in Europe, at Palazzo Grassi in Venice, which gathers a selection of more than 50 paintings produced over a 25-year period. On view through January 6, 2025, "Ensemble" is also a dialog with works that resonate with her own by some of her closest friends, who have been influential on her and with whom she has had a history of exchange and working. They include Tacita Dean, who filmed Mehretu in the act of printmaking; Nairy Baghramian, who created standalone aluminum sculptural frames for her recent "TRANSpaintings" on semitranslucent polyester mesh that free her canvases from the wall for the first time; Paul Pfeiffer, with whom she cofounded artist-led residency Denniston Hill in New York's Catskills; and Jessica Rankin, with whom she shares a life together.

Another prime example of how collaboration is an integral part of Mehretu's practice was her nomination to design the 20th BMW Art Car for the German car marque's iconic collection of "rolling sculptures". Since 1975, the world's most famous artists such as Alexander Calder, Frank Stella, Roy Lichtenstein, Andy Warhol, David Hockney, Jenny Holzer, Jeff Koons and Cao Fei have created BMW Art Cars. The latest BMW Art Car by Mehretu almost didn't see the light of day. Although she had been unanimously selected in 2018 by an international jury of museum directors and curators, including Richard Armstrong, Director of the Guggenheim Museum, and Hans-Ulrich Obrist, Artistic Director of London's Serpentine Galleries, it was only two years later that she agreed to the project, encouraged by her nephews, having refused it at first as she was unsure how she would approach the process of

painting a car. After looking at a photo of the jury and seeing the late Okwui Enwezor, former Director of Haus der Kunst in Munich, who had said, “she expresses dynamism within a form”, Mehretu decided to take on the challenge. “I really missed his perspective during the pandemic when we were globally under quarantine,” she points out. “And when I thought about what would Okwui do in a condition like this, how could you take an opportunity like this and invent something else, what does it mean to think about mobility during this time and how could an Art Car project evolve into something bigger than just painting a car, it became very interesting.”



BMW Art Car #20 by Julie Mehretu. Photo: Andreas Hempel. Courtesy of BMW AG

Imbued with a sense of movement and dynamism, Mehretu’s painting “Everywhen” became the point of departure. A haze of color is superimposed on and under energetic strokes, swirls, scrawls and exploding lines that can’t be contained within the canvas. She remixed it onto a BMW M Hybrid V8 prototype via a 3D mapping technique, imagining the painting “inhaled and digested by the car, which then transforms the car,” she states. “When I was in the studio with a one-fifth scale model of the car in front of the painting, I kept thinking about how it could drip into the car somehow. Then it became interesting to think of the painting as a portal that the vehicle would move through.” She also gives a shout out to Frank Stella’s Art Car with its grid pattern through her own spotted grid in a black-and-white, half-tone motif.

According to the BMW Art Car jury members: “Julie’s first three-dimensional work combines her esthetics and formal language with the idea of the glitch and the blur, turning speed into a visceral experience. This energetic space is as fierce and competitive in racing as it is ambitious as a creative playground of the imagination. It not only pays homage to the Art Cars of Jenny Holzer and Frank Stella, but also spins a visual web from Mad Max to graffiti and street art that is unique within the series of BMW Art Cars.”

As the BMW Art Car program originally stemmed from the winning idea of combining automotive icons and world-famous artists imagined by French race car driver, auctioneer and art enthusiast, Hervé Poulain, it was only natural that approximately half of all 20 Art Cars have competed on racetracks worldwide, from the Rolex 24 at Daytona in Florida to the legendary 24 Hours of Le Mans in northwestern France. The 20th BMW Art Car was designed to race right from the beginning. “The whole BMW Art Car project is about invention, about imagination, about pushing limits of what can be possible. I don’t think of this car as something you would exhibit,” says Mehretu. “I am thinking of it as something that will race in Le Mans. It’s a performative painting. My BMW Art Car was created in close collaboration with motorsport and engineering teams. The BMW Art Car is only completed once the race is over.”



BMW Art Car #20 by Julie Mehretu raced by the BMW M Team WRT at the 24 Hours of Le Mans last June. Photo: courtesy of BMW AG

The world's most challenging endurance race, the 24 Hours of Le Mans is based on one simple rule: the vehicle that has covered the longest distance after 24 hours wins. Originally invented to experiment the durability of materials and showcase innovative techniques, the race is now an essential fixture in the motorsports calendar. A grueling test of endurance for both man and machine, the 2024 edition of the competition last June went down in history for the number of hypercars entered – 23 from nine different manufacturers that battled it out under wet and windy conditions – compared to 16 participants the previous year. Just like in the centenary edition in 2023, this year saw a Ferrari victory in front of a record 329,000 spectators, with Toyota and Porsche putting up a serious fight. The technical progress of the cars combined with the drivers' dexterity offered visitors a particularly close edition of the 24 Hours of Le Mans, keeping them in suspense right up to the final minutes with nine cars finishing on the same lap – a first in the history of the discipline.

Marking its return to the top category of the 24 Hours of Le Mans after a 25-year hiatus, BMW M Motorsport fielded two BMW M Hybrid V8s. As no BMW Art Car has ever won at Le Mans, the team had high hopes for the 20th BMW Art Car bearing the Mehretu-designed livery and the #20. However, both hypercars met with unfortunate and frustrating accidents mid-race, although they had showed strong pace. Due to an unforced driver error, the 20th BMW Art Car went off the track just two and a half hours into the race and hit a barrier, forcing it to limp back to the pit on three wheels. With major damage to the tires, body and suspension, the car only managed to cover 96 laps in total, staying in the pit for the majority of the 24-hour race before coming out again for the last four laps. The decision had been made to have the car cross the finish line to honor the Art Car project, Mehretu, the designers, engineers and the BMW M Team WRT.

Beyond the vehicle, BMW, Mehretu and Mehret Mandefro, Emmy-nominated producer, writer and cofounder of the Realness Institute, will host artist workshops in five African cities, which will culminate in a major exhibition at the Zeitz Museum of Contemporary Art Africa in Cape Town in 2026. Long an advocate of encouraging other artists to take creative risks, Mehretu concludes, "The one thing that an artist can't be is restricted in any particular way. I think an artist is constantly finding, challenging and inventing from within society and reflecting a big part of that culture in society. But I don't think that society can propel itself anywhere without the creativity of artists and cultural makers."