

Galerie

Julie Mehretu Transforms the Palazzo Grassi in Venice with Dazzling Retrospective

Titled "Ensemble," the largest Europe exhibition of Julie Mehretu's work to date features pieces by Mehretu's closest artist friends

by Caroline Roux (March 29, 2024)



Installation view, "Julie Mehretu. Ensemble", 2024, Palazzo Grassi, Venezia.
PHOTO: MARCO CAPPELLETTI

When Julie Mehretu was invited to stage an exhibition at the Palazzo Grassi in Venice—the biggest European retrospective of her work to date—she decided to invite her friends. It surely says a lot about an artist to feel ready to share such hallowed attention.

The result is a show of multiple layers—and not just those in Mehretu's own work, which are plentiful and dense. Here at the Palazzo, one of two stunning venues presided over by Francois Pinault in Venice, is a rich secondary landscape provided by her friends, of sculpture, music, embroidery, and film. There is a gentle rumble of dialogue between all the different pieces and practitioners but it always manages to maintain just the right volume.

“I thought about the whole installation by thinking about my friends,” says Mehretu, who went on to call the show “ENSEMBLE.” “However well I know them and their work, you still learn even more when you bring it all together.” Here Nairy Baghramian, David Hammons, Robin Coste Lewis, Paul Pfeiffer, Jessica Rankin, Tacita Dean and Huma Bhabha are all included. But in spite of that dazzling role call, Mehretu remains the star.



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This is not a chronological exhibition. “The building wouldn’t allow that,” says Caroline Bourgeois, the show’s curator, who as usual was dressed in crinkled patent Courregesse separates at the grand opening. “It starts with small rooms, and then large spaces, and it’s a big building. You need to make a rhythm, to think not in terms of chronological progress but more in terms of music.” And indeed, there is a pace here, that draws the visitor through. (There is also real music, not least in a beautiful film where the camera draws back very, very slowly from a huge Mehretu painting, gradually revealing its complexity and breadth, to a saxophone soundtrack by Pharoah Saunders. Completed in 2021, it must have been one of the last works he made before his death in 2022.)



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Across these monumental spaces, Mehretu has inserted her own work into the original architecture (rebuilt from 1748 to 1772), and then inserted her friends accordingly. On two floors, one above the other, she has positioned a Huma Bhabha totem in front of a painting, like a woman standing guard. The repetition is joyful, as though the two sculptures form one very tall one.

In another narrower room, her own calligraphic painting, which has the brushstroke qualities of Chinese ink work, sits near the tattooed arms, legs and torso of Paul Pfeiffer's Justin Bieber series. While further on, Robin Coste Lewis, in a video installation, reads a text she wrote for Mehertu. It is called *Intimacy*.



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Mehretu's 50 works cover the period from 2001, when she was working with dynamic architectural plans—of cities or stadia—overlaid with abstract lines that suggest the worlds we construct and their inability to nurture or contain us. Mehretu herself was born in Ethiopia, in 1970, and came from there to Michigan when she was seven years old. She is not the only one here to have moved from one place to another. Jessica Rankin, Mehretu's partner for many years, is an Australian transplanted to New York. Nairy Baghramian is an Iranian living in Berlin. Displacement, through force or choice, informs all their work.

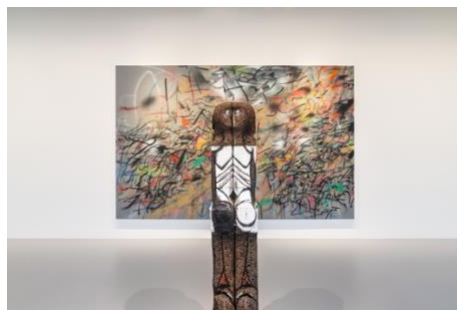


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While the blasting lines have disappeared from later work, the social situations prevail. The Syrian War, the Arab Spring, or the wild fires of California have all provided the underlying impetus for the layering of paint and motif on the super-size canvases. Later work moves into the realms of figuration, though you need to spend at least three minutes, if not five, standing in front of a work like *Your hands are like two shovels digging in me*, made in 2021-22, for those figures to emerge.



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In the early 2000s, Mehretu, along with Paul Pfeiffer and historian Lawrence Chua, bought 220 acres of farmland in the Catskills, an hour or two north of New York. By 2004, they had launched a full artists' residency programme, free in both attitude and cost, and it has so far received hundreds of artists. You don't need to know that in order to enjoy this show, but the more you understand Mehretu's world, the more sense it all makes.

"Ensemble" is at Palazzo Grassi, Venice until 6 January 2025.