

Middle Grey, 2007-09, ink and acrylic on canvas, 304,8 x 426,7cm. Courtesy artist, The Project and carlier I gebauer



DESTRUCTION/ CONSTRUCTION

Julie Mehretu's large-scale paintings are like entering a state of expanded mind, writes **Siemon Allen**. In this excerpt from an essay published in 2007, Allen discusses the Ethiopian-American artist's strategy of piling layer upon layer until sheer density causes the multitudinous elements in her abstracted paintings and drawings to reach a saturation point.

Mehretu's work is a multilayered event, built laboriously over time, stratum upon stratum, beginning with architectural scores sampled from sources at once diverse and precise, and materialising through an accretion of graphic shapes and expressive marks. Each painting is an occurrence preserved, but only for a moment, in an uneasy split-second resting point. Composition is action, a physical laying down of one snap shot over another. Stacked in transparent films, co-existent histories are embedded yet still visible in the terrain of a hyperreal city.

The territory is mapped. The territory is the map. We look with the sensation of seeing from above through God's eye, and our viewing resembles a kind of excavation of the painting, the mirror reverse of its making. Approaching the work in this way, we are like archaeologists trying to visually peel back the most recent actions to reveal those that came before. But the land is too unstable. Constant shifts in foreground and background (present and past) foil any such certainty. If these are layers of history, they are captured at the moment of a social rupture in what must surely be an irregular cycle of explosion, exposure, and re-absorption.

Yet turbulent as the scene may be – elements tumble, streak, zoom, swirl, and torque – there is also evidence of order in the seeming chaos of its

blueprint. Often a stabilising centre only just checks the forces that threaten the painting with unlimited expansion and total annihilation. In some paintings, this gravitational anchor operates like the core point of a centrifuge. Counter forces of push and pull spar for dominance. In others, this centre is the source of an enormous prana exhalation caught at the moment of maximal expansion before a great inhalation occurs.

In *Doors of Perception* (1954), Aldous Huxley explored notions of expanded consciousness, writing of his own experimentation with the psychotropic drug mescaline. He borrowed his title from a passage in William Blake's *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (1790-93): "If the doors of perception were cleansed every thing would appear to man as it is, infinite. For man has closed himself up, till he sees all things thru' narrow chinks of his cavern."

What are the "narrow chinks" through which we customarily peer? What is the nature of the "infinite" denied us by our human incapacities? For Huxley, citing philosopher CD Broad, the brain, nervous system, and the sense organs are in fact "eliminative" rather than "productive" and function to prevent the individual from being overwhelmed with sensory data. He considers how each of us is protected (and yet perhaps also limited) by what he names the "reducing valve". Is *this* the narrow chink? The very term

“All cities are geological; you cannot take three steps without encountering ghosts bearing all the prestige of their legends. We move within a closed landscape whose landmarks constantly draw us toward the past. Certain shifting angles, certain receding perspectives, allow us to glimpse original conceptions of space, but this vision remains fragmentary. It must be sought in the magical locales of fairy tales and surrealist writings: castles, endless walls, little forgotten bars, mammoth caverns, casino mirrors.” — Ivan Chtcheglov, 1981

sounds too mechanistic for a reading of the visionary Blake. And yet quoting Broad, Huxley reflects on the notion of the infinite and writes, “a person might at any moment be capable of remembering all that has ever happened to him and of perceiving everything that is happening everywhere in the universe”. Here the bounds of first, the temporal, and then, the spatial, are reconsidered. In this sensory wash, space and time collide into a single phantasmagorical image.

To stand in front of one of Julie Mehretu's paintings is like entering this state of expanded mind. We experience the past and the future knotted into the present; the constructed histories, utopian dreams, and lived experiences of a place joined in a terrifying simultaneity. The hidden foundations of the city's oldest structures, its constructions, its demolitions and reconstructions, and the traces of paths made by every living individual who ever moved within its borders are suddenly made visible. A global map is drawn and redrawn, as all maps must be over time, but with old borderlines of nations only partially erased, their provisional nature exposed. Events that customarily appear to unfold over time are perceived in a great co-instantaneous upheaval, a sight at once horrific and sublime. Paradoxically, the construction of the painting is like a series of erasures, each stage eradicating the last. Seen in this way, however, history is still not entirely rubbed out. Rather, it is re-inscribed.

The story continues, but as one layer is added a previous layer is partially obscured and undeniably changed. Once stable forms are given new trajectories with the superimposition of thrusting vector lines and billowing propulsion clouds. A new composition is created with each addition. Erasure operates not as a destructive but as a generative force.

For Mehretu, the painting also behaves as if it were but a single frame in an endless sequence of occurrences. As if layer might pile upon layer until sheer density causes the multitudinous elements to reach a saturation point; as if the urgent restlessness of the composition might propel the forms beyond the frame and out of our sight, leaving an empty ground. Our attention toggles between dense clusters of elements and the seemingly limitless space in which they move. The minute and the voluminous, the impenetrable and the porous, the dense and the fine co-exist. The span of the work is great enough to embrace both deafening noise and profound silence.

Disorientation is the risk of such expanded perception. We cannot remain detached. The painting will not remain fixed as an object, but rather becomes a window through which we fall into an unsteady world of churning restless movement. We lose ourselves in the deep space of this portal we call a painting. And yet the unbelievable whirling multitude of parts somehow comes together. Sharp point

and gentle wash, frenetic scribble and fluid line, logos and blueprints, and everything imaginable and unimaginable under the sun somehow sing together. Frenzied and hyperactive as the painting may appear, what we see is not merely a cacophony but also a perfect score.

Simon Allen is a South African artist who currently lives and works in the United States. The gordonschachatcollection will showcase his work RECORDS (2006-09) at the 2010 Joburg Art Fair (March 26 – 28)

REFERENCES

Ivan Chtcheglov, 'Formulary for a New Urbanism', in Situationist International Anthology, edited by Ken Knabb (Berkeley: Bureau of Public Secrets, 1981), pp. 1-2
Aldous Huxley, The Doors of Perception (New York: Harper Perennial, 1990)

This essay is an edited excerpt of an essay appearing in, and commissioned for the catalogue *Julie Mehretu: City Sitings*, published by Detroit Institute of Arts, 2007. The visuals are drawn from a new suite of works commissioned by Deutsche Guggenheim, Berlin, and first exhibited together under the title *Julie Mehretu: Grey Area* (October 28, 2009 – January 6, 2010)

TOP *Plover's Wing*, 2009, ink and acrylic on canvas, 304.8 x 426.7cm
BOTTOM *Fragment*, 2008-09, ink and acrylic on canvas, 304.8 x 426.7cm
 Courtesy artist, The Project and earlier I gebauer
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