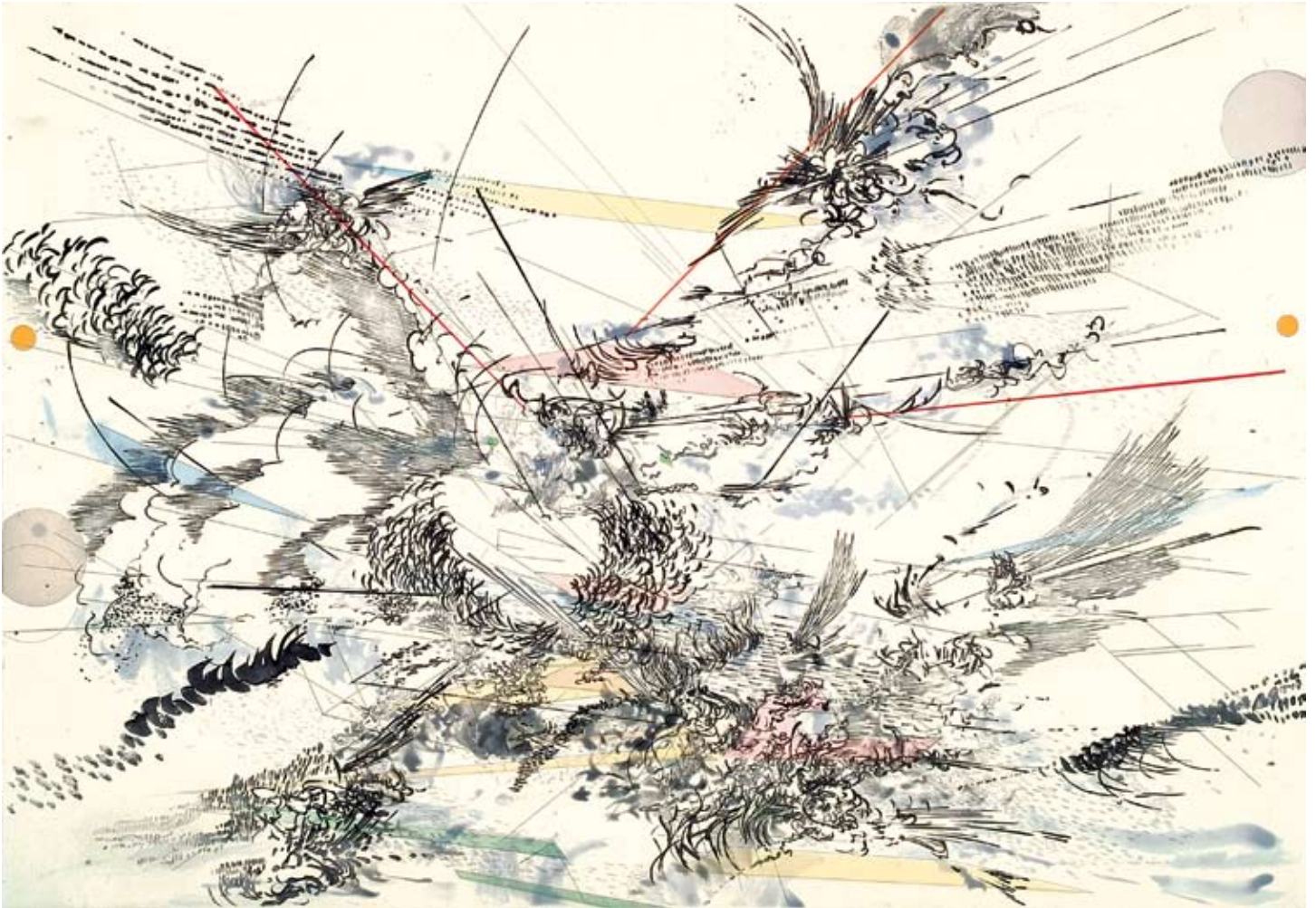


Overview



Local Calm, 2005. Sugar lift aquatint with color aquatint, spit bite aquatint, soft and hard ground etching, and engraving on *gampi paper chine collé*. Paper size: 35 1/2 x 46 3/4"; image size: 27 3/4 x 39 3/4". Edition 35. Printed by Dena Schuckit.

JULIE MEHRETU: HEAVY WEATHER

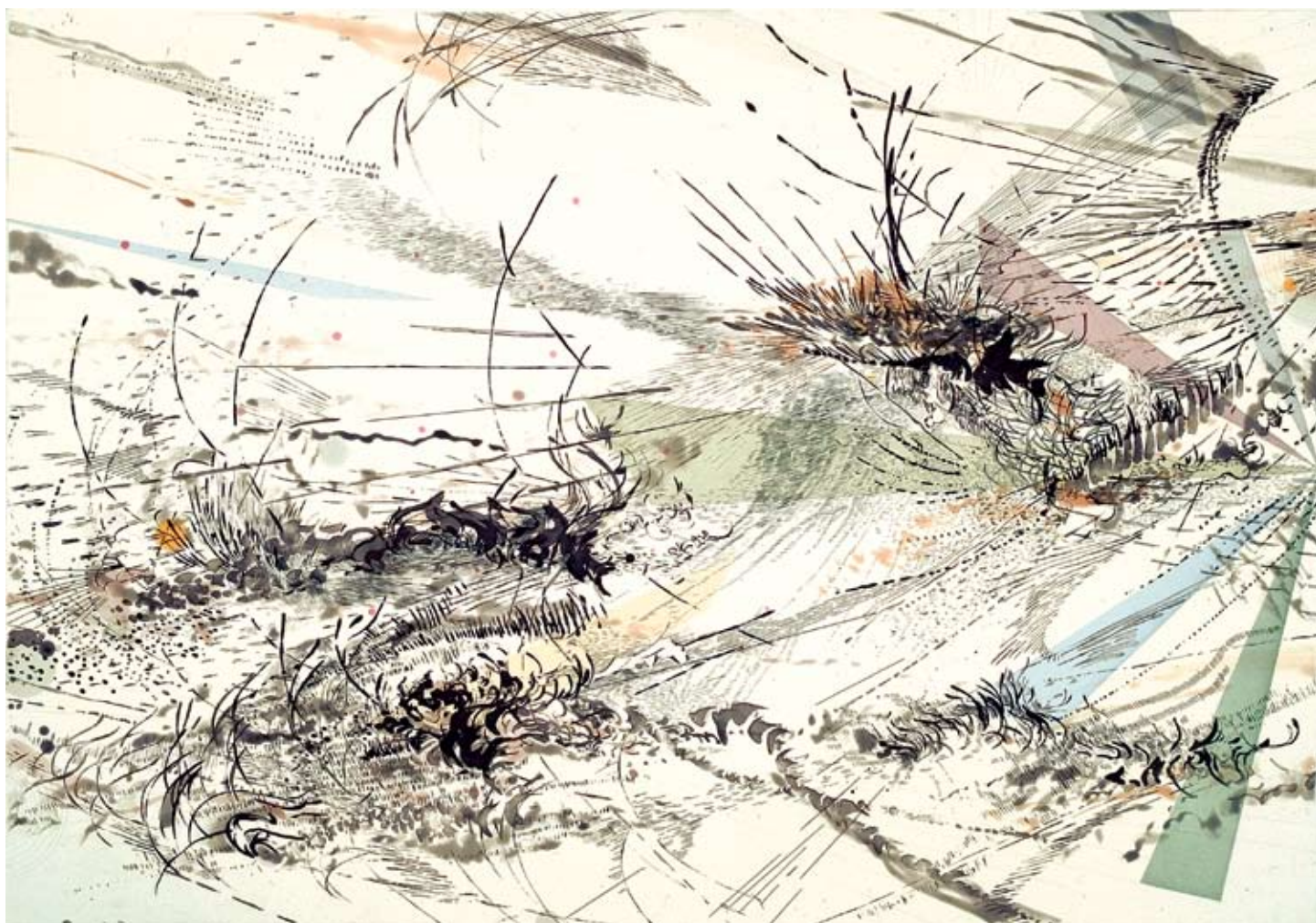
A year ago, on a ship, I crossed Drake Passage, the 400-mile-wide stretch of ocean between Cape Horn and Antarctica where the Atlantic and the Pacific meet. Legendarily, Drake Passage has the worst sea weather in the world, and although we crossed in what the crew called unusual calm, there were great troughs of waves. A cold wind was blowing and sunlight from time to time sent shafts through fog and spray. I struggled to the stern behind an excited expedition leader. A wandering albatross was following the ship!

The wandering albatross has a wingspan of ten to twelve feet, the largest of any living bird, and never touches land except to mate and nest. I clumsily braced myself on the pitching deck to watch the great and graceful bird, white with narrow dark wings against the fog, gliding, soaring, zig-zagging up and dropping down, catching air currents. Each wing was as long as a person is tall, and the wings were

linear, more like an airplane than a bird, never flapping. Albatross fly for miles without flapping, poised and strong. As a child in school I memorized parts of *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*:

At length did cross an Albatross,
Through the fog it came;
As if it had been a Christian soul
We hailed it in God's name.
It ate the food it ne'er had eat
And round and round it flew.
The ice did split with a thunder-fit;
The helmsman steered us through!

The mariner killed this "bird of good omen" with a crossbow, then
Ah! Well-a-day! What evil looks



Diffraction, 2005. Color sugar lift aquatint with aquatint, spit bite aquatint, and hard ground etching on *gampi* paper *chine collé*. Paper size: 35 1/2 x 46 3/4"; image size: 27 3/4 x 39 3/4". Edition 35. Printed by Dena Schuckit.

Had I from old and young!
 Instead of the cross, the Albatross
 About my neck was hung.

The words in my mind are overcome by the real-life image of the bird. It is an image that I call up from time to time as a counterbalance to the news of the day: war, terrorism, famines, hurricanes.

At the time that Julie Mehretu began working at Crown Point Press on the three etchings she called, collectively, "Heavy Weather," hurricane Katrina had departed New Orleans just two weeks earlier, and the stricken area was bracing for another storm, already named Rita. Mehretu's three prints, with the individual titles *Local Calm*, *Diffraction*, and *Circulation*, are "about" hurricanes, but diving into the prints is only slightly scary. Like the albatross, we catch the currents, sliding, soaring, getting caught in an eddy of tiny marks, then pulling out, around, feeling the weight and differentiation of each line. We are neither at the mercy of this storm nor mastering it; we are in an accommodation with it.

Mehretu worked long hours every day for three weeks on the copper plates for the three prints, feeling her way with tools new to her, learning how to draw with sugar syrup for fluid, inky blacks and using an etching needle and engraving burin against the resistance of the metal. She started hesitantly, unsure, but soon found a flow, adapting a steady hand to the materials. Day after day she pored over the plates,

working precisely, her face and body full of the calm demeanor of concentration, often wearing headphones connected to an iPod.

In conversation, she spoke about her "characters" that build cities, socialize, civilize, go to war, and so on. I was reminded of my son, long ago at the age of twelve or thirteen, occupied for hours drawing what he called "plans for the next war" and making little popping and cracking and swishing sounds as he worked. I don't mean to imply that Mehretu's work is unsophisticated (the opposite is true). I would like to suggest, however, that it may be more straightforward than you are led to believe when you read what is written about it.

In her enormous, amazing, labor-intensive paintings, Mehretu layers freehand marks like the ones in the prints over fine map-like images of city plans, fortifications, architectural renderings of stadiums, and other diagrammatic material that has been traced from projections. Because of this, her work has been called "a new form of history painting." It is easy for art-writers to get absorbed in the meanings of the maps. Faye Hirsch, for example, in an article in *Art in America* (June/July 2004) titled "Full-Throttle Abstract" talks about "cosmic sweep [combined with] the cloaked allusions of a latter-generation appropriationism" and never gets around to ideas about abstraction. Douglas Fogle, in his catalog essay for Mehretu's 2003 exhibition at the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, interleaves his essay with black and white photo collages dominated by scenes of war and injustice (when you buy the book, the pages of photos



Circulation, 2005. Color hard ground etching with aquatint and engraving on *gampi* paper *chine collé*. Paper size: 35 1/2 x 46 3/4"; image size: 27 3/4 x 39 3/4". Edition 25. Printed by Dena Schuckit.

are uncut; I recommend you leave them that way). Fogle writes that Mehretu “has created perfect metaphors for the increasingly interconnected and complex character of the 21st century,” and I certainly don’t dispute him (I am a Mehretu fan). But this artist has only been alive since 1970. I ask for some restraint, lest we kill the albatross that flies so buoyantly through her work and tie it around her innocent neck. Despite the title of the show, “Drawing into Painting,” Fogle mentions drawing only to say it is an “often marginalized and undervalued medium.”

Julie Mehretu, however, has a great deal to say about drawing, not in the Walker catalog but in an interview with David Binkley and Kinsey Katchka on the website of the Smithsonian Institution (www.nmafa.si.edu). Mehretu finds drawing “investigatory.” She says that she does draw in her paintings, but “there are a lot of decisions I’ve made conceptually before I start to paint. I’ve done research about what is going to go into the painting in terms of architectural information, color, narrative, concept and other stuff and then there is the development of the drawing in the painting. Painting, the making of it, is just a much more complex process, whereas the process of making a drawing is a fresh take; it’s a very immediate thing.”

Taking a break from writing this essay, I leafed through an old issue of *Harper’s* (June 2005) and stopped at an illustration with energetic ink-drawn lines that resembled the sugar-lift lines in Mehretu’s prints. I located the caption: the illustration was a drawing

by Rembrandt! Below it was a fine, lightly-drawn image done with a camera obscura by another Dutch artist, and it occurred to me that if you overlaid that drawing with the Rembrandt, you would have some of the chaotic feeling of Mehretu’s paintings.

The *Harper’s* article was an interview by Lawrence Weschler with David Hockney, who has been studying the single-point perspective of projected drawings for years but who is now fully engaged with Rembrandt. Hockney compares Rembrandt drawings to classic Chinese painting, “moving with the viewer as the viewer scrolls through the scroll, recapitulating the painter’s own movement through the world,” and I think about Mehretu alertly drawing, building a world for her characters. Hockney talks about the “life-force” in Rembrandt’s drawing. “The full-laden brush, I realized, was very effective. It’s the most direct method of laying in a mark flowing from the eye, the heart, down the arm to the hand, through the tip of your instrument, everything flowing very quickly and seamlessly.” In Mehretu’s drawing of her characters even the fine lines are immediate, despite their precision. Weschler points out that “the whole point of Chinese art was its endlessly refined discipline,” and Hockney counters: “That’s no less true of Rembrandt. I’ve always known that to be able to be spontaneous you have to train and train, and then plan and plan.”

But Mehretu’s spontaneous characters are only part of her story. There’s also the storyline, and the one-point perspective she mixes



Julie Mehretu in the Crown Point studio, 2005.

with the flat perspective of the characters. Even in the prints, which are akin to drawings—investigatory, unplanned, with no projected elements—some lines radiate to focal points. Al Held, the granddaddy of the concept of mixing spatial conventions in painting, likened the concept to a “three-and-a-half-legged stool.” It is unsettling, but it somehow feels like our world. Mehretu is not the only young painter working with that spatial concept, but she is the only one with her storyline: her African heritage (she was born in Ethiopia), her voracious interest in the news, her thrilling sense of “cosmic sweep.” This abstract art has subject matter. That is not unimportant, but (I believe) it is less important than what Hockney called the “life-force,” the way the mark “flows from the eye, the heart, down the arm to the hand” of the artist, and the consequent possibility that you and I can follow it in accommodation with the heavy weather of our time, gliding and soaring. To Julie Mehretu, in that regard, I say: So far, so good.

—Kathan Brown

In the Crown Point Gallery:

Julie Mehretu: Heavy Weather

January 14 – February 25, 2006

At the SFMOMA:

Ongoing

A large painting by Julie Mehretu is featured in the exhibition “Between Art and Life: The Contemporary Painting and Sculpture Collection.”

At the de Young Museum:

Crown Point Press: The Art of Etching

February 25 – August 27, 2006

Prints from the Crown Point Press Archive by Robert Bechtle, John Cage, Chuck Close, Richard Diebenkorn, Peter Doig, Hans Haacke, Sol LeWitt, Tom Marioni, Dorothy Napangardi, Nathan Oliveira, Laura Owens, Shahzia Sikander, Pat Steir, Wayne Thiebaud, Richard Tuttle and Fred Wilson.

The show highlights the prints illustrated in the upcoming book and DVD, *Magical Secrets about Thinking Creatively: The Art of Etching and the Truth of Life* by Kathan Brown, published by Crown Point Press and distributed by Prestel Publishing. The book will be released in May, with advance copies available at the de Young Bookstore and at Crown Point Press after the opening of the exhibition.

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