

Overview



Julie Mehretu: *Unclosed* and *The Residual*
by Kathan Brown

In a lecture at the Frieze Fair in London at the end of last year, critic Dave Hickey told this story: he and his wife were at a dinner party in Los Angeles discussing movies with some movie people. “What I like about that movie,” Hickey’s wife said, “was that it had good values.”

“Good values!” replied a director. “Do you think that’s coming back?”

Dave Hickey thinks so. “If you behave well, if you behave correctly, if you make art that will still matter in 200 years, all you can lose is money,” he said in his lecture. He didn’t explain this (the lecture overall was addressed to art dealers, not artists), but it has brought racing thoughts to me. Whenever someone asks how we choose artists to invite to Crown Point, I say we look for people whose work has a chance to still be around in 100 years. Then

I get befuddled trying to explain how anyone can possibly guess at that. I usually say you can’t tell only by looking at the artist’s work, and that the prices being paid for it are of little relevance, but it’s hard to say more. Now that Hickey has mentioned it, I think I probably look for correct behavior. And what is that—for an artist?

Bulldog behavior, getting a hold of something and holding on especially if you’re not sure exactly what it is—worrying it, wiggling it, maybe throwing it up in the air and chasing it, not letting it get away but not pinning it down either. Julie Mehretu, in a lecture at the San Francisco Art Institute last fall, spoke of “the thing that I’m chasing” rather wistfully, almost as an aside. The next day in the etching studio she said of the print later titled *Unclosed*, “If I put too much more in it, it will become definitive. I want it to allude, suggest.”



The Residual, 2007. Color sugar lift and spit bite aquatints with hard ground etching, drypoint, and burnishing. 40¾ x 50¾ inches. Edition 25. Printed by Catherine Brooks.

Julie Mehretu finished graduate school in 1997, ten years before her most recent (and second) project at Crown Point. She told the students at SFAI that in graduate school she asked herself this question: "How do marks have anything to do with who I am?" She is someone who reads newspapers and serious books about the history of civilization. She delights in the ruins of ancient cultures that poke into cities: "the Roman Empire, the Ottoman Empire, Hagia Sophia, the desire to modernize." She is always aware of the luxury she has in being able to draw and paint rather than "living in a shanty and concentrating on surviving." In answer to a student's question about whether she is "an activist" she replied, "I think of myself as a person engaged in the world and trying to make sense of it."

Back in graduate school, she made a mark and then repeated it, making a pattern that she thought of as "a little community." She began to think that "a mark could be a marker of some kind of behavior, a social system," but it could not do that in isolation.

Marks have "agency." Combinations of them exist as symbols, signs, diagrams, maps, architectural plans and other talismans of our lives.

Mehretu keeps a "visual archive" of newspaper clippings and tries "making sense of them," she says, "by making marks." In her paintings, she traces migration maps, geographic maps, airport diagrams, city plans, architects' blueprints, and other patterns and plans both humble and grand and lets them interact with freehand marks of her own. "As marks collide they develop other marks and a community develops in my mind," she says. She makes very large paintings, and when their surfaces become saturated she pours layers of acrylic medium on top of what she has painted and creates new layers "like civilizations on top of each other." She says that "the architectural drawing gives one space and the intuitive marks give another. You can follow a narrative—maybe not the one I had."

Her prints and drawings are different. They are mainly,



Unclosed, 2007. Color hard ground etching with spit bite aquatint and drypoint. 40¾ x 50¼ inches. Edition 25. Printed by Catherine Brooks.

though not entirely, made up of intuitive marks. Because physical depth created by layers of acrylic is not present and the works are smaller than even the smallest of Mehretu's paintings, the drawings and prints have a spontaneous feeling, a *joie de vivre* special to themselves. You could perhaps say that the etchings are somewhere between the paintings and drawings in this regard, as Mehretu has created the etchings in physical layers by drawing on multiple plates printed one on top of the other. *Unclosed* and *The Residual*, the two large etchings in her recent project, each uses five plates.

"How to make the next painting is always the question," Mehretu says. "In between bodies of work in painting I make drawings and prints and then try to make sense of them and continue from there. I make drawings in my studio to investigate mark making that can inform the work, and prints operate the same way—taking apart and putting back together." She added that the first project she did at Crown Point "was really informative. A painting directly came out of the prints."

The new prints, on the other hand, explore an approach Mehretu has recently begun using in her paintings: erasing. "I'm excavating my own work," she explained. "The erasure becomes the action when you sand out part of the painting. The surface breaks apart like dust. There's a potential in that, I hope. I have a desire to wipe away and reinvent. Everything becomes specks or smudges and has to be developed again." And then she added, seemingly as an afterthought, "In New Orleans, Detroit, Berlin, you see that type of erasure happening." The afterthought made it clear that the prints came out of an approach to painting that came out of life experience.

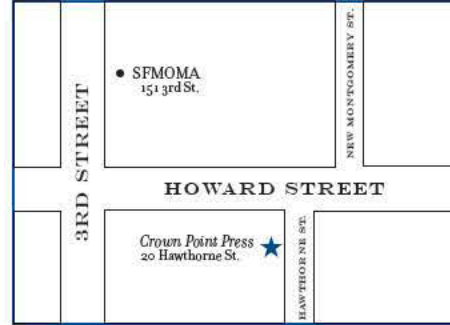
In the spring of 2007 Mehretu spent several months as a residency fellow of the American Academy in Berlin, an organization that invites distinguished artists and important thinkers in the fields of social science, politics, and the humanities to live and work in Berlin interacting with one another. Not only did Mehretu experience visually a great city destroyed and rebuilt in



Julie Mehretu in the Crown Point studio, 2007.

contemporary history, she was also in direct connection with big ideas about the world today. When she was at Crown Point she was reading a book about historical destruction, mostly to do with wars. “We have always lived inside fortifications,” she said to me. “War was the reason for cities. Maybe that’s why militarized marks come storming through my paintings.”

You can see that Mehretu is indeed engaged in the world and trying to make sense of it. And that is absolutely “correct behavior” for an artist so far as I am concerned. All art reflects who the artist is. What makes the difference between an artist who is chasing something and one who is content with self expression is that the world-engaged artist has a better chance to discover revelatory insights about the culture in which he or she lives. Artists who make such discoveries are the ones whose work can last 100 years or, to set more practical goals, can make a difference to their cultures within their lifetimes. Luck plays a part—the arrangement of circumstances,



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around the corner from the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. The Crown Point gallery and bookstore are open to the public Tuesday through Saturday, 10-6. Please visit us in person or online.

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being in the right place at the right time—but artists who make a difference in the long run generally do “behave correctly,” as Dave Hickey instructs, and lose nothing but money (sometimes not even that). Only a few artists in each generation keep for a lifetime their initial exploratory excitement in their work. I think Julie Mehretu has a very good chance to be one of the few.

In the Crown Point Gallery

The Cosmos: A Group Exhibition

Featuring Julie Mehretu's new etchings and including prints by John Cage, Terry Fox, Al Held, Anish Kapoor, Tom Marioni, Dorothy Napangardi, Judy Pfaff, Pat Steir, and Fred Wilson.

April 10 - May 31, 2008

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Layout: Sasha Baguskas

20 Hawthorne Street
San Francisco, CA 94105
crownpoint.com

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