

Media Information
May 8, 2025

The Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen presents Julie Mehretu's largest survey exhibition in Germany to date.

"KAIROS / Hauntological Variations" shows the range of Mehretu's artistic practice at K21 in Düsseldorf - including the original maquette of the BMW Art Car #20.

Munich/Düsseldorf. The exhibition "KAIROS / Hauntological Variations" (10 May to 12 October 2025) is the largest survey exhibition of Julie Mehretu's work in Germany to date. Nearly 100 works express the full range of her artistic practice, from her early, urban-inspired line drawings of the 1990s to her most recent, spectacular abstract paintings. Among the works on display is the maquette of the BMW Art Car #20 designed by Julie Mehretu in 2024, which is part of the renowned BMW Art Car Collection celebrating its 50th anniversary this year.

The Ethiopian-American artist Julie Mehretu is one of the most influential painters working today. Known for her immersive large-scale paintings reflecting on world politics, Mehretu has exhibited in the most prestigious biennials and museums throughout the world. Mehretu's work uses source materials that mark pivotal political events and historical sites. Through techniques like brushwork, line drawing, airbrush painting, and screen printing, these once-familiar images are transformed into abstract compositions. Through these abstractions, places and moments that define recent history—whether the Grenfell Tower fire in London or Saddam Hussein's destroyed palace in Baghdad—are pictured, dissected, atomized and interrogated.

"KAIROS / Hauntological Variations" features 25 paintings that measure up to 7.5 meters wide, range in date from 2001 to 2023, and show the chronological development of Mehretu's work. The exhibition further dives into Mehretu's conceptual thinking, showcasing works on paper and source material, which is exhibited alongside her works for the first time here. Also presented is time-based media made by Mehretu's peers inspired by her practice: the documentary "Palimpsest" (2021), capturing Mehretu in her studio; a video work by filmmaker Trevor Tweeten based on the album "Promises" (2021) by Floating Points, Pharoah Sanders and the London Symphony Orchestra; and an album by jazz musician Jason Moran.

Julie Mehretu artistically designed the 20th BMW Art Car in 2024, she developed the foiling for the BMW M Hybrid V8 as a remix of her painting 'Everywhen'. Her idea was for the vehicle to go through the painting and be affected by it. Over the next two years, Mehretu will be working with the BMW Group to organise the African Film and Media Arts Collective (AFMAC), a network for young filmmakers in

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five African countries. For the first time in the history of the iconic collection, an artist is developing an Art Car that goes far beyond the car as a pure art object. The maquette of the BMW Art Car can be seen in the exhibition and a film programme later in the year will show contributions by the artists involved in AFMAC.

The exhibition takes place in the anniversary year of the BMW Art Car Collection: in 1975, the iconic collection celebrates its 50th anniversary with the BMW Art Car World Tour, a concerted exhibition programme of the 20 rolling sculptures worldwide.

Mehretu's artistic career

Mehretu was born in 1970 in the Ethiopian capital Addis Ababa and fled with her family to Michigan, USA, in 1977 after the beginning of the military dictatorship under Mengistu Haile Mariam. There she began her art studies at Kalamazoo College in the late 1980s, spent a year at the Cheikh Anta Diop University in Dakar, Senegal, and received her Master of Fine Arts degree from the Rhode Island School of Design (RISD) in 1997. Interrupted by working stays in Berlin and artist residencies in various parts of the United States, Mehretu has lived and worked in New York since the late 1990s.

Influenced by her experiences of flight and migration, Mehretu's art has from the very beginning explored the upheavals and contradictions of history. In this context, she describes the large-scale works she has been making since the late 1990s as "story maps of no location." Borrowing from the visual language of cartography, they are palimpsest-like, overall compositions composed of many layers of ink and acrylic paint. As is readily apparent in works such as *Rise of the New Suprematists* (2001) and *Black City* (2007), the lower layers consist of fragmentarily composed topographies and cityscapes. Without identifying a specific location, the structures are based on historical, contemporary, and utopian architecture. They refer to buildings as sites of historical action and, for Mehretu, symbolize the power of dominant politics. Above them, in swarm-like formations, are the fine dots and lines of Mehretu's drawing vocabulary. The arrangement of these so-called "characters" (beings, figures, signs) is analogous to the ever-changing economic, social, and political events of the world.

Accentuated by explosions, smoke, and vortex-like structures, they suggest dramatic upheavals. The result is highly complex, layered imagery that makes the processes of over-writing history between past and future legible and tangible.

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From 2012 until today

Since the 2010s, Mehretu's work has undergone a significant aesthetic transformation. Initially, the backgrounds turned gray, with increasingly expressive markings covering more and more of the surface. In works such as "Conjured Parts (tongues)" (2015), the line drawings in the background disappear in favor of spray-painted forms of heavily manipulated, blurred photographs. These are appropriated from widespread media images associated with the rise of authoritarianism and white supremacy, the cruelty of civil wars and ethnic conflicts, catastrophic climate change, and emancipatory movements. They often show the vulnerability of people in the face of violence, but also their impressive capacity for resistance. If such images from Mehretu's archive, which has been steadily growing since the 1990s, once influenced the dynamics of individual formations on the upper layers of her works, they now provide the guiding material for her completely abstract compositions that fill the canvas. As vividly illustrated in works such as "Sun Ship (J.C.)" (2018), "Desire was our breastplate" (2022–23), and "TRANSpainting (recurrence)" (2023), Mehretu continually incorporates new colors and various painting and printing techniques. The resulting images often resemble calligraphy, graffiti, and even cave paintings, and where language reaches its limits, she processes scenes from world events into "visual neologisms."

The source for Mehretu's work

In Düsseldorf, a selection of the source material that Mehretu has been collecting since the mid-1990s and that serves as the basis for her works is being shown for the first time in an exhibition. The "Archive Pages" (1997), also on view in the exhibition, make clear that this archive material functions as a guiding atlas for her painterly gestures and signs. This series consists of fifty-seven photocopied images, some of which Mehretu has annotated with her "characters"—a deliberately reduced sign language consisting, among other things, of crosses, dots, and dashes. As drawn precursors and miniatures, twenty early works on paper also illustrate how Mehretu's large paintings developed layer by layer from the drawing. The comprehensive exhibition at K21 also includes a selection of Mehretu's monotypes. The forty-six sheets illustrate how the versatile medium of printmaking is a constant field of experimentation for expanding her painterly repertoire.

Last year, after a long period of planning, two prestigious major projects were announced. Mehretu designed a more than twenty-five-meter-high window for the Obama Presidential Center and created the twentieth BMW Art Car. Her work has been exhibited at, among others, The Museum of Modern Art in New York, the

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Centre Pompidou in Paris, the Hayward Gallery in London, the Louisiana Museum in Humblebaek, the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, and the Mori Art-Museum in Tokyo. She has also been represented at the Venice, São Paulo, Busan, Sydney, and Gwanju biennials, as well as dOCUMENTA (13), and has received major honors such as the MacArthur Award and the Medal of Arts Award.

Following exhibitions at the Kunstverein Hannover in 2007 and the Deutsche Guggenheim in Berlin in 2009, the Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen is proud to present KAIROS / Hauntological Variations, Mehretu's first institutional solo exhibition in Germany in over fifteen years. Featuring works from nearly thirty years, the exhibition demonstrates how, as a painter, she relentlessly counteracts every crisis with her inventive spirit.

The exhibition is curated by Susanne Gaensheimer, Director of Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen, and Sebastian Peter, Assistant Curator.

Programme**Press Preview:** May 8, 11 am**Press Conference:** May 8, 12 pm**Opening**

Friday, May 9, 7 – 10 pm, free entry

Artist Talk at 8 pm: Julie Mehretu in conversation with Kimberly Bradley (art critic, editor, and educator)

Further information on the exhibition's supporting programme can be found [here](#).

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The BMW Group

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In 2024, the BMW Group sold over 2.45 million passenger vehicles and more than 210,000 motorcycles worldwide. The profit before tax in the financial year 2024 was € 11.0 billion on revenues amounting to € 142.4 billion. As of 31 December 2024, the BMW Group had a workforce of 159,104 employees.

The economic success of the BMW Group has always been based on long-term thinking and responsible action. Sustainability is a key element of the BMW Group's corporate strategy and covers all products from the supply chain and production to the end of their useful life.

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