



Julie Mehretu, *Six Bardos: Transmigration* (2018).
31-color, 2-panel aquatint, 98 × 74 inches.
Image courtesy of Gemini G.E.L., LLC,
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Trace, Place, Politics

Julie Mehretu's Coded Abstractions

In a short treatise on drawing, philosopher Alain Badiou asserts that art fundamentally constitutes “a description without [a] place”¹—an elusive phrase that can confer endless meanings. In a general artistic context, we can consider a description without a place as a language and a set of terms (visual, material, and/or conceptual) that coalesce to form new and unfamiliar spaces or environments—settings that are tangential to, if not utterly unmoored from, our own quotidian world. Badiou distinguishes drawing, which is forged from the nothingness of a blank substrate, as one of art’s more evasive and placeless mediums: its complex interplay between mark, surface, and space embodies a “moveable reciprocity between existence and inexistence.”²

Interestingly, while this definition of drawing feels particularly well-suited to abstraction, Badiou declines to make any concrete distinction between abstraction and figuration, instead opting for the more metaphysical observation that “there is drawing when some trace without place makes as its place an empty surface.”³ This poetic summation struck me as a relevant framework for considering Julie Mehretu’s vast and cavernous canvases, which themselves teeter on a knife-edge of place and nonplace, being and nonbeing, and as such propose drawing as a porous site for the intertwining of the two.⁴ While in one sense this translates to a negotiation between figuration and abstraction, her work dives further than that still, carving a more oblique space where the

gesturally poetic and unequivocally political can exist simultaneously.

As evidenced by her impressive mid-career retrospective currently on view at LACMA, Mehretu’s works meld abstract, otherworldly marks—strikes, lines, scribbles, glyphs (all of which Badiou would characterize as marks without a place)—with diffuse yet meticulous renderings of actual, concrete places: ghostly facades of buildings in Berlin (*Berliner Plätze*, 2009), the contentious urbanism of Cairo’s Tahrir Square (*Cairo*, 2013), disembodied maps of Addis Ababa (*Transcending: The New International*, 2003), the sprawling geometries of metropolitan New York (*Invisible Line [collective]*, 2011). While in many ways, Mehretu’s oeuvre embodies Badiou’s poetic incarnation of drawing as a liminal, placeless place, her approach greatly complicates his premise. Foremost, by directly naming the geographic and architectural locations that she mines, Mehretu transcribes specific sites—not placeless ones. In doing so, she invokes the complicated histories, politics, and traumas wedded to each aforementioned place to impart additional layers of contextual information. This anchors her abstractions to the tumult of the real, physical world, rather than an unlocatable one. She generally communicates this information through her titles, detailed exhibition didactics, and other tangential texts—while, in the works themselves, opaque, undulating marks tend to obscure any overtly identifiable visual schema. In this way, her abstract, recontextualized canvases, otherwise seemingly removed from the politics of representation, assert engagement with geopolitical discourse, which ultimately positions them as Postmodern history paintings. As such, Mehretu’s work renounces abstraction as a politically neutral exercise, instead deploying its penchant for poeticism, expressionism, and metaphor as tools for interpreting and refracting difficult sociopolitical realities.

The massive, monochrome work *Transcending: The New International* (2003) is an early expression of this

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1. Alain Badiou, “Drawing,” *lacanian ink*, Issue 28, Spring 2007.

2. *Ibid.*

3. *Ibid.*

methodology. An abstract miasma of rushing marks overwhelms intricate yet disjointed cartographic representations of Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, and several other African cities (Accra, Ghana; Abuja, Nigeria; Arusha, Tanzania), incorporating everything from aerial maps and transit routes to architectural diagrams. In totality, the composition appears more as a blistering storm cloud or a teeming organism than any cityscape—clumps of blood-vessel-type lines snake through labyrinthine corridors, behind which slivers of crisp architecture peek through. While contextually removed and abstracted so as to conjure new, non-existent spaces—from interstellar nebulae to vague watery landscapes to molten explosions—the work’s urban renderings-turned-painterly marks nonetheless remain indelibly tethered to the real, terrestrial places from which they originate. In *The New International*, then, what initially reads as an abstract gestural tempest also presents as a tumultuous interpretation of the underlying existential turmoil that plagues postcolonial Africa, still tender from imperialism’s brutal wounds. By using Addis Ababa—both the artist’s birthplace and the capital of an African nation that resisted colonial occupation—as the foundation for a hybridized architectural matrix, the composition suggests a utopian megalopolis defending itself from a torrid onslaught of colonial terror. As a monumental, unnamable landscape, this work quite literally hovers between a mode of abstraction that eschews external referents and a mode of figuration that directly invokes the political conflicts of the extant world.

In later works, Mehretu incorporates photographic elements into her process, an inclusion that deepens her work’s sense of urgency and amplifies its political potency. In *Epigraph, Damascus* (2016), a towering six-panel, multi-plate etching (the technical complexities of which are a staggering triumph of printmaking), Mehretu begins with a photograph of a destroyed neighborhood in the war-ravaged Syrian city, which she then blurs in Photoshop

before layering with a scattering of found architectural blueprints. All of this she then renders in photogravure (a process that involves etching a photograph into a copper plate). A dense forest of inky calligraphic marks, ranging from wispy blurs to thick impastoed striations, form the next few layers, functioning as gestural masks that obscure the work’s photographic foundations. Each scroll-like paper panel is framed discreetly but installed flush against the next so as to form a long, horizontal landscape. The effect is one of a barely decipherable, apparitional city decimated by a plague of violent gestures, as if her marks were swarming locusts disoriented by the fog of war. Here, the title’s use of the word epigraph offers a linguistic clue as to the work’s purpose: an elegiac inscription on a historical monument or a brief literary preamble. These references dually suggest the city’s ending and its new beginning, each inscribed by violence and its aftermath. The work’s language—quite literally and through abstraction—memorializes an eviscerated city while also poetically mourning the unending savagery of interminable cycles of political violence.

While Mehretu’s use of found news photography translates as a gesture of direct political engagement, her act of blurring these photographs reads as a forceful shrouding of this association. The resulting images exhibit a similar tension between appearance and reality. As a momentary index of loss, the photograph of Damascus points to the aftermath of carnage while still being several degrees removed from it. As a strictly visual survey, it also fails to adequately account for the non-structural scars of war—in Damascus, even rebuilding besieged neighborhoods will not fill the gaping void of absence left by countless victims and the newfound dearth of young men, killed either as fighters or for garnering suspicion of being such.⁵ By imposing a Photoshop-induced blur, Mehretu not only further pushes the photograph into the depths of abstraction, but also materially eulogizes the absent and the unseen, lending

4. Here, my suggestion of Mehretu’s work as “drawing” specifically refers to her use of complex mark-making techniques that meld methods of drawing, painting, and printmaking while also employing processes of erasure and layering. Her large-scale canvases converse

in a hybrid language of drawing and painting that fluidly engages both modalities.

gestural weight to the cavities that violence leaves behind. In one sense, this act of blurring reduces unspeakable imagery to a purely formal, indecipherable state—a potentially ruthless aestheticization of trauma. Perhaps that's the point. The blur can also be read as merely referencing the collective manner in which disaster photography is consumed, swiftly registered on a constantly scrolling screen (which itself is peppered with a barrage of other media) before being even more swiftly disregarded.

Mehretu's approach of gesturally obscuring blurred photographs of catastrophe also recalls the post-WWII work of Gerhard Richter, who notably remarked that "[a]gony, desperation, and helplessness cannot be represented except aesthetically."⁶ The ineffable nature of mass trauma can elicit intimate and visceral aesthetic reactions. Many of Mehretu's works using found photographs drift from a focus on cartography to a narrower focus on more personal scenes of suffering, opting for the carnal immediacy of the body itself—a protest in the aftermath of Michael Brown's murder by a police officer in Ferguson, MO is featured in *Conjured Parts (eye), Ferguson* (2016); cluttered detention centers for children in California and Texas are pictured in *Haka (And Riot)* (2019).

More intimately scaled and less assuming than her aforementioned canvases (although still quite monumental), *Being Higher I* and *Being Higher II* (both 2013) each suggest flayed bodies maimed by violence. According to exhibition texts, they were each inspired by recurring events of police brutality in the U.S. as well as the unfolding revolutions of the Arab Spring in the Middle East. For both works, Mehretu dragged her own body across the canvas—limbs and fingerprints emerge from a hazy constellation of ashen ink, the frenetic movement of which recalls splayed viscera. The meter of abstraction here is more homogenous, limited as it is to the gestures put forth by human appendages alone. By using her own physical form to index the presence and absence of the body, she more

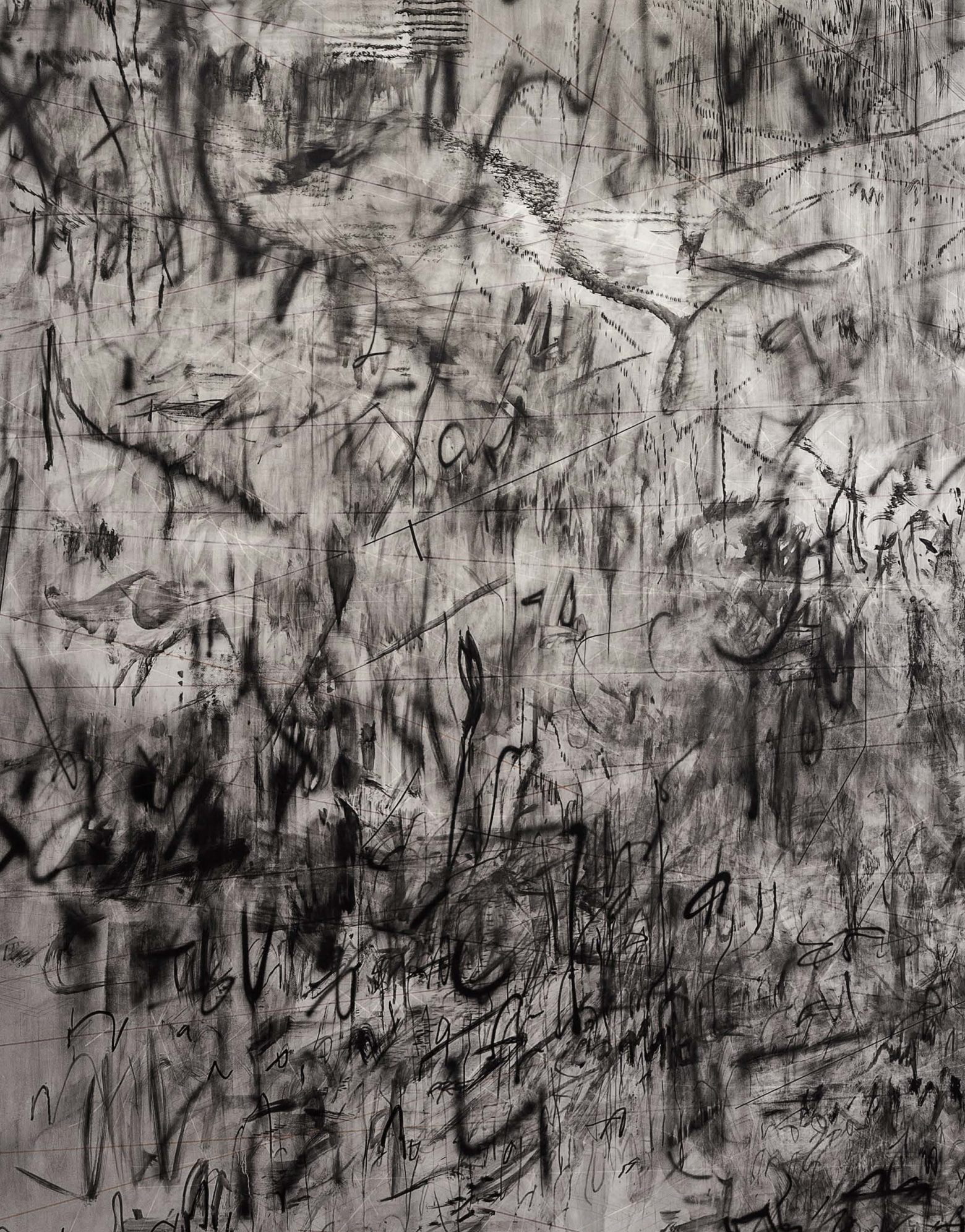
directly invokes the intimate anguish of bodies in peril, elevating her work's sense of political urgency to a state of existential crisis.

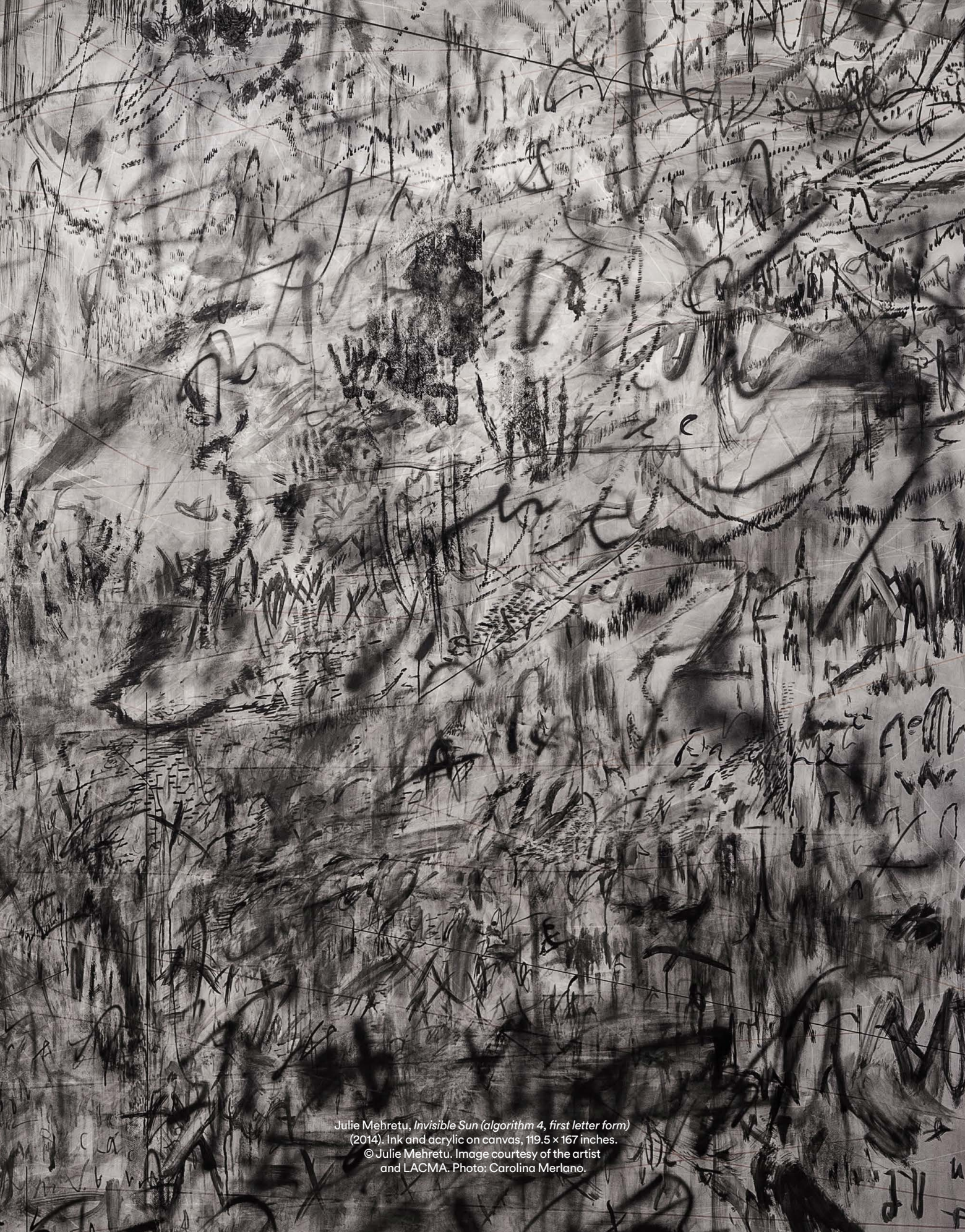
Being Higher I and *II*'s use of bodily abstraction as a tool for grappling with violence finds historical precedence in works by Yves Klein and David Hammons, both of whom similarly used experimental mark-making processes to reference bodies in the throes of trauma. While Yves Klein's notorious *Anthropométries* series may be the most obvious aesthetic counterpart to Mehretu's *Being Higher* works, his fire paintings from the early '60s offer a darker yet more apt comparison. Partially inspired by his experience of seeing the "Hiroshima shadows," the ghostly silhouettes of atomic bomb victims seared onto the city's cement surfaces by the inconceivable heat of the nuclear blast,⁷ the fire paintings' violent abstractions likewise point to bodies rendered viciously absent by war. (With their somber, shadowy human forms, *Being Higher I* and *II* are also jarringly reminiscent of the Hiroshima shadows themselves.) Not long after Klein's experiments, David Hammons used his body as an expressionistic tool, imprinting his skin and limbs directly onto paper to form agonizing compositions that spoke to the abject brutality of the civil rights era and the Vietnam War. In each of these instances, abstract representations of the body (and its absence) become, almost paradoxically, the most direct avenue through which to give form to the violent horrors of political conflict. In other words, in the wake of human destruction too abominable to adequately translate, figuration as a tool for depicting the human experience likewise breaks apart.

Julie Mehretu's canvases certainly exude this sentiment. While still embracing the liminal poetics of abstraction, her work suggests that the placeless, traceless, blank page or canvas can simultaneously function as an arena to interpret, isolate, and ultimately bear witness to historical (and contemporaneous) catastrophe. And although the artist herself has referred to drawing as "an activist gesture,"⁸ her abstractions

5. Vivian Lee, "What 'Victory' Looks Like: A Journey Through Shattered Syria," *The New York Times*, August 20, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/20/world/middleeast/syria-recovery-aleppo-douma.html>.

6. As quoted by Robert Storr, "Burnt holes, bloody holes, black holes: art after catastrophe," *Destroy the Picture: Painting the Void, 1949–1962* (New York: Skira Rizzoli, 2012), p. 244.





Julie Mehretu, *Invisible Sun (algorithm 4, first letter form)*
(2014). Ink and acrylic on canvas, 119.5 × 167 inches.
© Julie Mehretu. Image courtesy of the artist
and LACMA. Photo: Carolina Merlano.



Julie Mehretu, *Being Higher II* (2013).
Ink and acrylic on canvas, 84 x 60 inches.
Collection of Susan & Larry Marx. Image courtesy
Neal Meltzer Fine Art, New York,
© Julie Mehretu. Photo: Tom Powel Imaging.

avoid functioning as motivating catalysts for sociopolitical change; rather, her expressionistic marks emote the riotous and hopelessly fatal tensions that underwrite our current historical moment. As contemporary history paintings, her works ultimately infer the language of abstraction as political metaphor, with the breakdown of the picture plane directly correlating to the breakdown of civic order and the violent dismantling of our own collective moral fabric.

Jessica Simmons is an artist and writer based in Los Angeles. Her work and writing navigate the haptic, oblique space that exists between the language of abstraction and the abstraction of language.

7. Paul Schimmel, "Painting the Void," *Destroy the Picture: Painting the Void, 1949–1962* (New York: Skira Rizzoli, 2012), p. 195.

8. As quoted by Christine Y. Kim, "Julie Mehretu (A Chronology in Four Parts)," *Julie Mehretu* (New York: Prestel, 2019), p. 56.