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## ABSTRACT LANGUAGE

Painter Julie Mehretu (b. 1970, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia), whose art is included in “**Grief and Grievance: Art and Mourning in America**,” creates abstract canvases referencing social history. In her *Invisible Sun* series, begun in 2014, Mehretu creates energetic lines resembling hieroglyphics, or pictorial lettering, to address trauma and loss related to racial violence and revolution in the United States and globally. Mehretu starts her abstract paintings by selecting, enlarging and blurring media images of charged events, including protests and racial violence. She then builds the painting’s surface through screen printing techniques, acrylic paint, airbrushing, and erasers. By removing or erasing media representations that are often circulated and viewed as spectacle, Mehretu creates a new, abstract visual language to mourn and memorialize lives lost.

“...This whole series of paintings comes from this place of...trying to invent a new form of language...in a place I considered almost this third place of retreat where the architecture is completely fallen out. Any of the kind of dreams or symbolism or desires in architecture have disappeared and it’s really the language...trying to invent something else, and it’s almost frenetic and scrambling and...desperately trying to invent or maintain itself in a way. So they much more...operate like written language that’s not legible or...landscape or type of natural event or phenomenon that’s taking place and so these things fall into one another. It could be a vision into a city. It could be a...type of landscape and all of these types of different...marks come together to create this form of experience. But they’re much more situated in abstraction...”

**– Julie Mehretu, ‘Invisible Sun (Algorithm 7, Spell form)’, Marian Goodman Gallery, New York**

To learn more, you can **watch** a video or **listen** to a podcast of Mehretu speaking about her abstract painting as memorialization.

### KEY WORDS AND PHRASES

- **visual language:** a system of communication using visual elements in place of a written alphabet or spoken language
- **abstract:** art composed of shapes, forms, colors, textures, and techniques without clearly depicting people, places, objects, or events

- **mourn:** express sorrow after a loss (such as the death of a loved one, moving from one home, country, or school to another, or ending a relationship); enacting formal or informal rituals, often religiously prescribed, following someone's death
- **memorialize:** to remember and show respect for someone, through informal or ritual events or gestures; to erect a building, plaque, or statue in someone's honor

### START WITH ART: JULIE MEHRETU





- How would you describe the energy in these paintings? Do you see a sense of movement and excitement, or do the paintings seem quiet and still?
- The artist described her *Invisible Sun* paintings as a new visual language, with individual shapes and lines resembling letters or unreadable language. Do you notice any shapes or forms that remind you of letters?
- If you could hear this language, what would it sound like?
- What do you notice about the colors in these paintings?
- What feelings, moods, or tone do you experience viewing these paintings?

How can Mehretu's **abstract visual language** of lines and shapes inspire us to **memorialize** an event or experience by creating our own abstract drawings?

### LOOK AROUND

- Do you notice any graffiti, posters, brochures, newspapers, or magazines in a style that takes time to understand, or resembles a special code? How does this lettering resemble an abstract design?
- Where do you see shapes, lines, colors, or patterns in your home? What mood do these shapes and colors create?
- Can you think of a special experience, event, or person you would like to memorialize through an abstract drawing? Do you have any photographs of this event or person?

## **MAKE ART**

Let's make an abstract drawing memorializing an event, experience, or person by combining lines, shapes, and letters, taking inspiration from photographs (if available).

### **Materials**

- Paper
- Drawing media – pencils, crayons, markers or oil pastels
- Optional: photographs of the event or experience you wish to memorialize
- Optional: magazines or newspapers with bold letters you can cut out and collage onto your drawing
- Optional: glue and scissors to cut out and add letters

### **Making**

1. Once you've identified an event, person, or experience to memorialize, search for photographs.
2. If you find photographs, look at the shapes of the landscape, objects, people, and colors. Think about how to use some of these shapes and colors in an abstract drawing, and begin making a sketch using shapes and colors to represent feelings and memories.
3. If you cannot find a photograph, translate feelings and memories from the event into lines, shapes, and colors. Thinking about the energy and motion in Mehretu's lines, experiment with making thicker and thinner marks that express movement and convey different emotions. You might want to practice different types of marks on a separate paper before adding these to your final abstract drawing.
4. If you would like to include letters, you can write these or cut them out of magazines and newspapers. Similar to Mehretu's process of covering her source image, think about how to cover up all or part of the letters to make them unrecognizable – or recognizable to you, as a code, or expression of feelings.
5. As you finish your abstract drawing, think about how the colors, lines, and shapes contribute to the overall feeling and image.

## **REFLECTION**

- How did you select an event, person, or experience to memorialize?
  - As you worked on your drawing, did you have new memories? How did you translate these memories into lines, shapes, and colors?
  - Consider sharing your artwork with family members or friends. Ask them how they feel when they view it and what the feelings they think you were sharing.
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**IMAGES:**

Top: Julie Mehretu, *Rubber Gloves (O.C.)*, 2018. Ink and Acrylic on Canvas, 96 x 72 in (243.8 x 182.9 cm). Private Collection.

© Julie Mehretu. Courtesy of the artist, White Cube, London and Mari-an Goodman Gallery, New York. Photo: Tom Powel Imaging.

Bottom: "Grief and Grievance: Art and Mourning in America," 2021. Exhibition view: New Museum, New York. Photo: Dario Lasagni. (featuring works in Invisible Sun series by Julie Mehretu). Julie Mehretu, *Invisible Sun* series.

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