

Geography is Biography

Plate 1 from the portfolio Landscape Allegories, Julie Mehretu

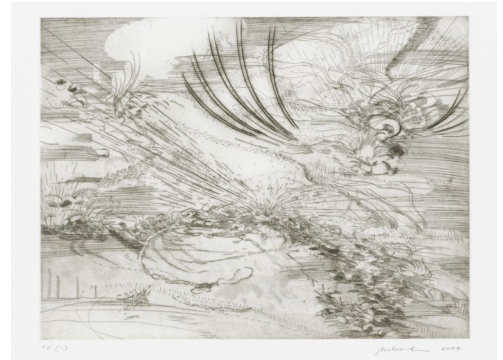
Migration, a fundamental aspect of human history, has shaped societies and cultures across the globe for thousands of years. Whether voluntary or forced, the movement of people from one place to another creates fresh narratives and opportunities for both joy and pain, resistance, and resilience. For painter and printmaker Julie Mehretu (born 1970), migration is a key theme in her portfolio, or series, *Landscape Allegories*. This work addresses themes like identity, cultural history, geography, and personal narrative. For the artist, printmaking is a layered process, both literally and metaphorically. In several of the compositions of this series, she overlaid architectural plans, natural imagery, and maps to create a single picture. She calls the dots, dashes, and squiggles that populate her works “characters” or “migrants” who must move to accommodate globalization.

Globalization has the potential to increase connections and interactions between different regions and populations around the world. Julie explores this on both a large scale and small scale, focusing on whole populations and individual migratory experiences. For the artist—born in Ethiopia, raised in the United States, and educated around the world—geography is biography. Her history is bound together by the moves, relocations, and migrations that have shaped her worldview and artistic practice.

Julie’s landscapes map the local stories, energetic sparks, and environmental impacts that emerge from migration and social movements. Within this series, figures, called “utopian fighters” by the artist, come together to form new communities: perhaps an allegory for many living beings on this planet.

Activities

- Have students reflect on their own collection of migratory experiences by creating a five-senses poem. First, ask students to think about the places they’ve been—these can be as local as the supermarket or a friend’s home or somewhere more distant or far away. Each student should brainstorm at least two locations. Using the format I SEE..., I HEAR..., I SMELL... I TOUCH... I TASTE..., have students create poems using one location per stanza. Share in pairs, then come together as a group to discuss something they learned about a classmate.
- Social movements are an important theme in *Landscape Allegories*. Invite students to share what they know about social movements, then create a classroom definition. Ask students to brainstorm something in their school community that they’d like to change. Vote to choose one social cause to rally behind as a classroom community and discuss ways to advocate for change. Document ideas and create a display board for the classroom or relevant location.



Julie Mehretu. *Plate 1 from the portfolio Landscape Allegories*. 2003–2004. Etching with engraving, drypoint, liftground, and aquatint. Sheet: 19 x 21 13/16 in. (483 x 554 mm). Plate: 11 7/8 x 15 13/16 in. (302 x 402 mm). Baltimore Museum of Art, Women’s Committee Acquisitions Endowment for Contemporary Prints and Photographs, BMA 2006.201. © Julie Mehretu and Gemini G.E.L.

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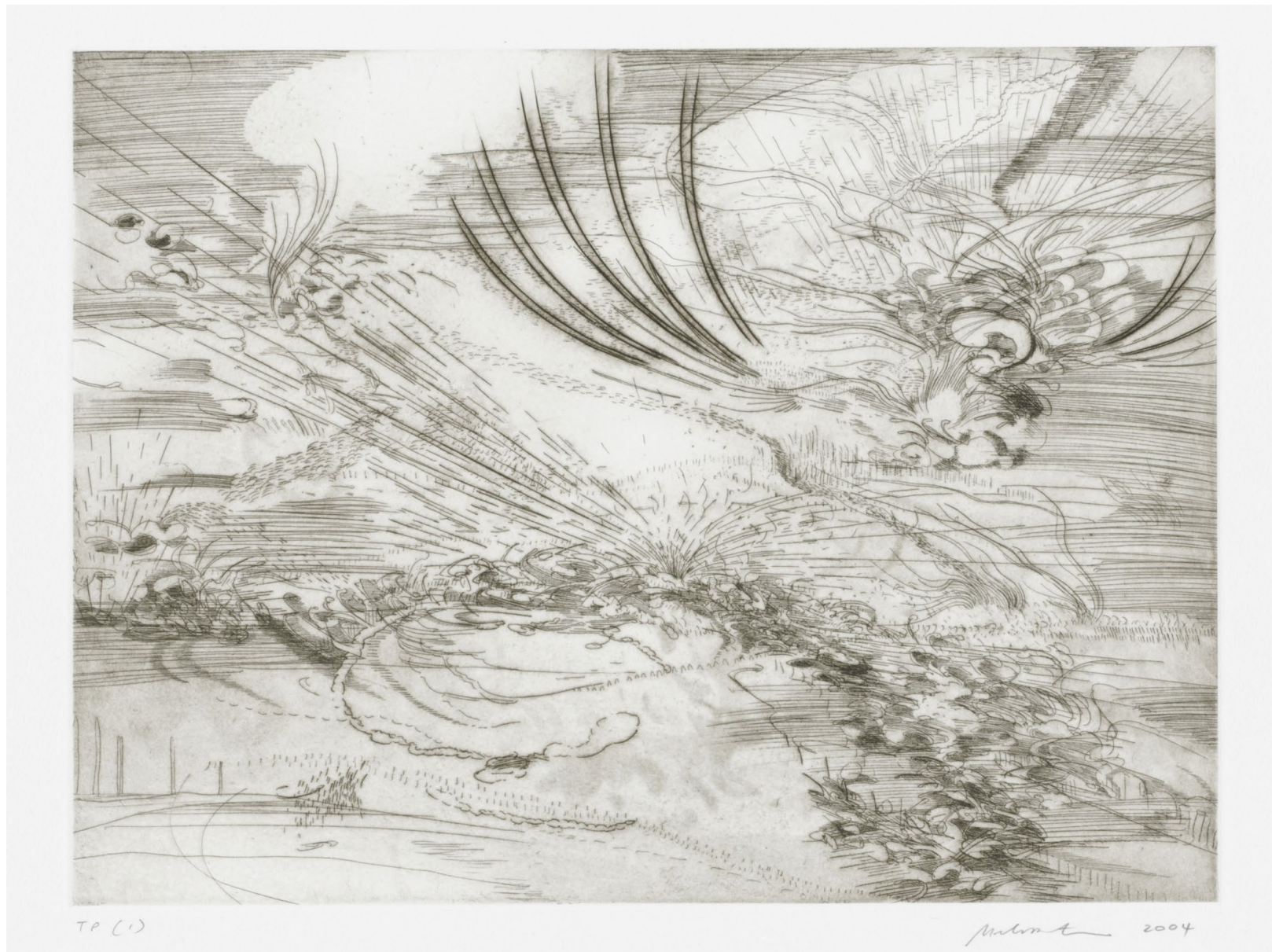


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