

FRONT Triennial engages globally renowned artist Julie Mehretu to paint mural on Cleveland Public Square's biggest, blank wall



CLEVELAND, Ohio — The biggest and most prominent blank wall in the city, overlooking Public Square and Old Stone Church in downtown Cleveland, will soon become a giant canvas for Julie Mehretu, one of the world's most respected and sought-after contemporary artists.

The FRONT International Cleveland Triennial for Contemporary Art, a 10-week, multi-venue exhibition of global contemporary art scheduled from July to October across Northeast Ohio this summer, announced the mural project Thursday.

The triennial said that it has engaged Mehretu, a New York-based artist whose work has been exhibited and collected by museums around the world, to paint an abstract mural by 2023 on a largely windowless south façade of the Standard Building, located just north of Public Square.

The tower was built in 1925 on the southwest corner of Ontario Street and St. Clair Avenue, with richly ornamented facades of cream-colored terra cotta tile facing north, east, and west, but with nothing but bricks on its south side.

"I gave it a lot of thought before thinking whether I would do it," Mehretu said earlier this week in

an interview with cleveland.com and The Plain Dealer. "When I went to visit the site, it became clear to me that it has to be something that can work in the city."

Mehretu plans to spend time over the next year laying plans to paint the 282-foot-high wall next year. This summer, she hopes to meet with Clevelanders to discuss the project. She'll also work with FRONT to obtain approval from agencies including the city's Planning Commission and to explore technical and artistic challenges.

Urban canvas

Originally built as an office building by the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers, the Standard Building was converted to apartments by Cleveland-based Weston Co., which bought the property in 2016.

The south façade was probably left blank as a fire barrier because the original builders expected another structure to rise immediately to the south, Suzanne Broadbent, Weston's marketing director, said in an email. The three-story office and education wing of Old Stone Church abuts the south side of the tower, leaving its upper 18 stories clear.

"We're really privileged and honored to be involved" in the Mehretu project, Broadbent said in an email.

The triennial, a nonprofit organization headed by founding CEO Fred Bidwell, a philanthropist, art collector and former advertising executive, has hired Brooklyn, New York-based Colossal Media, which specializes in hand-painted billboards, to work with Mehretu on the project.

Bidwell said that the triennial has budgeted \$450,000 to \$500,000 for the project and that Dealer Tire CEO and FRONT trustee Scott Mueller has pledged to pay for half of the project.

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"We're very confident we're going to execute this project," Bidwell said. "We're very excited about the opportunity to make a lasting public art impact on the community and for the community."

"Mic drop" for murals

Greg Peckham, executive director of the Cleveland-based nonprofit LAND Studio, which will also help manage the project, said the mural would qualify as the biggest example of public art in the city's history, and one of the largest projects of its kind in the U.S.

"This is like the mic drop for murals in this country," Peckham said. "I do not know of anything of this scale in a spot this prominent with an artist of this importance. This is going to be a national if not an internationally significant public art landmark. This is a big site that's been waiting for a big statement for a lot of years."

"How else do you respond to it, but 'wow!'" said Ward 3 Councilman Kerry McCormack, who represents downtown.

"To have this piece of art as the background for our building I think really has the potential to activate the imagination in some wonderful ways," said the Rev. Dr. Andrew McDonald, Old Stone's interim senior pastor.

Permanent installations of public art are a major component of the FRONT Triennial. In 2018, the triennial's first summer, it installed large murals on downtown Cleveland buildings based on designs by contemporary artists Odili Donald Odita and Kay Rosen, and by the late Cleveland "Op" Julian Stanczak.

The upcoming second edition of FRONT, delayed one year by the coronavirus pandemic, will include works by more than 75 artists from around the world at more than a dozen venues across Northeast Ohio. It will open with previews on July 14 and run through October 2.

Mehretu will organize a show at the Cleveland Museum of Art as part of this summer's FRONT. The exhibition will include examples of her own work and works from the permanent collection.

The artist's roots

Mehretu said she was excited to accept the challenge of painting a mural on the Standard

Building for reasons including her roots in the industrial Midwest.

Born in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia in 1970, Mehretu moved with her family to East Lansing, Michigan, seven years later to escape political violence following the 1974 overthrow of the Haile Selassie government by a Soviet-backed military junta.

Educated at Kalamazoo College and at the Rhode Island School of Design in Providence, Mehretu has had paintings sold at auction for up to \$6.5 million. Her biggest previous works include an eighty-foot-long mural in the entrance lobby of the Goldman Sachs headquarters building in lower Manhattan.

Mehretu said she's fascinated by Cleveland's industrial history, the racial segregation caused by white flight and suburbanization, and the city's history as a stop on the Underground Railroad for enslaved Blacks fleeing the American South before the Civil War.

"Those are the ideas that drew me," Mehretu said. "This is a huge scale. It's a huge time commitment. It's something immense, and if it stays there it will be a big part of the square."

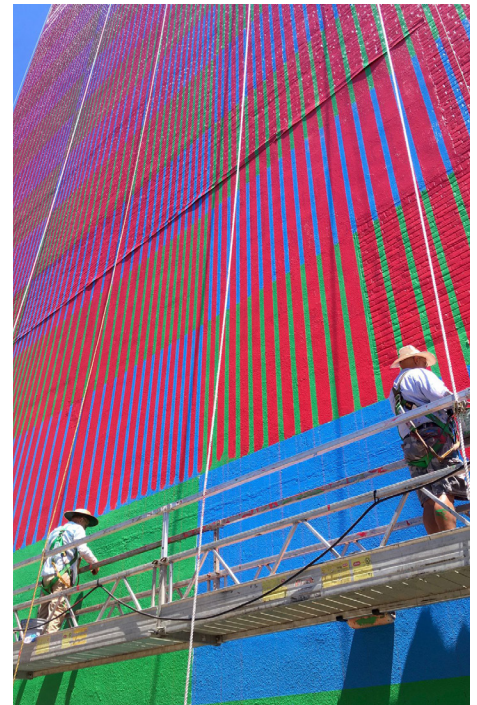
Mehretu said she's eager to engage Clevelanders over the summer in conversations over the project. She said she wants the mural to evoke "the ghosts of the past," but also to enable viewers to think about "how other possibilities exist."

Mehretu is known for complex abstract images that evoke vast landscapes and deep spaces, with networks of lines, patterns, and colors that appear to zoom across and through her images at high velocity.

She often bases her work on inspirations from history, literature, and other sources, without making any literal references.

In a large-scale print on view now at the Cleveland Museum of Art in the exhibition, "Women in Print," Mehretu used multi-layered strokes of color to communicate the Buddhist notion of the bardo, a period between death and rebirth when consciousness is detached from a physical body.

Mehretu used the word "ephemeral" to describe the effect she'd like to seek on the



Standard Building. And she's aware that the mural would be partially obstructed by the twin spires of Old Stone Church, built between 1855 and 1884.

She said she sees the mural becoming "a blurred image playing with the shadows of the church and shadows of the past. Hopefully, the experience would change under different times of day, and different kinds of light."