

Setting subdues effect of museum lobby art

One might have to look back more than a century, to the placement of Robert Aitken's sculpture of a nearly nude goddess atop a column in the middle of Union Square, to find a more audaciously conceived public unveiling of contemporary art in San Francisco. A pair of enormous paintings by Julie

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Art Mehretu, each 27 feet by 32 feet, has been installed in the Third Street lobby of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. A 2007 commission to Mehretu for a lobby piece of comparable scale cost Goldman Sachs a reported \$5 million, but the museum isn't saying what it paid for its bespoke works. It took the artist more than a year to make them to order.

Given the magnitude of such investments of money and time, one has to ask, though: Who had the idea to hang them

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Michael Macor / The Chronicle

Works by Julie Mehretu, titled "HOWL eon (I and II)" (2017), hang in the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art's lobby.



Michael Macor / The Chronicle

Julie Mehretu's 27 foot-by-32 foot paintings, "HOWL eon (I and II)" (2017), are partly obscured by columns in the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art lobby.

Lobby setting subdues impact of art

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in a stairway?

Mehretu is an artist in demand internationally, best known for pictures that layer architectural, topographic and other schematic images with more spontaneous and intuitive marks. Those canvases explode with a force that can't be rationalized or explained in words, and they don't take well to reproduction. But they can leave you reeling.

The new paintings, "HOWL eon (I and II)," are not in the sweet spot among Mehretu's best. They lack the breakneck velocity, the percussive impact for which her work is celebrated.

That, however, is one critic's opinion, subject to history's long-term verdict. What is more objectively clear is that any energy the pictures might contain is obscured — no, sucked out — by their setting. Hung high above our heads on walls divided by an eccentric staircase, they are, depending on where we stand, either too far away to be immersive or too close to allow a full scan.

Massive columns support-



San Francisco Museum of Modern Art

The second of Mehretu's commissioned SFMOMA paintings, in a way that it will never be seen in the lobby of the museum.

ing the entire hulk of the building interrupt all but sidelong views. Those stairs zig into sight lines, then zag past significant details. Given the height from floor to frame, they might as well be photomurals or projections, for all the handwork and technique we can enjoy.

Unable to properly see the

works from any single vantage point, we are left to view them in bits, then assemble the pieces in our imagination. Rarely is a cliché so apt: We see them, in their entirety, only in the mind's eye.

Not that most visitors will be aware of the problem. There's a whole unstudied genre of Lobby Art, to which

the new Mehretu paintings are here consigned. The Lobby Painting complements the architecture: high-class wall covering to set a soothing mood. If noticeable at all, it is because it is likable.

Lobby Art operates the same way in a museum as it does in a high-class hotel or corporate entry hall. Think of museums you have visited (or Google the phrase "museum lobby"). How many present art in the entryway more memorable than the Metropolitan Museum of Art's spectacular flower displays? (Though not every institution has a Lila Acheson Wallace to permanently endow such a program.)

I suspect there may be more to SFMOMA's new lobby works than we are invited to see. Hints of human figures and body parts among the freehand scrawls demand that we look more deeply. Atmospheric mists, punctuated by woody tangles and floating geometries, suggest Mehretu had Northern California much in mind, and that she embraced the challenge of responding authentically. To unravel all that

would require a kind of interaction with the works not possible currently.

I wrote recently about the Vaillancourt Fountain, a San Francisco landmark loved and hated with equal passion. All would probably agree that from across a plaza its ragged concrete forms are unsettling, though whether that is a virtue or a vice is open to debate.

At the same time, anyone can see that when the water is running between long droughts of official neglect, it entices both the curious and the insensible to bounce from one dry spot to the next among its tangled spouts. As with the fountain itself, the article attracted furious response, both in favor and against, distanced and engaged.

The likelihood for SFMOMA's new acquisition is that it will be ignored, like so much wallpaper. The best case is that it will be merely liked.

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