

AUTOMOTIVE

# With BMW, artist Julie Mehretu finds beauty in the process

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*Per the Ethiopian American artist's participation in BMW's Art Car initiative, Ms. Mehretu will also team suits for an upcoming racing event. Image credit: BMW/Andr Josselin and Tina Paffen*

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By ZACH JAMES

German automaker BMW is granting the public a closer look at its 20th Art Car project.

Ahead of the official unveiling in May 2024 at the Centre Pompidou in Paris, Ethiopian American artist Julie Mehretu is floating her version of the vehicle-turned-canvas initiative started in 1975. Joining a legacy that includes the likes of American sculptor Alexander Calder and global phenom Andy Warhol, Ms. Mehretu leaves her mark by giving digital audiences unparalleled behind-the-scenes access to her process.

"The prospect of competing in a BMW Art Car at the 24 Hours of Le Mans is an additional incentive for the entire M Motorsport team to prepare the BMW M Hybrid V8 as perfectly as possible for this big stage," said Franciscus van Meel, chairman of the board of management at BMW M GmbH, in a statement.

"In the 100th year of the race's existence and 25 years after BMW's last victory at Le Mans, winning there with a BMW Art Car would be the greatest possible success for all of us."

## **Driving inspiration**

Ms. Mehretu is utilizing her signature abstract style to pay tribute to past program participants.

Her plan for the model she will customize a BMW M Hybrid V8 racing car prototype involves applying large-scale digital paintings to the vehicle's livery as a film wrap.

The complete picture has yet to be shared with the public, but early-stage rendering and images featuring neon spray paint, dotted grids and photographs suggest a focus on dynamism.

"It wasn't until after going to the 24 Hours race in Daytona last year that the idea of how to approach the BMW Art Car really crystallized," said Ms. Mehretu, in a statement.



*Ms. Mehretu is utilizing her signature abstract style to take the 20th Art Car in a new direction. Image credit: BMW/Andr Josselin and Tina Paffen*

"I was thinking about Frank Stella's grid and how this could also be a shout-out to former BMW Art Car artists," she said. "And I kept thinking of this painting in my studio that I had just finished and the model of the Art Car was in my studio and I thought maybe we can try to have the car move through this painting."

The German Race Spirit team will drive the Art Car at this year's 24 Hours of Le Mans racing event in France. They are working closely with Ms. Mehretu on the design, having also collaborated with American artist Jeff Koons on the 17th edition of the effort.

Nods to American painter Frank Stella's signature grid pattern, which appeared on the second-ever version of the "rolling sculpture" in 1976, are present in this year's piece.



*Multilayered art is the key to the 3D application. Image credit: BMW/Andr Josselin and Tina Paffen*

Although she pays homage to those who came before her, Ms. Mehretu is also paving her own path. The one-of-a-kind wrap features a three-dimensional look for the first time in the Art Car's history.

"The creative play of what you can do in this new three-dimensional space and how many imaginations and inventions are played out to build it is highly instructive," said Ms. Mehretu, in a statement.

"It is not just the car itself but the designers and their deliberations as well as and foremost the drivers and their desires and aspirations which make it become this place of dreams where painting, conceptual art, aerodynamics, speed and aesthetics can participate."

### **Home circuit**

Ms. Mehretu's automotive sculpture will be fully revealed for the first time at the Centre Pompidou in Paris on May 21, 2024, before competing in the 24 Hours of Le Mans just a few weeks later on June 15.

Then, as announced in July 2023 ([see story](#)), the Art Car will tour the globe in 2025. It will be exhibited publicly at museums and art platforms internationally.

Following this series, Ms. Mehretu will embark on a nine-month trip in Africa, hosting eight workshops to uplift local artists. Creating her own lane, the artist's enduring commitments and connections could stand the test of time.



*Art from the workshops will be showcased alongside the vehicle at the Zeitz Museum of Contemporary Art Africa in Cape Town, South Africa. Image credit: BMW/Andr Josselin and Tina Paffen*

Within luxury, artistic collaborations mark well-tread ground. Fellow luxury car manufacturers have begun or continue to roll out respective engagements with creative fields.

Most recently, Italian automaker Lamborghini and Italian motorcycle manufacturer Ducati teamed up to present hand-painted models at Bologna Art Week ([see story](#)).

Others such as German automaker Mercedes-Benz have shone the spotlight on alternate forms of expression ([see story](#)).

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