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Project Review: Michele Mattei: *The Grids of Winter; Motherboards: Our New Bloodlines; and My Cyborg Life*

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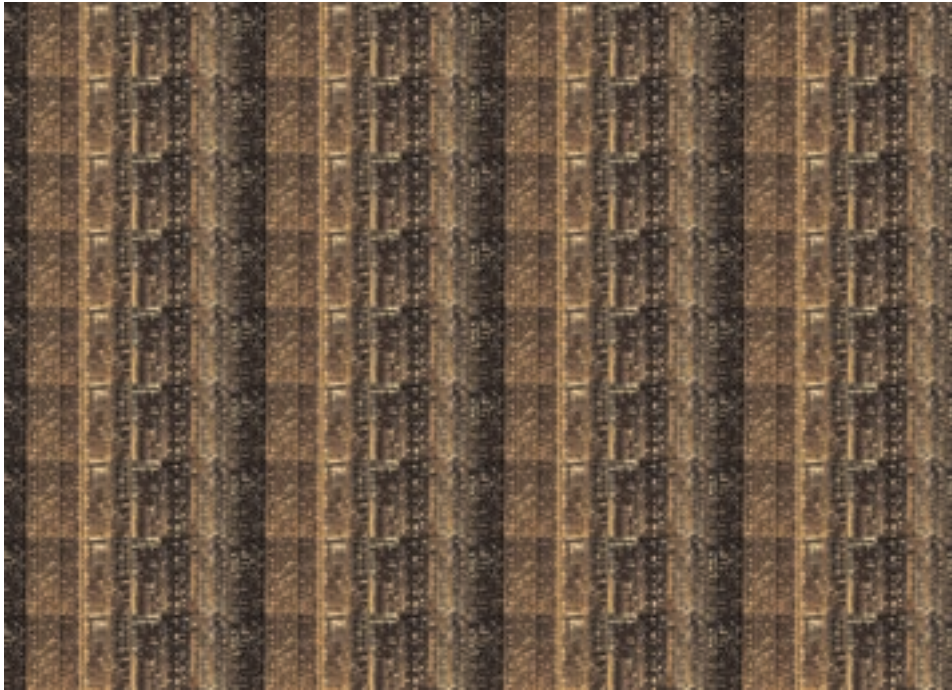


IMAGE 1. *Golden Spleen* (inspired by Baudelaire's *Le Spleen de Paris*) from the series *The Grids of Winter* (April–May 2020) by Michele Mattei.

During the COVID-19 Spring of 2020, French-born, Los Angeles–based photographer Michele Mattei began to contemplate what it meant for people worldwide to be shut inside their homes. She wondered about the multitude of lives confined behind closed windows and doors, which for her called to mind the opening passage of Charles Baudelaire's 1869 poem *Les fenêtres* (Windows), which she has loved since early childhood:

He who looks out at the world from an open window never sees as many things as he who looks at a closed window. There is nothing deeper, more mysterious, more fruitful, more shadowy, or more dazzling than a window lit by a candle. What we can see in

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daylight is always less interesting than what happens behind a windowpane. Deep in that dark or luminous aperture, life lives, life dreams, life suffers.¹

Thus inspired, Mattei sought to give form to what she describes as “the macro and the micro”: panoramic, nocturnal visions of the urban environment in which tiny specks of light each signify a human presence. Reaching into her personal archive of photographs taken around the world—in Hong Kong, Singapore, Beijing, Buenos Aires, Los Angeles, and elsewhere—she assembled images of buildings illuminated at night into repetitive, rhythmically complex, gridded structures, with the internationalism of the source photographs referencing the pandemic’s global reach. The geometrical framework of the buildings assumed symbolic resonance in what became *The Grids of Winter* series (2020). As Mattei wrote,

The grid, a system of order designed to bring harmony and logic to a chaotic world, has created a pattern of isolation ad infinitum. . . . Everyone inhabits their little square piece of real estate—one and all in their little boxes, isolated in large numbers, a dystopian world of concrete and steel, where communication has ceased to exist and where Zoom grids replace the warmth of human contact. The grid, a symbol of harmony, has become a prison.²

The photographs in the series are large (the horizontal pieces measure approximately 40 x 55 inches) and Mattei envisions them larger still—of monumental scale and possibly also as projections—so that we as viewers are absorbed into the warp and weft of her tightly woven tapestries. When seen from a distance, the photographs appear in fact to represent great swaths of fabric. It is only when viewed from up close that abstraction gives way so that the forms of the buildings and the thousands of pinpricks of light emanating from the individually illuminated apartments are revealed. Despite their suggestion of fabrics, the images do not seem flat, but dimensional, the composite buildings assembled into quasi-sculptural, accordion-fold patterns or undulating designs suggestive of basketry. Each photograph is distinct in color, structure, and feel. Staircases and other architectural features figure prominently in some, while others are more abstract. A few engage in abrupt shifts in scale, as in *Rhythmic Ostinato* (2020), in which two differently sized grids comprised of the same green and yellow window pattern form two concentric squares. Some of the images appear chaotic and are anxiety-producing; others are glimmering and jewel-like, offering a hypnotic sense of calm.

In several photographs produced later in the series, shortly after the murder of George Floyd in May 2020, the monumental figure of an androgynous Black model is absorbed into the rendering of the buildings through its transparency. In one of these works, *Only to Breathe!* (June 2020), the figure is seen from the back and in repose. In *Fighting for a New Dawn* (June 2020), a front-facing nude figure is positioned as at the start of

1. Charles Baudelaire, “Les Fenêtres/Windows,” trans. Emily Leithauser, *Literary Matters*, www.literarymatters.org/1-3-windows.

2. Michele Mattei, unpublished artist statement shared with the author, December 14, 2020.

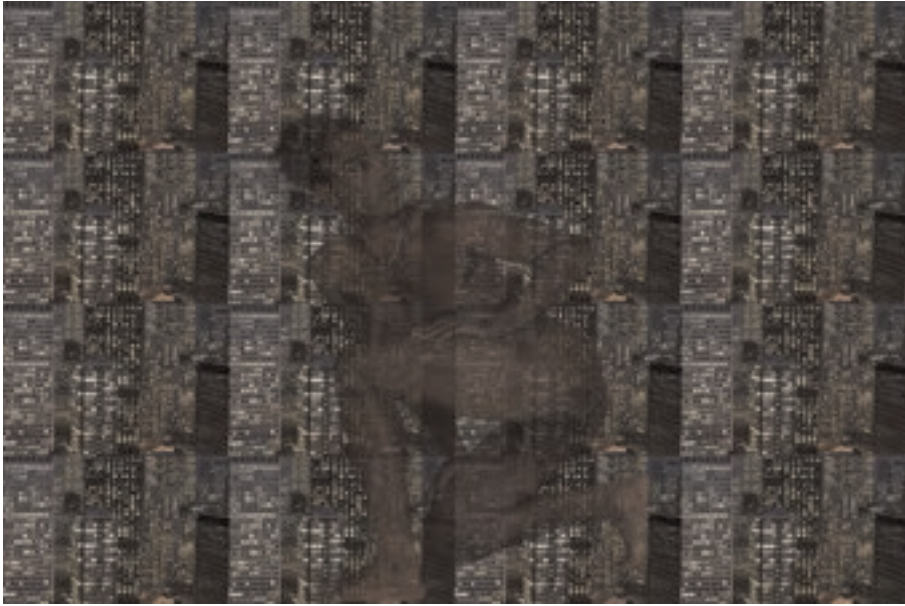


IMAGE 2. *Fighting for a New Dawn* from the series *The Grids of Winter* (April–May 2020) by Michele Mattei.



IMAGE 3. *Melodic Riff* from the series *Motherboards: Our New Bloodlines* (August–September 2020) by Michele Mattei.

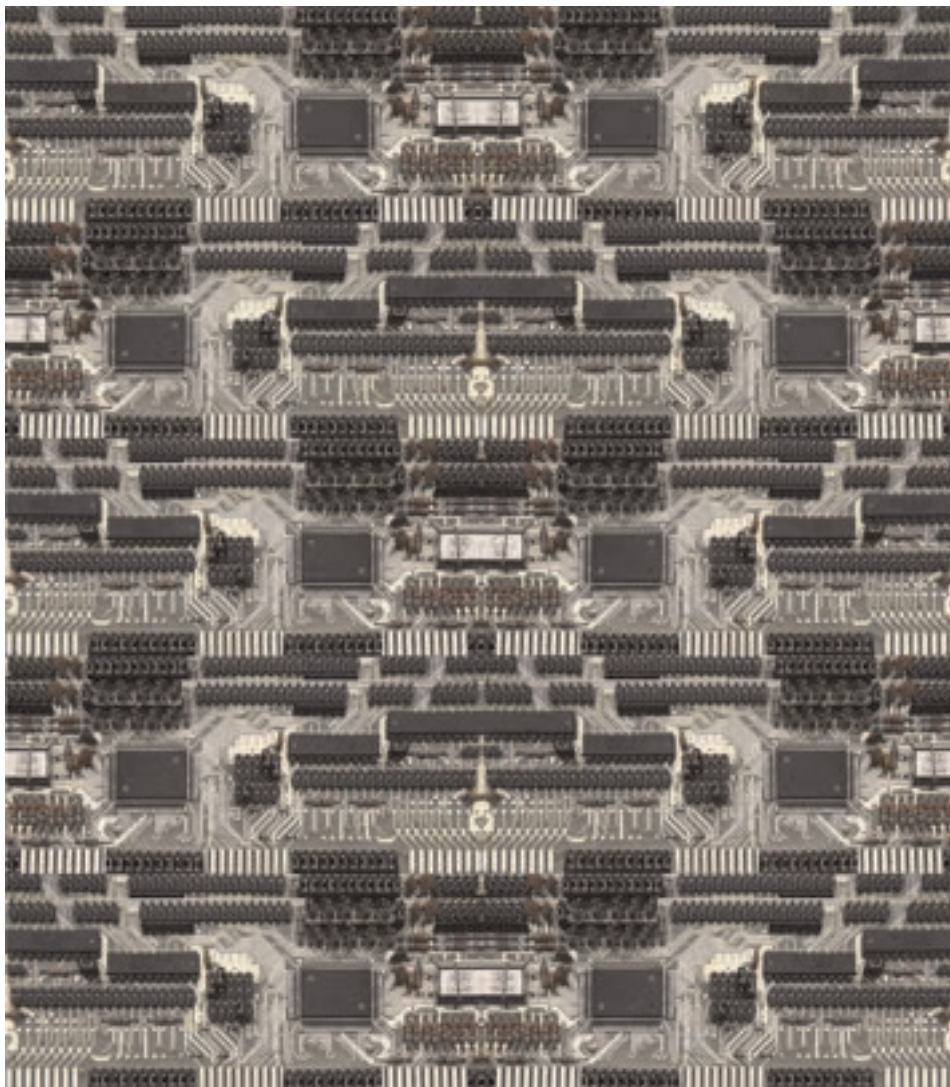


IMAGE 4. *Variation on a Theme* from the series *Motherboards: Our New Bloodlines* (August–September 2020) by Michele Mattei.

a footrace, the body seemingly empowered and prepared to spring into action, gaze lifted upward and lips parted as if in speech. This figure is both embedded in and rising above the surrounding urban fabric. Mattei told me³ that the figure represents *parrhesiastes*, as described by Michel Foucault: someone who takes a risk and speaks the truth.⁴

3. Mattei in a telephone conversation with the author, December 16, 2020.

4. Michel Foucault, “The Meaning and Evolution of the Word ‘Parrhesia’” in *Discourse & Truth: Problematization of Parrhesia*, six lectures given at the University of California, Berkeley, October–November 1983, <https://foucault.info/parrhesia/foucault.DT1.wordParrhesia.en>.

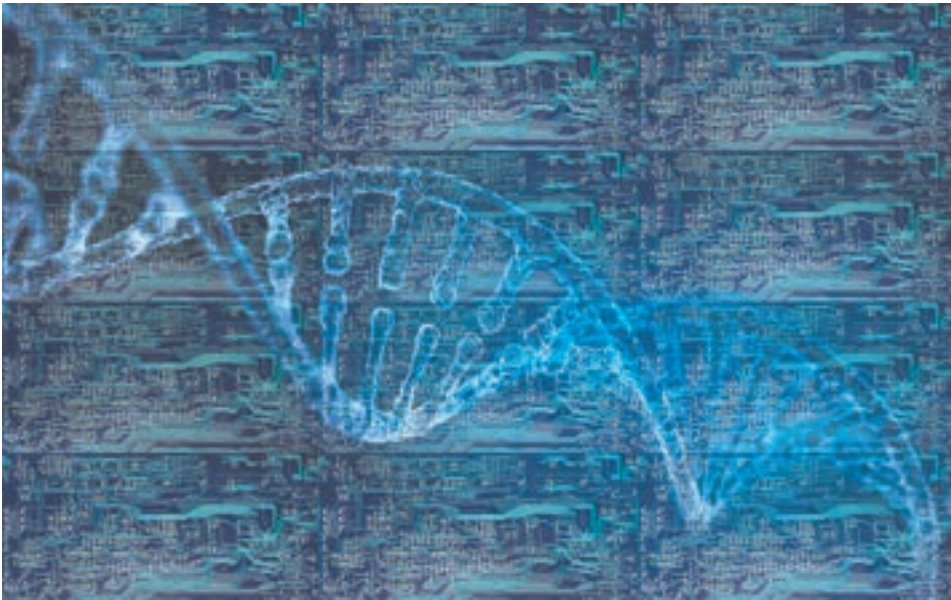


IMAGE 5. *Digital Mind* from the series *My Cyborg Life* (October–November 2020) by Michele Mattei.

As Mattei worked to produce the digital images that comprise this series, she began to consider the computer itself and our mutual dependence on its screens and networks for connectivity to the world outside. Having in the past replaced the motherboard of her computer and remembering its intricate, gridded structure of integrated networks, which echoed that of the buildings in *The Grids of Winter* photographs, she disassembled an old computer that sat in the corner of her studio. She photographed the infinitely complex network of cells, chips, and wires found within, repeating the individual images in gridded formats to again form ornate and wholly gorgeous tapestries. Some, like *Melodic Riff*, evoke wallpaper patterns of bygone eras; others suggest futuristic landscapes. The image titled *Variation on a Theme*, as Mattei acknowledges, resembles an aerial view of the formal gardens of Versailles. Although the works of this series vary widely in format, palette, and mood, each captures the buzz, hum, and sizzle of the electrical currents that give power to computer networks. Mattei titled the series *Motherboards: Our New Bloodlines* (2020).

Mattei's subsequent series literalized this concept in a dynamic pairing of the human with the machine. In the photographs of her final body of work made in 2020, *My Cyborg Life*, images of brain cells, neural pathways, the nervous system, and DNA strands are superimposed upon those of the motherboards. The word and very notion of “mother board” here assume heightened and ambivalent significance, as these works conjure up comparisons between human and artificial systems of interconnected networks. Both are capable of growth and change. While the machine was built by humans, its capacities far exceed our own, and so our dependence on “mother” grows. In contrast to the fixed, repeated images of the computer's innards, the human pathways are unpredictable,

PROJECT REVIEW

irregular, and often frenetic, the lines and forms curving, arcing, and reaching through and across space, in a manner seemingly expressive of yearning. This does not, however, connote human frailty, but the opposite: heroic strength and dominance. For the moment, we remain in control. Mattei's juxtaposition of these contrasting interior worlds results in stunning, otherworldly landscapes that we nevertheless recognize as our own, both now and as we move into an uncertain future.⁵ ■

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5. For more of the artist's work, see <https://michelemattei.com/Artist.asp?ArtistID=40910&AKey=5WF4SWYM>.