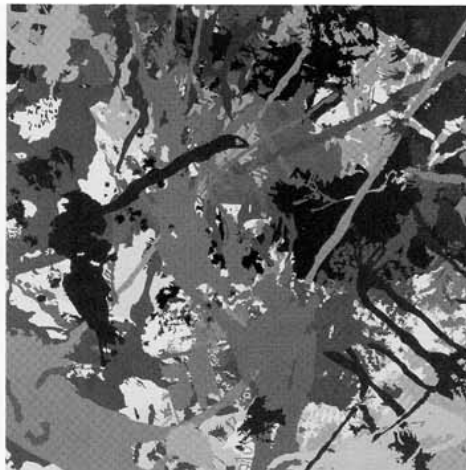


## INGRID CALAME

JAMES COHAN GALLERY

Everyone who follows contemporary painting knows the peculiar method by which Ingrid Calame makes her work—for others, let it be said that it has to do with transcribing stains found on city streets and sidewalks, then overlapping the resulting forms—but does anyone really care? What seems to matter is this: The paintings incorporate the random and arbitrary (and possibly also what used to be called “the object”) within a practice that nonetheless requires finical accuracy; there is a degree of almost mindless repetition and filling in involved, but the resulting forms are unpredictable and uncategorizable. Pictorial structures are irregular and full of detail, like a certain kind of Abstract Expressionism, yet there are no free gestures here. Everything is a rendering of a found shape, and the painter’s touch is not warm and expressive but cold and precise.

One’s awareness that the shapes have been rendered instead of occurring spontaneously and directly in the application of paint means that these works have a very different sense of internal scale than those of a precursor like Jackson Pollock. The direct Abstract Expressionist gesture means that each pictorial element represents only itself, and therefore the representation and what is represented are of equal size. This size, in turn, can always be experienced in relation to the scale of the human body. But with shapes that have obviously been rendered, the form could be smaller, larger, or the same size as its referent; therefore the viewer has no stable sense of the forms’ scale—among themselves or in relation to his or her own body. And furthermore, since Calame’s paintings show their layering overtly, with certain shapes clearly in the foreground and others pushed back to various depths—unlike a Pollock poured painting where, ideally, the weave of the lines of color resolves itself to a uniform texture without “holes”—they communicate a feeling of depth, of space, that is nonetheless immeasurable. There is something scary about these paintings: They’re



Ingrid Calame, *Bb-Aaghch*, 2003,  
enamel on aluminum, 60 x 60”.

tangled and energetic and you don’t know where you stand with them.

To note all that is still somehow to remain caught within the spell of method. Yet it is significant that Calame’s new paintings are much stronger than those she last showed in New York three years ago, although presumably made the same way. What escapes method, of course, is color. In these paintings it always feels dense, concentrated—its hardness and opacity signifying not resistance but latency, as if within each color a tremendous reserve of the same lay waiting to be released, later, in the mind. (Libby Lumpkin once remarked that Calame “analyzes colors the way dogs analyze smells.”) Paradoxically, Calame’s brilliance as a colorist may be most forcefully manifest in two monochrome works, a pair of excerpts from a much larger project she’s described as a painting “too big to be seen”—two spaces whose walls were almost entirely covered by twelve-foot-high Mylar sheets painted with her usual stain shapes but in lime green only. They somehow give a sense of all the potential color that’s been subtracted from the space even as they immerse the viewer in the immense quantity of the one color that is there.

—Barry Schwabsky