

## Ingrid Calame

### Tracing up to the L.A. River: Frog Town Turf War

It is no small claim for Ingrid Calame to dub *Tracing up to the L.A. River: Frog Town Turf War* her most "personal, naked, and aerobic" wall painting to date. A veteran of architecturally-scaled commissions, Calame is accustomed to the public exposure and physical demands of creating on site. For her site visit to ICA last summer, she arrived equipped with a binder full of preliminary sketches and calculations. Although her work may appear straightforward, it combines techniques as old as the Renaissance and as new as the latest computer-assisted drawing technology. Before brush ever dips into paint, there are patterns to plot, then stipple and pounce onto the wall. The paint itself is a commercial brand called One Shot because it covers in a single coat. Calame works with assistants—at ICA, the talents of wall painter Gibbs Conner were called upon, along with others from the installation crew—whom she directs, like members of a film crew, and works alongside.

In other words, there is a lot at stake in the production of this work and years of experience have taught Calame the necessity of treating each commission like an equation. Factoring the constant contingencies of time, space, and money, she attempts to figure out the variables, namely, the scale and complexity of the image itself. For instance, a recent, intricately filigreed work done in Korea came out to two hours of labor per square foot. It would be sheer folly to embark on such a work given ICA's 400-square foot space: you can't cram eighty days of art work into two weeks. Not that her formula is infallible, or that she still doesn't routinely push her work to the limits. "Look I can do something that will kill me; I don't want to do something that will kill you; but probably whatever I do will kill us both," she joked, while unrolling the sketches she had drawn up in her studio. The sketches called for a relatively simplified approach and were annotated with lots of numbers and personal calculus. We took these drawings along to the ramp—and there, like several artists who have confronted the vicissitudes of this daunting and dramatic space before here, Ingrid Calame changed her mind.

Since the mid-1990s, Ingrid Calame has been tracing the contours of stains onto white gallery walls. The stains are lifted from sidewalks,

parking lots, roads, and ramp-ways. Some are puddle-like; others bear the force of impact, defined by direction and speed; still others are simply small seepages, drops, natural drip and mechanical drizzles. There are actual paint stains, too: graffiti, the mark of human hands. Once traced, every stain is annotated with the place and date it was recorded, and then filed away for future application. Over the years, Calame has assembled quite an archive of stains traced in Los Angeles, New York, Las Vegas, and most recently Seoul. Drawing from this archive, in the studio Calame selects individual tracings, and composes them in layers, which she then transcribes into colorful silhouettes. Drawn in pencil on paper, or painted onto sheets of aluminum, or the wall, the imagery is simultaneously layered and flat, graphic and painterly, abstract and representational. It refers to cartography, forensics, and the gestures of Abstract Expressionism, and resembles abrasion, erosion, evaporation, erasure, and inscription. It is simple yet complex.

At ICA the tracings come from the Los Angeles River, the steep cement embankment walls of which the artist was instantly reminded by the ramp. The pitch of the space also made Calame aware of how much the street encroaches into the ramp byway of its giant picture windows. She promptly determined to make her commission into something for, and of, the street by using the visual language most directly associated with it. Graffiti has often shown up in Calame's work, but its identity is usually obscured in the process of layering. This is where the nakedness comes in: Calame says that prior to her ICA commission she had never let individual tracings stand starkly on their own. But combined with her desire to play to the street, there was something intrinsic to these particular tracings that permitted Calame to make this move.

There is a turf war going on in this wall painting. Two gangs from the Frog Town area of Los Angeles are duking it out in spray paint—each graffitiing over the others' salvo of text. This visual shouting match yields just the picture Calame seeks to render through her art: indexical marks of "real world" activities accreting into an imagery of abstraction that is as systematic (the back and forth exchange) as it is subjective (the signs of hands and voices). Calame's own subjectivity is expressed



through formal decisions about composition and color. What makes this work especially personal, however, might have to do with her conception of it as a giant "scratch-off" drawing—the kind kids make by coloring a sheet of paper with watercolors, then putting a solid layer of black crayon on top, to scratch, or draw through. The reference puts a childish, vernacular spin on her laboriously indirect process of making art. At the same time, it gave her a way of working with unprecedented speed: colors were just rolled onto the wall without having to be plotted in advance. Overall, Calame completed this wall drawing in record time. Her decision not to over-paint in black, which struck her as too illustrational, led to a nice coincidence. Her deep maroon "scratch-off" layer approximates the color of industrial paint used to cover up graffiti in Philadelphia. (In Los Angeles, where buildings are not predominantly brick, they use shades of white to do the job.) Also coincidentally, around the time Calame was installing her work at ICA, Philadelphia's news was full of municipal backlash against Sony for an illegal ad campaign masked as graffiti that the corporation undertook in a low-income neighborhood. Closer to Calame's home is controversy over efforts to remove graffiti from the Los Angeles River and protect the riparian habitat that has floundered ever since the river was turned into a flood control channel.

Tagging, disputing, marking, are all signified by this graffiti wall drawing, which on one very basic level reads "Calame was here." And inasmuch as it is so declamatory of her art, the ICA commission also calls out the important role of framing. Calame, who studied film in art school, talks about her compositions as "viewfinders." This term underscores the representational nature of abstractions that are in fact taken directly from the outside world. (For her epic "Secular Response" series of works, specific pieces of architecture, such as the floor of the New York Stock Exchange, are used as viewfinders.) At ICA, she treated the windows as viewfinders to frame her composition in parts that float like pictures on the ramp's expansive white walls. Maintaining the relationship between wall, window and street is where things got athletic. Calame was constantly scrambling off a ladder to run outside to check her work and make sure that the parts of her painting were perfectly aligned with the frames of the windows. This image of her at work comes straight from cinema: the director on set, checking the

picture through the camera to make sure she is getting the right shot. During a talk at ICA, Calame described one of her student films as a structuralist ditty; about five minutes long, it shows the back of her father's head while he is fishing, then jump cuts to scratchy drawings by neighborhood children. Looking at her work through the lenses of the ramp windows, it occurs that whatever departures this commission represents—in terms of its visual immediacy and speed of execution—Calame's work is a picture of continuity. The thoughts inside the fisherman's head are no more fathomable than the graffiti in the ramp is truly legible; all are abstractions flowing, streaming, from some interior place to stain the surfaces that Calame frames in her art.

Ingrid Schaffner, SENIOR CURATOR

Ingrid Calame (b.1965, lives in Los Angeles) has had solo museum exhibitions at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Cleveland, OH, and the Kunstverein Hannover, Germany; and numerous solo gallery shows. Notable group shows include "Extreme Abstraction," Albright Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, NY; 2000 Whitney Biennial, New York; and "Color Me Blind!," Wurtembergischer Kunstverein, Stuttgart, Germany. She is currently at work on a large-scale public commission for the San Diego Commission for Arts and Culture for the entrance of the San Diego New Main Library.

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ICA's 92-foot long ramp connects the first and second floor galleries and is visible from the street through large picture windows on the museum's facade. Ingrid Calame is the eighth artist to create a temporary work for the space, as part of a series of commissions that began in 2000.