

Welche Thiere gleichen ein-
ander am meisten?



Kaninchen und Ente.

We gain knowledge of the world through a process of trial and error.

As thought becomes something, an object, an idea, a concept, we judge its accuracy or fitness; if it is deemed invalid or otherwise unworthy, from this one thing, thought might become something else. Thought in painting has similar capacities, yet the stasis of the medium and its support make it difficult to sustain a sense of thought's mobility within a single work. Even in those many cases (and let's stay with painting) where trial and error is apparent to an observer, that observer will ultimately consider the painting as a discrete object, as the outcome of processes the artist may have aimed to separate out, or of meanings which might be parsed or contradicted in the painting itself. This is because painting, like thought, must become an object, in this case a work of art, before it can be considered in the first place. To convey a sense of thought's mobility in painting is, then, an almost paradoxical task. Can painting, a static medium on a fixed support, convey a sense of dynamic arrest—a sense, at one and the same time, of thought's tendency to configure into an object and its capacity for perpetual mobility?

In our time the method of trial and error, captured in the childhood game of rabbit-duck [Figure 1], finds a more complex and uncompromising postmodern echo in the "in-between," the indeterminacy of signs, the idea of "the text" as an all-encompassing universe without clear centers, peripheries, or even boundaries of sense and meaning. Evoking the ebb and flow of meaning in a de-centered universe, these postmodern signatures



FIGURE 1 [TOP]
Rabbit-Duck cartoon
Originally published in *Fliegende Blätter*, October 23, 1892, p. 147

FIGURE 2 [ABOVE]
hoo-koo—koo-koo
enamel paint on aluminum, 72" × 72", 2003

posit mobility as foundational for thought, and they emphasize the play of thought rather than its outcome. For all they tell us about thought's relation to the world, the method of trial and error and these postmodern notions fail to address thought's capacity for synthesis. In synthesis, a thesis and its negation are held together, suspended in a new object of thought. The word "synthesis" not only invokes a process of bringing elements together, it also suggests a whole greater than the sum of its parts.

A constellation is a synthesis of dynamic arrest. Like a force field, a constellation is at once an actual object, a structure with its own elements and contours, and a radiant field, a space through which energy bounds and rebounds perpetually. When conceived as a conceptual space, a constellation is neither rabbit nor duck, thesis nor antithesis, but a thought figure that might allude to either on the way to becoming something else, entirely. In Ingrid Calame's constellations, thought's mobility is not only indicated, it is sustained in state of dynamic arrest [Figures 2-3].

Calame's works of art have very often been described as maps. Yet, maps tell of a territory that is the artist's practice to defy. Maps generate meaning by making the perceptible legible. In the artist's constellations, meaning hovers in and through the visible, not so much generated as set in motion. Where a map is systematic, yielding knowledge of its charted territories, a constellation is a dynamic aggregate, an unstable synthesis of elements yielding no certain outcome or fixed meaning.

In the 1860s, the French poet Charles Baudelaire noticed that the new experience he called "modernity" brought with it an urban type, the *flâneur* or stroller, whose steady gaze along the freshly-made boulevards of Paris brought modernity's features into view.¹ Calame, a contemporary *flâneuse*, stalks interior and exterior spaces for indexes of the inadvertent: the shapes made by stains, tire marks, and graffiti [Figures 4-6]. These she transfers to transparent Mylar sheets on a scale of 1:1, recording the location and date of each find. In the studio she selects tracings from her archive, reconfigures them by laying one atop the other, and assigns a color to the outline of each tracing. The configuration made by the palimpsest of transparent Mylar sheets determines the constellation of her final drawings, paintings, and wall works. Tracings from two locations are overlaid in the color pencil drawings and each trace mark is retraced in its own color [Figures 7-8]. In the move from drawing to painting, Calame considers the often dense areas of silhouetted line in the drawing for their overall shape, and she intuitively selects a color from that area of the drawing. Although the paintings are constructed from the drawings bit by bit, with one section at a time in view, the artist never changes a color choice once she has made it.² With the exception of the single-color wall works, Calame's color spans the continuum from lushly natural to patently artificial;



FIGURE 3 [TOP]
#180 Working Drawing
color pencil on trace Mylar, 88" x 136", 2005



FIGURE 4
Alisa Ochoa and Marcus Mitchell tracing on the Los Angeles River, 2005
Photo: Ingrid Calame

1
Charles Baudelaire, "The Painter of Modern Life" [1863], in *The Painter of Modern Life, and Other Essays*, trans. and ed. Jonathan Mayne (London: Phaidon, 1964).

2
Correspondence with the artist on May 18, 2007.

shifts in hue and value are raucously disparate, barely discernable, or brought together in those contrasts European Modernism has taught us are pleasing, beautiful [*Figures 9–13*].

The artist calls excerpts from her constellations “viewfinders.” If Baudelaire’s *flâneur* brought modernity’s features into focus, what does Calame’s process render into view? What might these positively striking, seemingly simple yet subtly complex works of art tell us about our own time? Through the viewfinder of Calame’s constellations, we see bits of the world that have lost their referential moorings—the traces of many places and no place at all. Employing color the way Giorgio Morandi used his bottles, the artist shows how repetition of an element “amplifies the imaginative response.”³ Set in relation to neither object nor meaning, here color is experienced in perception and imagination, in that territory before form Walter Benjamin called “the optical unconscious.”⁴ Calame’s onomatopoetic titles are her color’s counterpart in the realm of language.

3

Sean Scully, “Giorgio Morandi. Resistance and Persistence,” in *Sean Scully Resistance and Persistence. Selected Writings* (London and New York: Merrell, 2006), 10. I thank Lucas Reiner for bringing this wonderful essay to my attention.

4

Walter Benjamin, “Little History of Photography,” in *Selected Writings/Walter Benjamin*, vol. 2, 1927–1934, ed. Michael Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith (Cambridge: Belknap Press for Harvard University Press, 1999), 507–530.



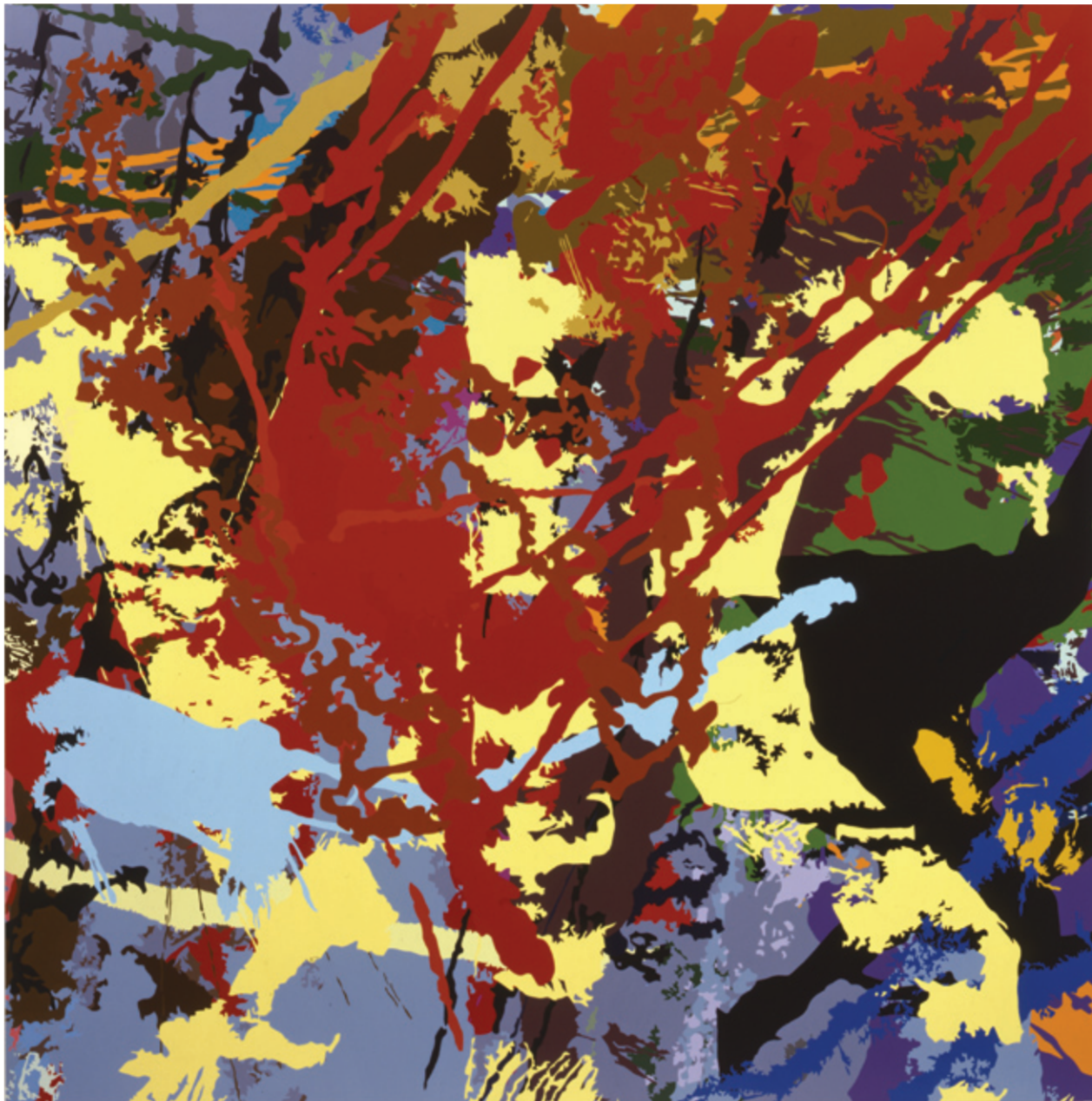


FIGURE 5-6 [OPPOSITE, TOP]
The tracing process at the Los Angeles River, 2005
photos: Ingrid Calame, Shelby Roberts

FIGURE 7 [OPPOSITE, BOTTOM]
Calame making a drawing in her studio, 2005
photo: Shelby Roberts

FIGURE 8 [LEFT]
Drawing on top of constellation in Calame's studio
photo: Shelby Roberts

FIGURE 9 [ABOVE]
ckckhckhckh
ruh ruh
72" × 72", 2002
enamel paint on aluminum

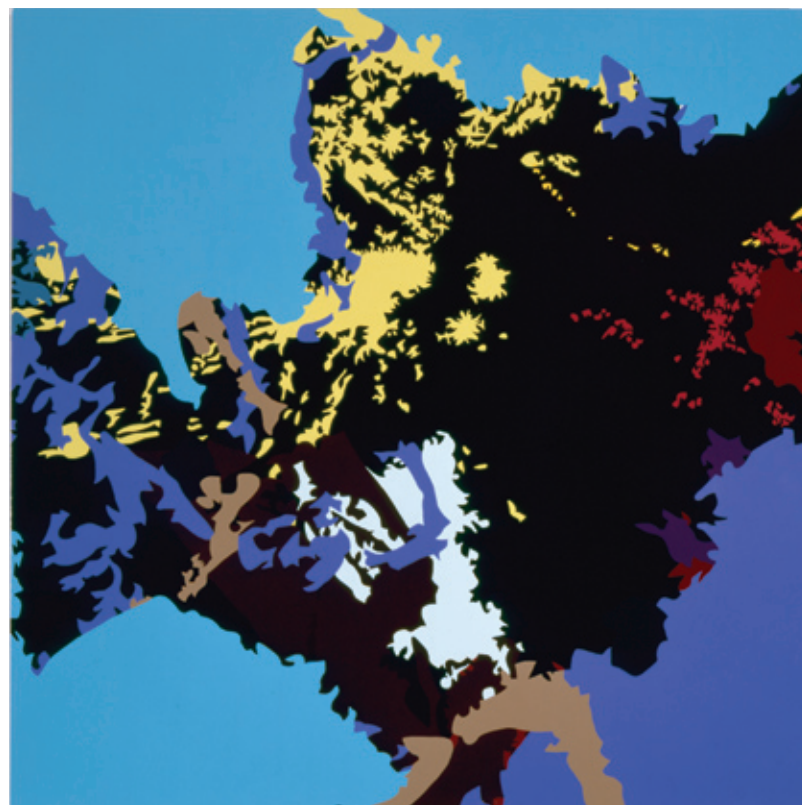


FIGURE 10
vuuUm—mum
enamel paint on aluminum, 48" × 48", 2004

FIGURE 11
Bb-Aaghch!
enamel paint on aluminum, 72" × 72", 2003

FIGURE 12
weh-HEY-y ʔUgo
enamel paint on aluminum, 24" × 24", 2004

FIGURE 13
Kong-Kung Kong-Kung, Kong!
enamel paint on aluminum, 48" × 48", 2003

FIGURE 14 [OPPOSITE]
Secular Response 2A.ʔ
enamel paint on Mylar, installed at Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, NY, 12'4" × 76', 2003

If a constellation is a fluid event, our viewpoint onto this event is equally unfixed. Simply put, Calame's art offers us no orientation: whatever is depicted there—an object, a web, an event—is not a there we can determine by scale or location. The artist's even application of flat, unmodulated color only exacerbates matters. Our point of view in relation to the image, like the elements in the work itself, do not add up: Is this perceptual or conceptual abstraction?; Is Calame's pictorial space optical or corporeal?; Are we meant to perceive color as surface, as a field of flat interlocking planes, or as depth, as unfathomable space?

These questions amplify in *Secular Response 1, 2, and 3*. Cutting tracings from one, exterior, location to fit within another, interior, one, the artist tackles the age-old conundrum of infinity: how, philosophers have asked, might we capture the vastness of the cosmos within the net of human reason; how, scientists have queried, might we transform the chaos of nature into a system of laws whose fundamental principles we might understand, and even replicate [*Figures 14–15*]? Calame's secular responses do not provide an answer. Instead, these projects call into question outside and inside, the local and the universal, as well as the assumptions, ideas, and concepts on which religious, economic, and scientific institutions rest. *Secular Response* is an intervention in the very best sense of this term as an artistic tactic: these projects implode categories and concepts. Through the artist's viewfinder we experience part and whole as mutually inflecting, and never entirely told apart. Religious faith, economic facts, and scientific laws may just be semantic complexities which we hew into fixed registers of meaning in order to make our world legible. As Calame's specific tracings of stains and her constellations' view of nowhere



FIGURE 15
Calame tracing in the NYSE, 2001
photo: Shelby Roberts





rub up against and overlay each other, we are reminded that representation and meaning are always abstractions [Figure 18 and pages 22–23]. Even maps, which profess an objective point of view, abstract from the given in order to make the perceptible legible. Constellations highlight the abstraction involved in the move from appearance to representation. In contrast to a map's static topography and fixed viewpoint, a constellation is an actual and conceptual territory made and remade through the synthesis of its labile parts [Figure 17]. Calame's paintings render the given into an unknowable object or view—still and explosive—whose time, an instant between past and future, has no apparent chronology.

Like the aesthetic moment itself, the experience of Calame's constellations results in no concept by which we might understand them.⁵ Instead of offering meaning, these works of art invite us to ponder the movement of thought itself—its penchant to configure into objects and its tendency for perpetual mobility. Focusing on a moment of synthesis, an instant of dynamic arrest, Calame brings into view the instability of the move from appearance to representation, or meaning. Maps propose to chart the perceptible world since, ostensibly, the world is like a map; language purports to describe the work of art since, supposedly, the work of art is linguistic, or like a language. Calame's constellations put the lie to such easy analogies, such comfortable slides toward meaning. They do so by reminding us that order might just be chaos arrested at any given moment. If instability lies at the foundation of thought's mobility, as the artist proposes, then representation, like meaning, will forever be an abstraction.

5

According to Immanuel Kant, the aesthetic experience offers no concept by which we might know works of art. See the philosopher's *Critique of Judgment* [1790], trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis, Ind.: Hackett, 1987).



FIGURE 17 [OPPOSITE]
Secular Response 3A (Tracings up to the L.A. River placed in the Clark Telescope Dome, Lowell Observatory, Flagstaff, AZ)
 installed at Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, Canada
 latex and enamel paint on wall, 2006, 16'6" × 17'5"

FIGURE 18
 Detail of constellation of Clark Telescope Dome filled with tracings from the L.A. River, in process
 photo: Ingrid Calame