

LOS ANGELES, JANUARY 2007. A sunny but chilly afternoon. I drive out to Ingrid Calame's studio, located in a nondescript industrial building in Echo Park. The front room is the usual cluttered office of a contemporary artist, with computers, printers, Fedex boxes, racks of rolled drawings, and a tiny kitchen where she makes us tea. The studio is something else. It's a big space, roughly 20 by 40 feet, with light coming in from a series of high windows. There are a few paintings in progress on the walls, but the main event is the floor: an uninterrupted expanse covered with a sea of overlapping drawings. Calame calls these quasi-random arrangements of drawings "constellations," and indeed their bewildering variety evokes the expanse of the night sky. Studying the floor more closely, you peer through layer after layer of tracing paper, and a different metaphor comes to mind. It feels like swimming or snorkeling in the clear waters of the Caribbean, where

you can see to the bottom, but the image is distorted by the rippling net of sunbeams refracted through the waves.

Here and there, across the floor, Calame has selected a segment of the overall "constellation" to become a specific composition. Positioning a sheet of Mylar atop the chosen area, she uses colored pencils to retrace the multiple layers of imagery, assigning a different color to each layer. The drawing, in turn, becomes a painting.

Calame's paintings look at first glance like the work of a younger, more joyous Jackson Pollock. A casual viewer might assume that they had been made by dripping lines and pools of paint onto a horizontal panel. However, the apparent liquidity of Calame's marks does not derive from her actual working method: she uses brushes to apply enamel paint to aluminum panels with small, measured strokes. Rather, the liquidity is a characteristic of her source



FIGURE 1 [OPPOSITE]
Ingrid Calame's Studio, January 2007
photo: Ingrid Calame

FIGURE 2
Ingrid Calame at work on *From #258 Drawing*, 2007
photo: Shelby Roberts

material: the stains, drips, smears, and graffiti found on the sidewalks, streets, and embankments of the modern city.

The action painter of the 1950s was supposed to be a kind of existential hero, creating spontaneously in reaction to the blank canvas instead of reproducing an earlier sketch. In contrast, Calame works with the methodical precision of Donald Judd or Sol LeWitt. Her drawings are constructed by a careful process of tracing and retracing. The finished drawing is a kind of palimpsest: every layer is visible simultaneously, but is distinguished by its color from all the others. To make a painting from this drawing, Calame reverses this process. First, she transfers the composite drawing to an aluminum panel. Each layer of the design is then assigned a new color and a new place in the sequence. One layer at a time, she fills in the colors, transforming the bare outlines into a series of colored shapes.



NEW YORK, JUNE 2006. I invite Calame to take part in a panel at the Guggenheim Museum on Jackson Pollock and contemporary painting. She explains that her paintings of the late 1990s were based on tracings of stains from the sidewalk outside her Los Angeles studio. She would arrange these tracings into larger constellations, and then choose a section of the constellation as the basis for a painting. We discuss the way that the stains that provide the raw material for her work partake of the same “abject” character that recent critics have found in Pollock’s drips. The day after the symposium, Ingrid sends me a letter explaining that she began making tracings in the street because:

I was hit with the ever-presence of our mortality, and the almost equal human need to hide or not see it. Signs of loss and disintegration are everywhere on the street. I chose the street because I wanted a public parade of loss rather than private revealing of events. The stains tell more and less about everyday life and incident. Death doesn’t seem like only a giant cataclysmic event, but also incremental loss and transformation... I traced on the street intermittently for several months. Passers-by would ask me what I was doing and when I explained, they

would see the stains as if for the first time. I realized one day tracing a tiny stain that it was both like a Pollock spindly mark, and that it could be piss...Pollock’s drip paintings have their tap-root in everyone’s drips and splashes and incidental marks. His paint and canvas (or paper) are the stand-ins for those life marks...

When I saw the Pollock retrospective at the Modern and saw the room with the giant drip paintings, I thought there is a scientific or indexical quality to those paintings that make them both micro and macro documents. They look like they could be any scale—giant or tiny cosmoses—and yet they too are always 1:1 in scale. They document a finite space and time in a clear way. The span of Pollock’s arm and stick and back gesture, the height/distance he was from the canvas, the temperature of the day affecting the viscosity of the paint, the absorption of the weave of the canvas. It is a representation of a frozen moment in time.

My project, at the tracing stage, documents some of these very things in the pedestrian stains: heat of day, viscosity of fluid, aggregate of the cement palimpsest it has landed on...And of course being traced they are always 1:1 scale.



ECHO PARK, 2005–2006. The Los Angeles River runs through a channel about five minutes away from Calame's studio. It's a post-modern river, trapped between broad concrete embankments overgrown with patches of scrub. In the fight between nature and technology, technology seems to be winning. Over the course of 2005 and 2006, Calame and her assistants trace the graffiti and other marks on the concrete banks of the river. The graffiti are spelled out with big block letters. In the tracings, they lose their character as text, instead becoming large abstract forms. Elsewhere, curving loops of paint overflow into long drips running down the slopes of the embankments.

Calame's first drawings and paintings from the L.A. River series were composed by selecting constellations of traced marks, freely superimposed in the studio. The overlapping lines of a drawing like *#210* seem at first glance to recall the overlapping drips of Pollock's paintings. But there is a critical difference between the two artists' approaches, which becomes evident in Calame's paintings. Michael Fried observed that Pollock had liberated line from its traditional function as the contour of a plane or volume, turning it into an independent compositional element. Even in her drawings, Calame's lines remain contours. In her paintings, she transforms them back into colored planes. This dramatically transforms the appearance of her compositions. In the painting *From #210* [see pages 10–11], for instance, the silvery branching form in the top half of the composition forms a distinct layer, floating atop the other layers of the composition. The bluish form in the lower right-hand corner coalesces into a solid shape, obscuring the other contours visible in the corresponding area of the drawing.



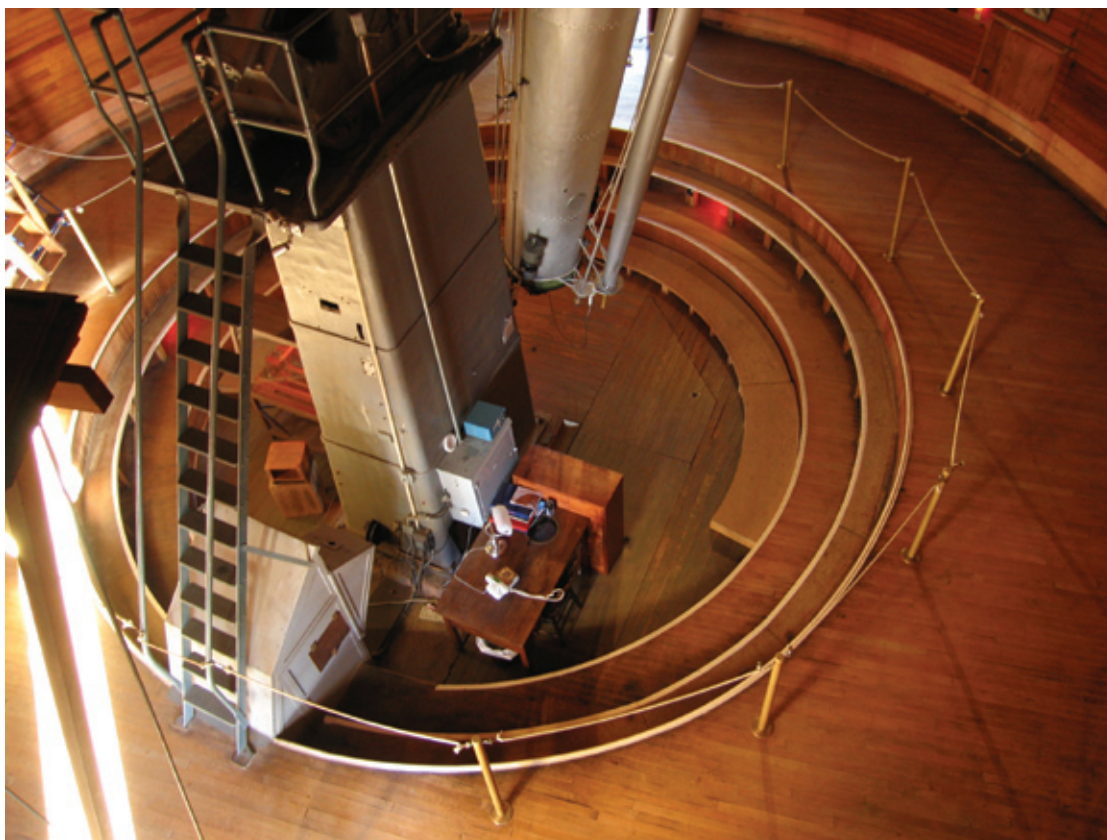
FIGURES 3–5 [LEFT TO RIGHT]
Calame and her assistants tracing on the Los Angeles River, 2005–2006
photos: Eri Koppers, Shelby Roberts, Ingrid Calame

FLAGSTAFF, NOVEMBER 2005. Beginning in 2000, Calame began to add another step to her working process, using architectural settings to provide a frame for her constellations. In the first work done according to this method, Calame and her assistants arranged tracings in the aisles of the United Methodist Church in Ardsley, New York. It was, as Calame called it, a “Secular Response” to the environment of faith, a synthesis of sacred (the church) and profane (the stains).

For her second “Secular Response” project, Calame chose a very different setting: the floor of the New York Stock Exchange. After repeated attempts, she was able to persuade the management of the exchange to let her bring

her team into the main trading floor of the Exchange over two weekends in early 2001. Her tracings were arranged in the spaces in, around, and between the figure-eight shapes of the trader’s posts with their banks of data screens. Over the long weekend, Calame and her team were able to retrace enough images onto long sheets of Mylar to provide the material for a 15,000 square foot drawing. She used a 12’ high by 80’ long excerpt of this drawing for a painting on Mylar that extended around three walls of a gallery in the Museum of Contemporary Art, Cleveland.

The problem with the method used for the first two “Secular Response” projects was that there was never enough time to make really detailed



retracings of the constellations laid out on the floors of her chosen spaces. For the third "Secular Response," done at the historic Lowell Observatory in Flagstaff, Arizona, Calame and her team lay out sheets of blank Mylar on the floors of the Clark Telescope and the Pluto Discovery Telescope Domes, and cut out their contours to reproduce the complex circular geometry of the observatory floors. The templates are then reassembled on the floor of Calame's studio, and used as the guidelines for new constellations of tracings done on the embankments of the Los Angeles River. At this stage in the process, the constellations look like topographic maps of a jagged, desolate landscape.



FIGURES 6-7 [OPPOSITE]
Calame and Eri Koppers making Mylar template in the Clark Telescope Dome at the Lowell Observatory, Flagstaff, AZ, November 2005
photos: Ingrid Calame, Patricia Johnson

FIGURES 8
A section of the Mylar template of the Clark Telescope Dome on the floor of Calame's studio, 2005
photo: Ingrid Calame

ONTARIO, SEPTEMBER 2006. Calame executes a section of the constellation from the Clark Telescope Dome as a large, multi-colored Mylar mural for an exhibition at the Art Gallery of Ontario. Meanwhile, sections of the same constellation serve as the basis for drawings such as *#231*. Here, we can see in more detail how the painting process transforms her compositions. The upper right-hand corner of *#231 Drawing* contains a pair of large loops drawn in bold red, floating over a web of pale, fine-scaled lines and enclosed by a broad, irregular oval drawn in orange. In the corresponding section of the painting, the loops are drawn with broad strokes of pale yellow, while the oval solidifies into a mass of dark taupe. The underlying web has virtually disappeared, except for a series of white forms, almost invisible in the drawing, that float in the shallow space between the yellow loops and the taupe oval. In both the drawing and the painting, the scale of the marks ranges from roughly an inch to a foot, but the painting seems weighted towards larger forms, because so many of the smaller ones have been eliminated. In both versions, the composition is organized around a series of broad curved bands, descending from left to right, that correspond to the template taken from the floor of the Clark Telescope Dome. But the creation of large areas of solid color in the painting generates a series of countervailing movements that rise rather than fall as the viewer's eye moves across the composition.

The curving forms of the Clark Telescope Dome are also visible in *#238 Drawing* and *From #238 Drawing* [see pages 24–25]. Towards the bottom of these images, you can recognize the long drips of paint running down the embankment of the Los Angeles River [see *Figure 3*]. Here too, the shift from transparent outlines to solid areas of color transforms the appearance of the composition. The large areas of red and yellow on the left of the painted version of *#238* correspond to forms that are virtually invisible in the drawn version of the composition.

Once assigned to the identity of upper layers in the painting, however, they emerge as irregular but definite forms, advancing in space and dominating the composition. An Abstract Expressionist painter like Pollock used automatism to plumb the depths of the unconscious, dripping lines of paint that momentarily spelled out ideographic signs and archetypal images, and then merged into a veil of abstract forms. If Calame's liquid contours and palimpsestic compositions seem to echo Pollock, her work nonetheless turns in the opposite direction: away from the inner self and towards the outer world. Like an archeologist of the modern world, she sorts through the detritus of urban

life, taking notes that will come together as the field reports written in her paintings. The architectural templates of the "Secular Response" series add new layers of meaning to her work. In the first series, the juxtaposition of stains and church pews suggests the range of human experience from the abject to the sublime. In the second, the empty contours of stock trading stations evoke the contradictory associations of commerce: insatiable desire, feverish risk-taking, glamour and envy. In the third series, based on the templates from the Lowell Observatory, the secular materials of Calame's tracings are elevated into sacred constellations, rotating along the tracks of heavenly spheres, describing random movements with scientific precision. The viewer must in turn become a kind of archeologist, learning to recognize one set of arbitrary forms as architectural remnants of a church, a second as remnants of the trading floor, a third as remnants of an observatory dome. Calame's paintings make us into connoisseurs of the everyday, savoring the differences among the infinite variety of accidental marks.



FIGURES 9, 10
Mylar template and part of the constellation of the Clark Telescope Dome filled with tracings from the L.A. River, Calame's studio, 2006
photo: Ingrid Calame
photo (opposite): Emily Joyce



INDIANAPOLIS, OCTOBER 2006. For her newest project, “Traces of the Indianapolis Motor Speedway,” Calame and her team trace the rubber tire tracks and skid marks from the home of a quintessentially American sport, combining high tech and true grit, quiet concentration and ear-splitting noise.

Shortly afterwards, she describes the experience in an e-mail to the painter David Reed, who was her teacher at the California Institute of the Arts in the mid-1990s:

The majority of the marks I found were located in the Pit—where the cars stop for 30 seconds to refuel and have all 4 tires changed and then take off back onto the track. It is the only place that has cement as opposed to asphalt, which makes the

marks considerably more visible—black on white. The marks consist of rubber that is thick black to crystallizing grey. The asphalt and the rubber are all diamond cut (to make it an extra smooth surface which feels like a cheese grater on your skin) which gives the marks a strange digital/crystalline character. We traced 3 of these for 4 days and on the last day we traced another 7 in a much more general manner.

The “digital/crystalline” character Calame mentions is clearly visible in her tracings. Unlike normal tires, the “slick” tires used on race cars are made from unusually soft rubber and have no treads: their broad, smooth surfaces give them more traction by maximizing contact with the roadbed. Moving across the “cheese grater” surface of the concrete pit, they leave behind varying



FIGURES 11–12 [LEFT TO RIGHT] AND FIGURE 13 [OPPOSITE, TOP LEFT]
Calame and her assistants making tracings in the Pit at the Indianapolis Motor Speedway, October 2006
photos: Ingrid Calame, Tad Fruits

FIGURE 14 [OPPOSITE, BOTTOM LEFT]
Calame studying the Victory Donut on the track of the Indianapolis Motor Speedway, October 2006
photo: Tad Fruits

FIGURE 15 [OPPOSITE, RIGHT]
Constellation of Tracings from the Indianapolis Motor Speedway and the L.A. River on the floor of Calame's studio, with color pencil drawings #258 and #268 in process, 2007
photo: Ingrid Calame

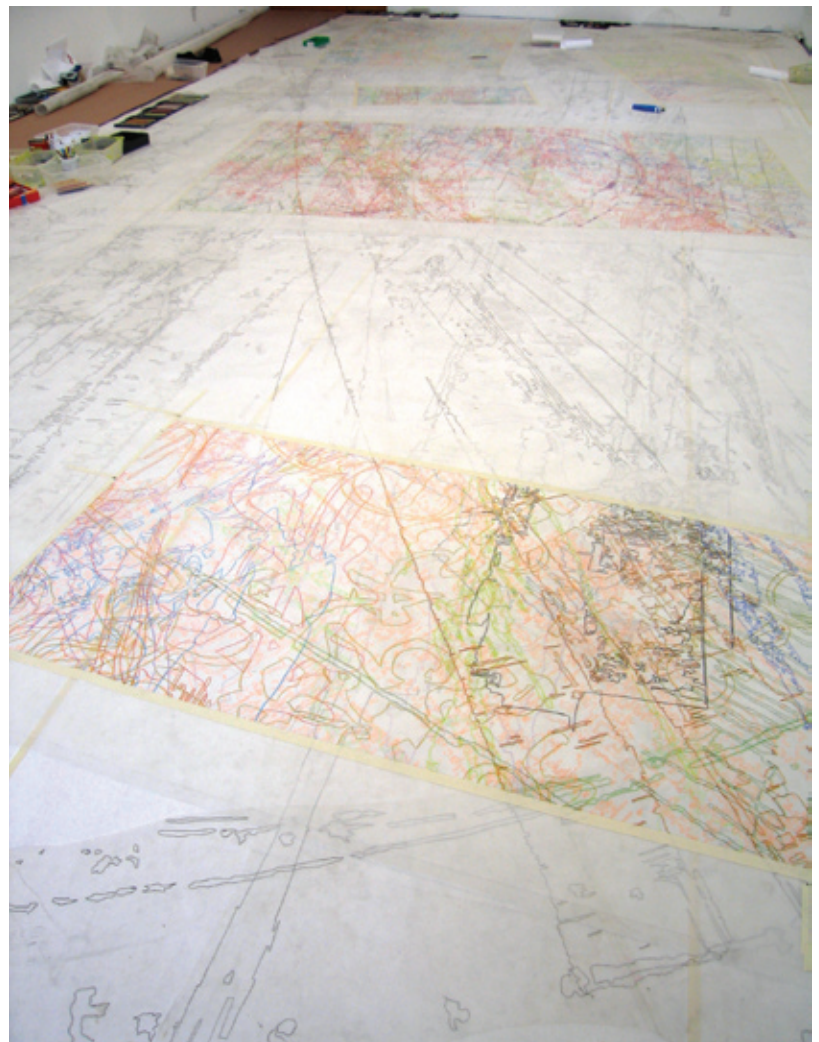


amounts of rubber, depending on microscopic variations in the height of the concrete. In Calame's tracings, the tire tracks appear as bands of parallel marks, looking strangely like the printout from a spectrograph, measuring the wavelengths of the light from distant stars or the frequencies of voices transmitted over telephone lines. It is raw information, a signifier without a signified.

In her e-mail to Reed, Calame goes on to explain the second phase of her work at the Speedway:

I also traced the victory donuts that the last winner of the 500 drove once he won. This is about a 1600 square foot line drawing. Very lovely—it is much more simple in line quality. And of course one skid mark but this was huge—20 × 50 feet and super simple because the marks would seem to disappear against the asphalt when I was low to the ground. Who would think tire treads would have nap?! I imagine these will work as wall paintings.

On the asphalt, the slick tires leave a different kind of mark, striated instead of granular, with thread-like projections at the edges (the "nap" described in Calame's letter).





... big snit! I'm sitting right here!
enamel paint on aluminum, 48" x 24", 2006

ECHO PARK, 2006-2007. Back in her studio, Calame decides to use the drawings from both the Los Angeles River and the Indianapolis Motor Speedway as material for her next series of paintings. She dispenses with the architectural framework of the “Secular Response” paintings, apparently because the skid marks and the Victory Donut from the Speedway provide large-scale structures for her new constellation. Even Calame’s 40-foot long work space is not big enough for her to unfold the entirety of the skid mark, but in studio photographs you can see a section of it stretching from the door towards the far end of the studio [Figure 15]. The tracings from the Pit are less visible in the photographs, but are critical to the texture of the paintings that emerge from this new constellation of drawings. From the studio photograph, for instance, it is clear that the large diagonal band traversing #268 *Drawing* and the painting *From #268 Drawing* [see pages 48–51]—beginning near the center of the composition’s top edge and descending to the lower right edge—is in fact a section of the long skid mark. In the painting, it forms a broad swathe of gray, dividing the composition into left and right compartments; the gray band seems to push insistently into the foreground, while the light blue and green areas at left and right open up

into quasi-illusionistic spaces. The curving blue and orange forms that seem to swim across the surface come from the earlier L.A. River tracings, while the “background” as a whole displays the granular textures of the Pit tracings from Indianapolis.

In #258 [see pages 56–57], the main incident of the composition is a pair of broad curves that derive from the Victory Donut at Indianapolis. The distinctive imprint of rubber on asphalt is recognizable from the striated edges of the curves. In contrast, the granular texture of the Pit tracings reappears in the vertical bands at right.

If Walt Whitman could see the universe in a blade of grass, Ingrid Calame’s special gift is to take something equally mundane—a stain or a tireprint—and to construct a new universe from it. What she reveals is not the readymade order of nature. Rather, it is the potential of the human mind and hand to create new orders and meanings. Calame’s pictures hold out a promise: that even in the drabest materials of our everyday lives, there is the stuff of a new life, with all the drama and complexity of the lives and paintings we knew before—and yet wonderfully, ferociously new.



FIGURE 16
Ingrid Calame tracing at the Indianapolis Motor Speedway, October 2006
photo: Tad Fruits

FIGURE 17 [NEXT PAGE]
Detail of tracing at the Indianapolis Motor Speedway, October 2006
photo: Tad Fruits

