

# CONSTELLATED

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The scene might be a busy Manhattan street where pedestrians have to execute split-second evasive manoeuvres to avoid the young woman hunkered or prone on the sidewalk, mysteriously intent on the tip of her pencil which is tracing minute lozenges and intricate snaking, friable forms on some kind of semitransparent medium. Or it might be a factory interior where she seems to have convened a meeting of concrete fetishists, their faces pressed to the floor. Here she is again, stretched flat on the bed of a shallow bathing pool, directing the attention of her cohorts to who-knows-what minute detail of its mottled surface. And once more: hugging the diamond-cut concrete of a speedway track, searching for clues among countless tiny glyphs of burnt rubber. What exactly is she looking for? On the street, if asked, and so as to head off conversations about art as such, she used mischievously to claim that she worked for the government: the Department of Public Works, she would say, pointing to a stain on the sidewalk, was interested in the effects of certain liquids on concrete or stone. In fact, Ingrid Calame is proof that if you stand – or, in her case, squat or lie – on the street for long enough staring at nothing, or what looks like nothing, at length a crowd will form and gawp likewise, at which point it is time for the instigator quietly to slip away. Calame's is an art of appearance and disappearance, of sedulous attention to the material world, followed by a studied withdrawal in order to contrive the resulting work.

Since the mid-1990s Calame has been producing drawings and paintings that have their origins in detailed tracings of stains and striations and other marks, these tracings in turn traced to form palimpsests or (as the artist puts it) 'constellations' of subtly chaotic forms. The word is well chosen, for a constellation is always in part an imagined order, a creative gathering of disparate (in time as well as space) points of light into something we like to think of as a coherent whole. To 'constellate' is to bring such points together in an act at once of documentation and intuition, realism and fantasy. Calame's constellations form just one stage in the production of her work, but a metaphorically as well as materially resonant one: they bristle with energies drawn from the actual strata

on which she labours at first, and project into being the completed drawings and paintings with their elaborate interlocking of different tracings and their sometimes obscure but always ravishing chromatic logic. At times we might be looking at fantasized heavenly bodies: coiling systems of interstellar matter or imaginary nebulae flying off in all directions – Calame's is an art that travels easily between pavement and firmament.

There are rules for these tracings, as well as for the paintings and drawings that emerge from them: each form recorded must describe a closed loop, a notional circle or as Calame puts it herself, a 'donut'. The completed works that follow – the tracings themselves are never exhibited as works in their own right, but are redeployed until the artist considers them 'used up' – are variously complex or direct renderings of the impulsive self-involvement of the constellation, or its scattering velocity. The surfaces from which she has extracted the information that eventually translates into painting or drawing have included the shallowly sloping concrete banks of the L.A. River, with their garish or fading agglomerations of graffiti. (Such is the antagonistic energy of L.A.'s riverside taggers that a section of graffiti traced by Calame and her assistants will have already substantially altered by the time they have finished, so that the tracing is itself the record of a continuing process.) At the Indianapolis Motor Speedway she searched in vain at first for traceable marks on the surface of the track – it turned out that it was cleaned so assiduously that none remained – until she found them in the pit, where a faint stratum of tyre rubber had been left to ensure a grip for cars as they slowed or accelerated. In the ArcelorMittal Steel Shipping Building in Buffalo, New York, stencilled numbers stand out from the blizzard of minute forms that whirl around them, while at the nearby Perry Street Projects wading pool the marks she and her assistants traced composed a sort of graphic metropolis at the centre of ramifying suburbs and exurban conduits. As we shall see, Calame's work invites cartographic comparisons, although they are not really accurate. In their turn, the pencilled ghosts of such places have been inserted – projected, in a sense – into such unlikely venues as the precincts of

the New York Stock Exchange. Part of the oblique or subdued documentary power of Calame's art consists in her insinuating these scatted and 'ugly' (her word) fragments of place into pristine environments, not least those of the gallery or museum.

For an artist whose work so clearly emerges from a strict and meditative practice, Calame touches on a remarkable number of other genres and forms. She trained as a dancer and a film-maker – she worked for a time in Hollywood – and her work retains something of both in its essential address to the question of time and its obvious dependence on certain taxing bodily attitudes. There are long hours spent stretched or crouched on the ground while tracing tiny details onto rolls of translucent Mylar, then the protracted process of 'editing' these coiling, film-like fragments into an intermediary whole: a layered drawing that serves as the source for paintings and further drawings. Calame's art engages the world at an intimate but also expansive level, her supreme attention to the tiniest variations of surface transformed in time into works of daring chromatic intensity and often overwhelming scale.

Consider the paintings and drawings derived from the tracings at ArcelorMittal warehouse. Calame chose to trace portions of the factory floor onto which numbers had been stencilled to denote certain materials, so that incoming vehicles or overhead cranes would extract or deliver the right ones. Here, she avoids (and instructs her assistants to ignore) the surrounding evidence of use and infrastructure, and focuses instead on the numbers, which are visibly degrading at their edges, and the small fraying accretions that surround them. All is not exactly decay or degradation: each set of digits has been combined with her tracing of lines of tar which cover cracks in the Albright-Knox Gallery parking lot, and is framed by what Calame calls the 'viewfinder', which is constituted by the edges of the drawing or painting. Still, the impression is first of all a chaotic one, especially in the drawings, where jagged or meandering lines intersect and overlap with no apparent logic – what forms are recognizable seeming to shake themselves to pieces in fragments of debris. In the drawings, each layer of the palimpsest is accorded its own colour. In the paintings, the same holds true, except where it does not: that is, where forms overlap and are made notionally transparent and rendered in another colour.

Throughout, the numbers hover in a curious limbo between figuration and abstraction: it's unclear if what we are seeing is meant to represent the aged, dirty surface as traced, an imaginary landscape (again, the temptation towards cartography), or the meeting and parting of shape and colour in a wholly abstracted

space. In places, there are recognizable gestural expanses of paint: here and there, a numeral looks like a portal onto some roiling or falling body of liquid, as if the painting contains relics of Abstract Expressionism even as it submits itself to the indexical and to some degree impersonal process of tracing and retracing. Elsewhere, pigment is a solid block of colour that refutes any implication of the artist's hand at work, and small flecks of colour float about unamenable to much sense of expression or intention. Occasionally such bodies of colour are bruised by another hue, suggestive of depths within the otherwise pristine surface. Or, again, alien patches of contrasting colour invade the painting, superceding the layers below. Calame has recently begun to use oil paint instead of her usual enamel, and the result is a new or heightened ambiguity in the shapes that once were tracings: their surfaces are suddenly at issue, and they seem to open onto new volumes or depths.

Look again at these paintings and you start – this writer has had the added advantage of being talked through the process by the artist – to see that the forms they depict (if that is the right word) do not merely overlap at random to produce new colours. There is a hierarchy at work, a logic that determines which aspects of the constellation have priority over others. This is one of the key distinctions between the drawings and the paintings. In the former, the outlines of the traced forms collide with no thought for which has priority; only their colours distinguish them, so that they might be thought to exist on the same, immensely convoluted plane, or to recede and advance in an infinitely deep space. The paintings, by contrast, introduce a different sort of shuttling between flatness and depth; suddenly local distinctions are in evidence – the way a certain form overlaps another or is tucked behind it – and the whole affects a three-dimensionality at the same time as the planes of colour suggest a new *platitude* or flatness. We might say that the paintings engage in another sort of constellating, extracting a limited amount of information from the layered tracings, turning the palimpsest into a readable text once more. (Calame speaks of her tracing as a type of handwriting, and of handwriting as a type of drawing.)

The artist herself will say that her nose-to-asphalt connection with the world is a matter of answering a fundamental question: 'What does life look like?' (Another way to put it, she says, is to ask: 'What does death look like?') If it sounds a surprisingly direct question to ask in the context of a practice that is so veiled in intermediary stages of translation and transformation, it's nonetheless clear that the problem of her work's 'realism' will not go away. 'Realism' is the wrong word – it's rather a matter of the 'index', that's to say a mode of representation

that has a direct, in this case protractedly tactile, relationship with its object. Indexicality is a phenomenon more usually associated with photography – with the chemical action of the photographed thing, via light, on the apparatus and medium; with the way a photograph is materially tethered to its subject – than with painting or drawing. But as is always the case with Calame's work, we are faced with forms that in a fundamental way have not altered, no matter the translation into pigment or the complex layering of patterns from their original status as stain or mark or scratch on a pavement or floor. Even the elaborately derived and to some extent constrained (by rules, by habits) painting remains a kind of after-effect of the traced surface, a stain of sorts.

Such thoughts return us to the question of cartography. Turn once more to almost any one of Calame's works – the paintings, drawings or preparatory tracings themselves – and it is nearly impossible not to see a sort of geography or geology at work. There are what look to be oceans of colour containing archipelagos of traced artefacts, or vast ranges of complex mountain or rock formations. But maps, as Calame points out, involve miniaturization, and her work is made always at a scale of 1:1. A map contrived at such a scale is the ultimate fantasy of obsessive realism – we might think of the versions imagined by Lewis Carroll in the 1893 novel *Sylvie and Bruno Concluded* or in Jorge Luis Borges's 1946 story 'On Exactitude in Science': maps that cover and therefore obscure the territory they affect to represent, becoming unreadable by virtue of their very accuracy. Mapping is a form of translation – of topography into text, of accidents of geology and infrastructural designs into symbols or hieroglyphs – but a map drawn at a scale of 1:1 is rather a blank restatement, a visual tautology. Calame's work seduces with the phantasm of a perfect mapping, and then invites us to become lost in its illegible code, in a landscape without a key or legend.

If they are not maps, perhaps the ArcelorMittal paintings are texts of a sort. After all, their subjects are numbers, having a particular readable significance in situ at the factory. But can a painted number be said to be a number in the way that the same figure or set of figures would be when printed? Once more the ambiguity of the traced outlines is at issue, but made all the more pressing by the innate significance of the forms represented: in short, the question is whether these recognizable symbols, with their penumbra of stains and marks and fragmenting paint, are best described, or perceived, as abstract or figural. In the last analysis, the question is unanswerable – the images are at once representational, readable and formally insistent.

The smaller drawings and paintings – they are expanding in size all the time, Calame declaring her intention to overwhelm herself and the viewer with an expanse one cannot take in at once – are but one instance of this act of translation or projection of marks that retain their mystery. The other strand of her work is to be found in the large-scale wall drawings that once more project a 1:1 tracing of a specific territory onto the gallery wall. The most recent wall drawings are produced using the pounce technique, by which a pattern is outlined in tiny holes pricked into paper and placed on the surface that is to take the drawing (in this case the gallery wall), and pigment forced through the holes. Once more it is a painstaking process, the production of the perforated drawing taking weeks in the studio and the finished work several days in the gallery. The result, in Calame's case, is a scale of drawing that fulfills her desire to overwhelm the viewer with a single image of a traced portion of the world. Consider, for example, her tracing of a portion of the wading pool in Buffalo. The completed tracing measures over ten metres by seven, and depicts (though by now we have learned to distrust such terms) just one province, as it were, of the pocked and leaking whole. In this case, the resulting image is again map-like at first, but soon suggests other structures and surfaces, its lines and intersections recalling veins of nerve fibres, and the haze of powdery pigment suggestive of a vast bruise.

In the end, it is this physicality that impresses itself, through the long and detailed process of tracing, through the production of the constellation, and then the finished drawings and paintings. The completed works are documents, among other things, of time as well as space or place: the time spent crouched or lying on the territory in question, plotting its minutest accidents and oddities, the time of translation from tracing to constellation, the time of the drawing or painting of the final work. (For a long time in the studio, the artist remains physically a part of the expanse she is working on: the tracings are laid out on the floor and she carefully and practicedly picks her way among the pencilled lines.) The slow time of documenting and re-documenting is flattened in the initial tracing and inflated or expanded again in the constellation and completed works with their illusions of deep space before us and a lateral drift or creep of forms at the edges of our vision. Calame makes works that not only constellate points and planes in the visual field she surveys, face down on the sidewalk for example, but which archive time itself in the growing collection of her 'used-up' tracings: ghosts of attentions paid to the material world, star charts of her meticulous and daring vision.