

INTERVIEW

A conversation between Ingrid Calame; Shelby Roberts, artist and lecturer in photography at University of California Irvine and Calame's partner; Fiona Bradley and Elizabeth McLean, Director and Deputy Director of The Fruitmarket Gallery, Edinburgh.
Los Angeles, January 2011

Fiona Bradley (FB): I would like to start by talking about the new wall drawing that you are creating for The Fruitmarket Gallery: *L.A. River at Clearwater Street, 2006–8*, 2011. It will be the third wall pounce drawing that you have made.

Ingrid Calame (IC): Yes. The previous two were of a wading pool in Buffalo, New York in 2008. This one is an image of graffiti from the the L.A. River at one of the many points where the dry riverbed has been covered in cement. The image is all one conversation – it's graffiti on graffiti. There was a gap of six months between the first time I traced and the last. When I returned to continue tracing rival taggers had crossed out each other's graffiti by spraying their tags on top. I just continued where I had left off, with the additional tags in that section.

FB: So the layers in the drawing are not added by you, but at the source. Did you know that that would happen?

IC: No – but I knew it was a possibility. The tracings take time to make and I like having the process of time built into the work.

Shelby Roberts (SR): How is this new wall drawing different from the wall drawing *Tracing up to the L.A. River: Frog Town Turf War* (pp.90–91) you made at the ICA Philadelphia in 2006?

IC: One difference is the painting process. The ICA Philadelphia wall drawing was a scratch-back method, like a child's crayon drawing where you put down lots of colours, cover it all in black and then scratch an image out. For *L.A. River at Clearwater Street, 2006–8* at The Fruitmarket Gallery, I will apply the drawings to the wall by tracing

the image onto butcher paper and perforating it using an electric stylus. Then I place that transfer drawing against the wall and pounce with pigment to transfer the line from the image onto the wall. It is a replica of the image with pigment rather than pencil. The tracing on which it is based is also much more complicated and filigree than the older work.

FB: So these wall drawings have a much closer relationship to your drawings than your paintings.

IC: And a closer relationship to the trace. I used this pounce technique to transfer the drawing onto the wall for my previous wall drawings made with paint. Now I'm stripping the process down to just the pounce transfer.

SR: I see this new work for The Fruitmarket Gallery as a direct evolution from the Philadelphia wall drawing. For a long time you've made these tracings and would hold them up to me to say 'look what I got today'. You'd sift through them like a photographer sifts through contact sheets or work prints – all these materials that you had collected which were then processed into something else through the drawings and the paintings. However, with this new wall drawing the audience gets to see the pure thing that you have collected and there is a direct relationship between the pounce technique and the coloured pencil on Mylar drawings.

IC: Making the drawing with pigment aligns it more directly to the trace than the coloured pencil drawings in that I spill the pigment through the holes to make the line. In a drawing the outlines of the edges of stains are cartographic. I try to control how the pigment transfers through the holes but there is a lot of chance – pouncing causes little explosions through each hole that radiate out. It is an event, like a drawing/dance. I'm physically punching the pigment through the paper and gravity causes it to fall down behind the paper and sit on the imperfections on the wall. It is the residue of the translation of something traced from the ground moving up onto the wall.

FB: Does the process somehow distance you as the creator of the drawing? The coloured pencil drawings look like your drawings – there is a system of notation that I very much associate with you. Yet this new wall drawing is rather different: the people who made these marks in the first place, perhaps they have a bit more say than usual. Are you aware of the conversations backwards and forwards between yourself and, in the case of the L.A. River wall drawings, the taggers; between the decisions that you're making and the decisions that they've made? Are you at all interested in their decisions?

IC: Yes, I'm interested in collecting the evidence of events or decisions that are outside of myself. Finding marks to trace is like finding a snowflake – there is an individual formal beauty to them. That is why I select them – they resound with me in their form as well as in their content.

Also, when I'm tracing, I'm often tracing with other people who are working under my direction. It's very specific – they are playing my game and I like their translations. Working with the tracings at the studio the drawings we have made together inadvertently become a document of the group of people, the place and the time of the tracing.

SR: You're a collector of forms. It's not random and not any form will do. You go out into the world and you edit out all the other things except for this one shape. Again, there are parallels with the way photographers work – you go to a location and study it to find the shot but, unlike in photography, things like the texture of the cement and the touch of your hand become part of the composition.

IC: I see my process as very similar to photography. Basically, they both have their limitations. I couldn't take a photograph of something as big as my tracing from the L.A. River and get the information I need. When I trace, the limitation is time and physical capacity – I'm limited by what the body can do, but it is actually the most appropriate tool. I'm using the scale of my body to translate the actual scale as we see it. Photography isn't an efficient tool for this task.

FB: Are you interested in the body's relationship to how you first encounter these marks in the world? This new wall drawing is very large, and you must walk around and over the drawing as you make it (as we are doing as we talk about it).

IC: There is something about drawing that is similar to writing. There is a direct relationship between the line that I'm drawing and the shape

that exists. I'm working in actual scale, tracing one to one. It reminds me of handwriting and how you first learn to write at school by tracing letters. It's a way of assimilating information through your hand into your mind and I think that is similar to what I'm doing when I am drawing. It is a language that I've been learning for a long time and I use marks from tracings over and over again. There is a semiotic relationship between the stain or mark that the trace is referring to, and the drawn version of it.

FB: You must hold that relationship in your head as you work. There must come a point when you realise as you are tracing that the finished drawing will need a particular kind of mark that you can seek out.

IC: Yes. I work with specific traces for a while and then suddenly I'm over them and there's a hunger to go and trace more marks. It's quite unconscious. Like a puzzle that I'm trying to work out with the marks.

FB: When did you start to trace on the street?

IC: I began to trace outside in 1997. Previously, from 1994 to 1997, I was working on a project based on stains from my studio floor.

FB: Stains that you found when you moved into the studio?

IC: No, I made them in the process of making other works. I became interested in the marks on the floor; how they were both specific residue and abstract at the same time. So I traced them all – there were about 30 of them. I named and catalogued each stain to create a taxonomy. Each stain was named with onomatopoeic titles like *oit* or *thunk*, and then I combined them into bigger constellations. For example, in *BINKALINKALONK! crup-CHA-coomp, lup oit, PING-OING thunk*, 'BINKALINKALONK' would be the constellation and the stains are the titles following.

FB: These were traced and then went straight into a painted form – there was no drawing stage?

IC: The titles worked like drawings. The titles were the link between the tracing and the painting and located the small shapes within the larger constellations that the painting was excerpted from.

In 1997 I started tracing outside on the street. *Spalunk* (p.29) was the first piece that I made from these tracings. When I traced from

the street I did not name the shapes because they were indexes of the world. This is when I began to make coloured pencil drawings to track the overlap of shapes.

SR: I think it is important to acknowledge that when you leave the studio to trace in Hollywood, Las Vegas or Lower Manhattan these different places are part of the work. It is not only that the viewer becomes aware that these shapes came from Vegas, say, but also that when you trace in the desert it is so dry that you get a different kind of line. The shapes change and the place becomes woven into the work in various ways.

IC: That's true. The viewer can't look at them and know which is which, but they are micro-histories, all the information is there.

FB: So you're saying that the place where the marks are traced becomes conceptually, if not representationally, part of the work?

IC: Yes and I currently use the title for this. When I'm working out in the world, the fact that these particular marks are made by tagging crews becomes part of what I know and think about the work, as can be seen in a title such as *L.A. River at Clearwater Street*.

That idea is also something I worked with in 2004 with the project *Secular Response* which brought in the idea of place versus traced micro-histories of place.

FB: That is something that I find really interesting – the recontextualisation of space – why do you do that?

IC: *Secular Response 1, 2, and 3* came out of trying to understand the idea of part and whole. Previous to this, in 1999, when I made *b-b-b, rr gR-UF!*, *b-b-b* to encompass the wall and floor of the gallery, I thought why am I using the limits of the gallery as the limits of the constellation? There are other spaces that reflect wider aspects of our culture. In *Secular Response* I used the footprint of a building as a container dictating the edges of the constellation. I was interested in buildings that had to do with immortality. Religion, economics and science are all metiers that attempt to explain what we are doing here and what is left when we die. At the same time I was collecting street stains, emblems of loss and detritus. I decided to place these traces inside the footprint of buildings.

Architects determine how people should flow through places, how to direct their movement for the activity for which the building is

designed. In *Secular Response* the building becomes 'the ground' but it is also a figure and the stains are figures within that figure. In the works made from the *Secular Response* constellations, both the figure of the negative space of the building and the traced stains are visible.

In a semiotic game of Twister, I planned to use the church of my childhood, Ardsley United Methodist Church in suburban New York, and fill it with stain tracings from L.A. for *Secular Response 1*; in the New York Stock Exchange I used stains from Las Vegas for *Secular Response 2*; and in Lowell Observatory in Flagstaff, Arizona I used stains from New York's Wall Street for *Secular Response 3*. But when I started working on a 15,000 square foot drawing on the main trading floor of the Stock Exchange I realised I would need every tracing I had. They wouldn't allow me to use any stains from Las Vegas on their floor because they did not want any association to be made there, but I did use them. I used every tracing I had.

FB: I love the idea that the mark itself might have the power to make people's minds connect world finance with gambling – it's brilliant. But that isn't actually going to happen at the level of abstraction at which your work functions.

SR: I think there's a movement back and forth. When you're looking at the final work your experience is that of looking at an abstract artwork but then you're brought back to the real world by the knowledge of the origin of the marks, and how the work was first assembled and made.

FB: Was there a conscious shift from abstraction to representation in the stains you trace? I'm thinking about the decision to trace readable graffiti as well as splashy marks.

IC: Yes. It was 2005 and George W. Bush had been elected for a second term and I felt disconnected from the way most of America voted. The graffiti that I was tracing didn't have anything to do with the election, but it was a visual public conversation going on at the periphery of society. My interest was in other people, and also in decisions that are conscious rather than accidental – making graffiti is a conscious defacement, whereas spilling your coffee isn't. At the time, I was also working with homeless youth at a shelter and they were mostly drawing names – of friends and family and how they all connected – in diagrams or letters. I was interested in how when drawing a name, a world was represented. When I'm tracing graffiti it's the same thing – people saying 'I was here' in a public forum.

FB: So your decision to use graffiti had political implications as well as formal ones?

IC: It was triggered by the political situation but I don't think that the work is political. I was thinking about who we are and the choices we make. Who am I in relation to other people and what are people thinking? It was an election that many feel was stolen and that, consequently, we had lost our voice. Maybe scrawling something on the wall is the only way to make your point, and this was a visualisation of that.

FB: Maybe not political, but certainly engaged.

IC: I like that in my process I have to go out into the world. Whether I'm tracing on an L.A. street, or the Indianapolis Motor Speedway, or in a steel plant, tracing connects me to the world at large. It takes me out of the studio when I need to wonder about the world.

FB: Does that happen over long or short periods of time? Are you driven outside to trace from one day to the next, or are there tracing periods and studio periods?

IC: From 1997 to 2000, I would only go tracing alone. I needed to connect with the street or the people that I would meet. Then I started working on a much larger scale for *Secular Response 2* in 2000 tracing on the streets of Manhattan and Las Vegas. The tracings needed to happen faster so I started working with a team of people and the tracings became more intricate. For this I need to block out a period of time: it takes preparation to gear up to work out on the street as well as to direct a group of people. There are tracing periods (a couple of weeks) and long studio periods (a couple of years) that require different psychological spaces.

FB: The image for the new wall drawing at The Fruitmarket Gallery, though coded and translated by you, is still a faithful representation of what was there in the world. Yet quite often when you work you lay a sequence of tracings one over the other and re-trace to get the image for a work. Does the difference depend on the type of work you're making – a drawing or a painting – or on something else?

IC: Generally, whether for a drawing or a painting I layer tracings into a new, complex image. It's only recently that I've started using the tracings alone for these large wall works.

SR: But you haven't made either a painting or a drawing that was a single layer of tracing before.

IC: No. Usually I make a constellation, laying out the tracings and layering them in an arrangement.

FB: That would seem to return us to the idea of an invented language – that you gather elements to make a conversation from them.

IC: I make a whole constellation, and then I excerpt from it to make drawings, and then paintings from the drawings.

FB: And, presumably, when you are gathering the original tracings, you don't have a sense of the constellation they are going to form?

IC: No, I have no idea. I'm not thinking of where the tracings will end up. I'm also not thinking of what they are. The drawing we are looking at, for The Fruitmarket Gallery wall drawing, wasn't traced to make a wall drawing specifically. It was collected as a giant shape for resource material, so it could be in a painting, it could be in a set of drawings. It's after the fact that I made the decision to use it as a whole to create a wall drawing.

SR: One thing that I think is interesting is the long-term friendship you have, Ingrid, with Janet Fish who is a representational painter. I think that it is an interesting relationship in that she makes still-life paintings that are almost photo-realist representations, while you go out and make intricate tracings of things in the world and bring them back. But when I look at your work it feels like I'm looking at an abstract piece of art rather than a representational thing, even though I know that the visual information it contains is very specific. And when I look at Janet's paintings I am actually looking at a work with no actual relationship to the real world – abstract, you could say – yet it is to be viewed as a 'real' representation of the world.

I'm interested in the shift in the viewer's experience of your work. When you first see the work, you experience the marks as abstract. Then you discover where the marks come from, and you connect that with what you know, and what you see then coalesces into another kind of experience.

FB: Are you playing with the sense that all art, however representational it may seem, is in fact abstract – is translation, is marks on a surface?

IC: Yes. Verbal language is both abstract and representational, yet we understand each other. Art is much the same. When you are looking at a representation of a glass in Janet's painting you have an experience of colour that is a sensation. It goes beyond the idea of a glass to a pre-verbal experience of light and colour and the edges of things.

The abstract paintings of another friend, David Reed, also play with the sensation of colour and the idea of memory. When you are looking at his paintings the marks are material colour. The strokes have a mysterious remove that gives an impression of the representation of a mark overwhelmed by the experience of colour and gesture. Regardless of whether a painting is representational or abstract, you have an experience that is about the materiality of paint and the construction of a visual world. This is important in my own work. My work is representational while using the language of abstraction.

FB: Perhaps it is a semiotic rather than representational relationship. I am struck by the way you talk about the works with sound titles – both the titles and the marks seem to be about translating the world into building blocks that someone else can understand. Your work does not 'represent' reality in the same way that a word or a sound does not actually 'represent' the thing it refers to.

IC: Yes.

SR: Another aspect of the representational relationship is your use of colour and light in these paintings. *Vu-eyp? Vu-ep? Vueyp? Vu-eyp* (2002; p.57) is painted in the colours of our pet parrot – the colours have an autobiographical meaning. Similarly when you did the show in Austria that used the colours from the public buildings and the sky in Northern Europe.

IC: The colours are another form of tracing, and something that cannot be rendered in film. When I first started making these paintings I was in film school and thinking about image in relation to memory and time. I find colour is such a deep trigger for memory and sensation for me that I can engage it most fully in painting, making frozen moments rather than using the narrative structure that a time-based medium involves.

FB: Was it your desire to have a better range of colours that made you change from painting in enamel to painting in oil?

IC: Oil paint gives me a pure pigment. I always mixed the enamel paint but it had limitations because they were industrial colours.

FB: And enamel paint gives the paintings an anonymous surface, whereas your more recent paintings in oil show the mark of your brushstroke. How important is the surface texture to you?

IC: Both enamel and oil paintings are painted like a puzzle. The shapes that you see are interlocking on the surface like tectonic plates. Each one is painted separately in one layer. I see the enamel paintings as very handmade; the marks show the history of the painting of each shape. In the oil paintings, the shapes have turned into fields and I use brushstrokes to unify or disengage adjacent areas to and from one another. I look at the work of Philip Guston or Piet Mondrian and think about the evidence of their making, and the way they paint up to the edges of a shape.

FB: Could you talk a little bit about the difference between the coloured pencil drawings and the paintings?

IC: In the drawings I use out-of-the-box colour, but to create an impression of colour-mixing. The mixing happens between the lines so, for example, a combination of imperial violet next to spring green mixes optically. As the lines become intricate and the composition more dense they begin to buzz and then as they drift apart it becomes a less intense colour experience. The drawings ironically seem a little more like traditional oil paintings which have glazes as they are layered to build colour; whereas in the paintings I mix the colours for each shape and they join together like a puzzle. I don't go back and change a colour once it has been decided, like not removing a brick from the bottom of a wall being built.

FB: To me, the paintings seem like a single surface, whereas the drawings give the impression of a stack of layered tracings, even though there is in fact only a single surface. The translucency of the Mylar allows the lines to float.

IC: When I trace, the aggregate of the cement on the ground acts as the tooth of a piece of paper for the mark that is added to it. This brings me back to the notion of representation. Since I have been tracing numbers and graffiti – representational marks – disintegration becomes legible. With splatters and spills you can't tell what is disintegration or accumulation.

FB: Your recent paintings made in 2009 from tracings at the steel works in Buffalo, New York feature traced stencilled numbers, which seem to operate in a different register from other marks you trace. Did you select these as source material because they are stencilled? Does the quasi-mechanical process by which they are made make them react differently to being traced?

IC: Very differently. One of the things that attracted me to these marks was the efficiency of their making. They have been made to communicate something in the fastest way possible. It is only about being legible. When the edges started to erode and the legibility broke down, the company painted over them without getting rid of the old number. Graffiti on the other hand is aesthetic – it is handwriting. It's one of the last places you see handwriting in modern life and it is a signature. It may be the equivalent of what I do; my drawings are my signatures. Graffiti is about expression while the stencil is a mechanical mark. Numbers are also particularly interesting to me because they are finite – they quantify the world. Numbers are both the most concrete and abstract representations.

Elizabeth McLean (EM): I think about your work in terms of gesture. Abstract art often involves grand, gestural marks. You find these gestural marks in anonymous stencilled numbers and messy handwritten graffiti tags. These strike me as authentic gestural marks that you take to the studio to make abstract work. You are taking gestural marks from the world and pinning them down in art in a representational way.

IC: It is gestural, you're right, but not like an abstract expressionist gesture. I think of handwriting again. The way that I cross out words so that they can't be read is by writing other words over it. Similarly my work is both subtractive and additive through accumulation, the representation becomes obscured. The *L.A. River at Clearwater Street 2006–8* wall drawing is absolutely that. It is a conversation that people are having with each other by addition and subtraction, by writing something on top so that you can no longer read the original gesture.

FB: Maybe we can look at the skid mark made by Dan Wheldon after his Indy 500 victory in 2005 that you can see in your 2007 painting *From #258 Drawing (Tracings from the Indianapolis Motor Speedway and the L.A. River)* (pp.66–67). A car driver celebrating his win with a wheel spin – it doesn't get much more gestural than that. But once it has been traced by you and goes up on the wall as part of a painting,

it's no longer about the driver making his mark. You are erasing his gesture at the same time you are recuperating, or immortalising it.

IC: I think in that painting, it's recuperation. I made the wall drawing *2005 Indy 500 Victory Donut: Traces of Dan Wheldon* of only the victory loop to be a link with the real. Once a gesture like that goes into one of my constellations, what it originally was begins to be erased while at the same time what it is becoming is more apparent. The mark is incorporated into my system, and begins to look like my handwriting, even though it was written by a man driving a car.

I thought about the immortalizing aspect of my project the other day when I went back to the L.A. River after not going down there for two years – I was looking for some new graffiti to trace. The whole Frog Town stretch of the river near my home had been gentrified and cleaned up. Railings along the bank divided the pedestrian space from the cement embankment and all the graffiti had been painted out. I hurried to see if the tag I based *L.A. River at Clearwater Street, 2006–8* on was there, but it too was gone. I felt like the rug had been pulled from under me. I had assumed that the world was the same as it always was, that I could return again and again to this touchstone monument, but it was gone. I was surprised at how permanent I had come to expect something as ephemeral as graffiti to be.