Ingrid Calame: Mining the Surface

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The works of Ingrid Calame, one of the foremost painters of her generation, are shaped by the interweaving of two elements: the artist's extensive and methodical process and the demands of her steadfast collaborator—the surface of the urban sites she occupies. A New York native, Ingrid Calame moved to California in 1992 to attend the California Institute of the Arts, where she earned her MFA under the tutelage of Michael Asher, Mary Heilmann and David Reed. Although she also held a strong interest in the experimental cinematography prominent in the 1960s and 1970s—known as structural film—Calame decided to pursue painting as her chosen medium. The move to Southern California charted a new course, and ultimately, Calame settled in Los Angeles. Soon, this sprawling metropolis became not only her home but also the subject of her work. Interested in the common threads that bind the urban fabric of the city, she began tracing the spills, marks and stains on the surfaces around her—sidewalks, streets and even the Los Angeles River basin. These stains comprise a vast array of substances and activities—motor oil, spilled drinks, urine, scattered paint, transmission fluid, discarded chewing gum and, in the case of the river basin, layers of tagged graffiti marks. Although vastly different, in each case Calame perceived these remnants as evocations of loss, degradation and change.

> I was thinking about how we all disintegrate. We all know that we're going to disintegrate, not just while we're alive, but also when we're dead. I was thinking a lot about mortality. There are signs of it everywhere on public streets and sidewalks—marks of collapse, accidents, and loss. I wanted the work to reflect everybody's disintegration, everybody's loss. The mess of it.[1]

For thirteen years, these markers of disintegration and decay written across the surface of the city have remained the focal point of Calame's multifaceted approach. The artist begins by tracing the outlines of such spills and stains in pencil, onto sheets

[1] Ingrid Calame, quoted in Ben Portis, *Wallworks: Contemporary Artists and Place* (Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, 2007).

Calame making a drawing in her studio. Photo: Shelby Roberts

of transparent Mylar. While, initially, this practice focused on Los Angeles and remains conceptually tied to the urban nature of this environment, over the course of the last decade, Calame has traced in locations all around the country, including Wall Street in Manhattan; the Las Vegas Strip, Nevada; and the Indianapolis Motor Speedway racetrack. In each case, Calame remains faithful to the intricate, fastidious and time-consuming nature of this process, which necessitates the careful tracing of the exact contours of each mark's outline so that the trace is an exact, full-scale replica of its subject. As a result, each of the traces that Calame and her assistants commit to Mylar retains an indexical relationship to the mark itself—it carries the mark's identical scale, the outline of its exact shape and boundaries. As Lisa Freiman has noted, this part of Calame's method is more akin to photography than drawing, as "her tracing activity reenacts by hand what the photogram achieves with a machine: it creates a 1:1 relationship between the original physical site and its corresponding trace."[2] The affinity between Calame's tracings and the photographic process, however, ceases in the next phase of the artist's approach. Back in her studio, Calame compiles series of tracings—layering a variety of Mylar sheets, each one frequently containing marks from distinct, geographically unrelated sites, until she arrives at a desired arrangement. The artist describes these arrangements as "constellations"—an apt term, considering the fact that they reconcile disparate geographical bodies under the auspices of a larger, unifying entity.[3]

Once she arrives at a constellation, Calame treats it with the same fastidious approach as the original tracings—each layer of the constellation and the marks it contains are coded in a specific color. Then, the disparate layers that comprise the constellation are retraced, each one in its respective hue, onto a single sheet of Mylar. This process yields a new spatial synthesis—the working drawing. The multiple layers of the constellation are eliminated; all the marks become united on the surface of a single support. Rather than physical markers of separation, in the working drawings, color becomes the spatial code, unifying seemingly distinct marks that belong to the same physical site, while separating

[2] Lisa D. Freiman, *Traces of the Indianapolis Motor Speedway: Ingrid Calame's Indexical Struggle*, Forefront 51 (Indianapolis Art Museum, 2007).

[3] Starting in 2000, Calame also began using a tracing of one site as a "container" for those of another location. That is, an entire constellation would be predicated on the shape of another structure. For example, Calame placed tracings of the Los Angeles River basin within the container of the Clark Telescope Dome, Flagstaff, Arizona.

#320 Drawing (Tracings from Buffalo, NY), 2010, color pencil on trace Mylar, 50 x 34 inches (127 x 86.4 cm)

entangled webs of line according to their geographic reference point. As the drawings demonstrate, Calame's traces remain faithful to the mark but not to the site where the mark resides.[4] Indeed, the drawing itself becomes the new site to which all of the tracings are physically bound. Ultimately, the intricate, delicate compositions of the working drawings—which the artist considers as complete works in their own right—become the basis of Calame's colorful, graphic paintings. In the paintings, these compositions are translated onto aluminum panel and the outlines of the traces are filled with vibrant colors. Until the most recent series, Calame executed her paintings using enamel paint—a sign painter's standby and a pop painting essential—known for its high contrast and bold impact. Maintaining the color-coded separations, each tracing was rendered using its own designated color.

Calame's sequential, systematic process also yields important offshoots that rewire its successive circuitry. Most frequently, these take the shape of installations, including wall works and large-scale enamel paintings on Mylar. Some of these projects tap directly into individual traces; others are grounded in fragments of tracing constellations. The Monterey Museum of Art's ephemeral wall drawing, for example, is based on a tracing from a single location—a derelict wading pool in Buffalo, New York. This intricate trace of a single site was transferred to the monumental wall of the Museum's Dart Gallery with a pounce pattern—a Renaissance technique used to apply a cartoon drawing to a wall. In this method, the lines of a drawing are incised or pinpricked into a second substrate, which is then tacked up on the wall. Then, pigments are literally beaten against the surface of the substrate. Where there are holes in the pounce, the pigment seeps through, thereby re-creating the forms of the original drawing but without the use of line. The Museum's wall drawing contains a "nucleus"—a large circular area dense with traces—and a series of meandering traces that circumnavigate the vast expanse of the wall. It was created using only two pigments—a dark blue and a vibrant red. The two tones alternate, sometimes folding into each other, other times creating a sense of contrast. Due to the physical nature of its execution, the pounce varies in saturation—the result of the changing amount of

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[4] Freiman, *Traces of the Indianapolis Motor Speedway.*

Perry Street Projects Wading Pool, Buffalo, New York (detail), 2010, pigment on wall, 458 x 280 inches (1163.32 x 711.2 cm)

pressure with which the pigments are applied to the wall. As a result, the drawing appears to pulsate, like a vibrant, living circulatory system animating the wall. Some of its "vessels" appear clearly delineated, many still retaining the perforations of the pounce, while other areas appear hazy, like delicate bruises.

Given the nature of her work and its urban context, comparisons of Ingrid Calame's projects to geographic and geological networks have permeated the critical literature. Her drawings, paintings and wall works have been likened to "urban topography"[5] and touted as "map-like,"[6] resembling "topographical maps or aerial views of winding, disorganized cities like Rome."[7] Given the artist's emphasis on charting urban surfaces, mapmaking serves as an apt metaphor for her process. At the same time, however, Calame has also been dubbed "an archeologist of the modern world," someone whose works reveals an "archeological view into the contemporary human landscape by tracing and documenting the stains of our existence."[8] Unlike mapmaking, which focuses on graphic representations of the world's surface, archaeology conceives of history as a series of layers, or strata. In order to search for evidence of the past, archeologists explore these hidden recesses below the ground.[9]

To uncover the deep meaning of Ingrid Calame's recent painting, however, we need look no further than the evidence resting on the surface. From the start, these precise, uncompromising works confront the viewer with a visual dilemma. In terms of style and execution, they speak the language of abstraction; and yet, the words that emerge from this abstract idiom are unmistakably representational. In the midst of the abstract tapestry of lines, discordant shapes and strident colors, we find sequences of stenciled numbers, unrelenting and prominent. Perhaps even more unsettling than this amalgam of abstraction and figuration is the fact that, somehow, despite the prominence

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[5] Victoria Keddie, "Ingrid Calame at James Cohan Gallery," *The Brooklyn Rail* (November 2003).
[6] Freiman, *Traces of the Indianapolis Motor Speedway.*
[7] Rachel Somerstein, "The Skid Stays in the Picture," *ArtNews* (November 2007): 56.
[8] Keddie, "Ingrid Calame at James Cohan Gallery."
[9] In the last quotation, Victoria Keddie mixes metaphors of geological and geographic description, erroneously suggesting that Calame digs below the surface to trace the ground.

Top: *#291 Drawing (Tracings from ArcelorMittal Steel, Buffalo, NY)* (detail), 2008, color pencil on trace Mylar, 48 x 72 inches (121.9 x 182.9 cm)
Bottom: Calame and assistants tracing the Perry Street Projects wading pool in Buffalo, NY. Photo: Tom Loonan

of these stenciled forms, it would be a struggle to call these paintings representational. These numbers do not dominate the visual field. Instead, they are pitted in an uneasy tug of war with their surrounding context, the colors and forms that both define and threaten to chip away at these numerical shapes. In *ArcelorMittal Steel Shipping Building One, Left Nos. 200 & 201*, the numbers are palpable, yet difficult to pin down in space. In large part, this is due to the relationship between the three dominant colors that, more than the stencil shapes, anchor the palette of this painting—gray, steely blue, and deep, saturated orange—that rest side by side on the aluminum support. Unlike the mellifluous color blending of gestural abstraction, here their merger creates an awkward, uneasy alliance. Although they meet, each color intractably retains a measure of autonomy. The colors themselves, therefore, exert a corporeal presence that rivals the rigidity of the stenciled shapes. Like a thin steel sheet, opaque and unbending, the light blue covets the majority of the support. From the periphery, broad bands of orange cut diagonally into this field. At the same time, hovering over or under the blue layer, the gray zone comes into view.

Closer inspection reveals further clues. Rather than layers of colors and shapes, the painting consists of a single, carefully delineated surface—a puzzle of interlocking colors and forms all equally present on the same visual plane. Rather than blending, intersections between the dominant colors generate new, distinct pieces of the puzzle. For example, the meeting place of orange and blue on the bottom right creates a shape of lighter blue. The meeting of gray and orange in the number 2 takes the form of a purple spot. Moreover, each color "area" bears a striking, almost infinite number of variations. The gray changes radically—charcoal and opaque on the left hand side of the panel, it becomes lighter as it traverses the support, as evident in the tonal variation between the 2 and the 0, growing darker once more on the right edge of the support. The orange is equally mercurial; each of its shapes is defined by a tonal range of lighter and darker patches, as most evident in the left upper corner of the painting. The light blue zone also undergoes a process of ever-changing saturation. In addition to these chameleon-like color apparitions, each shade also bears a distinct brushstroke. Rather than unifying areas of the composition, each color now vibrates with not only a distinct tone but also a unique mode of application. The gray area, for example, is strikingly illusionistic, creating the sensation of depth and modeling. The blue color bears a subtle yet distinct vertical

ArcelorMittal Steel Shipping Building One, Left Nos. 200 & 201 (detail), 2010, oil on aluminum, 24 x 40 inches (60.9 x 101.6 cm)

orientation, like streaks or striations spanning the height of the support. The orange color is flat, with little evidence of brushstroke style or orientation.

Rather than integral, distinct compositional elements, the stenciled numbers are shaped by the collisions between colors and the visceral distinctions of paint modulation. First, the numerals themselves are defined by two of three dominant colors—three of the digits appear in shades of gray, another pair in orange. From the title, we learn that the painting contains two sequences of three-digit numbers—200 and 201. However, only two digits of each sequence are initially apparent. To discern the second gray 0 wedged between the two orange stencils requires more fastidious inspection. Even those figures that are somewhat recognizable are not complete. The gray 2 is severed at the top; the bottom left of the 0 is indistinct. The orange 2 is reversed and sliced off at the head and the base. The orange 0 appears only in fractional form. Although these fragmentary views of the stenciled numbers threaten their legibility, they impart a sense of energy that relates these figurative components more closely to the abstract elements of the composition.

Like the colors that pulsate and shimmer, the stenciled numbers, too, give off a sense of dynamic, even frenetic, energy. Their outlines look jagged and frayed, as if ready to unravel. Indeed, their dilapidated forms seem to splinter, shedding tiny shards of filigree "residue" across the surface. From the fragmented numbers to the ever-changing colors and interlocking forms that comprise the painting, the composition is unified solely by a sense of instability that heightens the relational aspect of these elements and shapes the manner in which they collide and crack, causing shifts, ruptures and new realities across the picture plane.

Rather than mining hidden depths, Calame's works have insistently excavated the most visible aspects of our world—the urban surfaces that we occupy and, whether knowingly or unwittingly, mark with our presence. Instead of revealing buried, invisible relics, Calame investigates the way in which the city's epidermis swells with physical, social and temporal evidence—it is this delicate yet integral fabric, continually rewoven to encompass the past and the present, traces of change, loss, and disintegration, that informs the artist's conceptual and formal strategies, as well as her process. Nowhere is this

Top: Tracing at the Perry Street Projects wading pool in Buffalo, NY. Photo: Ingrid Calame
Bottom: Tracing in Shipping Building Two, ArcelorMittal Steel, Lackawanna , NY. Photo: Tom Loonan

fundamental aspect of Calame's endeavor more systematically pursued and emphasized than in her most recent project, begun during her 2008 residency at the Albright-Knox Art Gallery in Buffalo, New York. While in residence, Calame and her assistants traced three local sites; a dilapidated wading pool (the basis of the MMA wall drawing), the tarred and re-tarred parking lot of the Gallery, and one of the buildings owned by steel producer ArcelorMittal, previously part of the colossal Bethlehem Steel mill that fueled Buffalo industry for decades.[10]

While each site was traced with an equal amount of precision, the decaying building previously occupied by one of the icons of American industry became the focal point of the project. Calame's descriptions of the site highlight the manner in which the past and present are intertwined and reflected in the physical state of the facility. The "crumbling romantic idyll of industrial buildings," consists of operational structures that remain in use, as well as those derelict buildings that, unoccupied and unmended, continue to decay.[11] The site, which at the time of Calame's residency served as the base of three active companies,[12] was, effectively, a functional ruin. Within it, used and unused buildings stood side by side. In fact, the unused, dilapidated structures served a vital purpose. As Calame notes:

> Even in this new configuration, some of the buildings were unused and fell into disrepair, but the shells were left standing in order to support the utilities that ran around their exterior and connected all of the buildings.[13]

Known as "active ghosts," these vacant buildings remained vital structural elements of the mill's footprint, integrated within the network of buildings all bound together by the connective circuitry of the utilities.

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[10] Bethlehem Steel Corporation was once America's second-largest steel company. In 1922, Bethlehem Steel acquired Lackawanna Steel, the large mill in Lackawanna, New York, on the outskirts of Buffalo. During World War II, at the height of its production, the mill employed 20,000 workers on its 1,300-acre site. By 1977, Bethlehem Steel began to drastically reduce its workforce at the Lackawanna facility. By 1983, the facility employed only a skeletal crew and occupied only a small section of its substantial footprint. See *Buffalo Architecture and History*, http://www.buffaloah.com/h/beth/index.html (accessed September 28, 2010).

[11] Ingrid Calame, "Statement of Plans," Application for the Guggenheim Fellowship, 2009.

[12] ArcelorMittal closed its plant in Buffalo in April 2009.

[13] Calame, "Statement of Plans."

ArcelorMittal Steel Shipping Building One, No. 233, 2009, oil on aluminum, 40 x 24 inches (101.6 x 60.9 cm)

The notion of an "active ghost" might equally describe the function of those elements on which Calame decided to focus her tracing efforts—the stenciled inventory numbers of one of the active steel shipping buildings at the mill. These large numbers, handpainted on the floors of the building, line the walkways between giant spools of sheet steel so that the crane operators can identify their location in the building from a distant height.[14] While still in use, the numbers themselves were in various states of disrepair and disintegration. Some that had been illegible were haphazardly repainted, the outlines of one generation of stencil and the next awkwardly unaligned. Calame was struck by the juxtaposition of a utilitarian stencil and its handmade application, the manner in which their disintegration signaled the unraveling of an industry, the loss of jobs and the disappearance of the workers who laid those marks.[15] The disintegration of the numbers, as Calame notes, "points to technology's powerful ability to replace people."[16] The state of this "homely abacus"—a series of aging, dilapidated numbers—also foregrounds the notion of counting, of sequencing, the movement of time as well as the manner in which its progression has transformed this site.[17] Rather than thinking of them simply as numbers, it might be useful to consider the function of these stencils as multivalent digits: units of measurement; signifiers of a new technological era (the digital age); proxies for the innumerable "digits" whose labors they supported, the ghosts of the mill's more prolific past.

In choosing to trace these systematic sequences of stenciled digits, Calame entered an uncharted territory in terms of her process—representation.[18] Calame's project hinges, or so it would seem, on a central dialectic—the perpetual oscillation between abstraction and a material, physical connection with the urban surface. Through tracing, all of her works remain inextricably bound to the real, tangible world from which they emanate. At the same time, this connection takes the form of highly evolved, nonrepresentational

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[14] Ibid.
[15] Ingrid Calame, Conversation with author, New York, September 10, 2010.
[16] Calame, "Statement of Plans."
[17] Ibid.
[18] Calame's traces of the Los Angeles River basin, and the related works, incorporated some elements of writing expressed in the traced graffiti marks. However, these representational elements are far less discernible in the work than the stenciled numbers of the current series.

#318 Drawing (Tracings from Buffalo, NY) (detail), 2010, color pencil on trace Mylar, 34 x 50 inches (86.4 x 127 cm)

compositions, often likened to "hybridized simulations of Abstract Expressionist gestures"[19] or "the work of a younger, more joyous Jackson Pollock."[20] In terms of appearance, then, Calame's appropriation of stencils may invite comparisons with the pop generation, particularly Jasper Johns and his repeated use of the stencil as a motif and a structuring device in his paintings, drawings and prints. However, while these comparisons are relevant, it may be more fruitful to consider the function of the stencil in Calame's work in a different context—the projects of earthworks artists, particularly the Boyle Family and their use of real materials from the physical sites interpreted in their paintings. While they are undoubtedly figurative, in Calame's work, these stencils also exert a physical presence, rather than merely a distant, representational echo of something that exists elsewhere.

This palpable material quality is the result of several substantial alterations to Calame's working method, which were propelled by the introduction of the stencil traces. At the same time as the individual works enact notions of change and rupture in painted form, this new series signals a broader shift, a fundamental reorientation of elements in Calame's approach. In order to understand the scope of this transformation, we have to momentarily break away from the intricacies of these enticing surfaces and consider the elements and practices that inform Calame's method—elements that both structure this new body of work and, at the same time, are redefined by these paintings.

The first major shift might be best understood as a process of simplification and distillation. For example, for this series of works, Calame chose to focus only on one geographic locale—Buffalo, New York—rather than combining multiple locations in the constellations and related drawings and paintings. In addition, Calame decided to simplify the structure of the works, using fewer of the traces to arrive at a constellation. As a result, the subsequent drawings are also less intricate. Moreover, rather than beginning with the constellation, and then progressing into drawing and painting, Calame was already thinking of the paintings as she arranged and prepared the constellations and the related drawings. Not only did this shift the progressive emphasis that had governed her work

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[19] Jeffrey Hughes, "Ingrid Calame Indianapolis," *Art Papers* (January/February 2008).
[20] Pepe Karmel, "Ingrid Calame: Field Reports" in *Ingrid Calame: Constellations* (New York: James Cohan Gallery, 2007), p. 34.

ArcelorMittal Steel Shipping Building Two, Left Nos. 51 & 56, 2010, oil on aluminum, 40 x 24 inches (101.6 x 60.9 cm)

until this time, but it also opened up the possibility for a less direct relationship between the composition of the drawings and those of the paintings. While there are drawings that correspond to each painting, the paintings also deviate from the script, at times, adding layers of tracings or subtracting marks that may be present in their counterparts.[21]

These works usher in a different relationship between the stages of Calame's overall project, as well as signal a shift in the material and compositional structure of the paintings themselves. Instead of the enamel paint used in previous paintings, Calame executed all the works in the series with oil paints. Given the fastidious nature of Calame's enterprise and the well-rehearsed sequence of processes and materials, this change proved particularly significant to the appearance and application of the works. As Calame noted, "The velvety intimate surface is a big departure from the sign painter's glossy enamel with which I have worked for years."[22] Less aqueous than enamel-based paint, oil holds the brush mark, revealing traces of the process suspended on the surface of the completed painting. In other words, Calame chose a medium that resonated with and mimicked the indexical nature of her method. Moreover, with the introduction of the oil paint, Calame ceased to layer forms and colors in her painting, opting instead for an even more rigorous and intricate formal strategy. As before, the artist applied the colors and forms side by side, creating a single painted layer of puzzlelike complexity. Within this system, each mark, whether stenciled number or an infinitesimal fleck of color, maintains a rigid, concrete shape and texture that locks into the greater whole. In addition, the oil paintings use each tracing as a visual event field in which the chosen color blushes and varies throughout. While the paintings flirt with a hint of depth, all their components and their infinite manifestations are grounded on the same plane; all exist equally poised on the same surface.

Given the significance of the stenciled forms as markers of loss and disintegration, it is interesting to consider that, in the paintings, the erasure or fractioning of the numbers does not result in a void, an emptiness. Instead, it results in the formation of another

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[21] Calame, Conversation with author.
[22] Calame, "Statement of Plans."

ArcelorMittal Steel Shipping Building One, Right No. 197, 2009, oil on aluminum, 40 x 24 inches (101.6 x 60.9 cm)

entity that interlocks with the form of the number, a kaleidoscopic rearrangement of parts. Moreover, the colors of each element and the brushstroke in which it is rendered are all influenced by its relative position within the composition, its relationship to each other part and the role of each discrete element within the larger surface it creates. This aspect also brings us back to an element of Calame's method that, although always present, is distilled and poignantly restated in the Buffalo works—rather than an archeological endeavor, the unearthing of buried relics of the past, Calame's project hinges on the understanding that the present and the past, the remnants of what came before and their gradual, ongoing transformation, are marked on the surface of things.

In discussing why she chose to trace the marks of streets, sidewalks and buildings, Calame explained, "I chose the street because I wanted a public parade of loss rather than a private revealing of events...Death doesn't seem like only a giant cataclysmic event, but also incremental loss and transformation."[23] The fact that Calame refers to her tracing sites as "public parades of loss" is significant in terms of the manner in which the city structures active engagement with our surroundings. With this phrase, Calame imagines loss as an active process, an event that always necessitates a physical exchange between participant and site. Moreover, like a parade, loss becomes a production, a spectacle, a locus of activity, marked by reappropriation and reconstitution rather than annihilation or disappearance. The notion that the movements of the parade are slow, "incremental" rather than "cataclysmic," relates this event directly to the sequential lines of stenciled digits and the procession of steel mill workers that traversed them for generations. It also brings us forward to the paintings themselves and the subtle, incremental quality of change that is made indelibly palpable in them—parts of digits splintering off, other pieces coming to take their place—the transformation of information from the trace to painted form, and, finally, the slow, measured pace of the brush returning the mark to the surface. The parade of loss marches in time. Ingrid Calame keeps it grounded in place.

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[23] Calame, quoted Freiman, "*Traces of the Indianapolis Motor Speedway.*"

Top: *ArcelorMittal Steel Shipping Building One, Right Nos. 274, 275, 277*, 2010, oil on aluminum, 36 x 72 inches (91.4 x 182.9 cm)
Bottom: *#300 Drawing (Tracings from Buffalo, NY), 2008*, color pencil on trace Mylar, 48 x 84 inches (121.9 x 213.4 cm)