

ICA RAMP PROJECTS

INGRID CALAME, TRACING UP TO THE L.A. RIVER: FROG TOWN TURF WAR

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Tour Preparation for High School Students



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ABOUT THE ARTIST

Ingrid Calame was born in 1965 and lives in Los Angeles.

Calame traces contours of stains from the streets and transposes them onto white gallery walls into graphic, painterly compositions that are reminiscent of Abstract Expressionist paintings. Each tracing is filed away with the place and date it was found for use in her future paintings.

When making a painting, Calame combines these archived tracings to create layered works that are at once abstract and representational.

She is known for her large-scale enamel paintings and drawings with lyrical titles like *Spalunk* (1997) and *b-b-b,rr-gR-UF! b-b-b* (1999).

ABOUT THE PROJECT

The steep pitch of ICA's ramp reminded Calame of tracings she had made on the concrete embankments of the Los Angeles River. The tracings included a turf war in spray paint between two local graffiti crews, with one group painting over the tags of the other, creating an abstract conglomeration of words. In a departure from her previous works, Calame traced whole sections of the graffitied embankment and transposed the tracings directly onto the ramp walls within an area defined by the shape of the ramp's windows. On the interior, viewers can approach the paintings for a close inspection of the graffiti; from the exterior, stand across the street for a perfect view.



ACTIVITY

Trace and collect a number of stains. Ask students to consider where they will gather the stains. How will that affect their meaning? Ingrid Calame only traces stains from streets and sidewalks so that the stories behind them are somewhat anonymous – her personal involvement is only recorded in her choice of stain tracings for use in her paintings.

Cover a sheet of white paper in wax crayon, pressing hard and leaving no white space. For her Ramp Project, Ingrid Calame first carefully planned the colors she would use by testing them on the wall in her Los Angeles studio. She compares the under painting to Hans Hofmann. Discuss Hofmann's push and pull color theory with students. Visit www.pbs.org/hanshofmann/for_teachers_001.html for lesson plan.

Paint over the colored paper using black tempera paint mixed with a few drops of soap (the soap will make the tempera paint adhere to the waxy crayon surface). After the paint is dry, students can transfer their stain tracings to the paper. Place a piece of carbon transfer paper between the stain tracing and the painted work and heavily retrace the stain so that it transfers onto the painted surface. Note that Ingrid Calame used this idea in her ramp piece, but in reverse: she transferred her stains onto the brightly colored surface and painted around them in brown. Finally, students can scratch off the black paint inside their traced lines to reveal brightly colored stains on a black background. Have students discuss or write about their work.

SUGGESTED READING

Engler, Martin. "The Street as a Puzzle." *Ingrid Calame/Mathilde ter Heijne/Jörg Wagner*. Exhibition Catalogue. (Hannover: Kunstverein Hannover 2004): 16–35.

Lumpkin, Libby. *Calame*. Exhibition Catalogue. New York: Deitch Projects, 2000.

Moos, David. "Ingrid Calame: NYSE." *Art Papers* 27, pt. 6 (Nov/Dec 2003): 22–27.

front: Ingrid Calame and assistant painting the Ramp. Photo: Robert Chaney.
left: Ingrid Calame in her studio with tracings for ICA Ramp Project, Los Angeles.
Photo: Shelby Roberts.
right: Ingrid Calame, 2006, ICA installation view. Photo: Aaron Igler.
back: Ingrid Calame, tracings for ICA Ramp Project, Los Angeles.

CONVERSATION WITH THE ARTIST

A conversation with artist Ingrid Calame and ICA senior curator Ingrid Schaffner from ICA's Exhibition Walkthrough on January 20, 2006.

Ingrid Schaffner: Ingrid Calame is the eighth artist in our series of ramp commissions and she is the third artist to create a wall painting. Unlike Amy Sillman, for whom the scale of the project was a huge leap, Ingrid is more like Arturo Herrera in as much as working on this scale is part of their practice. Ingrid, tell us about the imagery you've used in this project.

Ingrid Calame: I took both windows and used them as viewfinders for material that I brought from Los Angeles. The space is very big and I needed to find a way to contain it. Then I took stains I traced from the LA river, three tracings of graffiti. The graffiti is probably 34 feet long by 17 feet high.

IS: It's a direct scale?

IC: Yes. I traced each of these markings with architect's drafting mylar. It's a very exact rendering of the accumulation of graffiti. None of them are the singular marks of one person.

IS: I see language, a flower, scribbled out words and numbers. It seems there is something particular going on in this imagery. Can you talk about the turf wars?

IC: I'm tracing a lot of different kinds of marks. Graffiti is relatively new as a big group of marks I've been tracing. The stains have generally been splashes and spills and more filigreed things. I live a couple of blocks away from the LA River and I bike down there. It is so full of graffiti. I started tracing this conversation after the last election because I was wondering about America and I felt disconnected. I looked down and saw this conversation people were having right in front of me. I've been doing that for about a year and a half now. I empathized with this stain because it's people writing over what other people have written and changing it into something else rather aggressively. I could relate to that feeling of obliteration, that my voice isn't heard or that I'm trying to speak over other people.

IS: What about the color?

IC: This is a real departure for me. Underneath this looks like Hans Hofmann. It's a balancing act between colors. I planned the color I was going to use and the color that went on top but I didn't know how I would lay out the colors until I got here. That was very difficult because I had to keep



jumping back from inside to outside to see what I was doing because it is so huge. We had the window shape taped off and then this big abstract composition went underneath. It's based on those crayon drawings you did as a kid with lots of colors that you put black over and scratched through. That was the basic idea of the colors and seeing through to colors because for me those drawings were quite magical.

IS: This is a real departure from your work to date. Typically you've traced stains found in parking lots and streets and layered the Mylar sheets into single color wall paintings that are generally much more flat, a silhouette of all these different layers. It's like a taxidermy of an abstract expressionist painting with its imagery of the gesture but all very meticulously rendered. When Ingrid came for her site visit she brought one of these drawings as a proposal for this space but then when you saw the space you had to completely rethink what you were going to do.

IC: Yes, definitely.

IS: You have worked in architectural settings like this—this isn't your first ramp or wall—but there was something particular about this space that made you change direction.

IC: My original proposal had to do with an ongoing project that uses architecture to contain stains from different city streets called *Secular Response*. I wanted to use a portion of *Secular Response 2*, which was based on an excerpt of the floor of the New York Stock Exchange. When I came to ICA I thought, "What am I thinking?" First of all, those stains are like lace, they are very filigreed and they take forever to do. We only had two weeks and there is only one small flat space in here, which makes it very difficult to move a ladder. To make one of my tiny lacing works would have pushed everyone to the limit and I didn't want to do that. I also thought it just didn't feel right because this architecture is so dominant and I really didn't want to fight it. I think the experience of this space is best from outside; it looks more like a diorama. I felt from everyone I was working with here that this was like a lab, they didn't care if I did what everyone knows I do, they just wanted me to do something that responded to the space.

I was talking to high school students today and someone asked how long it took to prepare for this. I meant it to be light and easy, but I said it was like Thanksgiving. It was days, and days and days of preparing, and then everybody eats and it's over. But it was actually months of preparation, not including tracing the stain, and then we did it within a week or less because of all that preparation. If you started preparing Thanksgiving dinner when the guests arrived you'd be in trouble.

