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Q&A: Ingrid Calame

Bronx-born artist on tracing spills, stains and urban surfaces



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Equipped with mylar architecture paper and graphite, Ingrid Calame traces stains, spills and other 'closed shapes' before repairing to her LA studio where she converts them into colourful drawings. She introduces her process to Sam Gaskin

Why tracing?

When I started this, the idea was that the whole surface of the world is a potential drawing. I can't trace the whole world, so I'm tracing a fragment. I'm interested in how impossible it is for us to represent something as huge as the world.

Is your work documentary, like photography? What do you leave out?

It's information that couldn't be documented with photography because that would change the scale. Also, some of the stuff is not even visible with photography because of the greys I'm working with. I'm making the decisions about what's visible. Your reflection from being a journalist is interesting because you know how subjective it has to be, but when I trace, I'm aiming not to be creative.

What can you deduce about places from their markings?

The technical things that influence marks are the viscosity of the liquid, the aggregate of the concrete, the temperature of the area and the season. In Las Vegas there were flash dried snowflakes. I traced a one way sign painted on the road in Seoul once and because of the

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temperature changes there the concrete shrinks and expands a lot. It had many cracks and had been repainted, becoming this incredible geological formation.

Where else have you traced?

For the first ten years I was doing this I was on the street and it was very guerilla, but recently museums have helped me get access to certain places. The Indianapolis museum of art wanted me to trace in their forest and it's a beautiful forest but I don't have anything to trace there. I said, 'How about the speedway?' I found out that the speedway is actually incredibly clean, there was barely anything to trace because they clean it so much so that the cars don't have any friction. Who would ever know? Arcelor-Mittal Steel is the dirtiest place I've traced. It's giant, several football fields long. The numbers crane drivers use to identify where they're picking up steel from are body sized, two feet by three feet and the disintegration of them was handled so matter of factly – they just painted the numbers right next to them or right over them. The numbers are human in how they're made and how they disintegrate. They're important in the job they do but they're not aesthetically important.

Does your work have social concerns?

I found out on opening night that the curator who suggested Arcelor-Mittal Steel, her dad had worked there. He'd been laid off right before retirement, which was a common bad practice there and it had changed all their lives. I'd just responded to these numbers but it resonated with other people's lives.

Is your work a kind of reverse graffiti, urban surfaces drawing on the artist?

It's like I'm embodying a process that happens in life. That there are all these histories inscribed on us. Some of the things are literally graffiti that I'm tracing, or stains, but they then mark me, and it's not something I anticipated in wanting to collect remnants of life.

Have you considered tracing in New York post Hurricane Sandy?

I'm from New York but I don't really memorialise anything like that. When Katrina hit there was a collector who wanted me to come down to New Orleans and trace but I'm not really a disaster tracer. I'm more interested in the incremental trauma of life. In Shanghai, it's not necessarily bad, but it's gotta be traumatic, the building, building, building, the changing, changing, changing

What does your five-year-old daughter make of your work?

Recently, she was drawing something in my studio, and she said she was going to work on it again the next day like I do. But I've been working on this one painting for four months and I'm so jealous of her process, because she just makes a drawing within a minute. She is complete in the moment that she does that drawing. She doesn't need to go back and keep doing a fragment.

Ingrid Calame: Drawings is at James Cohan Gallery until January 24.

Sam Gaskin