

# JAMES COHAN GALLERY

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Ingrid Calame says her work — including numbers from the floor of the ArcelorMittal plant — is meant "to point people in a direction that is more about a human thing rather than a necessarily overarching documentary thing." The piece has a particular poignancy for Eric Smith, left, who lost his job when the plant closed. His voice can be heard on an audio tour of the exhibit.

Robert Kirkham/Buffalo News

### Artist finds abstract beauty in traces of Buffalo's past

By Colin Dabkowski

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When the ArcelorMittal steel company ended production at its Lackawanna plant in May, one of the last functioning remnants of Western New York's once-thriving steel industry ground to a halt.

The plant's closure and the painful dismissal of its 260 employees was the latest in a series of blows to the region's slowly disintegrating manufacturing economy — one more notch on the Rust Belt.

Ingrid Calame, a Los Angeles-based artist whose exhibition "Step on a Crack..." opened at the Albright-Knox Art Gallery last week, can't do anything to stop the encroaching rust. But her work, based on enormous tracings from Western New York sites including the ArcelorMittal plant, keeps a significant slice of Buffalo's history alive on the gallery's walls.

In late 2007, the Albright-Knox commissioned Calame to create a body of work based on ground markings in and around Buffalo, a process that began with a three-week residency last summer. With a cadre of local artists and students as assistants, Calame traced huge sections of floor

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markings at the ArcelorMittal plant — then still in operation — along with parts of a wading pool on Louisiana Street and large swaths of the Albright-Knox parking lot.

The resulting works include one room-encompassing wall drawing based exclusively on the steel plant tracings and 10 vibrantly colored drawings and paintings that combine Calame's sources into abstract amalgams. She calls them "constellations of an event."

Before Calame's residency began, Nancy Spector, Albright-Knox associate curator of education, led gallery staffers in scouting more than a dozen locations in and around Buffalo. Potential sites ranged from the Erie Canal locks in Lockport to a former barrel factory in downtown Buffalo. "She was very picky about her marks," Spector said.

Calame settled on the ArcelorMittal plant — part of the once-mighty Bethlehem Steel Corp. until it folded in 2003.

"We thought they would laugh. But they didn't," Spector said of the ArcelorMittal management's reaction to her request for access. "They all thought there was this beauty in their workplace that they wanted to show us and share with us and that they felt was important. And it obviously energized their lives to think somebody would be interested in it."

Shortly after her arrival, Calame decided to trace a dilapidated wading pool in Buffalo's old First Ward, as well as sections of the Albright-Knox parking lot. In terms of scope, the residency and year of studio work that followed, Calame said, was her biggest project yet.

Spector stressed the educational potential of the show — about the conceptual challenges of the art itself and in terms of what it can reveal about the history and landscape of Western New York.

"From an educational point of view, the connection of art and the community is a really natural one," Spector said. "The expression and the creativity that goes along with art are the kinds of skills that people need to have good lives. They need to, I think, look at something beyond what's right in front of your nose."

### **'We could compete'**

For Eric Smith, one of the 260 workers who lost their jobs when the plant closed, that connection between art and community couldn't be clearer. Sitting in a gallery whose walls are painted with numbers and patterns traced from the floor of the place where he worked for 11 years, Smith reflected on the exhibition.

"It might be a dead industry, but I'm lookin' at ,,,, it's still got memories," said Smith, whose father also worked in the Lackawanna plant for 30 years. "And I'm glad they brought it here, where I can actually come and see it, bring my kids and show them what I did."

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Smith's memories of his time at the plant are part of the exhibition's oral history component. He and other Western New Yorkers contributed reminiscences and reflections that provide context to Calame's work. They can be heard through the show's audio guide.

After a stint in the armed services, Smith took a job at Bethlehem's coke oven facility in 1998. He worked his way up through the ranks until the oven was shut down in 2001. Undaunted, he put in for a transfer to the galvanizing plant across the street, where he finally worked his way up to the top position in the mill — called the "roller" — in March. One week later, he was let go.

"All that I went through to learn the job, and I liked it," Smith said. "We did a lot, because they'd been wanting to close that part of the mill down for a long time, and we showed 'em we could compete against anybody. That's what hurt, when they closed us down."

Because of the plant's sudden closure, the exhibition took on an unanticipated role in capturing not just the culture of a city, but a pivotal moment in the death of an industry.

### **'A pinprick in time'**

That idea isn't lost on Calame, whose systematic but highly personal approach to art-making has as much to do with her own whims and curiosities as with the city from which she drew her inspiration.

Her drawings and paintings combine the meticulous tracings from the wading pool, the parking lot and the steel plant into layered abstractions that give little hint about their source. Several of the pieces look like color-coded topographical maps of otherworldly landscapes; others have the look of more traditional abstract painting.

All of them are infused, in ways that are anything but obvious, with Calame's ideas about mortality, her own family history and her interest in the perceptions of abstraction and representation. Part of that comes from Calame having her mother and daughter stay with her for her residency in Buffalo.

"I had a really intense time tracing these things, and it involved my whole family. My mother came to watch my daughter while I was here, so I lived here for three weeks with my daughter and my mom, and that was very intense," she said. The exhibition title, "Step on a Crack,...," is meant to evoke ideas about motherhood and mortality.

"I wanted to point people in a direction that is more about a human thing rather than a necessarily overarching documentary thing," Calame said.

The result is an exhibit that combines Calame's personal curiosities with the marks she traces in a way that renders both strains happily ambiguous and largely indistinguishable from one another.

"In the paintings, I'm definitely making a new place that's not Buffalo and not my daily life," Calame said. "It's just sort of based on memory and thought."

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Still, Calame said, she wanted to create one piece for the show in which audiences could see a clear connection between her art and the community.

That piece, the room-sized drawing "Mittal Steel No. 1 Shipping 192-209," is drawn from the numbers on the floor of the plant's so-called "skid mill," where completed orders of steel waited to be shipped off to customers throughout North America.

"I really wanted to take a thread out from the whole tracing experience and leave one tracing shape visible, so that people could relate to it in a more documentary way," Calame said. But, she added, "It's not really 'about' Buffalo, it isn't about the steel factories. It's about making a larger picture of the world."

Calame sees the marks on the Earth's surface as records of human and natural activity, or, as she put it, "collisions between life and death." She came to tracing as a way to record that activity and, in that process came to an important realization about her artistic outlook.

"I got there by thinking about the whole world being a skin and that each place I'm tracing is like a tiny fragment of that skin. And if I could trace everywhere it would be a complete picture, but of course that's impossible, which I like, because you never have a complete picture," Calame said. "I would never have a complete picture of Buffalo no matter how much I researched it. So this is like a pinpricked place in time."

People who have long been immune to the allure of abstract art may find the exhibit challenges their preconceptions about abstraction's connection to real life.

"It can teach us about the present, where we are. It can teach us about the past," said Spector, the education curator. "And it can sort of point a little way to think about how a better community might be in the future."

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