

Ingrid Calame

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It's impossible to conceive of matter without form. Objects can be nondescript, amorphous, or indefinite, but these still describe their form. Even to say that something is just a blob or a squiggle is to talk about a kind of shape. In fact, when we call something formless, it usually doesn't indicate an absence of physical parameters, but only that the object was molded by a set of forces which we cannot describe or for which we do not have names.

In an earlier body of work, Ingrid Calame knew exactly where to find these shapes: on the floor of her studio. In those paintings, the artist outlined the marks left by paint that had dripped onto the floor, rearranged the silhouettes, then transferred them to new surfaces in neat, clean colors. This process highlights the idea that formless matter is more than just an ungraspable concept, it's also a source of psychic anxiety. It's why we feel disquiet when material of any kind (but liquid especially) escapes from the system that has been designed to enclose or contain it, like oil leaked from a car, water spilled from a glass, blood from a body, or paint from an artist's palette.

If one accepts this theory, then Calame comes upon the scene like a psychic janitor, busily whipping all those offensive smears, spots, splotches, and stains into shape. On behalf of anyone who's ever spilled wine on a new blouse, dribbled barbecue sauce onto a clean pair of jeans, or left a candy bar to melt all over the seat of their car, she punishes transgressive stains in the worst possible way: by perfectly duplicating them. The paintings become to these blemishes what Kryptonite was to Superman; reproduction robs them of their anarchic, unbehaved singularity.

Calame's new installation, *Spalunk...* (1997), works along these same lines, but it



ups the ante. This time, the artist leaves the safe confines of her studio and makes her tracings off the surface of the road outside the gallery. With an absolutely flat and unmodulated layer of rust-colored enamel, she transfers the marks that she finds there onto three long strips of Mylar that roll down from the ceiling of the exhibition space and spill across the floor. The intricate, lacy edges of her painted forms are convincing signals that the artist has traced out the actual stain, which one can even go out and relocate in situ, all of which compounds the work's quality as a cartographic exercise. That's critical, because maps put a premium on precision, accuracy, and placement—qualities that the original blotches flout and which make them unwanted intruders in our desire for order.

Calame's impeccability might have made the work a deadly bore to entertain, were it not that the aleatory nature of these shapes invites imaginative projections. As in the famous passage from Leonardo's *Treatise on Painting*, where he encourages artists to conjure fantastic visions by staring at the coals in a grate, it's not hard to perceive Calame's shapes as land masses in a bigger cartographic project, plant forms, magnified microbes, clouds of galactic soup, or even gargoyles, dragons, and demons, if you're so inclined.

All of this begs a larger question about the identity of these marks. They are, in fact, the signature of entropy. In the ur-

ban setting from which they were transcribed, they are produced by things breaking down, machines spinning out of control, chemicals eating their way out of tanks, and human error. Inevitably, they mean something has gone wrong. By displacing the marks off the street and neutralizing them with art materials, this fact becomes lost in the finished work. In their aesthetic incarnation, it's impossible to tell whether the accident that caused them was a minor irritation or a major catastrophe, although, given that some of them are several feet across and creep ominously down the full 20-foot length of the piece, one tends to assume the worst. This makes *Spalunk...* a double-edged sword. It takes calamity and makes it beautiful, light, and delicate—an elegant and enticing object transformed out of somebody else's bad luck.

Carmine Iannaccone is an artist and instructor at the University of Southern California and the Los Angeles County High School for the Arts.

Ingrid Calame
Spalunk..., 1997
Enamel on Mylar
234" x 162"