

ART

Stop Your Engines! The Artist Is Tracing

By DOROTHY SPEARS

WHEN the Los Angeles artist Ingrid Calame wanted to trace the skid marks on the Indianapolis Motor Speedway, the track's manager was skeptical. "The request was pretty unusual," said the manager, Dan Edwards, who in his eight years at the speedway has provided special access to people testing tires, engines and racecars.

Then he researched Ms. Calame's boldly colored compositions, derived from stains and graffiti that she traces from city streets and sidewalks. And he realized that the racetrack "was like a canvas," he said in a phone interview. "There were stories that went with every tire mark, every gouge."

One pattern was a famous pretzel-shaped skid mark made by Dan Wheldon in 2005 after his Indianapolis 500 victory. Now an enamel and latex wall painting based on his celebratory gesture is the 76-by-20-foot centerpiece of "Ingrid Calame: Traces of the Indianapolis Motor Speedway," opening Friday at the Indianapolis Museum of Art.

With a series of large colored-pencil drawings and enamel-on-aluminum paintings, the exhibition offers visual testimony of what usually goes unnoticed: the fuel spills, sprayed gravel, gouges and skids that remain indelible after high-speed courtships with death.

"I'm a tourist in the racecar world," said Ms. Calame, 42, who wore her dark-blond hair in dreadlocks at an interview in New York, where her paintings were shown recently at James Cohan Gallery in Chelsea. Still, it didn't take her long to surmise that feelings about the racecar industry loom large in Indianapolis. "It isn't neutral," she said, recalling the reaction last year when she suggested tracing patterns at the Speedway. "Some people at the museum were really resistant."

When Lisa Freiman, the museum's curator of contemporary art, proposed a site-specific commission, she invited Ms. Calame on a stroll through the 100-acre art and nature park behind the museum. "She suggested the forest," Ms. Calame said. "But there was nothing to trace there."

The speedway's annual Allstate 400 at the Brickyard was the next day, and Ms. Freiman arranged a visit. "Ingrid got so excited," Ms. Freiman said by phone from the museum. "It was completely obvious where she wanted to go with this project."

After Ms. Calame obtained permission for a week's off-season access to the speedway, she posted a search for assistants on Craigslist.com. Carl Ashmore, an office manager for a local sports artist and muralist, responded immediately. A native of Indianapolis, Mr. Ashmore said he grew up attending qualification and practice runs for the Indy 500. "Ingrid interviewed



PHOTOGRAPHS FROM THE INDIANAPOLIS MUSEUM OF ART

me on the telephone," he said. "I told her I have a great love for the Motor Speedway. She said, 'O.K., let's do it.'"

When Ms. Calame arrived at the speedway last October, Mr. Edwards took her on what he called "a slow-rolling tour." "Every mark he showed me," she said, "he could say who did it, on what date."

Outside the pit, where racecars stop for fuel and tire changing, Ms. Calame and her team of 12 assistants laid several rolls of

"blew what I had been working on completely out of the water." She said the project reminded her of Robert Smithson's earthworks, which often used heavy machinery like bulldozers and tractors.

"At first a big museum commission sounded glamorous," recalled Mr. Di Gregorio, now an art teacher. "But the process was just about as labor intensive as anything I have done."

How intensive? "Some people quit," Ms. Calame said, smiling wryly. "One guy walked off the track at lunch and never came back." (She was three months pregnant while working at the speedway; her daughter was born in April.)

Ms. Calame (pronounced cah-LAHM) grew up in Westchester County, N.Y., where her mother was a physical therapist and her father taught physical education. Having studied dance before shifting to painting in college, she keeps a focus on the body in her art making.

In 1997, a year after earning an M.F.A. in art and filmmaking from the California Institute of the Arts in Valencia, she began tracing stains on the floor of her Los Angeles studio. In an odd confluence of events, she then learned that when her grandmother had died years before in Florida, the body was not immediately discovered. By the time the corpse was found, Ms. Calame said, it had begun to decompose.

An image of the stain on the bed where her grandmother died began to haunt her, Ms. Calame said, explaining how she sees stains as collisions between life and death — personal records, or traces, left behind when life has vanished.

Seeking to record "evidence of people," Ms. Calame began tracing stains in public places: at a church in her hometown; at the New York Stock Exchange; at the Lowell Observatory in Flagstaff, Ariz.; on random streets and sidewalks. These works have been shown at museums in the United States and Germany.

After the week spent tracing at the speedway Ms. Calame returned to her studio in the Echo Park district of Los Angeles to copy the collective tracings onto clean sheets of Mylar, which is so durable that "they make sails out of it," she noted. She reconfigured these and added color.

Sometimes she juxtaposed the speedway's distinctive shapes and patterns with tracings of more abject stains from the



Ingrid Calame, left, has made artworks like the one above by tracing skid marks at the Indianapolis Motor Speedway. Dan Wheldon's victory doughnut, below left, is among the better known skids.

INGRID CALAME: TRACES OF THE INDIANAPOLIS MOTOR SPEEDWAY

INDIANAPOLIS MUSEUM OF ART
4000 North Michigan Road, Indianapolis, (317) 920-2660; Nov. 2 through Jan. 27.

In skid marks at a racetrack, Ingrid Calame sees a record of lives in the fast lane.

Mylar side by side. They traced from 8 a.m. to 6 p.m., with a break for lunch, in 30- to 35-degree weather.

"I was dressed for Siberia," said Jose Luis Di Gregorio, a recent graduate of the Herron School of Art and design in Indianapolis, one of those assistants.

The track's diamond-cut grooves favor traction over tracing, and progress was slow. "We were tracing marks the size of a pea or even smaller," Mr. Ashmore said. "In an area of three feet there were hundreds, maybe thousands, of marks."

Racecars out of control tend to skid quite a distance; one mark was 200 feet long. "The scale of that skid," Ms. Calame said,

concrete embankment of the Los Angeles River, which runs near her studio. When the river dries out, she said, she can lose herself in tracing the graffiti and leaf splatter left visible. People walk by. There are herons and frogs. Nobody bothers her.

By contrast time was short on the speedway's track. Ms. Calame and her team had been tracing for four days when Mr. Edwards remembered Mr. Wheldon's famous finish-line doughnut. "I took Ingrid out there," he said. "She was fascinated."

Ms. Calame's painting of the victory loop — like an incarnation of a Kenneth Noland target painting — stands in stark contrast to her previous stains. Mr. Wheldon, speaking by phone from St. Petersburg, Fla., couldn't resist weighing in on the commemoration of his most treasured moment. He has seen one of her enamel-on-aluminum paintings that includes a portion of his victory doughnut, and he compared her attention to detail to that required when building a racecar.

"A significant amount of history went into Ingrid's piece," said Mr. Wheldon, the first driver in Indy 500 history to do doughnuts after crossing the venerable Yard of Bricks finish line. "I was extremely emotional after winning the event. 'I had, uh, tears. I thought: 'I cannot drive into Victory Lane crying. I'm a man.' So I started doing the doughnuts."

