NEW WORK: DAWN FRYLING
SEPTEMBER 19 – NOVEMBER 4, 1990

Dawn Fryling's work is something new. Every exhibition is different from the one before it, often so much so that one would be hard pressed to be sure that it was her work. Yet what Fryling does is always smart, reticent, witty, pure, and somehow subversive, and one can look forward to each new body of work with confidence that it will be significant and fresh.

Working with her on this exhibition has been a delight. We are pleased as well to print below a text on her work by Kevin Ford, which was commissioned at her suggestion.

John Caldwell
Curator of Painting and Sculpture

Dawn Fryling was born in Pasadena, California, in 1960. She received a B.F.A. from the University of Arizona, Scottsdale, in 1985 and an M.F.A. from the San Francisco Art Institute in 1988. As a student, conceptual- and time-based performance art strongly influenced her work. Along with beauty, Fryling has pursued an eclectic choice of materials and processes, incorporating a wide range of media in her work: sculpture, performance, video, and photography. She focuses on sensations absorbed by the intellect, not on those dependent on sentiment or nostalgia. Fryling's alert intuition and insight into the objective properties of materials display a pragmatic and independent approach, recalling that of artists in the 1960s who worked stridently to distance themselves from Abstract Expressionism.

A factual and unequivocal use of basic materials is plainly stated throughout Fryling's work. As viewers, we are encouraged to read this information without extraneous metaphysical connotations. No Title, 1990, is a room with closely hung empty picture frames on each wall. On the floor are brightly shining halide lamps whose beams are directed outward to illuminate the interior space. When stepping into No Title, our first thought is to adjust our position to lessen the blinding irritation of the lights. An immediate solution can be found by simply standing in the shadow of another viewer. Once this spot is found, we discover that Fryling's intentions begin to unfold. The subject of this work is the emphasized shadows of the audience in the vacant frames of glass hung on the surrounding walls. The lights and bare frames intentionally withhold specific meaning for the purpose of encouraging a restless interaction with the audience. Because there is no physical content inside the frames, our attention is channeled to the more elusive aspect of the work. The traditional nature of the collectability of the art object has been downplayed, and in its place a stage has been constructed that reflects the human exchange in an inconclusive social performance.

Fryling places audience, circumstances, and equipment on equal footing and regards them as materials with an open dialogue of interchangeable and complementary functions. By giving light fixtures, shadows, and drifting motion meaningful consideration as effective art objects, Fryling's materials and their intended use flow from the principles advocated by artists in the
late 1960s. That is, artwork about things or, as Donald Judd stated, “things that exist exist.” All reference to symbolism or allegory has been collapsed for the purpose of describing this basic phenomenon: she looks for a structure of specific representation from material.

Fryling also favors work that uses the passage of time and the depletion and replacement of materials as key elements. This interchangeability, the purpose of which is to deemphasize preciousness, began with previous sculptures in which the components of toast, flour, or recycled clothing were supplied as needed within the duration of the work’s existence. This element can be seen in No Title, as people unpredictably drift in and out of the shadows, replacing one another in a continuous cycle. Within an unspecified time period the people, as main subject, are replaced, causing the work to evolve, yet so remain unchanged.

In her earlier sculptures, Fryling stacked toasted bread on the wall in narrow wooden frames. Here, in the series Toast 1–7, 1990, she has made an important further step. By photographing toast, she deprives us of the direct interaction experienced with the earlier pieces. Toast is now perceived through the framework of the intellect rather than through the senses, such as smell, touch, or the “aliveness” of the real object. By distancing us from the subject (as well as enlarging a piece of toast to greater than life size), she enables us to scrutinize the peculiar physical qualities of toast as a real phenomenon. Shape, texture, color, and scale become the primary clues in the search for understanding these pictures. Ordinary toast is not normally considered the material of serious art. But, as we observe bread (primarily encountered at mealtime) in this redefined situation, we are startled by its arresting, and somewhat humorous, distinction. On closer inspection, the beauty of the “patina” (the variegated burn marks) asserts itself, modifying our vision and inclining us to see no longer just plain bread but an aesthetic object. We notice the representation of what is prosaic and mostly unobserved coming into sharper focus.

Throughout her working process, Fryling is constantly probing materials for their physical characteristics and their basic palpable properties. Bread as an aesthetic object becomes more real as we begin to notice the distinct shapes and straightforward beauty of the exaggerated surface. The texture and quality of moving shadows become a physical looming presence in No Title. These unassuming and simple elements from everyday life surprise us with their factual realness, while simultaneously downplaying any suggestion of icon, simulation, or sign. The emphasized physical characteristics of toast or shadows are not used as vehicles for peripheral meanings or symbols but are images in themselves.

Materials and process are not held sacred by Fryling; she applies whatever best fits her needs. Image-producing vitality is found in overlooked materials freed from the content of cultural or social value. Without the dead weight of allegory she acknowledges the independence of her chosen materials, allowing a purity detached from sentiment to prevail. Fryling uses the senses both as a gateway to immediate stimulus and as a tool to help recognize the elegance in the ordinary shapes and furnishings of everyday life. What is achieved by isolating and disclosing the uncommon in the commonplace is a definition of beauty independent of metaphoric or symbolic references.

Kevin Ford
DAWN FRYLING
Born in Pasadena, California, 1960
Lives and works in San Francisco

EDUCATION
University of California, Santa Cruz, 1982
University of Arizona, Tucson, B.F.A., 1985
San Francisco Art Institute, M.F.A., 1988

INDIVIDUAL EXHIBITIONS
1985
Zgany Gallery, Tucson, Arizona
1989
The Lab, San Francisco
1990
Southern Exposure Gallery, San Francisco

GROUP EXHIBITIONS
1984
Two Evenings of Performance, Casa Seton, Tucson, Arizona
1986
Performance Exhibition, Joseph Gross Gallery, University of Arizona, Tucson
Exchange, Mandeville Center, University of California, La Jolla
Base ’86: Emerging Time-based Artists, The Farm, San Francisco
Post Studio, 181 Club, San Francisco
Volm Show, Kid Ailuck Collection Gallery, Tokyo
1987
Spring Show, Emanuel Walter / Atholl McBean Galleries, San Francisco Art Institute
Sculpture: Down Fryling and Charles Guté, Diego Rivera Gallery, San Francisco Art Institute
1988
Third Annual Juried Exhibition, Pro Arts, Oakland
Exchange, Sushi Inc., San Diego
Contention, New Langton Arts, San Francisco
1989
Bay Area Conceptualism: Two Generations, Hallwalls, Buffalo, New York
Bill Bury, Down Fryling, Ivan Majdor, Matthew Matsuoka, Kent Roberts, Richmond Art Center, California
Introductory ’90: Mara Adams, Down Fryling, Frank Jackson, and Robert Orthol, Gallery Paule Anglim, San Francisco

BIBLIOGRAPHY

CHECKLIST
No Title
1990
mixed-media installation (wood, glass, halide lights, and paint)
dimensions variable
Courtesy of the artist and Gallery Paule Anglim, San Francisco
Toast 1–7
1990
Type “R” prints
50 1/8 x 52 1/8 in. (128 x 133 cm) each
Courtesy of the artist and Gallery Paule Anglim, San Francisco
Untitled (work-in-progress)
1990
mixed-media installation
dimensions variable
Courtesy of the artist and Gallery Paule Anglim, San Francisco

New Work: Dawn Fryling is generously supported by the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art’s Collectors Forum.
© 1990 San Francisco Museum of Modern Art
401 Van Ness Avenue, San Francisco,
California 94102–4582

The San Francisco Museum of Modern Art is a privately funded, member-supported museum receiving major support from Grants for the Arts of the San Francisco Hotel Tax Fund and the National Endowment for the Arts, a Federal agency.
Installation view of No Title, 1990, at Southern Exposure Gallery, San Francisco

Cover: Toast, 1990
A SERIES OF RECENT WORK BY YOUNGER AND ESTABLISHED ARTISTS