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**SFMOMA SHOWCASES RECENT ACQUISITIONS WITH  
*PASSAGEWORKS: CONTEMPORARY ART FROM THE COLLECTION***

The San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (SFMOMA) presents *Passageworks: Contemporary Art from the Collection*, on view from October 25, 2008, through January 19, 2009. Drawing primarily from SFMOMA's collection and highlighting recent acquisitions, some presented here for the first time, the exhibition looks at art that evokes a sense of passage or transition—from past to present, from fact to fiction, from the personal to the collective, and back again.

Organized by Tara McDowell, project assistant curator for SFMOMA, this thematic selection of approximately thirty-five works includes paintings, photographs, sculptures, drawings, videos, and installations, and brings into focus important pieces—many of which have been completed during the past decade—by Yto Barrada, Tacita Dean, Thomas Eggerer, Vincent Fecteau, Felix Gonzalez-Torres, Pierre Huyghe, Emily Jacir, Julie Mehretu, and Luc Tuymans, among others.

According to McDowell, “The fluid and unpredictable approach to art making addressed here poignantly resonates with how we move through the world today. Many of these artists find their place, like each of us, within a constellation of individuals and locations, and negotiate that shifting terrain on a daily basis. They do so from the position of the navigator, the trespasser, the exile, the historical dumpster-diver, the *bricoleur*, and the translator.”

The exhibition's title is inspired by the writings of German literary critic Walter Benjamin. While living in Paris in the 1930s he studied the city's 19<sup>th</sup>-century shopping arcades or *passages*, intrigued by the unfixed place they occupied between interior and exterior, private and public, and production and consumption. In thinking about these spaces, Benjamin expressed regret that his own time had “grown very poor in threshold experiences.” More than seventy years later, in today's era of mass-media saturation, “experience has become its own form of commodity,” says McDowell. “Certain contemporary practices seek this threshold, resulting in works of art that, despite being present in the gallery, will always point to an elsewhere: a place conjured, an image appropriated, a body absent, a past reimagined.”



Felix Gonzalez-Torres, *Untitled (Golden)*,  
1995/2008; photo: Ian Reeves

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The galleries will be organized thematically, with installations focused on multiple and shifting notions of navigation, displacement, and translation. The function of memory, explored in many of these works, has likewise influenced the entire presentation. Galleries devoted to single-artist presentations of work by Glenn Ligon (*Narratives*, 1993), Emily Jacir (*Where We Come From*, 2001–3), and Pierre Huyghe (*The Third Memory*, 2000) offer extended meditations on key exhibition themes. A selection of earlier work by artists who emerged in the 1960s and 1970s—such as Vija Celmins (*Suspended Plane*, 1996), Jess (*Narkissos*, 1976–91), Gordon Matta-Clark (*Conical Intersect*, 1975), and Robert Smithson (*Nonsite [Essen Soil and Mirrors]*, 1969)—provides historical perspective on these concerns.

## **Memory**

*Passageworks* addresses the difficulty of putting forward in material form—or fixing in an image—the volatile, partial nature of what and how we remember. Much of the art gathered here serves as a reminder that memory involves forgetting as much as remembering, the imagined as much as the real, and often shifts, too, from the collective to personal experience. In Tacita Dean's *Beauty* (2006), the artist begins with an enlarged photograph of a tree taken in her native southeastern England. She paints out the tree's surroundings with chalky white gouache, streaking thick impasto across the image to leave only the figure of the tree untouched. The resulting image renders memory visual, illustrating the way a single powerful form might emerge crystalline from a hazy, indeterminate field, not unlike the way clear pictures emerge from a remembered past.

Luc Tuymans's work addresses memory from a different angle by engaging history. *Ballroom Dancing* (2005), an oil painting based on a found image of a recent Governor's gala in Texas, is among a series of paintings by the artist that forms a fractured portrait of life in the United States under the Bush Administration. Distinctly contemporary at the time it was made, the painting nonetheless imagines its moment as already past; the work poses as a history painting of a waning era.

## **Displacements**

The term “displacement,” in the context of this exhibition, is borrowed from the artist Robert Smithson, who thought of his practice as moving between the represented and the real, the contained and the scattered, and the site and the non-site. One of his most well-known formulations of this concept, *Nonsite (Essen Soil and Mirrors)* (1969), consists of rocks and dirt gathered by the artist from a site in Holland, far removed from the exhibition space for which the work was originally conceived. Piled on a large mirror placed on gallery floor, the earth becomes a representation of the remote site, or a “non-site,” that in its very name conjures the site even as it marks its absence.

Allan Sekula also problematizes notions of place, as well as conditions of globalization, adopting the role of trespasser in *Dear Bill Gates* (1999), a work that refers to a scenario in which the artist treads water at the edge of Gates's underwater home security system. Yto Barrada's work, such as *Frontière Sebata-Border Ceuta (Illegally Crossing—Tangier)* (1999), is also concerned with dividing lines, documenting through photography the movements of people living primarily on the African side of the Strait of Gibraltar. Thomas Eggerer's *Call of the Wind II* (2007)—depicting figures in the foreground whose backs are to the viewer as they contemplate a river clogged with sailboats and a deserted encampment of tents in the distance—portrays a world on the verge of dissolution and engages with issues of belonging. Although it portrays recognizable forms, areas of the painting appear unfinished, evoking a sense of

alienation and unresolved tension between figuration and abstraction. Similarly, three small-scale untitled sculptures by Vincent Fecteau have the feel of dwellings, safe but anxiously fragile spaces that, like many works gathered here, speak to concerns about belonging and home.

## Translation

More conventionally understood as a linguistic or literary activity, here translation is meant to describe an artistic process, one in which an object or image found in the world is translated by an artist into a new work. Steve Wolfe's *The Andy Warhol Diaries* (1991–92) is meant to be a faithful replica of the original, but this version of the book is impossible to read. Shifts between legibility and illegibility, skilled labor and the banality of copying, illustrate a deep connection to the source material, one often marked by desire or longing. Jess, an artist based in San Francisco throughout his career, considered translation to be one of the foundational methods of his practice. His *Narkissos* (1976–91) comprises a multitude of hand-drawn or collaged fragments related to the Narcissus myth, forming a cautionary tale against the seductive dangers of representation. Robert Gober's method of translation offers a different model. His bundled stacks of newsprint in *Newspaper* (1992) seem to be just that, but are instead lithographs of real and false articles compiled and designed by the artist. Produced during an election year, the information on display is choreographed to foreground political and social issues that remain contested terrain even today, sixteen years later.

Other highlights in the presentation include Emily Jacir's *Where We Come From* (2001–3). In this project, the artist asked individuals—primarily Palestinians living in cities throughout the world, who are nevertheless unable to move freely in and out of Palestinian territories and Israel with ease—to answer the following question: “If I could do anything for you, anywhere in Palestine, what would it be?” Ranging from the poetic to the mundane, the responses are documented through text panels and photographs by the artist, who comments with sensitivity and pathos on the condition of exile, mobility, and borders. And perhaps at the heart of the exhibition's concept, is Felix Gonzales-Torres's *Untitled (Golden)* (1995), a vast curtain made up of millions of strands of faceted gold beads. Both a literal and metaphorical passageway, the curtain marks an “in between” space that visitors must cross. SFMOMA acquired Jacir's installation and Gonzales-Torres's *Untitled* this year; both works will be on view at the museum for the first time as part of this exhibition.

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**Museum hours:** Open daily (except Wednesdays): 11 a.m. to 5:45 p.m.; open late Thursdays, until 8:45 p.m. Summer hours (Memorial Day to Labor Day): Open at 10 a.m. Closed Wednesdays and the following public holidays: New Year's Day, Fourth of July, Thanksgiving, Christmas. The museum is open the Wednesday between Christmas and New Year's Day.

**Koret Visitor Education Center:** Open daily (except Wednesdays): 11 a.m. to 5:30 p.m.; open late Thursdays, until 8:30 p.m. Summer hours: Open at 10 a.m.

**Admission prices:** Adults \$12.50; seniors \$8; students \$7. SFMOMA members and children 12 and under are admitted free. Thursday evenings after 6 p.m. admission is half-price. The first Tuesday of each month admission is free.

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