CURATOR'S STATEMENT

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Throughout her career, Faiya Fredman (b. 1925) has achieved recognition for an extensive and diverse body of work ranging from large mixed-media paintings incorporating three-dimensional elements to impressively scaled sculptures. Consistently original and elegant, she has derived inspiration from universal phenomena and timeless places, including the cycles of life, nature, ancient astronomy and mythologies, and archaeological sites and artifacts. Another distinctive aspect of Fredman's art has been her ongoing experimentation with non-traditional materials, recent technologies, and unusual techniques. The advent of digital technologies has further enriched her arsenal of creative tools and methods of production.

Given the abundance of floral and botanical imagery in the art world for centuries, not to mention its pervasiveness in popular culture (advertising, mass media, amateur gardening, etc.) it will likely come as a surprise to people familiar with Fredman's creative history that she is embracing a theme as accessible and seductive as this one. Even the artist's approach to her subject is, in the context of contemporary photography, classic and uncharacteristically conservative for her. Indeed, "Botanical Images 2005 – 2007" marks the most surprising and radical change in Fredman's artistry in nearly six decades. What prompted this transition from understated, monochromatic, and conceptually driven art to a body of work that, at times, could be characterized as a celebration of form, color, and unabashed beauty?

First, a description.

Fredman's botanical photographic images range from sumptuous and colorful to elegant and spare. Some evoke comparison to lavish 17th and 18th century Dutch still life paintings, whereas others, whose primary elements are leaves and twigs, suggest *ikebana* (Japanese flower arrangements) in their austerity and painstaking composition. The latter, taken to extreme, is #050714, a graphically powerful minimalist scattering of dry, bent and twisting stems superimposed on a black background. On the other hand, the most spectacular and showy group of images (including #050739, which depicts an arrangement of sensually curling bordello red petals, and the glorious #050718, whose fiery gold colors and ornateness rival a baroque altar) is imbued with as much movement and passion as a powerful abstract expressionist painting or the climax of a symphony. In all of these images, the botanical materials are in various stages of decomposition, ranging from being slightly wilted, but still retaining most of their original color, to brown, thoroughly dried out, and crumbling.

Detailing the antecedents to Fredman's botanical imagery in photographic history is beyond the scope of this statement – and this approach may distort the picture somewhat – because throughout her career as an artist Fredman has worked in many media and disciplines. "I have never considered myself to be a photographer," she says. "Photography has always been a means to an end in my work." In fact, she confesses never having heard of many of the

photographic masters who are often cited in descriptions of her work. “I don’t think I fall into any categories,” she adds.

That being said, there are some striking similarities and relationships between Fredman’s art and that created by the iconic artists who preceded her. These occur not only in photography, but in other disciplines, such as painting (in Western art, still life painting was recognized as a distinct genre in the 17th century), botanical illustration, and printmaking. In photography, for example, botanical subjects can be found as early as the 1830s with the “photogenic drawings” (photograms) of one of its inventors, William Henry Fox Talbot, whose many fields of expertise included botany. [A full treatment of the history of botanical imagery in photography can be found in William A. Ewing’s *Flora Photographica: Masterpieces of Flower Photography from 1835 to the Present* (Thames & Hudson, 2002).]

Adding more confusion to the mix, the initial captures of Fredman’s botanical material are done with a flatbed scanner, rather than a camera. Although the flatbed scanner was invented in 1975 by Raymond Kurzweil, its potential as a tool for artists has been recognized only in the past decade or so, and, even today, it is more commonly used in commercial, rather than fine art, applications. A controversy has arisen that likely interests art theoreticians more than anyone else, but, for the sake of completeness, it will be mentioned here. The question is this: Does flatbed scanner-based imagery truly qualify as photography?

Purists, who often get very emotional about the issue, say “no” because the process doesn’t involve using a conventional camera. Those with a more all-encompassing view, however, such as scholars, historians, museum curators, and cutting-edge artists, see digital scanning simply as an alternative, camera-less way of making photographs. Museum of Photographic Arts (MoPA) Executive Director Deborah Klochko observes that “hybridization” in the contemporary art world (the use by contemporary artists of many different types of media in one work) coupled with a pervasive melding of disciplines, make assigning precise categories to many kinds of today’s art particularly difficult. MoPA, incidentally, owns two works from Fredman’s botanical series.

Fredman has incorporated unusual photographic techniques into her artmaking for decades, but in the 1970s, foreshadowing her current work with flatbed scanners, she experimented with Xerox machines – forerunners of scanners – as a way of creating images. In some works from Fredman’s memorable “Galapagos Series” the artist used delicate images of tidelines as metaphors for the cycles of life, juxtaposing conventional photographs with Xeroxes. At the time, advances in Xerox machine technology made photocopying an attractive way to create art, appealing especially to feminist-oriented women artists who saw it as an alternative, anti-establishment medium of expression.

It is Fredman’s sophistication and complex history as an artist that separate and distinguish the art in her current exhibition from the competently executed, but painfully obvious, images by most of the other artists – primarily commercially successful photographers – who work in a similar genre. A lesser artist would have photographed colorful, dew-laden flowers at the prime of their bloom, thus adding to the surplus of clichéd poster and calendar-type imagery that gluts the art market.

Fredman, on the other hand, takes a darker, more unsettling, and thought-provoking path by focusing, for the most part, on flowers and foliage that are decaying. This immediately places her in what appears to be a relatively small camp of artists working with botanical themes; those who confront, and even see beauty in, that which is less-than-perfect, even rotting. Among them are Bay Area photographer Cay Lang who worked with dead and dying flowers as a metaphor for the human condition, and Boston photographer Chris Enos who has explored the form, color, and texture of dying flowers.

Perhaps the closest parallel to Fredman's botanical images can be found in the work of Barbara Norfleet (Cambridge, Massachusetts), the founder and curator of the Photography Collection at Harvard University. Norfleet's series of dead and dying flowers, which she began photographing around 1975, shortly after the death of her father, is one of her most important early bodies of work. To quote from Ewing's book: "She had been unable to discard flowers sent to her in sympathy and she found herself fascinated by how much their slow metamorphosis revealed of their inner structures. The metamorphosis paralleled the sense of transition, rather than loss, that she felt at her father's death."

Since then, much of Norfleet's imagery, augmented by several literary and curatorial endeavors, has dealt in some way with, as she wryly described it in a recent phone interview, "things that are dead." Now in her early eighties, Norfleet expends part of her creative energy trudging alone through the desolate swamps of New England trying to capture their desolation and gloom on film.

The earliest appearance of botanical imagery in Fredman's art occurred in the early 1980s when she incorporated images of red chili peppers into some of her works. Relating to themes that have been prevalent throughout much of her oeuvre, the redness of the peppers suggested, among other things, life flow and the use of red pigments (symbolizing blood) in ancient rituals. Fredman remembers being especially fascinated by the appearance of the chili plants as they withered and died.

Botanical subjects wouldn't emerge as a pivotal theme in Fredman's art until decades later. This avoidance of one of the most classic and timeless themes in art may have been, in part, because severe allergies to the pollens and scents of certain flowers have plagued Fredman her entire life. Like Norfleet, however, Fredman's interest in plants would be awakened by life's vicissitudes. And, although she didn't realize it at the time, these same circumstances would encourage her to learn about and adopt the technologies she would use later to create her botanical images.

As Fredman remembers it, bouquets of tulips on display at a neighborhood florist shop first caught her eye. At the prime of their bloom, the tulips were stunning, but it was the subsequent aging of the flowers that truly fascinated her. Having spent much of her life exploring themes of decay and renewal in her art, Fredman saw the dying flowers with their falling petals, loose grains of pollen, and fading colors, as being much more beautiful than when they were alive. Eventually, seeking a more diverse visual vocabulary for her increasingly complex botanical images, Fredman began collecting botanical detritus from the streets near her La Jolla residence.

During this period, Fredman's intellectual and artistic examination of decay and renewal became all too real and personal. Her long-time husband, Milton "Micky" Fredman, was diagnosed with a terminal illness. Many of the flowers she and Micky received – flowers that, ultimately, Fredman incorporated into her works of art – were sent by well-wishers while his health was declining and as expressions of condolence when he died.

Certainly the temptation is strong to link the darkness of Fredman's botanical images to the death of her husband. There is no doubt that an aura of melancholy pervades the exhibition and can be sensed even in her lightest and brightest works, such as those with stark white backgrounds. These evoke floral motifs and art popular during the Victorian era, which, in addition to being preoccupied with death and mourning, has been characterized as the golden age of plant collecting and botanical illustration. Fredman, however, who is an intensely private person and unusually reserved in her demeanor, adamantly rejects the scenario of the grieving widow pouring her heart and soul into her art.

Looking at the bigger picture in the context of her life's work, she says, "My [current] art is an evolution of thoughts and ideas I came up with along the way. I want people to look at life as a process we all go through. The buds symbolize birth, then there's the flowering and the withering. I'm showing that the withering can be just as beautiful as the buds." Indeed, as if proactively seeking to counter any misperceptions of sentimentality that might be germinating in the minds of viewers, Fredman elected to leave all of the images in this exhibition untitled, instead assigning to each an impersonal sounding inventory number.

Fredman credits her late husband with introducing her to the technology that would ultimately make her botanical images possible. When he became ill, Micky Fredman insisted on buying her the most advanced computer equipment available despite the fact that she was completely unfamiliar with it. Sheer determination, tutors, and encouragement of professionals like Suda House, a brilliant San Diego-area photographer, enabled Fredman to gain enough confidence and proficiency to experiment…the lifeblood of her creativity. It was House, incidentally, who alerted Fredman to the potential of the scanner as an artist's tool.

In terms of technique, Fredman is reluctant to reveal exactly how she creates her botanical works, saying that "it takes the magic away" to go into detail. However, as described above, she uses a flatbed scanner to capture images of the specimens. The scans are extensively manipulated with a powerful computer loaded with image editing software. This software enables her to modify colors, move elements around, introduce elements from other scans, magnify or reduce components of an image, change backgrounds, etc. The final products, the prints (issued in extremely limited editions) are noteworthy for their color saturation, depth, and clarity. They are printed on Crane 100% rag paper using a high end inkjet printer. Fredman's studio, piled high with discarded print proofs, is a testament to the countless experiments with papers and inks that are needed to achieve the results she desires.

Citing her early background as a painter, Fredman frequently compares the process of building a botanical image to that of executing a painting. A petal suggests a luscious daub of paint; a stem is not unlike a linear brushstroke. Placing and layering parts of plants into

compositions, says Fredman, is every bit as challenging as arranging the elements of a painting. "Because I have such an extensive background in painting," she continues, "it [the botanical image] has to work as well as a painting does."

In the images with solid black backgrounds, especially, the warmth, depth, dramatic interplay of light and shadow, and still life-like arrangements of some of the compositions create the illusion that the flowers, pods, stems, and leaves could be floating on the surface of an infinitely deep pond. They have also confused a surprising number of viewers who, at first glance, see them as trompe l'oeil paintings. Others commonly mistake those with white backgrounds for delicate watercolors.

Fredman's botanical images also reveal her skills as a colorist. On occasion, in previous bodies of work, Fredman has incorporated some color, but, by and large, her mature oeuvre could be characterized as relatively monochromatic and understated. Early on, however, during her years as an art student at UCLA, she created colorful paintings heavily influenced by Cézanne and Rouault. These were semi-abstractions painted with a palette knife, often referencing the human figure. In Fredman's current botanical images, she has embraced color as never before. Most people would agree that Fredman's fearless and sophisticated use of color, which ranges from dramatic to sublime, is the most striking attribute of this body of work. Artists, in particular, will recognize the difficulty of maintaining control over the creative process when one is faced with a panoply of colors inherent in the original source material, plus infinite options available for manipulating hue, saturation, brightness, etc., made possible by image editing software and the ongoing revolution in printing technologies (inks, hardware, and graphic software).

Another aspect of these images that has a kinship with the artist's previous work is its sculptural quality. Her three-dimensional works have ranged from canvases with objects and materials affixed to their surfaces, to large, free-standing sculptures like *Buddoso* (1999), a 14-foot high steel and concrete work commissioned by the late Robert Orton for a sculpture garden located on the grounds of his La Jolla estate. In her botanical images, Fredman's use of black, negative space, which isolates the subject, objectifies it, and eliminates visual cues as to its context and scale, is one of the most important devices she uses to create this illusion.

Fredman's exhibition, besides offering a visual feast, delivers a delightful shock of realization that one is in the presence of instant classics, many of which have as much staying power as works by Imogen Cunningham, Robert Mapplethorpe, and other modern and contemporary masters.

Fredman's works can be found in many public and private collections, including the Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY; the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco, CA; the Oakland Museum, Oakland, CA; the Chicago Art Institute, Chicago, IL; the Museum of Photographic Arts, San Diego, CA; the Museum of Contemporary Art, La Jolla, CA; the University of California, Los Angeles; the J. Paul Getty Center for the History of Art and the Humanities, Los Angeles, CA; and numerous others.