

Overview

Nathan Oliveira

The late 1950s and early 1960s, when Nathan Oliveira matured as an artist, were heady times in the San Francisco Bay Area. There were strong directors at the San Francisco Museum, the Oakland Museum, the Richmond Art Center, the California School of Fine Arts and the California College of Arts and Crafts. They sponsored annual competitive exhibitions, chose strong artists to feature in shows or to hire as faculty members, and generated active community interest in art being made at that time in that place. Artists worked with purpose to find a way out of the Abstract Expressionism which dominated the art magazines, one of which (*Artforum*) was founded about this time in San Francisco.

Painter Elmer Bischoff said in 1977, remembering the 1950s, "If one has cooled off with the Abstract Expressionist idea, meaning that one no longer believes in it as a language ... then it seems like it's pretentious." And Richard Diebenkorn later explained to an interviewer, "I wasn't going to get stuck in any dumb rut. I felt I could move on to something else. I got kind of a thrill out of doing that."

Speaking of the San Francisco figurative painters of the time, historian Caroline Jones says "they all felt free to utilize the expressionistic style while dipping into sources (from Bougereau to sports photography) that would have made most of the New York School painters blanch." By the mid-sixties Pop Art had taken hold in New York, with Minimal Sculpture also in full swing. A few painters, like Alex Katz, had begun to work figuratively, but with conscious cultivation of style. The Bay Area painters, wishing to be unpretentious, tried to avoid style. Above all, they didn't want to be a movement. But in searching for non-personal triggers for personally biased painting, they predicted the Neo-

expressionist painting that dominated new art in the eighties.

Oliveira was born in 1928—eight years later than Diebenkorn, seventeen years later than David Park—and was a student at the California College of Arts and Crafts in 1950 when Park began painting figuratively. However, in 1959 only Oliveira and Diebenkorn were invited from the Bay Area to show in the New York Museum of Modern Art's *New Images of Man* exhibition. And locally, as early as 1957, Oliveira had been chosen along with Park, Bischoff and Diebenkorn for a show at the Richmond Art Center selected by asking artists to name their most influential colleagues.

Despite his indisputable stature, however, it was not certain that he fit in with what the others were doing, and he was not included in the 1957 definitive exhibition, *Bay Area Figurative Painting*, curated by Paul Mills at the Oakland Museum.

Oliveira was a friend of Diebenkorn, Bischoff and other Bay Area Figurative painters, even an occasional member of their weekly drawing group, but his work seemed unlike theirs because it was more emotional, hotter, more influenced by European painting. Oliveira had studied with Max Beckman when he had been a guest at Mills College, and had spent many hours absorbing an Edvard Munch exhibition at the deYoung Museum. He also was influenced by Alberto Giacometti and Francis Bacon. "I admire Diebenkorn's work a great deal, but my objectives in painting are quite different," Oliveira wrote Charles

Alan, his New York dealer, in 1957. He explained that the other painters thought of the figure "simply as an element among other elements," while he thought of his figures as emotionally charged in themselves.

Oliveira often isolates a figure in a space that interacts with it but at the same time remains clearly a background. He has spoken of his figures as metaphors, and has said he wants to "make a spiritual contribution." The four etchings presented here, with their theme of man as animal, animal as man, are clearly metaphoric, and at the same time speak individually and personally to those of us who have felt



Profile With Baboons, 1994. Color drypoint with aquatint. Paper size: 40¼ x 52½"; image size: 32½ x 28½". Edition 50.

the kinship they describe.

These are Oliveira's first etchings, a surprising fact since he is widely known as a printmaker, and has been

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making prints since his student days when he discovered that "all those European painters I admired" made prints. He was head of the printmaking department at the California School of Fine Arts (now the San Francisco Art Institute) from 1956 through 1960, and in 1957 and 1958 received a Tiffany Foundation grant and a Guggenheim fellowship, both for his work in lithography. In the past fourteen years, Oliveira's printmaking has been in monotype, a medium he has introduced to many painters and, through their work and his own, has helped bring to its present state of popularity.

In the etching studio, working with tar and wax and copper plates rather than the more flexible monotype and

lithography materials, Oliveira at first almost despaired. "I feel like a concert pianist who walked onstage and was handed a violin to play," he said to Daria Sywulak, his printer. But he immersed himself in the medium for three weeks, and now we see the results. His virtuosity with texture and line has combined with his excitement in discovering a new way to work. Together they have given us these beautiful prints which are, Oliveira assures me, just the beginning of his love affair with etching.

—Kathan Brown



Cat Man, 1994. Color drypoint with soap ground and spit bite aquatints and aquatint. Paper size: 40¼ x 32½"; image size 29½ x 24". Edition 35.



Dog Man, 1994. Color drypoint with soap ground and spit bite aquatints and aquatint. Paper size: 40¼ x 32½"; image size 29½ x 23½". Edition 35.

NATHAN OLIVEIRA

Born 1928, Oakland, CA. Lives in Stanford, CA.

Selected One-Person Exhibitions

- 1960 *Nathan Oliveira: Paintings*, The Alan Gallery, New York, NY
- 1961 *Nathan Oliveira: Paintings and Drawings*, McNay Art Museum, San Antonio, TX
- 1963 *Major Comprehensive Exhibition of Five Years of Work, Nathan Oliveira* Dickson Art Center University of CA, Los Angeles (traveled to San Francisco Museum of Art; Fort Worth Art Center, TX; Colorado Springs Fine Arts Center, CO)
- 1965 *Ten Years of Printmaking*, Stanford University Museum of Art, Stanford CA (traveled to San Francisco Museum of Art)
- 1969 *Nathan Oliveira Works on Paper 1960-69*, San Francisco Museum of Art, San Francisco, CA
- 1971 *Nathan Oliveira: Graphics*, Terry Dintenfass, Inc. New York, NY
- 1973 *Nathan Oliveira: Paintings 1959-73*, The Oakland Museum, Oakland, CA (traveled to Portland Center for the Visual Arts, Portland, OR)
- 1978 *Nathan Oliveira: To Edgar Allan Poe/A Suite of Lithographs and Related States*, Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA
- 1979 *Nathan Oliveira: A Survey of Work—1959-79*, Charles Campbell Gallery, San Francisco, CA
- 1980 *Nathan Oliveira: Swiss Site Series*, Newport Harbor Art Museum, Newport Beach, CA
- Nathan Oliveira Print Retrospective: 1949-80*, The Art Museum and Galleries, California State University, Long Beach, CA
- 1981 *Nathan Oliveira: Recent Paintings and Monotypes*, The Arts Club of Chicago, Chicago, IL
- 1984 *Nathan Oliveira: A Survey Exhibition 1957-1983*, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (traveled to Laguna Beach Museum of Art, Laguna Beach, CA; Madison ART Center, Madison, WI; Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery, Lincoln, NE; Museum of Art, University of Oklahoma, Norman, OK)
- 1985 *Works by Nathan Oliveira*, Honolulu Academy of Arts, Honolulu, HI
- 1986 *Autunno in Toscana 1986, Recent Monotypes*, Il Bisonte Galleria d'Arte, Florence, Italy
- 1988 *Continuous Tone: The Work of Nathan Oliveira*, Charlotte Crosby Kemper Gallery, Kansas City Art Institute, Kansas City, MO
- 1991 *Nathan Oliveira Painting and Works on Paper, 1959-1991*, Salander O'Reilly Galleries, New York, NY
- 1992 *Nathan Oliveira: Figurative Work 1958-92*, The Hearst Art Gallery, Saint Mary's College, Moraga, CA
- 1993 John Berggruen Gallery, San Francisco, CA ('91, '90, '87, '83, '81, '80, '79)

Selected Group Exhibitions

- 1955 *The 1955 Pittsburgh Int'l Exhibition of Contemporary Painting*, Dept. of Fine Arts, The Carnegie Institute, Pittsburgh, PA
- The Bay Printmakers First National Exhibit at the Oakland Museum*, The Oakland Art Museum, CA
- 1956 *Ten Years of American Prints 1947-56*, The Brooklyn Museum, NY
- 1958 *The 1958 Pittsburgh Int'l Exhibition of Contemporary Painting and Sculpture*, Carnegie Institute, Dept. of Fine Arts, Pittsburgh, PA
- 1959 *Premiere Biennale de Paris*, Musee d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, France
- 1960 *Guggenheim International Award 1960*, The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York
- 1961 *The 1961 Pittsburgh International Exhibition of Contemporary*



Nathan Oliveira in the San Francisco studio, 1994.

Photo: Colin McRae

- Painting and Sculpture*, Carnegie Institute, Dept. of Fine Arts, Pittsburgh, PA
- 1962 *Fifty California Artists*, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York (traveled to Waldker Art Center, Mpls, MN; Albright-Knox Art Gallery Buffalo, NY; Des Moines Art Center, IA)
- 1964 *Contemporary Sculptors and Painters as Printmakers*, The Museum of Modern Art, New York
- 1967 *1967 Annual Exhibition of Contemporary Painting*, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York
- 1969 *1970 National Drawing Exhibition*, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, CA
- 1970 *The Drawing Society National Exhibition 1970*, Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.
- 1971 *A Decade in the West: Painting, Sculpture and Graphics from the Anderson Collection*, Stanford University Museum of Art (traveled to the Santa Barbara Museum of Art, CA)
- 1975 *24th National Exhibition of Prints*, The Library of Congress and the National Collection of Fine Arts, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.
- 1976 *Painting and Sculpture in California: The Modern Era*, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art
- 1977 *Perception of the Spirit in 20th Century American Art*, Indianapolis Museum of Art, IN
- 1978 *New American Monotypes*, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.
- 1980 *The Figurative Tradition and the Whitney Museum of American Art: Paintings and Sculpture from the Permanent Collection*, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York
- 1981 *Contemporary American Prints and Drawings 1940-80*, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.
- 1984 *An Exhibition of Work by Newly Elected Members and Recipients of Honors and Awards*, American Institute of Arts and Letters, NY
- 1985 *Contemporary American Monotypes*, The Chrysler Museum, Norfolk, VA
- 1986 *Public and Private: American Prints Today*, The Brooklyn Museum Brooklyn, New York
- 1989 *Bay Area Figurative Art, 1950-1965*, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco (traveled to Hirshorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.; Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, Philadelphia, PA)



Nathan Oliveira, *Baboon (Celadon)*, 1994. Color drypoint with aquatint.
Paper size: 44½ x 38½"; image size: 32½ x 28½". Edition 20.

Calendar of Events and Exhibitions In the San Francisco Gallery

November 17 - January 7

Nathan Oliveira - New Etchings, Drypoints and Monotypes

Tom Marioni - New Photogravures

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20 Hawthorne
San Francisco, CA 94105
415.974.6273
FAX 415.495.4220

Notes

Karen McCready Fine Art will be open by appointment beginning on December 1, 1994 at 39 Bond Street, New York. If you would like to see Crown Point Press's new editions please call her at (212) 677-3732.

Wayne Thiebaud was awarded the United States National Medal of Arts at the White House in October.

Sol LeWitt is exhibiting *25 Years of Wall Drawings* at the Renn Espace d'Art Contemporain in Paris through February. He also has concurrent shows at 14/16 Verneuil and Marc Blondeau in Paris, through December.

Elaine de Kooning: Artists & Writers exhibition is at the Joan T. Washburn Gallery in New York, through November.

Richard Diebenkorn has an exhibit titled, *Small Format Oil on Canvas, Figures, Still Lifes and Landscapes* at the Knoedler & Co., New York, through December 3.

Markus Lupertz is showing at the Lelong gallery in Zurich, Switzerland through November.

Katsura Funakoshi is showing new sculpture at the Andre Emmerich Gallery, New York, through January 7, 1995.

Per Kirkeby has an exhibition of his work from the 1960's at the Michael Werner Gallery, New York, through January 14, 1995.

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