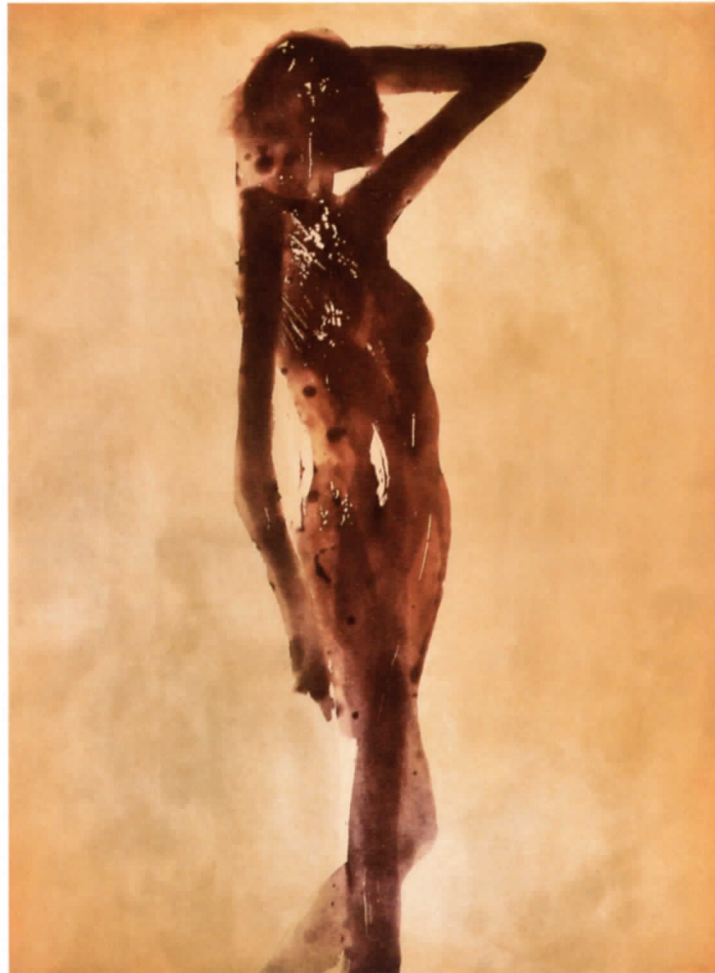


Overview



Nathan Oliveira, *Copper Plate Nudes II (8)*, 2001. Color spit bite aquatint with aquatint. Paper size: 40-1/2 x 31-3/4"; image size: 29-3/4 x 22-1/4". Edition 40. Printed by Dena Schuckit.

Nathan Oliveira New Copper Plate Nudes

"Given all the technology that we're in the middle of, I would be so pleased if someone would look at one of these prints and say, 'You know, sometimes I feel like that,'" Nathan Oliveira said to me. He was in the Crown Point studio, working on his third series of nudes drawn directly on copper plates from a model.

He did the first series as part of our "Live Model Group," a portfolio of prints by four artists who spent an afternoon in 1997 drawing on plates with a model posing, and printers to help them. Oliveira's five prints, titled *Nude 1*, *Nude 2*, and so on, are essentially silhouettes: we glimpse an outlined body or a sensual curved shape against a light background. He used the sugar lift aquatint process then for the first time. "I don't seek to replicate the reality of the human figure, but to reach behind that, to a different reality

born out of the language of gesture and the fluidity of the material that I use," he said (and I quoted) at the time.

In 1998 he came back for a project at Crown Point that he had planned with a different subject, but in the course of it we slipped in a few days of work with a model. Almost in a throw-away mode, he painted mostly on the backs of old plates using acid directly, letting it puddle in the shadows, brushing it out thin for highlights. The resulting prints are spit bite aquatints, defined by the flow of the acid off the brush, and they do not have the strong shapes and sharp edges that sugar lift provides. They are ephemeral and waif-like; they are lovely animated shadows. He called them *Copper Plate Nudes* and printed them in the glowing colors of the plates on which he had drawn.

"Those prints were almost written, calligraphic," Oliveira said as he looked at them next to the new group, *Copper Plate Nudes II*. "I like the energy of the earlier group, and the shadow quality."



Nathan Oliveira, *Copper Plate Nudes II* (1), 2001. Color spit bite aquatint with aquatint and texture from the back of a discarded plate. Paper size: 27-1/2 x 22-1/2"; image size: 18 x 14". Edition 30. Printed by Dena Schuckit.



Nathan Oliveira, *Copper Plate Nudes II* (2), 2001. Color sugar lift and spit bite aquatints with aquatint and texture from the back of a discarded plate. Paper size: 25-3/4 x 21"; image size: 15-3/4 x 12". Edition 30. Printed by Dena Schuckit.

This year I wanted to keep the sense of shadow but make the figures more credible. More factual. They are meant to be more solid."

Oliveira did the first print in this new series using spit bite aquatint, the same technique he used for the earlier group. But he added a developed background, printed in a different color. In conversation, I likened this print, (1), to the "shadows in the cave" of Plato's famous dissertation on reality and illusion. "Not *that* cave," Oliveira said. "But the *Neolithic* caves are very important to me. Sometimes stick figures are really universal figures. You know what they are. They're human."

For (2), the second print in the series, and all the subsequent ones, Oliveira switched techniques, and started with sugar lift aquatint, drawing with a viscous sugar solution that lifts to expose the plate underneath. This process provides clear edges, and—in its simplest form—does not show modulations within the drawing. In its complex form, used here, modulations are added in a separate step, normally with spit bite aquatint. When the plate was ready for spit biting, I asked Oliveira if he'd like the model to resume the pose he had already captured on the plate before he began this second round of painting. He said no, that he would make it up.

"When I internalize it, I deal with it in a different way," he explained. "I've done a lot of painting from the figure, and I can usually do that convincingly. But what I'm concerned about now is creating a metaphor for what the figure really is. Look at that red one," he added, pointing to an early proof of (2), up on the studio wall. "It looks pretty simple. But then you get close to it and you start to interact with it. And you can make what you wish out of what I've formed. It isn't that I understand exactly



Nathan Oliveira, *Copper Plate Nudes II* (3), 2001. Color spit bite aquatint with aquatint and texture from the back of a discarded plate. Paper size: 25-3/4 x 19-1/2"; image size: 15-3/4 x 10-1/2". Edition 30. Printed by Dena Schuckit.



Nathan Oliveira, *Copper Plate Nudes II* (4), 2001. Color spit bite aquatint and texture from the back of a discarded plate. Paper size: 20-1/2 x 25"; image size: 11-1/4 x 15-3/4". Edition 30. Printed by Dena Schuckit.



Nathan Oliveira, *Copper Plate Nudes II* (6), 2001. Color spit bite aquatint with aquatint, *chine collé* and texture from the back of a discarded plate. Paper size: 24-1/2 x 20-1/2"; image size: 14-1/2 x 11-1/4". Edition 20. Printed by Dena Schuckit.



Nathan Oliveira, *Copper Plate Nudes II* (7), 2001. Color sugar lift and spit bite aquatints, *chine collé* and texture from the back of a discarded plate. Paper size: 27-1/4 x 22-1/2"; image size: 17-3/4 x 13-3/4". Edition 20. Printed by Dena Schuckit.



Nathan Oliveira, *Copper Plate Nudes II* (5), 2001. Color spit bite aquatint with aquatint and texture from the back of a discarded plate. Paper size: 22-1/2 x 26"; image size: 13-3/4 x 17-3/4". Edition 30. Printed by Dena Schuckit.

what I do, but what I want to do is make something that is just figurative enough that people can use it to create their own metaphors."

Yesterday I was reading in *The Art Newspaper* an interview with Jean-Christophe Ammann, the director of the Modern Art Museum in Frankfurt, Germany. "Scientists behave as if new technology, genetic research, microbiology, etc., have the potential to discover the 'content' or essence of mankind. It is embarrassing and it is also ridiculous," he said. Discovering the essence of mankind is a job for artists, Ammann implies. "We have to rediscover individual consciousness in art today, and I think this is already beginning to happen." It's an interesting thought coming from Ammann, who has digested the language of Postmodernism and its talk about art as a creation of society. Maybe some curators in the world's major museums are beginning to tire of the now-so-numerous followers of Andy Warhol.

Nathan Oliveira is seventy-four years old, and is a revered and celebrated figure in the art scene of the San Francisco Bay Area. But it's possible that Jean-Christophe Ammann, in Frankfurt, would not recognize his name. "There are artists producing wonderful things, but we never hear of them because the [international] market does not support them," Ammann says in the *Art Newspaper* interview. "I see a lot of [young] artists today who want to do certain things, but they have not got the ability because, for example, they never learned to draw at art school." He goes on to

say that developing skills takes a lot of time, and "artists are being swallowed up by material matters: productivity, public relations."

The artists of the San Francisco Bay Area have not yet been faced with that dilemma. For better or worse, our tradition is that of the artist as practitioner. We look at art as a practice, and we expect an artist's art to develop slowly as daily work progresses. "Here we are, in 2001," Oliveira said to me, "and these figures are different—but not that much different—from where I started out in 1956."

I remembered that Oliveira had corrected me about the cave, directing my attention away from a question about the nature of reality and toward a direct, material, sensual set of cave images. "How are you connected to philosophy," I ask, "to history?"

"I'm not thinking about the particular heavy issues of today," he replied. "I don't want to deal with what art is or is supposed to be. I'm here on this planet for whatever years I have and I want to leave something behind. And right now I think what I can best leave behind is some simple image of ourselves. Recently I was in the Met and I noticed a portrait of a face done in Ancient Egypt. In it was all the faces I've ever seen. My greatest hope would be to be a part of that kind of chain."

—Kathan Brown

In the Crown Point Gallery:

Nathan Oliveira

Copper Plate Nudes II: New Etchings and Watercolors, through May 31.

Please join us for a reception for the artist, May 3, 5:30-7:30 p.m.

In New York City:

Nathan Oliveira's new etchings and selected other Crown Point publications are available on request for viewing at Pace Prints, 32 East 57th Street, (212) 421-3237.

Visit us at Art Chicago 2001, Booth #C137, May 11-14 and Art/32/Basel, Switzerland, the Art Edition section, June 13-18.

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