

# Overview



Nathan Oliveira, *Dancer*, 2004. Drypoint with color aquatint. Paper size: 25 x 21"; image size: 16 x 13". Edition 30. Printed by Dena Schuckit, assisted by Catherine Brooks.



Nathan Oliveira, *Stairs to the Stars* 2004. Drypoint with color aquatint. Paper size: 25 x 21"; image size: 16 x 13". Edition 30. Printed by Dena Schuckit, assisted by Catherine Brooks.

## Nathan Oliveira

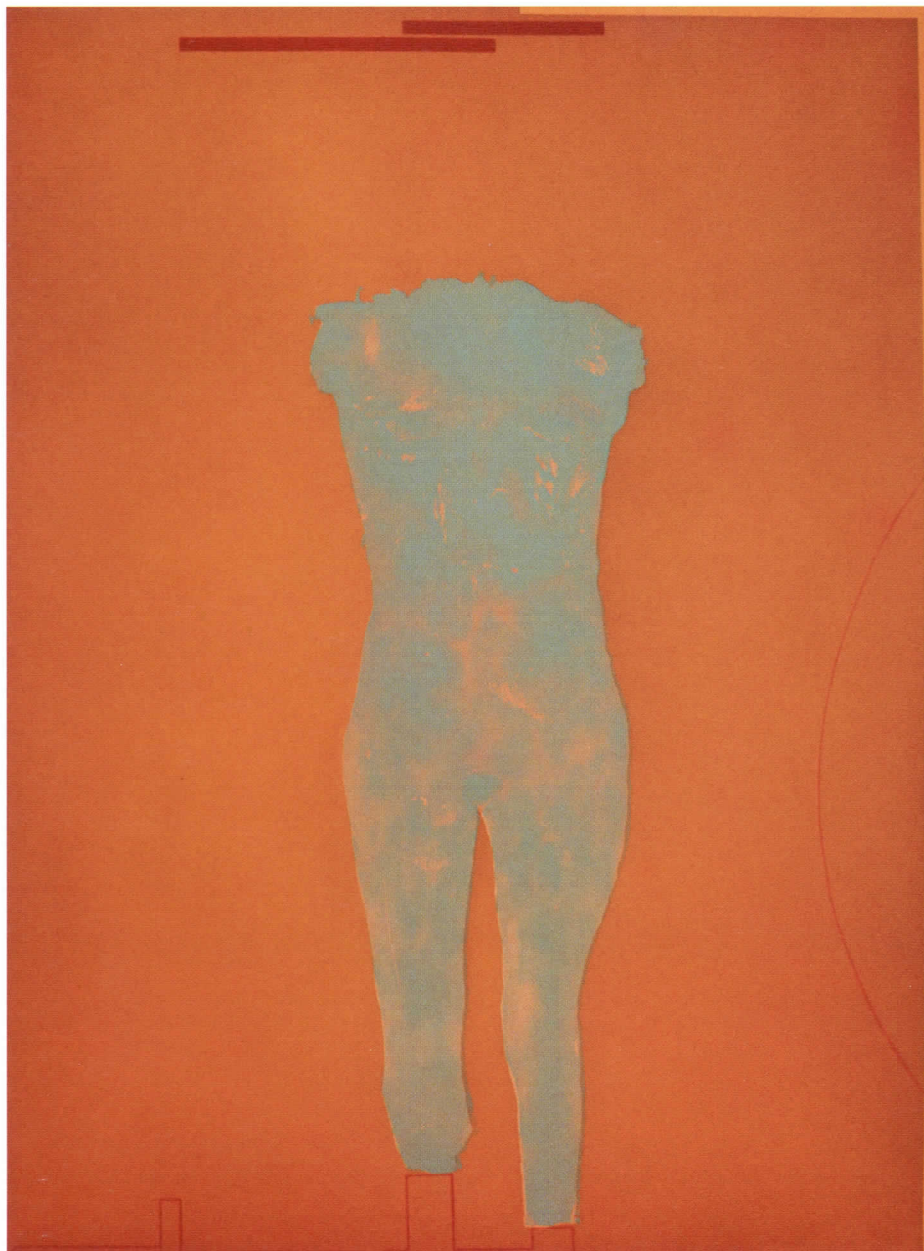
"What I'm concerned about," Nathan Oliveira said to me, "is creating a metaphor for what the figure really *is*." In thumbing through the catalog of his 2002 retrospective (organized by the San Jose Museum of Art) my attention was captured by a photograph of him with Richard Diebenkorn drawing a nude model. The date was 1956, nearly fifty years ago. In the catalog, which illustrates a half-century of Oliveira's paintings, sculpture, and works on paper, the images range from landscape-like magical spaces to animal subjects to figures, with—I think it is fair to say—figures as the dominant theme. The body is the subject of Oliveira's figurative works; faces are abstracted. Sometimes the models wear a mask; sometimes their faces are in shadow—even when the picture is only a face, the face is mask-like. At the same time, in each of the prints that Oliveira has done at Crown Point Press from live models, we can recognize the individual model who worked with him. Bodies are specific, but this is an unusual kind of specificity in that it contains within it a

generalization—a metaphor, to use the artist's word. Oliveira's approach to creating in printmaking a metaphor for what the figure really *is* has developed gradually over four live model projects here at Crown Point.

Oliveira did his first series of nudes here 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 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





Nathan Oliveira, *Torso I*, 2004. Color sugar lift and spit bite aquatints with soft ground etching and aquatint. Paper size: 31-1/4 x 23-1/4"; image size: 31-1/4 x 23-1/4". Edition 20. Printed by Dena Schuckit, assisted by Catherine Brooks.

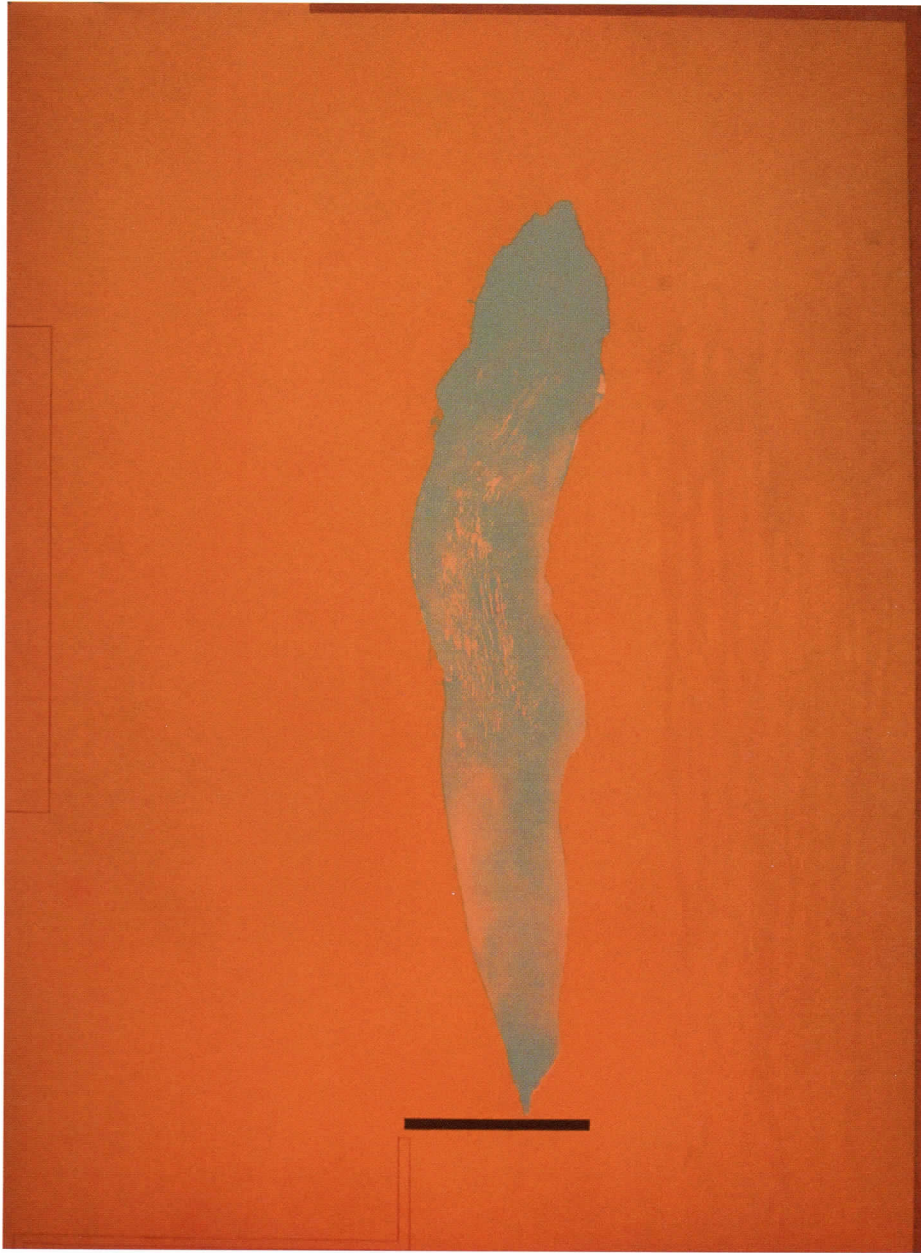
model. Almost in a throw-away mode, he painted mostly on the backs of old plates using acid directly, letting it puddle in the shadows, brushing it out thin for highlights. The resulting prints are spit bite aquatints, defined by the flow of the acid off the brush, and they do not have the strong shapes 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 calligraphic," Oliveira said as he looked at them with new prints done that year, in 2001, and titled *Copper Plate Nudes II*. "I like the energy of the earlier group, and the shadow quality. As I moved on, I wanted

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

Now, in 2004, Oliveira's fourth group of live model nudes is more solid still. Two of this new series (*Dancer II* and *Dancer III*) retain the shadow aspect of the earlier prints, and two (*Dancer* and *Stairs to the Stars*) have left shadows behind. Beyond them, in a surprise, are two larger, different prints (*Torso I* and *Torso II*) in which the bodies have become sculpture, solid but still soft, still human, still discovering more about what the figure really is.

*Dancer II* and *Dancer III* relate to Oliveira's 2001 *Copper Plate Nudes*. "I would be so pleased," Oliveira said about that group, "if someone would look at one of these prints



Nathan Oliveira, *Torso II*, 2004. Color sugar lift and spit bite aquatints with soft ground etching and aquatint. Paper size: 31-1/4 x 23-1/4"; image size: 31-1/4 x 23-1/4". Edition 20. Printed by Dena Schuckit, assisted by Catherine Brooks.

and say, 'You know, sometimes I feel like that.'"

*Dancer II* is a red image in sparkling light on a copper-colored background. In the pale colors of *Dancer III* the lace-like shadow dissolves in light, balanced and beautiful.

*Dancer* and *Stairs to the Stars* are defined by lines, rich, irregular, drypoint lines that lend themselves to the sensuality always present in Oliveira's work with the figure. Here we see bodies, not shadows, and though the backgrounds are in color a few deft lines have turned them into rooms rather than the environments of color that the shadow works inhabit.

Are the torsos another story entirely? In a way, they are, as they have design elements and are formal in nature. They

relate to the many paintings Oliveira has done of central, static figures. In another way, however, the torsos are not far separated from the copperplate nudes. They partake of the sensuality of the earlier prints, and of the colors of copper in its shining and tarnished (verdigris) forms. They were drawn with a model present, though they clearly represent works of sculpture—there are even pedestals in the pictures. Oliveira's new *Torso* etchings take his question about what the figure really *is* to another level. We begin consciously to consider something we have probably known all along: timelessness is conferred upon the sensuality of the figure when it is transformed into art.

—Kathan Brown





Nathan Oliveira, *Dancer II*, 2004. Color sugar lift aquatint with aquatint. Paper size: 25 x 21"; image size: 16 x 13". Edition 15. Printed by Dena Shuckit, assisted by Catherine Brooks.



Nathan Oliveira, *Dancer III*, 2004. Color sugar lift aquatint with aquatint. Paper size: 25 x 20"; image size: 16 x 12". Edition 15. Printed by Dena Shuckit, assisted by Catherine Brooks.

In the Crown Point Gallery:

*Nathan Oliveira*  
new releases

*Figurative: Face & Form*  
a group exhibition

March 9 - April 25, 2004

Design and Production: Sara Lanham  
© Crown Point Press 2003

20 Hawthorne Street  
San Francisco, CA 94105  
TEL 415.974.6273  
FAX 415.495.4220  
www.crownpoint.com

PRESORT  
FIRST-CLASS MAIL  
U.S. POSTAGE PAID  
SAN FRANCISCO, CA  
PERMIT NO. 13929

*Crown Point Press*