

Pivotal: Highlights from the Collection
Orange County Museum of Art
October 7 - December 31, 2017
ARTIST INFORMATION

Nathan Oliveira

Born (Oakland, CA), died 2010 (aged 81, Palo Alto, CA)

Italian Sentinel, 1959

Oil on canvas

Nathan Oliveira was born in Oakland, California, taught at Stanford University, and lived in Northern California his entire life. Often credited with fusing Abstract Expressionism and figurative painting, he listed artists such as Edvard Munch and Max Beckman, with whom he also studied, as well as Francis Bacon and Alberto Giacometti as influences. Oliveira once stated about his work, "I'm not part of the avant-garde. I'm part of the garde that comes afterward, assimilates, consolidates, refines." As if to illustrate his words, *Italian Sentinel* has been included in over 17 exhibitions since OCMA (formerly Newport Harbor Art Museum) acquired the work in 1978.

Oliveira made no secret of his early influences: not Mark Rothko and not Clifford Still, the heroes of the immediate postwar period who taught at the California School of Fine Arts (now San Francisco Art Institute). A traditionalist at heart, Oliveira's cites Max Beckman, Oskar Kokoschka and Edvard Munch, whose work was featured in San Francisco museum shows in 1948, 1949, and 1951, as his creative catalysts. Oliveira studied with Max Beckman at Mills College in Oakland in 1950. That experience led him to become more interested in contemporary Europeans such as Giacometti, Picasso, Matisse and Marino Marini. Oliveira stated, "Not having total sympathy with the Abstract Expressionists, my association with those European figurative artists was essential even though they were far distant from me in California. De Kooning's attempts to synthesize Abstract Expressionist language with figurative concepts were a logical continuation of my own attitude and formed the basis for my enthusiasm for the works of David Park, Elmer Bischoff, and Richard Diebenkorn in the mid-fifties."¹

Bay Area Figuration came on the heels of Abstract Expressionism, the style that made abstraction synonymous with "real" art and codified New York as the art mecca. "We were viewed as a provincial, regional faction, but I was not making art to fit in, Oliveira says. In fact, I was very influenced by the East Coast. I remember seeing those De Kooning 'Women,' forming and dissolving the way they do, and being deeply moved."²

Known primarily as a painter and a printmaker, Oliveira concentrated on the essence of the human figure, an approach that has dominated his work through much of his career. "... There is one thread—the figure—that clearly unites [Oliveira's] work. The human figure occupies the painted field as the human creature occupies life: it represents the painter's simultaneous observation of and confrontation with the figure, and so with the fact of human existence."³

Discussing his work, Oliveira says that he "finds the figure within the act of painting." He discovers the figure as he paints. Particularly in his early work, he built up thick layers of paint and many possibilities for placing the figure were tried, rejected, and painted over. In later works, he refined this process, working with less paint to create subtler and more elusive figures. Oliveira describes the figure that results from this search as an "implosion"—a concentration of vigorous, gestural painting shaped against a more tranquil background. In this way, his work presents the image and the act of painting as a single expression of energy. "What I seek is not to replicate the structural reality of the human

¹ Henry Hopkins, *50 West Coast Artists*, (San Francisco: Chronicle Books) 1981, 52.

² Marlena Donohue, "Oliveira: Spectral Images From a Private World," *Los Angeles Times*, 11-21-84.

³ Charles Shere, "Nathan Oliveira, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art," *Art News*, 1-85, 117.

figure, but somehow to try to reach behind that, to a different reality born out of the language of gesture and fluidity of the material that I use...."⁴

The classical commitment to the figure, in Oliveira's The Sentinel, is combined with the Abstract Expressionist notion that a painting is born from the process or the act of painting. With its nondescript features, the enigmatic, solitary figure looks as if it was discovered from some unconscious place, rather than painted from life. His figures are symbolic images rather than individuals. His work deals "with his perennial preoccupation: the single figure embodied in, engulfed by, and barely emerging from the ambient space."⁵

"...In his life as an artist, Oliveira strives to paint the "same" painting... While critics have speculated on the meaning of Oliveira's elusive and 'lonely' figures, Oliveira, himself, can only stand back from the finished painting, after weeks of work, and say of the figure: 'there it is again.' He does not offer clues to the meaning of the usually spectral figure."⁶

Irene Barr 2/00

⁴ Oliveira quoted in Exhibition brochure Marsha Mateyka Gallery, Washington, D.C., 11-5 through 12-11-93.

⁵ Marcia Tanner, "Perennial Preoccupation," Art Week, 2-8-90.

⁶ Phil Linhares, "Nathan Oliveira," Currant, Dec.75-Jan.76.