Nathan Oliveira Sculptures in Palo Alto
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by Kenneth Baker

Living most of his life on the West Coast has sidelined Nathan Oliveira from the dialogue between Europe and New York since 1965 about sculpture as a vehicle of historical and human truth. As the powerful survey of his bronzes at the Palo Alto Art Center demonstrates, this exemption has worked to Oliveira's creative advantage, if also to the detriment of his critical standing. In the early 1980s when Oliveira, already a painter of unassailable accomplishment, turned his hand to sculpture, he appeared to ignore main currents in the art since the 1960s, instead seeking direct counterparts to his work with the human figure on canvas. "Nathan Oliveira: The Painter's Bronzes" includes his first cast sculpture, circa 1960. A figurine, nominally female, only 6 inches tall, with the air of an archaic relic, it looks almost like a false start, though a remarkable one. It appears here alongside two recent, scaled-up bronze versions of it that amplify the ambiguities in the original piece - a plume of wind-blasted hair that might also suggest a headdress or even a departing spirit - plus an echo of Cycladic sculpture from the distant roots of Western art. These pieces, with more than 40 years between the old and the new, sum up Oliveira's determination to translate his pictorial vision into sculpture. In a painting, he can create the space that envelops a figure and tune the feeling - usually one of fraught isolation - that their relationship stirs. A 1982 photograph in the exhibition catalog, a valuable addition to the Oliveira literature, shows the artist in his studio, staring intently and uneasily at a wax form that would become the bronze standing "Figure Three" (1982). People who know little of the creative process underestimate the necessity, the amount and value of the time that artists spend studying their own work in progress. Through representing only an instant, the picture attests to it. So does the finished sculpture. I see Oliveira in the photograph thinking about whether the sculpture's stylized contours will effect the reverberation between figure and surrounding space - real space - that would create an emotional equivalent to his best paintings. Oliveira acknowledges admiring Alberto Giacometti's distended figures, but where Giacometti's look eaten away by the space around them, Oliveira's tend to look squeezed: pressurized by invisible forces, inward, existential or both. A recent work, "Figure Five: Woman With Her Arms Back" (2007), achieves what most of Oliveira's figure sculptures seem to have attempted, with uneven results: the evocation of embodiment, of being in a material world, as a kind of bondage to unease. Oliveira has pursued his work in bronze against a background of other contemporary art that assumes that the human figure can no longer symbolize the strange, troubling dimensions of our historical condition. His work with the human figure and face hardly unmakes the argument of minimal and post-minimal sculpture, though "Figure Five" must count as a dramatic counterpoise. But give Oliveira credit for one remarkable tangent to the minimalist watershed. While many sculptors of his generation took to the floor or the earth when they foreswore representation, Oliveira invented his own mode of landscape sculpture. His "Sites" grew out of monotypes of cluttered imaginary places, though they relate also to a thin lineage of game-board-like Surrealist planar sculptures by Giacometti, Max Ernst, Daniel Spoerri and others. "Yucatan Sequence Two" (1983), like all the works in the series, takes the base, typically the most problematic point in a sculpture, and turns it into a situation, a mysterious

terrain in its own right. Although Oliveira's experience of travel in the Yucatan lies somewhere in the background of these works, nothing he remembers seeing there really corresponds to their scatterings of weapon-like, tool-like forms. Uncertain as to scale and possible function, some of these forms say "actual size" to the hand, while others appear dramatically miniaturized. An elastic sense of space, responsive to the viewer's engagement, results. No way of seeing a piece such as "Yucatan Sequence Two" settles either its internal scale or its meaning. Oliveira's unusual longtime practice of handling patina like paint adds subtlety to the "Sites." Oliveira identifies a recent series of "Masks" as a response to the invasion and occupation of Iraq. Even knowing this, a viewer feels rather than sees a connection. Versions of "Mask III" (2007) and "Mask I" (2007) carry the suggestion most clearly. With their reminiscence of impact-fused bullets, they insinuate disturbing thoughts: of soldiers as ammunition in an ideological battle, of larger events' power to make us see a sculptural convention - the head on an armature - as a severed head.