

Nathan Oliveira: Drawings 1960-2010

By John Goodrich
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Too often, the life of an Expressionist resembles a rocket's flare: brilliant ascent followed by early flameout. (Pollock and Basquiat come to mind.) Other artists, such as de Kooning, find ways of retrenching and rethinking over the course of a long, productive lifetime. Fitting this second, happier model is Nathan Oliveira, whose luminous drawings and watercolors are currently on view at DC Moore.



"After Munch," by Nathan Oliveira.

One of the youngest of the Bay Area figurative painters, Oliveira catapulted to fame in the late 1950s on the strength of his mystically-tinged, expressionistic figure paintings. The ascent may have been too high and too fast; the artist quit painting for several years in the early '60s—a move that slowed his meteoric career but allowed him to focus on his drawing and printmaking, mediums especially conducive to his supple line and evocative textures. Along with painting and sculpture, they form a significant part of his work today.

Oliveira seems to have lost barely a step over the years. Spanning a full half-century, his nearly two dozen works in DC Moore's smaller exhibition space show his touch becoming lighter with time, but radiating just as much pleasure in the sheer manipulation of pencil or brush. Indeed, few artists so seamlessly combine rawness and elegance. Works from the '60s and '70s—mostly graphite drawings with dense, rapid hatchings—record posing models with a kind of obsessed exhilaration. Shunning detail, he captures an angling leg or folded arm in restless nests of marks. One dark ink drawing from 1965 summarizes a pale model half-wrapped in black fabrics; we can feel her shadowed, featureless countenance staring at us through a deliciously smoky atmosphere.

Penciled outlines in a 1973 watercolor muscularly capture the volumes of a reclining torso. But Oliveira disguises his virtuosic modeling with a dose of indulgent technique: He drops onto the figure wet pools of scarlet pigment, which pool and bloom in bands that lusciously contradict the volumes. As with Schiele, the medium seems capable of its own autonomous growth, though the effect here is far closer to celebration than abjection.

Mostly dispensing with backgrounds and graphite lines, the later works rely on bare washes of burnt sienna to turn figures into shimmering, vulnerable presences. Occasionally Oliveira's propensity for the mystical mark leaves them underdefined: We already know that a wisp of a stroke can suggest a gale-wind of possibilities. But others rivet the eye with their completeness. One watercolor from 2003 magically catches a standing figure's complex forms, the slightest gatherings of tones conveying everything: the turn of a head, the stretch of arms, even the tension in the graceful arc of the torso. In such works, articulation and evocation are wondrously simultaneous.