

Nathan Oliveira's six-inch-tall Standing Figure, 1960, recalls the delicate, hieratic Minoan figurines excavated at the Palace of Knossos. Though Oliveira strips this body of any iconographic specificity, his figurine, with its wrought patina, evinces something of a talismanic artifact. In place of a head, the figure's torso unfurls into a flattened undulation, like an extravagant shock of hair, perhaps shorthand for the body's lyric extension out of its own boundaries. Two larger versions of this work, cast over the past two years, take his sculptural practice full circle, in this first comprehensive survey of Oliveira's sculpture. The artist's standing figures, particularly striking, inevitably court comparison to Alberto Giacometti's elongated specters and their attendant existential angst. But Oliveira who showed with Giacometti in the Museum of Modern Art's 'New Images of Man' in 1959 has carved out his own nuanced approach to the body: an ineffable balance between the solemnly still and the endearingly off-kilter. Figure Three, 1982, leans onto her toes, but her legs and feet cross to anchor her forward pitch; her arms are drawn behind her back, elbows splayed, lumpy fingers curled and upturned. Even in its distillation into elegant and anonymous form, the body is brought back down to earth by the particularity of an awkward gesture. In a few corners of the gallery, the shadows of several forms by turns distended or decapitated extend the play of images beyond the objects themselves, augmenting the parley of spindly bodies. Indeed, the beautifully conceived show situates objects and images with a compelling economy of space. The curator, Signe Mayfield, has hung several of the artist's monotypes where they highlight the rapport between Oliveira's sculptural practice and his (more established) reputation as a figurative painter. The crossed beams in the foreground of Improvisation 8/28/75, for example, announce the artist's interest in derelict, industrial spaces and the play of stray objects that his 'site sculptures' take up and explore a decade later. In these works, the base becomes the sculpture in its own right, strewn with strange objects somewhere between fishing tackle and the fetishes of an esoteric cult. These are scattered across a large rectangular surface like a drawing board, or tabletop, or altar but are sealed under the epoxy of bronze casting. The pieces invite comparison to Giacometti's earlier, Surrealist game boards. Once again, however, Oliveira's achievement is his own. The range of his sculpture in the exhibition challenges the pigeonholing of Oliveira as simply a member of the Bay Area figurative movement or, indeed, as merely a painter. Still, the last gallery's painting, Seated Figure Watching the Green War, 2006 the roiling red of which complicates the image's allusion to Iraq's infamous Green Zone suggests that Oliveira has not lost his painting hand, either. In two dimensions or three, the body obtains, in his work, a haunting presence. - Ara H. Merjian