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Kenneth Baker



“Figure with Arm Up” 2010 oil on canvas by Nathan Oliveira

That Nathan Oliveira sat in a wheelchair the last time I saw him added poignancy to the upright and mobile figures that populate the paintings at Berggruen from his final decade.

Oliveira (1928-2010), an Oakland native, holds an unchallengeable position in the pantheon of California artists. He long used the figure as a vessel for the projection of humanity into artworks: the values of conscience, empathy and emotional truth, including humor, that abstraction threatened to drain from painting.

The Berggruen show samples 50 years of Oliveira's work in various media. The unpopulated "Sites" monotypes and bronze landscape sculptures continue to look like unique high points of his art. But the human figure always reappears, its significance changing against the last half century's shifting cultural background.

Critics imposed a sort of existentialist reading on singular presences in Oliveira's early work. It made sense considering newly felt isolation and conformity of postwar American life and the long Cold War nuclear standoff.

But since then the anonymous human figure as heroic symbol of self-defining potential has vanished from the common culture, replaced by grotesques of merciless self-seeking: the power-hungry elite in politics and the profit system.

Against this background, Oliveira's figures more vividly than ever serve as markers of vanishing hope for painting's capacity to objectify values.

The light seems to be fading in late pictures such as "Walking with Yellow Line" (2010) and "Figure with Arm Up" (2010), but the way the Oliveira evokes light makes its authority felt as never before. What once looked merely like inhabited or haunted color fields now stand among the strongest instances available of painting as a defense of humanity, of our instinctive curiosity about one another upon which all interest in sharing rests.

