LIVIO SAGANIC: THE OBSESSION IS WITH PERMANENCE

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Livio Saganic's aesthetic decisions in favor of enduring tradition and sober solidity preclude the flash and dash of much present-day art by his contemporaries, but not the subtler pleasures of mystery and surprise, sensuality and metaphysics.

I was stone: mysterious stone;
my breach was a violent one; my birth
like a wounding estrangement,
but now I should like to return
to that certainty,
to the peace of the center, the matrix
of mothering stone.

—Pablo Neruda

All works of art are acts of death defiance or denial. They are intended to live forever, meaning different things to each future generation, long after the artist who made them is gone. They have the permanence of death while affirming life. Some artists—Impressionists and Expressionists, for instance—flirt with the idea of the transient, stressing the momentary sensation, the fleeting glance. Others—and Livio Saganic is surely one of these—seek the safety of the ancient, the stable, the everlasting, as imperatively as plants seek the sunlight. He even chose his material, stone, because he sensed its incompatibility with the very idea of modernity and neon-lit stylishness. Since stone was here long before any cultural developments, he feels it invites the free use of historical references and he exploits this opportunity with great relish:

> It is important that the substance I use predates any culturo-historical reference the sculpture might address itself to. This helps me keep my own role in perspective against the larger process in which I engage.*

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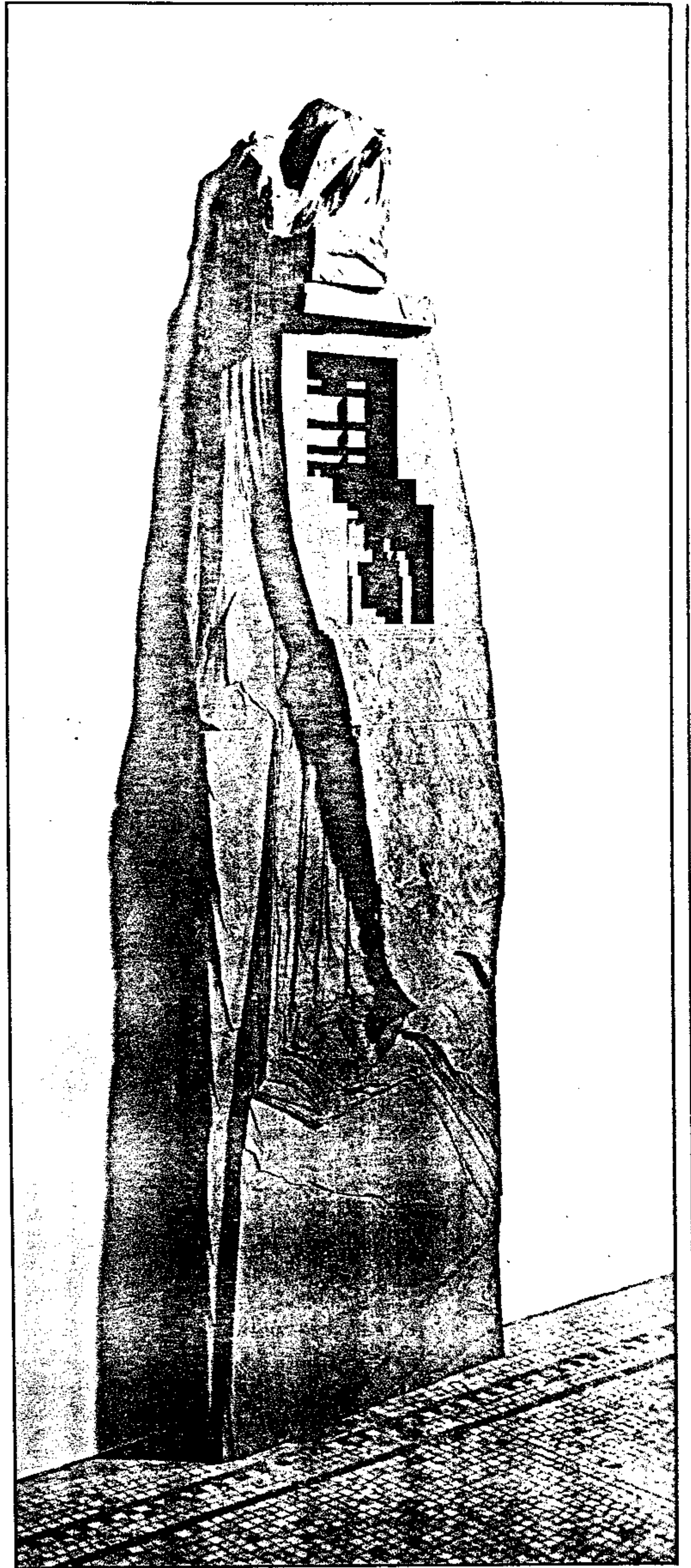


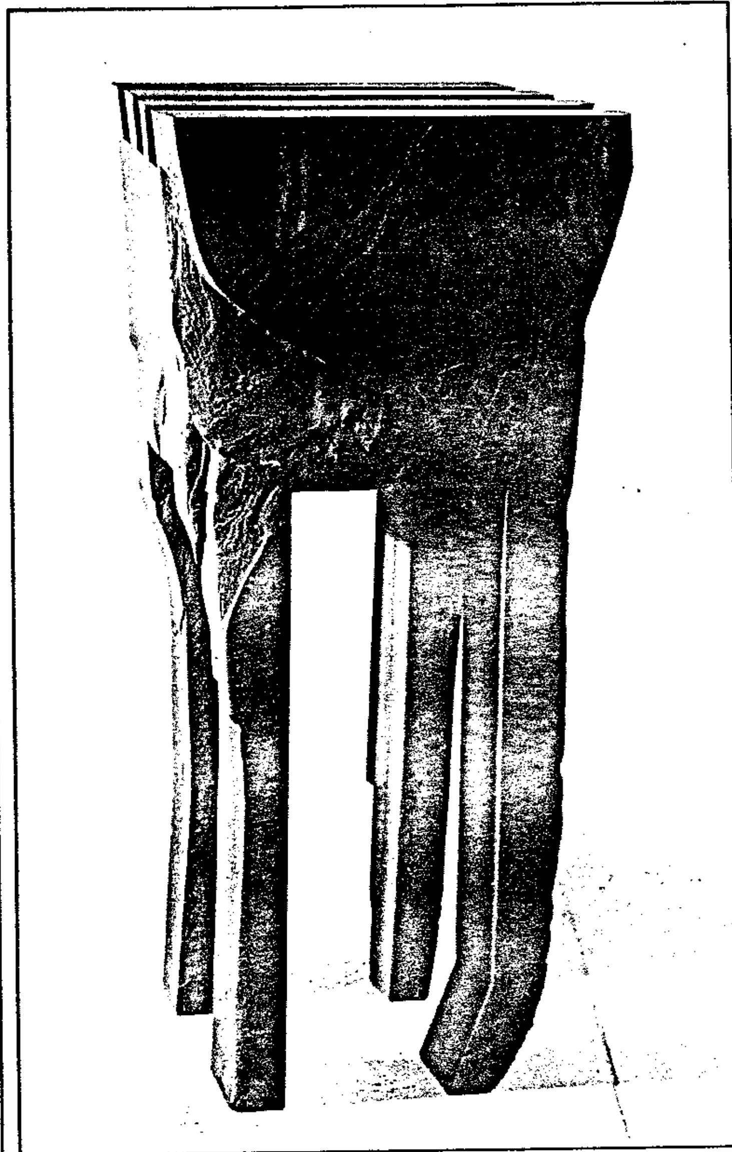
Livio Saganic, Trogle II, 1982. *Slate, 82 x 26 x 7". Courtesy Armstrong Gallery.*

Saganic didn't visit the rock-cut tombs of Egypt and temples of India until 1983, but they'd been holding an important place in his storehouse of source material for some years. The startling juxtaposition of the nature-made and the human-made in these monuments carved out of the living rock imbues this architecture/sculpture with a sense of aliveness that no constructed building can match. Even when Saganic isn't

deliberately echoing the forms of such rock-cut tombs in one of his sculptures, this quality of aliveness comes through, because his intervention in the natural configuration of the rock is limited and minimized; much of the rock's appearance remains geologically wrought.

The layers of slate are split apart along their natural lines, cut into by an electric saw in the artist's studio only where necessary to establish the artificial configuration, then glued back together to reform the original hunk of rock he removed from the quarry not long before. (He always works the stone as soon as possible after its on-site selection so that it remains wet and splits readily). Recently, Saganic has been experimenting with creating sculpture out of a given chunk of rock with only a minimal number of saw cuts. ... *Who Never Saw This Place*, done this year, borders on that extreme of simplicity whereas *Trogle II* (1982) is close to the other extreme of visual complexity in his work. But, no matter how great the intervention, one never loses sight of the stoniness of the stone for that is what he plays against with every cut.

Livio Saganic,
Gesture of Commonplace, 1985. *Slate, 50 x 20 x 12". Courtesy Armstrong Gallery.*



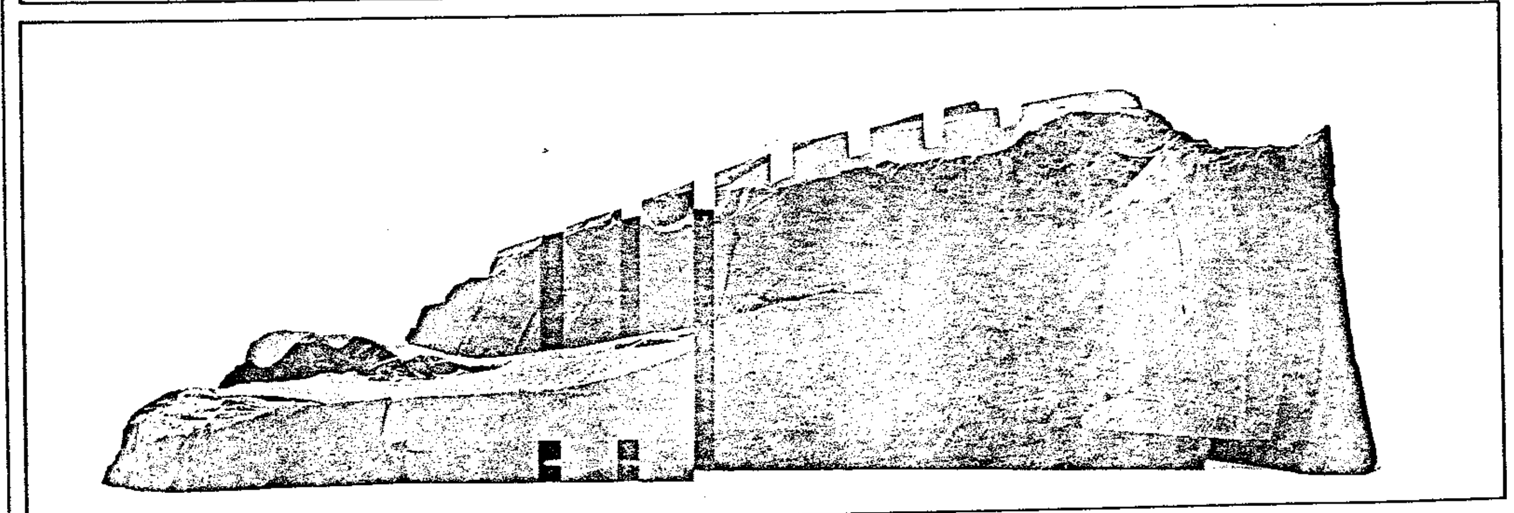
Saganic sees the rock itself as a metaphysical force. "Unlike other primary physical properties (fire, water, air)," he states, "the earth has a more precise ability to be both a unit and a location, an object and a site." He sees a fieldstone, an island, and an entire continent as essentially similar states. Saganic writes: "Stone, as a sculptural medium, should be restored to its absolute function: a connecting link to the mass that is earth." He sees it as his function as an artist to interrupt bits of the earth in their sedimentary/dormant state and project them into a new role, transforming them without their losing their initial identity. His purist stance might be compared with that of a Sierra Club geologist; he is so concerned about doing the right things to the stone when he cuts it that the raw stone makes him literally sick:

> Matter in its raw state nauseates, suffocates, intimidates, convulses, and induces an amnesia-like state in me. The only time these symptoms can be overcome, or at least become bearable, is when a concept for an operation is sufficiently strong to overcome the state of paralysis caused by the confrontation.

These ideas of a way into the stone, a process by which to intervene, often come as he is riding buses to his New Jersey teaching job, or is otherwise distant from the actual material. A series of drawings in which he works out the image, followed by a stack of overlaid tissue drawings (or templates) for each of the many layers, then result.

A cartographical-topographical approach to the material is basic to Saganic's aesthetic. He was trained in graphics, particularly intaglio, at Pratt Institute. Cutting into his material in topographical layers was the way he imposed himself on paper, then Masonite, and finally slate (after he discovered that real slate blackboards made more interesting reliefs than their Masonite imitations). At Yale in the mid-Seventies the focus was on developing a process, a systematic, logically ordered process by which to create the work. Minimalism's emphasis on grids and templates, machine-produced or machine-like imagery still held sway. Saganic would extract material in a highly controlled manner from the interior of a wall, and later a floor-oriented surface, and then display the extruded material in its removal sequence so that the process was the literal content of the piece. In 1979 he made a piece out of a foot-thick slab of floor-oriented slate entitled *Extraction #8* which pivoted him 180 degrees around the direction he now takes. Instead of displaying the extracted material, he simply left the cave-like opening its removal had caused as it was—dark, mysterious, inviting, and full

Livio Saganic, Mesapha III, 1984. *Slate, 21 x 70 x 9". Courtesy Armstrong Gallery.*



of potential implications. Jungian and Freudian interpretations, personal, but also natural and architectural meanings suddenly began to reverberate from the piece simply because "explanation"—the process of its making—wasn't its ostensible content anymore.

The *Trogle* series of early Eighties sculptures was a vertical physical and a horizontal allusional extension of the implications of *Extraction #8*. *Trogle II* is a tall, majestic piece that hugs the wall the way *Extraction #8* hugged the floor. Access to the interior is limited by the shallow depth of the stone but the imagination is given free rein in the cut units.

The allusion these units make to gigantic Near Eastern tombs cut high in rocky outcroppings causes the viewer to imagine walking around in them on a miniaturized scale. The title—*Trogle*—an abbreviation of troglodyte, is a deliberate reference to the caves cut out of the cliffs and mountains in his native Yugoslavia. These ancient dwellings and places of worship so deeply impressed him as a child that their intense mysteriousness continues to reverberate in his sculptures. One memory of a story about a castle high atop a mountain peak with an opening in its floor—through which ill-starred mortals were dropped to their death in the sea—may be surfacing as part of the content of *Qorqor* (1985), with its sharply cut Greek cross channeling down through the stone from the canted top. The cross, though, also has obvious religious references and the piece can be imagined as a container for holy water.

Intimations of function, in addition to architectural references, are relatively new in Saganic's work. One of his latest sculptures, *Gesture of Commonplace*, seems like an altar or sacrificial table because of the grooves cut across its smooth top surface. A small piece in red Vermont slate entitled . . . *who never saw this place*, made this year, and a very large one yet untitled both seem to have possible uses as containers for holy water or models for baptismal fonts. One can imagine the pure mountain water caught in the basins, and one can readily relate them to the archetypal loci for myths in many Mediterranean countries that William Irwin Thompson describes in his book, *The Time Falling Bodies Take to Light*:

> The fountain or the well represents a point where invisible energies flow into a society; in geomancy these would be known as "power points." Where these energies are, elementals or *genii loci* or nature spirits congregate.

In the crucial Egyptian myths and in Old and New Testament parables, such water sources are central to the narrative. "I have changed from a spider to a scorpion," the artist writes, "from weaving delicate webs in empty spaces to cutting dark stone sanctuaries." He quotes Sigfried Gideon's *The Beginnings of Architecture*:

> The organization of the interior space of the temples before 3000 B.C. testified to a desire to attain direct contact with invisible powers with no intermediary aid of anthropomorphic deities.

And one of his favorite quotations from Sidney Geist's book on Brancusi is: "Sculpture is the art of that which does not move. This art is of ancient origin, an art of mysteries and dark forces, of death and the tomb."

This reading of Saganic's work is also appropriate in terms of how important the idea of place, or of his sculpture as place, is to him. He was even considering titling his Armstrong Gallery exhibition "The Language of Place," and he sees each work "as a place unto itself, as site, its physiography dictating the imposed identity." Essentially hybrids of nature and architecture, his sculptures in temple configurations, such as *Hal Saflieni II* (1982) or this year's *Where I Go Calling Alone*, give the illusion of great specificity as to location. The journey one must make around them to see them from all their very different aspects adds to the sense of experiencing a real place. He writes:

> Passage—step—wall—column
> Primitives designating place.
> Facilitating the process of temporary
> 'inhabitation' of a sculptural object.
> Instruments and repositories of memory and meaning.

Sculpture-as-place is refuge and sanctuary for him, probably much as his favorite places in rural Yugoslavia were when he was a child. He remembers running from the sound of a passing airplane and hiding his head among stones:

> Where I grew up there was always talk of people running away. ... daily diet of it. I suppose it was obvious to everyone so I never asked why. I do what I do as a relief from chaos, instability and anxiety. The obsession is with permanence and quietude I feel I once knew, yet know I can never regain. The experience of a refugee is that you feel alienated from your own people as well as from the newly adopted culture.

Although it may not be a factor in his thinking at all, sculpture's traditional connection with the human body also comes through in much of Saganic's work. This is not true of *Field of the Immemorial* (1985), *Mesapha III* (1984), or other horizontally oriented works, but it is an aspect of all the others with a vertical thrust. Even the table-like pieces feel like truncated bodies with legs, and the smaller mountain/temples such as *Hal Saflieni II* often remind one of visored helmets or the tops of figures. Works of human height, whether free-standing or wall-attached, cannot avoid this figural reference and it is one of the reasons we connect viscerally with the work. Our eyes glide sensually over the surfaces of the stone caressing the gentle curves, sliding down the grooves, and cross the graduated planes in a sympathetic response to its skin-like beauty. Yet our bodies sense the density of the stone and its solidly grounded upright stance as kin to our own weightedness. Two new pieces, *Prisoner of Winter* and *Sky is a Rigid Terrace*, push this figural analogy into a surprisingly near-Baroque mode. The graceful arc of *Sky is a Rigid Terrace* seems to set the slender plane in motion, as if in a dance. *Prisoner of Winter*'s stance reminds one of Rodin's *Balzac* with his massive cloak wrapped tightly around him blocking out cold winds.

Despite these rather unusual intimations of movement, Saganic's work can be characterized overall with adjectives such as dense, massive, obdurate, and substantial which describe its essential stillness. He likes the thought that rock has generative powers, but feels it important that those powers be trapped in inert matter. "The stillness of sculpture only makes more evident the stirring of all else" is a line from Geist's Brancusi book he likes to quote. "According to Brancusi," he says, "modeling has history and carving has memory. In that case my work would represent a meditation on a fixed state." His work may be multi-referential and literally comprised of many units (the reconstituted slices of slate with their "interventions"), but it is received as a holistic object rather than as a composite. This is true even when the parts of a given piece are actually separated from one another as happens in *Hal Saflieni I* and *Mesapha III*; the mind's eye skips across the physical gap to reconstitute the piece as a whole.

Two other factors, one external, the other internal, are also important to how the work is received. The mystery of the dark spaces within is deepened by the lighting of the piece, and the subtleties of the natural color bandings, quartz and mineral deposits, and nature-made surface modulations are transformed into artistic decisions by his handling of the light. Internal scale, a finely tuned sensitivity to the relations of small forms to large, is also crucial to the reading of this work. One always feels that a given piece could exist on an enormous scale with the viewer as a tiny creature walking around in its vast spaces. Big pieces are imagined to be the size of mountains, smaller ones the size of parks. The potential would seem great for Saganic to make extremely effective public sculpture since one can so readily visualize the work on such a scale. The Chinese believed that the Immortals inhabited another world with its own sky in the caves and grottoes in and under the five great mountains at China's corners. But since they were unable to actually locate this netherworld, they created magic mountains replete with caverns and grottoes on a smaller scale as parks and gardens, and miniature dwarfed landscapes in bowls and pots with "bonsai" trees and suggestively craggy rocks. The enlightened viewer of such a shrunken world shrinks too, imaginatively, and wanders through the fantastic landscape dreaming of immortality.

Saganic feels a responsibility as an artist to bypass both social urgency and personal pathos. He is deliberately seeking the kinds of ancient verities that have sustained humankind through the many rough passages of history. He hopes that someday it might be said of his work that it was at least part of the solution to the great human problem Sigfried Gideon once defined as "how to confront the unformed with the formed without allowing the formed to be reduced to insignificance."

*All quotations are from interviews with the artist and from his notebooks.