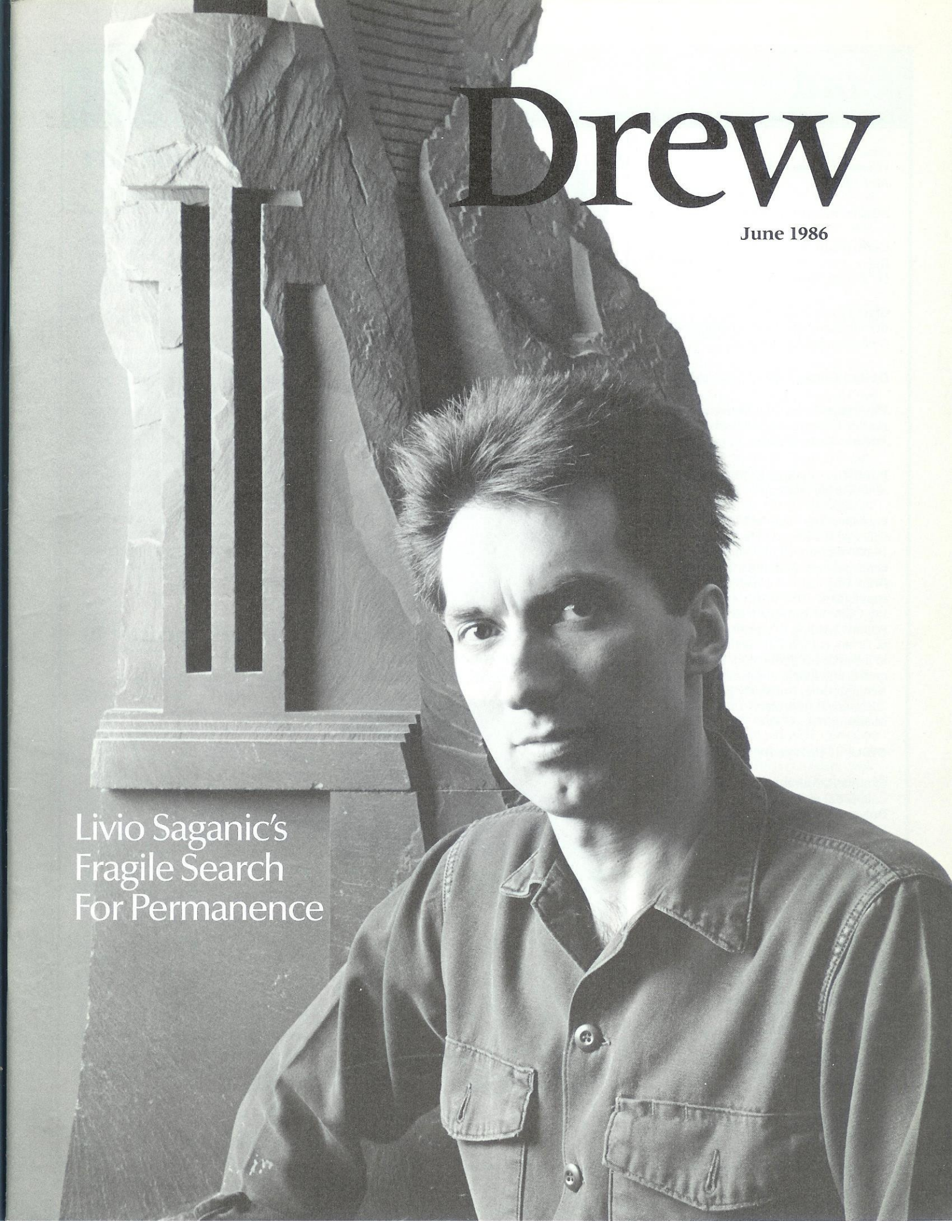


Drew

June 1986

Livio Saganic's
Fragile Search
For Permanence





Livio Saganic's Fragile Search For Permanence

His unique slate sculptures recall his homeland in the Mediterranean and have made him a budding star of the New York art scene

By Kenneth Cole

If, as the origins of the Greek Muses suggest, art springs from a union between memory and the divine, then unveiling the source of the sacred in Livio Saganic's slate sculptures remains the more difficult task, for even the artist can easily identify the power of memory in his works. It is embedded in their very rock, their jagged edges, their somber formality.

"I do what I do as a relief from chaos, instability and anxiety," says the associate professor of art in an *Arts Magazine* article this past November. "The obsession is with permanence and [a] 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."

Saganic's progress from painter to printmaker to installation artist to sculptor and his choice of medium reflect the restlessness of his search for permanence and the very fragility of the search itself. In his material of choice—slate, he works in a complicated and delicate manner to produce works reminiscent of the ritual caves, rock-cut tombs, and dark altars of the monumental past.

After his ten years of teaching at Drew, that search for permanence has also made him a budding star on the New York art scene. *The New York Times*' Grace Glueck and William Zimmer and *New York Magazine*'s Kay Larson have all written of his work, in particular of his involvement in the "Art on the Beach" shows at Battery Park City on the Lower West Side. He has enjoyed several exhibits elsewhere in New York and in Brunswick, Maine, San Francisco, Newark, Trenton, Boston, Buffalo, and Richmond. Within the last seven months, Saganic has staged important one-man shows at the Armstrong Gallery in New York and the Henri Gallery in Washington, D.C., and a two-person showing at the Carolina Union Gallery at the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill.

The Newark Museum, more than 20 corporations and foundations, and a dozen individuals have purchased his work, and his reach extends to the walls of the university's Faculty Club and the Korn Art Gallery, where he has exhibited and whose installations he helps arrange.

Saganic's search, however, stretches back to the Yugoslavian island of Cres, where he grew up within sight of the Italian border. Saganic remembers it as a rugged, stony place where everyone talked of leaving, but also as a place and a time locked forever in memory as a peaceful idyll.

"The kind of environment I grew up in was still 19th-century-like," he says in his gentle Mediterranean accent. "There was no electricity or radio or running water or roads. It was rather isolated even though we were not very far from some major cities like Trieste and Venice. My father was a sailor on a local passenger boat that sailed between the islands, so I spent much of my summers hopping around."

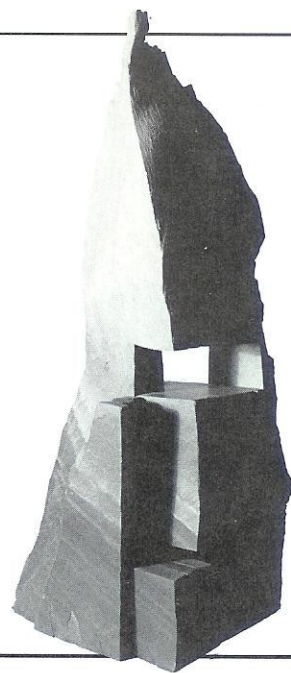
"We grew all our own food and raised all our own animals, a little bit of everything, you know. Just enough olive trees to have some oil, and almonds, wheat, corn, vineyards, and potatoes—whatever we needed to subsist. It was a great environment to grow up in because it gave me a sense of how everything worked."

Saganic's early schooling in a one-room schoolhouse began his drawing career; he produced plenty of maps while the teacher worked with others in the eight grades of children. It was a halcyon period he remembers fondly.

But the family left Cres in 1962, partly for political freedom in the West and partly for economic reasons, in hope of reaching relatives in the United States. What they found on the way was upheaval.

"The refugee camps were particularly unsettling," Saganic says. The family went through a series of three camps in two years. "The first camp in Trieste was actually a leftover World War II concentration camp with 10-foot high walls and barbed wire. We were quarantined and the men separated from the women for the amount of time necessary for the authorities to see if you were a criminal. They put us all in a room without a window; it was one of those places where for a mattress they gave you a sack and you had to stuff it with straw."

A move to a camp in southern Italy several months later improved the climate, but the food remained bad. Saganic lied about his age to gain work in the nearby tobacco fields so he could buy better food to prepare himself. He refers to the time as a "good education," but in fact he was out of school for two years and struggled to learn the language.



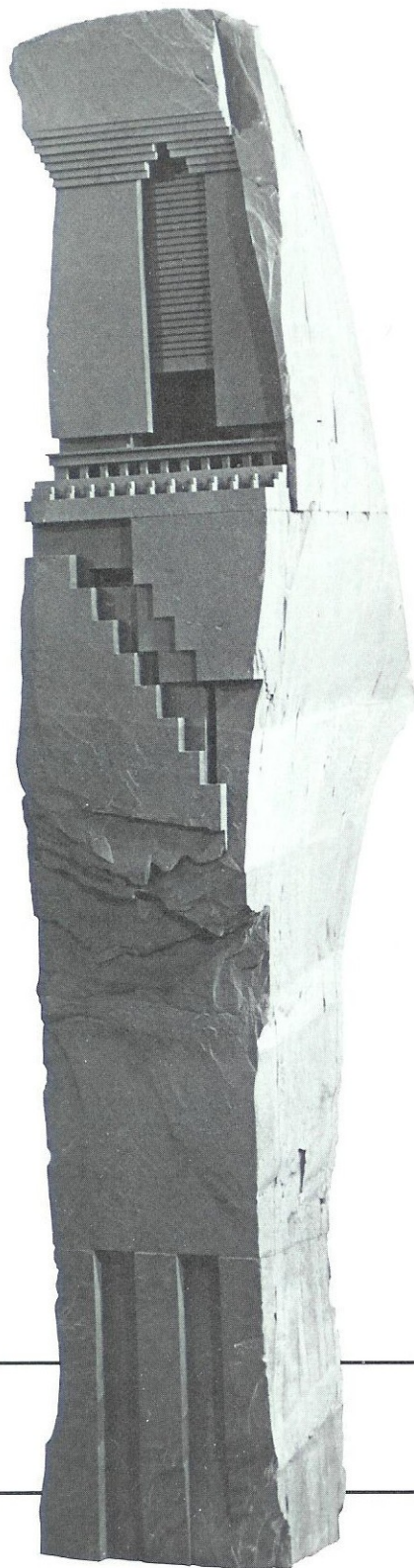
Above: Hal Saflieni IV (1985; 17" x 8" x 6"). Far left: A detail from Zagaru (1982).

Then came a second upheaval, the move to West New York, N.J., an enclave of Spanish-speaking immigrants. The 14-year-old Saganic restarted school in the eighth grade as one of the oldest students and then had to master two new languages. In the process, he discovered that his talent for drawing transcended speech.

"I drew a lot and received lots of attention from the teachers," he remembers. "I couldn't do any academic work, so I simply did a lot of drawing and painting."

After learning English and regaining his ability to work in school, Saganic went on to become a painting major at Pratt Institute and, after a year-long break before his senior year, went into print-making. Upon graduation, his prints brought acceptance into the Yale University graduate program in art, and there he expanded his work to include wall reliefs and environmental sculpture.

"What I was trying to do at that time was to determine a certain order or location in forms that were totally random and totally accidental. I worked on surfaces that had jagged edges, similar in configuration to an island like Greenland. I would look at this form and ask, 'How do you go about deducing visual information from that random structure?' I worked with plywood, masonite, asbestos, formica, and other media. The first step was to make them into fragments."



Saganic graduated from Yale in 1976, but not before two more unsettling experiences intervened and the idea of slate and its possibilities arose.

"We all had to be evacuated from the school because of asbestos. They moved us to an old school building, where one night some vandals came into my studio and smashed up the blackboards on the wall. When I came in the next morning, there were all these fragments on the floor with wonderful configurations, a more honest type of fragment than the one I was trying to mimic. They were natural forms with strong geological connotations."

Over the next year or so, Saganic perfected a special way of handling the slate, a method no other known artist uses. He selects his pieces at the quarry, going through literally thousands of stones lying around or already being processed and looking for a stone with a form that strikes him, "usually with a strong landscape reference...a sense of place in itself, a kind of completeness." He then has one end cut so he can set the piece up, although the cut has the additional advantage of exposing the stone's grain so it can be split into layers.

Saganic's choice of stone, he himself admits, indicates an exploration for permanence and mines his past in a very tactile way. The material contrasts with the sort of temporary installations he attempted before he moved into slate.

"Some of the sculptures I was doing before...were room installations, mostly in corners, made with nothing but elastic cord—very thin, black elastic cord, stretched right across the space as if it were drawn right into the wall. It was a way of dealing with a given environment by deriving a whole different structure from it. That wasn't satisfactory, although it was very practical. I could carry a whole exhibition in my back pocket.

Left. Zagaru (1982; 106" x 25" x 15") is part of Saganic's Troggle series. All photos by Shelley Kusnetz.

"But I needed to do something much more permanent and much more resistant and timeless. I guess I like the idea of disturbing something that's been sedimentary, hidden for millions of years, and then subjecting it to a new kind of order. But the change does not totally superimpose, like carving a figure, for instance. I wouldn't say it has to do with nostalgia, but it does with where I grew up, which was a rocky, rather severe, unchanging environment with islands in the distance and a stable horizon."

Although Saganic does not completely reshape the stone as Michelangelo did with marble, his method, in its fragility, is a paradoxical commentary on the permanence he seeks in his work. First he sketches ideas for his image, then often follows up with a stack of tissue overlays that serve as templates for how the different layers of cut slate will look. He takes a chisel—not to begin sculpting the stone, but to split layers of slate from the stone until he has disassembled the entire mass.

A delicate process that could easily break the layers of slate, the disassembling itself is an important part of Saganic's relationship with the stone, one in which he discovers the matrix of the stone out of which the sculpture will rise. Besides being a physical act, it is a mystical process in its revelations of the slate's positive and negative images of each layer's grain.

"Traditionally, stone has been carved from all sides, as if it were a large sugar cube," he says. "With slate, you can get to the center of it, taking it apart in infinite layers, and then reassemble it into the original monolith."

Which is exactly what he does after he performs his complex series of saw cuts on each piece of the slate. He works with an electric saw to form the dark recesses of a work like *Zagaru* (1982; 106" x 25" x 15"), reminiscent of Egyptian cliff tombs, or the severe, two-inch-deep incisions in his sacrificial table-like work, *Gestures of the Commonplace* (1985, 50" x 20" x 12"; not shown), or the temple shape recalled in *Mesapha II* (1984; 48" x 30" x 9"). Saganic's *Troggle* (Greek for "cave," as in troglodyte) series, which includes *Zagaru*, deliberately alludes to the subtractive architecture around the Mediterranean basin and comprises works that are a reassemblage of dozens of layers of slate. After he cuts on each layer separately to

create the image, he glues the pieces back together with epoxy.

Besides being painfully slow and delicate to create, Saganic's sculptures are painful in another sense, for they elicit a very physical reaction he must overcome just to begin work on a new piece. As art critic April Kingsley reported in *Arts Magazine*, Saganic "sees it as his function as an artist to interrupt bits of earth in their sedimentary/dormant state and project them into a new role, transforming them without losing their initial identity...[He is so concerned about doing the right things to the stone when he cuts it that the raw stone makes him literally sick. He writes:] '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 bearable, is when a concept for an operation is sufficiently strong to overcome the state of paralysis by the confrontation.'"

Saganic has managed well enough to create a body of work that has gained notice, and if his rise on the New York art scene has not been meteoric, at least it has been steady. Furthermore, as with the sources of his work, Saganic is clear-eyed about his place in the contemporary art market.

"My work isn't very fashionable," he admits. "It's very quiet work, and what seems to be in vogue is pretty flashy work, dealing with popular culture like sitcoms and cartoons. A lot of people consider my work to be beautiful and classical in orientation, even though that's not my intent. The stone is very beautiful in itself; it's hard to break away from that. The trend nowadays is not to make things beautiful, so there is some interest in my work [for running against the trend]."

By his own report he plans to continue teaching, for he needs the connection with a community. But Saganic does enjoy living in New York because it affords a distance from his

daily demands and permits privacy for his work. New York is also a city he has known well since his West New York days, when he used to frequent a then-different Times Square and the Hudson River waterfront. The city, in fact, forms another part of his artistic heritage.

"In high school," Saganic recalls, "I became fascinated with the Italian Futurists...artists in the early part of the century who idealized the modern city, speed, and machinery. I went through a similar development, coming from where I did, not growing up in the city.

"I love industrial sights," he continues. "I spent days down by the Hudson because of all the railroad depots and piers and refineries. They have a kind of industrialization gone obsolete, and so it [my time] was archaeological in a sense. I discovered how the machines were subjected to a process of naturalization, to entropy."

And while the machine is present in his sculptures—in the straight cuts and grooves he makes in the stone—it does not overpower the slate. Saganic's work partakes of the spirit of sculpture that Sidney Geist highlights in his book on the sculptor Brancusi. Geist writes that "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." ■

Right: Saganic's 1984 work, Mesapha II (48" x 30" x 9"), carves out a temple form.

