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Virgil Hammock

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DAVID SAMILA

By Virgil G. HAMMOCK

This January the recent paintings of Winnipeg artist David Samila will be shown at Montreal's Saidye Bronfman Centre. Samila's work should not be totally unfamiliar to Montreal gallerygoers. Represented in both the Montreal Spring Show in 1965 and Survey '68 at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, he was also one of the artists chosen by juror William Seitz to exhibit five paintings in the Seventh Biennial of Canadian Painting at the National Gallery in Ottawa in 1968. The current exhibition, however, will be the first time that Québec viewers will have the chance to get acquainted with this important young painter's work.

The exhibition was originally conceived by Professor George Swinton of the University of Manitoba to be shown in Gallery III, a small but inventive gallery that Professor Swinton directed at the School of Art on the University of Manitoba's Winnipeg campus until this year, but the idea of a Samila exhibition

proved so interesting that the National Gallery's Extension Service took responsibility for the show and is now touring it across Canada.

David Samila is a prodigal son returned to his native Winnipeg in 1969 after a prolonged sojourn in Europe and two different teaching posts elsewhere in Canada, first at Mount Allison in Sackville, New Brunswick, and then at the Alberta College of Art in Calgary. He now teaches at the University of Manitoba: the institution from which he graduated in 1962. In that same year he was one of the first winners of a Leverhulme Canadian Painting Scholarship that allowed him to study for a year at the Slade School of Art in London with Keith Vaughan and brought the young artist into contact with Harold Cohen who played a major role in the philosophic development of Samila.

Samila is a prolific artist turning out, on the average, one of his difficult large constructed works a week. He only does

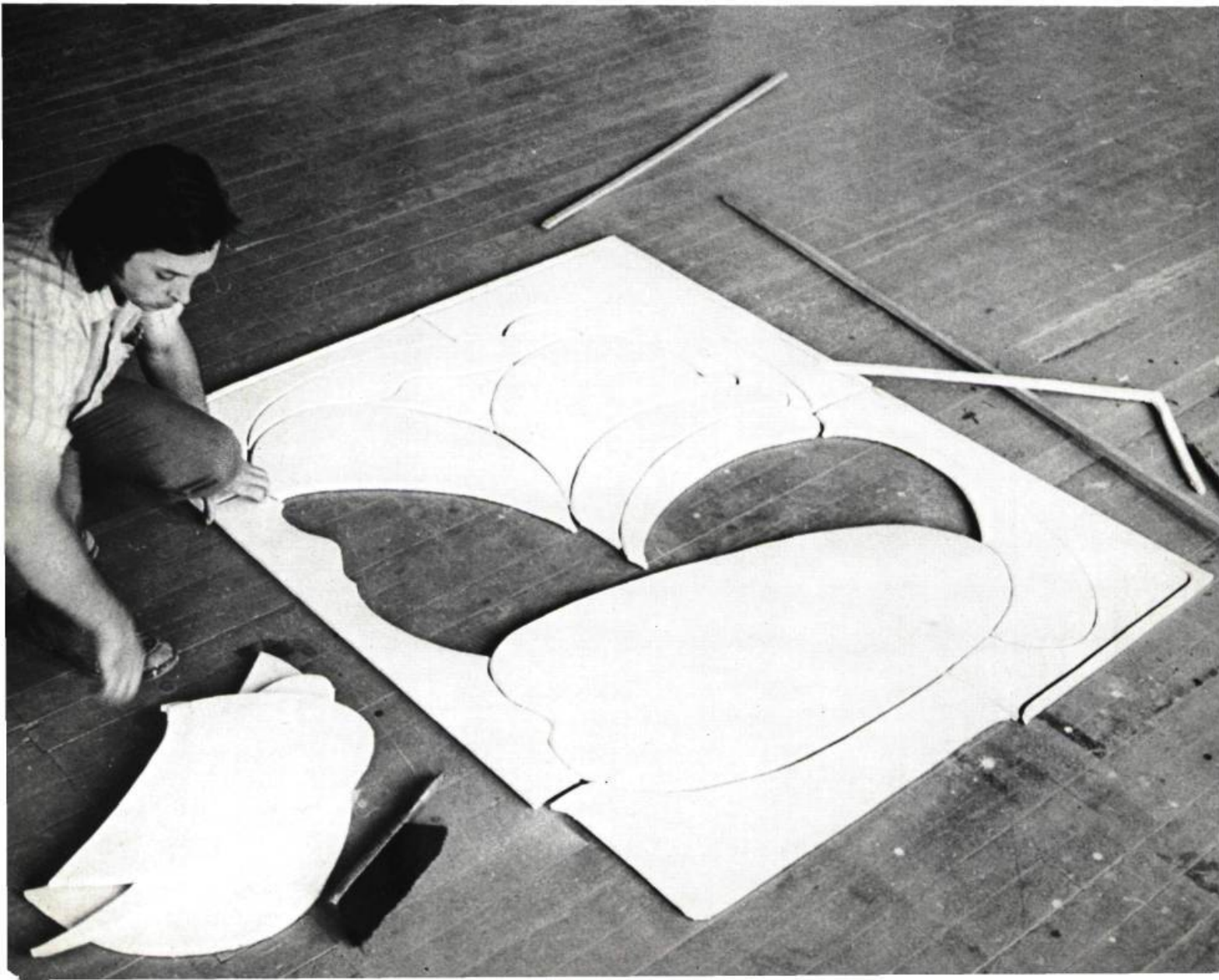
this by working every day, and generally returning in the evening as well, in a large loft studio he shares with painter Donald Reichert in downtown Winnipeg. All of the paintings in the National Gallery touring exhibition with the exception of one were done in 1970. This is not to say that Samila is not demanding on what leaves his studio. When I interviewed him at his studio this June he would only allow photographs to be taken of three of his new paintings although the studio was filled with what I took to be finished works. These he dismissed as being unresolved and in need of both more thinking and work before he would let them out for public viewing.

Unlike many artists today Samila enjoys the pure physical work that goes into one of his creations. He would not 'farm' the execution of works to a factory in the fashion of Robert Murray nor would he trust a phone order work like Robert Morris. This is not to say there

is any particular virtue in Samila's work that is missing in that of the two sculptors. The only thing that one can judge is the finished product.

Samila's paintings are really constructions but he is a long way from being either a Constructivist or a Structuralist. An artist like Biederman or Borstein use actual space, not the illusory space of Samila. The sections of his paintings are used as a way of drawing on a flat surface. The slight space formed by where the canvas-covered wood sections meet in a work act as a line would in a drawing. The flowing arabesque and visual puns so evident in Samila's work would also prove foreign to the Constructivist ethic. The only other artist who I can think of who works in a somewhat similar fashion is the American George Ortman, but his paintings are more geometric in character while Samila's are organic in concept.

One of Samila's paintings begins with



number of small drawings until a particular configuration is arrived at. Then a large scale drawing is done complete with notations for possible colour choices. This is not unlike an engineer's blueprint with one important difference. However precise one of Samila's drawings might be the word *red* is a notation for one work may not mean the same thing as the same word in another drawing.

The colour in his painting is felt and weighed visually in each painting by the artist rather than a mythical location on a spectrum that a scientist chooses to call red. All this proves is how incredibly dull and imprecise the written word is in describing something like colour, but it is another excellent reason why Samila could not pass on one of his drawings, no matter how detailed, to someone else to make a painting and compare with results that would satisfy him.

Once the drawing is complete the information is transferred to half-inch plywood. He then cuts the wood into pieces following the line as a guide. These pieces are carefully covered with raw canvas and stained with acrylic paint. The individual pieces are put together in a jig-saw fashion and screwed to a ridge frame. It all sounds simple enough but like a woman it is not the parts but how they are put together.

A recent work, *Untitled, May, 1970* (56½" x 70"), should serve as an example of Samila's craftsmanship. The colours are at their fullest chroma, pinks, oranges, sky blues and richer earth tones. All the pieces or sections fit beautifully—no small matter in this age of the *Peter Principle*. The central figure is abstract and ambiguous yet the suggestion is there of some type of organic or animal form that the viewer might pick from his imagination.

In the case of this painting I would call it worm or wormlike. It is unusual for a Samila painting to be untitled. All of the paintings in the touring exhibition have titles but generally he picks the titles after the completion of the work on the basis of what the work suggests to him at the time. This painting is one that Samila had not found an appropriate title for at the time this article was written.

While I have said that Samila is careful about what leaves his studio he has very few hang-ups about letting his work go once he is satisfied and go many of them have into important public and private collections. His last large commercial one-man show at Toronto's Dunkelmann Gallery in 1968 was very successful and another exhibition is being planned for the same gallery sometime this winter. David Samila is not yet thirty but he is already one of Western Canada's most promising artists.

(Traduction française, p. 72)



Mouse May, 1970. 56½ in. by 70" (142.9 x 187.8cm). Under construction. (Phot. Charles Scott.)



Untitled, June 1970. 56½ in. 70" (143.2 x 178.8cm). (Phot. Charles Scott.)