

SAMIR SAMMOUN'S MASTERPIECES OF LOVE

In the fury of the moment I can see the Master's hand
In every leaf that trembles, in every grain of sand.

—Bob Dylan, "Every Grain of Sand"

By **VICTOR BENNETT FORBES**

When Elliot Blinder — that champion of accomplished artistic talent — called to make us aware of an artist who merited attention in our publication, *Fine Art Magazine*, little could we imagine that fifteen years hence we would be composing these words to introduce Samir Sammoun's monograph. As a life-long friendship developed between artist and writer, the latter continues to marvel at the solid performance of Samir as he rises above the whimsies and challenges of the art world, passionately engaging the fields of creativity in which his masterful representations of the natural beauty of an unpeopled paradise in vivid and sublime portrayals have earned him honor, respect and an ever-expanding corps of collectors.

The simple pleasures of life are the hallmarks of his work, colorfully administered to his canvasses. Glorious waves of verdant flowers, spectacular forests with trees of heroic proportions, wheat fields pregnant with nourishment, ancient olive groves that continue to bear fruit, grand mountains, sublime snowstorms, cityscapes and sun-drenched beaches are lovingly rendered in a singular style that can only be termed a "Sammoun."

In today's tumultuous times of sound-bites, 30 second attention spans and fifteen minutes of Warholian fame for all, one can legitimately pose the question of the relevance and importance of an artist whose primary concern is the pure unsullied depiction of nature.

What value, then, is there in interpreting, replicating or portraying scenery, whether realistically or via impressions? Do photographs not suffice, or a walk in a meadow or forest? For some, yes but for countless millions who are touched by a sensitive rendering of a beautiful outdoor scene — "unsullied" — there is the landscapist whose sensitivity and skill reveals elements of our home planet that could well be overlooked or missed in our oft hurried day-to-day lives. The gift that Sammoun proffers is one of timelessness, of an infinite static depiction that becomes eternal. The result stops time like a poem. When an artist dedicated to a world vision of peace and tranquility, whatever the worldly situation, as is Sammoun, opts to paint unmodified scenes of real nature, he is shining a light on what *could* be as well as what ought to be and what was. This Romantic concept hearkens to the very foundations of art and to man's history on Earth. Who doesn't long for a sweet vision, a fond remembrance of a beautiful meadow or an ancient forest — a collective memory ordinary or exceptional that is an innocent portrayal of a reachable paradise?

With a style and technique bordering somewhere between the brush strokes of the Impressionists of the late 19th century, the powerful color of the Fauves and even the subtle intensity of the Ash Can School artists (among them William Glackens and Robert Henri) that rose to fame in New York City at the turn-of-the-century, Sammoun's painterly invocations are directly descended from his personal love of and special affiliation with Vincent van Gogh.



Samir Sammoun



Bekaa Valley and Mount Lebanon, oil on canvas, 8" x 10"



À la plage, oil on canvas, 60" x 48"



Sunrise on the Beach, oil on canvas, 60" x 48"

"Sammoun uses a contemporary interpretation of the post-impressionist style of strong colors, a thick impasto of paint, and distinctive brushstrokes to illustrate his subject matter. Light and atmosphere play a major role in bringing the paintings to life."

— CECILIA M. ESPOSITO, DIRECTOR, PLATTSBURGH STATE ART MUSEUM

On the first of numerous trips to Montréal to visit the artist, he was still involved in his highly successful telecommunications consulting business in which he created the formula that allowed high speed cable signals to share single lines, up and down stream. His offices in the heart of the city were home to many of his paintings. What I recall most vividly about this initial exposure to the work is a conversation in which he related a brief story about one of his early collectors who had fallen on difficult times. Despite an opportunity to sell his Sammoun at a profit, the gentleman could not part with it. "It is with me when I wake up and when I go to sleep, and is of far more comfort to me than I could have ever imagined," he said. That is the impact Samir's work has on his collectors. You are drawn into the artists' field of vision — a peaceful, tranquil space of color and content with soft power to transform an immutable milieu into a passion play of serene works of art that are overflowing in a concise and orderly, yet abundant, stream of life. They are stalwart tributes to the visible nature of earthly paradise, for which our consciousness as a species yearns. Living amidst his masterworks is akin to a permanent meditation. Certainly the artist carries with him his visions as in a special room-full of works, collectively known as "Walking With Giants." The double-entendre relates not just to the masters who came before him, but to the masterfully painted series of glorious primeval forests through which we all may tread or stroll, depending upon our point of view. Samir makes the walk more than the means to an end. Rather he reveals a path in which each step, each moment frozen in time, becomes an ending and

a beginning unto itself.

As the snow fell softly on the city, we closed in on the art on the walls, so that every brush stroke was visible. There were an abundance of individual units, carefully crafted and blended effortlessly into a composite whole, a distinct entity that is solely Sammoun. All these years later, the subject matter hasn't shifted — nor has the palate — yet the paintings still retain the significance of the moment compounded with memory ... a memory filtered through the visions and dreams of a young boy at harvest season in the mountains of his birthplace Joun, Lebanon on his family's 1,000 year old olive plantation. (The entirety of his biography and engineering achievements can be found in his [Wikipedia](#) entry). The spiritual yet earthly energy emanating from Samir's work, with the added impact of layered paint upon paint, invokes a mystical aura of sacred perfectibility with child-like clarity drawing us further into the imagery and its roots. It is almost as if the paintings would be on a computer monitor, or your phone, and as you click on the link, you are transported to a magical place image by image, like a slide show. No need for a looking glass, rabbit hole or whirlwind to get you there.

Sammoun soon thereafter left the engineering area of the telecommunications world to devote himself entirely to painting as his work became increasingly in demand, not only by collectors in Montréal, but by an ever-expanding group of quality art galleries from Texas to Boston, and by a number of prestigious museums. Most recently the Museum at the State University of New York in Plattsburgh used a Sammoun painting from their



Mustard Field, oil on canvas, 30" x 40"

permanent collection as the cover of their Alumni magazine. His dramatic 2009 oil on canvas, *Ticonderoga, July 30, 1609, Midnight After the Battle* focuses attention on the natural beauty of the area preserved by New York State's Wilderness Act that has, for the most part, contributed greatly to the well-being of America's largest park, the 6 million acre Adirondack Preserve (an area roughly the size of Vermont and greater than the National Parks of Yellowstone, Grand Canyon, Glacier, and Great Smoky Mountains combined).

Raised during a period of peace in his homeland (Samir's brother, unfortunately was killed at the age of 17 in the 1976 civil war), the artist's earliest recollections were of families from his village gathered together at harvest time in the olive groves, bringing the fruit to the press from which the oil was extracted. As a small



Olivier, oil on canvas, 48" x 60"



Samir with Olivier Sculpture, bronze



Olive Tree, Oil on canvas, 12" x 16"

child, Samir was captivated by the activity, especially that of the clanging contraption that produced the liquid. His fascination with the machinery and the process of turning olives into oil certainly played a part in his desire to become an engineer. Years later he would convert those memories into works of art that stand as timeless paeans to the world in which we all abide — a testament to all that is good... despite the long and more than occasionally loathsome history of man.

Because of this, it is a great pleasure to write about Samir Sammoun; to tell you a bit about his life and to weave his story into his art. Samir is like the great musician, who spent a summer by the sea at an early age, practicing his craft, honing his style and walking away from his hermitage with his skills fully developed so that, as is the case with the great instrumentalist, his work from the moment of



Apple Blossom, oil on canvas, 48" x 60"

his epiphany decades ago is almost as it is today in the fullness of his development. This is not to say there has been no refinement or growth — he has developed magnificently — but to a keen observer one can see the connection carried forth from his earliest works to his latest. Getting back to our initial meeting at his offices, perhaps the most interesting element of our conversation was his casual revelation that he channeled Vincent van Gogh when he

Painted early in his career, as if he and Vincent were actually painting side by side. Thus Samir's work, for a time, was more than direct linear heritage of the one and only Vincent. It was a true interaction with an immortal. You would have to know Samir to understand how radical a concept this was as Sammoun is nothing if not steady, conservative and with the sensibility of a scientist/engineer. Perhaps it is this process that leaves the door open to the possibility of this matter. After-all, the concept of time and space travel has been around forever and just because one has a staid persona — strait-laced, serious and conventional — doesn't necessarily eliminate some seemingly far-out concepts to emerge. Samir told me this with such casual forthrightness that I just tucked it away and took a closer look at his paintings. While the application of paint to canvas did not possess the swirling, whirling (some might say "tortured") energy of van Gogh, one could readily notice a continuum of a style — a veritable explosion of life and color in the poppy fields, apple orchards, mountains and cityscapes tempered by the peace of the elegant olive trees and the subtle movement of the wheat fields, ready for harvest.

Vincent created a series of paintings of wheat fields from his that he could see from his cell at Saint-Paul Hospital from May



Walking With Giants, oil on canvas, 48" x 60"

1879-1880, one of van Gogh's major series from Saint-Rémy. So many of the elements of Sammoun's paintings can be found in this group — mountains, cypress and olive trees, changing seasons. van Gogh's lineage, an inheritance as it were, is carried on magnificently in Samir's vision. The troubled mind and turmoil in which Vincent resided is smoothed over and extrapolated in Sammoun's art. He has taken everything van Gogh has given us and converted it all into equally emotional radiant paintings that go deeply into the mind and heart of both artist and viewer. They challenge in their subtlety, in their painterly hues and sharp yet soft depictions of nature. One could look out a window and imagine van Gogh laying it all on the line from his room at the asylum and gaze into a Sammoun painting with many of the same elements in the tradition of Vincent, yet totally original. Sammoun inhabits and creates works of a more peaceful environment, intentionally so, that reflect his own vision. He processes the beauty of the scene, yet in his perfect portrayals, there can be very subtle element of dread. Nothing is forever in this tenuous world. Mountains will crumble, flowers will die, wheat fields may be trampled by invaders or a storm, olive groves and cypress trees wickedly destroyed ... yet a painting of lasting value will be honored through the ages. My hope, dear reader, is that as you peruse the brilliant imagery in these pages you will consider not only the beauty of the work but the intent of the artist with no limitations.

And then it happened, right there before my very eyes at the [Musée des Beaux Arts](#) in the heart of Montréal, in October,



En route to Harvard University (detail), oil on canvas, 30" x 40"



Farm house Tuscany with Poppies, oil on canvas, 40" x 40"

2005. As fate would have it, there was a corresponding exhibition, *Samir Sammoun* in the street level Gallery d'Art, an annex of the Museum adjacent to the gift and bookstore, entered via the museum's lobby. There was quite a collection of Samir's work on display, with a top notch reception/cocktail party filled with top notch people from the government (Quebec Prime Minister Jean Charest and his wife Michelle Dionne) and the business/social/art segment of Montréal society. But what sealed the deal for me as far as my friend's conviction that he was harboring the soul and spirit of Vincent in his own live body was a tour we took with the museum's chief publicist of the major exhibition, *Right Under The Sun: Landscape in Provence From Classicism to Modernism 1750-1920* which was occupying the entirety of this very special building. In this exhibition of masterpieces, van Gogh's were the center of attention. As I was on somewhat of a press junket, I had the attention of the Director of Publicity and I invited her to view Samir's show in the Galerie d'Art. We were both stunned and startled by not just Samir's paintings, but by

the palpable transmission of energy by both artists via their work — it was like the cable system Samir patented, with the flow of the signal going up and down from headquarters to the last house on the hill without interruption. Of course, it will be up to future generations to place Samir in the same breath as Vincent, but next time you're at an art fair or gallery where there is a collection of Sammouns, try this out for yourself. It was amazing how he could capture the essence of van Gogh without plagiarizing his style — a tribute indeed.

In the decade hence, Samir has begun to sculpt. He has brought to life his beloved olive tree in bronze and he plans to cast life-size versions for site-specific patches of comfort to call attention to his heart-felt desire for world peace. The United Nations would be an ideal home for such a setting, as would plazas, parks, hospitals and embassies throughout the world. The elegance and strength of the olive tree lends itself perfectly to the enduring tenacity of cast bronze. Samir's works have contributed to many charitable causes and his vision of the sculptural park as



Wheat Field, oil on canvas, 48" x 60"

a sanctuary in the midst of chaos will not be a dream deferred if the artist has his way.

Doors open to Samir. His gifts have taken him far but it is his character that keeps him there. His is a very beckoning persona backed up by the talent and track record of a world-class artist. He is consistently happy and friendly. His roots go down deep despite what is going on around him. His humble smile and softly spoken words seemed to attract even more, as if he was and is enveloped in a golden aura. Stability and consistency are manifest in him with emotions and feelings on the surface and below that are both hidden and evident in his paintings. He is the same day in and day out, extremely talented, kind and generous — you are always going to know what this man is going to be like. We live in an imperfect world with imperfect people and there are going to be disappointments. Sammoun's art seems to say that while this may be true, there is the possibility of perfection, not just in a landscape or a portrait, but in a way of life. Of quietude, serenity. There is a special magic, an intricate depth inherent in Samir Sammoun's work that results in a spectacle, a spectacular portrayal of splendor that brings to mind these words of the master art critic of the ages:



Lavande et soleil, Oil on canvas, 24" x 24"



An Evening in Paris, oil on canvas, 47" x 47"

“Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow: they toil not, they spin not; and yet I say unto you, that Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these.” (Luke 12:27). Sammoun gets this. His landscapes and flowers contain an energy and brilliance, conveyed as only a self-realized artist can. Soft, serene and delicate, they hold a mesmerizing power over a viewer. Whether a wheat field or a mountain range, they are elegantly composed, carefully colored, fully conceived inviting yet somewhat foreboding in their awesomeness. These paintings are done by a man who goes way beyond the surface. He sees things and he sees into things, every blade of grass, as Dylan said, “Every grain of sand.” This collection quietly states there’s a large life in front of you, a life grounded in imparting the truth and beauty of nature in its purest form, unadulterated, recognizable, perfect. These paintings — dynamic combinations of contentment and wonder — are treasures, works of great beauty. Masterpieces of love.



Sammoun

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