

To Make Meanings Real: A Conversation with Mark di Suvero

by Jan Garden Castro

Mark di Suvero celebrated his 70th birthday without fanfare in fall 2003. He was on site with his small crew at Laumeier Sculpture Park, St. Louis, preparing for his retrospective exhibition and installing his mega-ton “dragons in the sky,” including the new work *Destino*. In 2004 and 2005, his work continued to evolve, as evidenced by *Beethoven’s Quartet*, an exquisitely crafted monumental sculpture with a mobile musical core, and by multiple exhibitions, including shows at the Frederik Meijer Gardens in Grand Rapids; Madison Square Park in New York City; and Michael Hue-Williams Fine Art in London. In May 2005, his two-year exhibition at Storm King Sculpture Park opened to commemorate the park’s 45th anniversary and di Suvero’s historic 1985 and 1995 exhibitions there.



Mother Peace, 1970. Painted steel, 12.7 x 15.06 x 13.49 meters. © George Bellamy. Courtesy of the artist and spacetime c.c.

A philosophy major from California who was born in China to parents of Italian heritage, di Suvero has reinvented himself many times. He emerged as a young superstar in the '60s, known for monumental assemblages incorporating salvaged steel implements and wood, as well as for fierce wood and wax hands that paid homage to Rodin. During his recovery from a near-fatal accident, he spent time refining his steel-working skills, from welding and cutting to cold-bending, a labor-intensive technique. Among many firsts, di Suvero was the first living artist to have his work shown in the Tuileries Gardens in Paris in 1975, when he also exhibited at the Whitney Museum and in outdoor settings around the New York metropolitan area. In 1995, his work was again shown in Paris and in the Venice Biennale. He is the first artist to have three major exhibitions at Storm King.

di Suvero has studios in Long Island City next to Socrates Sculpture Park, which he founded; in Petaluma, California; and in Chalon-sur-Saône, France, where he founded *La Vie des Formes*, an atelier for emerging artists. In his spacious Long Island City studio, the main work space is unheated, spare, and industrial, connected by a rickety ramp to a room with a drafting table that overlooks the East River. di Suvero’s sculptures are open and interactive. People are invited to scale and even to ride on some works. His steel geometries connect earth and sky, space and time. Primordial elements, physics, music, poetry, and philosophical influences also find their way into the mix. di Suvero’s wizardry melds the monumental and the intimate, humanizing steel as though it were another form of writing by hand.

Jan Garden Castro: Your work is remarkable not only for notions of balancing heavy metal and gravity, but also solids and voids, earth and sky, manmade materials and nature. Could you talk about the physics and the poetics of balancing tons of steel?



Beethoven's Quartet, 2003. Steel and stainless steel, 7.5 x 9 x 7 meters. © J. Price. Courtesy of the artist and spacetime c.c.

Mark di Suvero: The end result of any work is the result of the methods. At a symposium in Toronto in '67, it came to me that I needed a set of tools—essentially the crane, the cherry-picker (they call it the “man-lift” sometimes), a torch, a welder, accessory hammers, wire brushes, and small hand tools. The crane allows for lifting. As Renzo Piano said to me two days ago, “Well, Mark just picks 'em all up and moves them around with a crane, and then when he likes it, he just welds it, and turns it over sometimes.” Renzo got it completely. He's an architect, but he's a builder also. Architects sometimes ignore the building process itself. They haven't been trained in it. Renzo has.

Handling the steel itself at the level of professional steel workers—not just fabricating it and having it blown up—gives one real respect for the machinery. The possibilities seem delirious—a child five years old can pull a lever and lift a ton of steel. Although exhilarating, it is also very dangerous. We have a great tradition of steel workers, going all the way back to the fabrication of the Brooklyn Bridge and the difference between steel and iron. Steel is an alloy that isn't as breakable as cast iron, and it has changed civilization. Everybody who drives around in a car or flies in a plane depends on it, and yet it is metallurgy at a very extreme level. Just as poetry can't happen if you don't know how to use words, you have to handle all of the methods in order to reach the moment when you can do the dreams. It's that kind of relationship.

JGC: How do you use triangles, spirals, non-Euclidian geometry, and physics to construct a work?

MdS: Any Constructivist work depends on a certain sense of geometry and structure. There are people who have built collapsing pieces of sculpture. They have either done it on purpose or have ignored some of the basic principles of building. Structure is something that every house builder, boat builder, and carpenter knows. A four-sided figure is deformable and depends on the strength of the joining of the corners, but a triangle is usually stable, unless it's overloaded. There are the equivalent structures in three dimensions, so that a tetrahedron, like a triangle, is a very solid, non-deformable geometrical object. I've been interested, like a lot of the Park Place artists, in that special kind of geometry, topology, which has to do with the deformations, and it's a different kind of thinking. I wish that I really could do non-Euclidian geometry in our mere four dimensions, but somehow it's easier to think about than it is to do.



Frog's Legs, 2002. Steel, 8 x 3.3 meters. © J. Price. Courtesy of the artist and spacetime c.c.

I'm basically interested in something that Suzanne K. Langer pointed out—that human beings use symbols all the time. The words that we're using now are symbolic, and mathematics depends on the use of symbols. If you don't have icons, which are symbols, the computer doesn't work. Langer, a Freudian, dealt with the symbolic structure that Freud had found in the human unconscious/subconscious. Human beings have created huge symbolic structures like language, mathematics, and art, and these have that very difficult word, meaning. What is the meaning of one's life? What is the meaning of a poem? The meaning of music? These things are true to our gut reaction to life and very hard to define.



Yes! For Lady Day, 1968–69. Painted steel, 16.46 x 12.19 x 10.67 meters. © George Bellamy. Courtesy of the artist and spacetime c.c.

What is so thrilling about sculpture is that we make these meanings real—that is, in three dimensions, so that you can bump into them in the dark. There is a way of looking at the objective world that is very analytical, that describes it and tests it. And then there is a way, as in sculpture, when you have the real object there, that is like a springboard into dreams, poetry, and the feeling—the internal feeling of one's life. More and more, we have a split in human minds between the feeling, internal, subjective world and the objective world where the car runs into somebody or into a wall. In contrast to the analytical, the subjective world is much more plastic and changes in ways that depend on meanings at a psychic level.

JGC: Speaking of symbolism and Freudian associations, your work titled *Are Years What?* (For Marianne Moore) is a series of V forms, with one dangling in the sky. I've heard that the V sometimes represents the prow of a ship, and Irving Sandler pointed out that the V suggests your family's maritime roots in Venice. He also wrote that your acute angles have male and female associations: "If horizontal it is phallic...As a vertical V, it is vaginal. The V also resembles

the wings of birds in flight. In addition it is the symbol of victory and the central form of the peace symbol prominently cut into *Mother Peace at Storm King*." Do your acute angles and triangles have these and other readings?

MdS: I don't find that steel is very sexual. I've never gone to bed with a steel partner.

JGC: In Freudian terms?

MdS: I'm not a Freudian. If anything, I'm closer to a Jungian. I think that there are archetypal forms that people react to. I think that people respond to geometric forms in a way that doesn't have to do with a direct sexual interpretation. When I see a pyramid, I am moved by the complete form, like the Egyptian pyramid of Cheops. It is a very clear symbol of hierarchy. Because of size, it has all of that awe to it, but I never think of it as a sexual symbol. Geometric art, which we now call Cubism, liberated us from this kind of enslavement to figurative art.

JGC: I really respect your answer.

MdS: Disappointed, right?

JGC: No. Your sculpture cultivates intimacy with the viewer through participation. The viewer can play with the sculpture: in some cases, climb on it, sit on it, swing on it.

MdS: What I consider my diploma is a photograph of a couple making love on the swinging bed. That piece, which was at Cranbrook, proves that there can be a kind of linked relationship of motion with a sculpture and a blossoming of the human erotic imaginative impulse.

JGC: Another motion-filled work is Beethoven's *Quartet*, which has a suspended, moving core. How did you develop the central shape? Could you



La Petite Clef, 1972–73. Steel and wood, 8 x 8.23 x 11.51 meters. © George Bellamy. Courtesy of the artist and spacetime c.c.

discuss balancing the different kinds of steel?

MdS: There are three types of steel in the piece—Cor-ten (a specialized alloy), steel, and stainless steel. It took me almost three years to build. The central element is a suspended stainless steel mobius band. It's a one-sided surface, and it has an ellipse that I used to change the center of gravity of the total piece. At one end, there is an evolution that seems to be a spiral. In fact, it's not a direct spiral. That part is all cold bend. Most of the bend in the steel is cold bend, which I do with a crane. It is a minor version of a tour de force in handling the steel—to bend one-inch Cor-ten is quite difficult. The other end is a straight Constructivist collage in which the cut-out circles and ellipses are important in a different way. They are suspended, and I try to give them a lot of detail up high, as you find in the flying buttresses of Gothic churches, to give a sense of the sky and liberty.

JGC: Does the title drive the work or emerge later?



Beyond, 2004. Steel, 7.3 x 6.5 x 6 meters. © J. Price.
Courtesy of the artist and spacetime c.c.

MdS: Titling pieces is an important part for me. Sometimes they tell me their names; it's written into the piece. Sometimes it's difficult to do. Beethoven's Quartet has changed the aesthetic evolution of my life. This work was very hard to name, and I think it's an awkward title. There was a great book written by a mathematician called Beethoven: His Spiritual Development. It talks mostly about how the quartets evolve. The very late quartets have an exaltation to them and an anguish, with a realization on the other side of anguish, where there is not just acceptance but something above the landscape of human emotions. It is not otherworldly in the sense of spiritual, clean, and pure. It accepts the kind of cruelty that existence gives us—in Beethoven's case, deafness, the worst thing that could happen to a composer.

JGC: That piece comes with its own hammers. When did you start playing with the musical qualities of steel?

MdS: There is an early piece called Sunrise that I did with a leftover cut-off end of an I-beam. In steel-handling jargon, they're called drops. I used this drop and found that it had a real resonance to it. That was done 40 years ago. I really like the sound of steel. In a piece called Chimes, I tried to make it so that the wind would fashion the kind of haphazard music that you hear among trees.

JGC: One of the features of Beethoven's Quartet, which is also a feature of Frog's Legs, is that the work integrates solids and voids. For example, in Frog's Legs, the sky and water enter through the oval and triangular openings in the form.

MdS: It really relates to the moment of drawing. Drawing for me, I think for many people, is the beginning, the seed. At this point in our lives, we understand how deep the meaning of a seed is. There are thousands of highly trained people who study DNA, which is really the root of what seeds are. The seeds of those pieces have to do with drawing, and the drawing is the way that one has the vision. I do the drawings so that I can remember what I saw in the vision of what the piece could be.

There are people who respond to the visionary in art. Dick Bellamy, for instance, could have strange antennae. He was able to respond to works and to know—we say, intuitively, in a non-rational, non-analytical way. He was a great friend, a partner through a lot of my life and work, and a terrific support. You know, the support that one gives to artists is sometimes not just physical. It is at a completely different level. Our evolution as artists has to do with a certain kind of growth, and what allows the growth is a stimulus, a kind of excitement and resonance from one another. In a quartet, the line that the cello is playing responds to the line that the violin is playing. And at that moment, you build something different from one or the other. You build something that's called, let's say, harmony. At that moment, it becomes much more exciting. What happened at Socrates Sculpture Park is that with a community, with young artists, with Enrico Martignoni and Dick Bellamy, we were able to build a park that has now been working for 20 years and is integrated into the urban fabric in such a way that you feel that you're looking at outdoor sculpture rather than an isolated piece in front of a corporate building.



Double Tetrahedron, 2004. Steel, 17 x 4 x 4 meters. © J. Price. Courtesy of the artist and spacetime c.c.

JGC: Let's go back even further to your first exhibitions at the March Gallery, the Green Gallery, and Park Place and to your early friendships, including Dick Bellamy.

MdS: The March Gallery was a cooperative gallery in the late '50s, and it had people like Pat Pasloff, Bee Wheeler, and artists who have continued working. There was no support for them at that time. It was very hard. There was Abstract Expressionism, all of the French art. After I had a work-related accident, I ended up showing with Dick Bellamy, who started the Green Gallery. Dick showed many radical artists of the time like Don Judd, Robert Morris, Claes Oldenburg, and James Rosenquist. He gave many of them their first shows, but he was unable to hold his personal life together. I left the gallery too because of my own weird ideals. We tried to build a really communal gallery called Park Place. It ended up being the first large SoHo-style gallery, although it was one block north of Houston Street. It became a model for many of the galleries that then appeared down in SoHo. There was an effort, on the part of Dick, myself, and the people who worked with me, to build a gallery that did not depend on competition, publicity, and the art market.



Aesop's Fables, 1990. Steel, 3.52 x 9.9 x 4.2 meters. © J. Price, Courtesy of the artist and spacetime c.c.

JGC: Was your philosophy during the late '50s and '60s closer to Abstract Expressionism, Constructivism, or the objets trouvés school?

MdS: That's all over the place. I think there was something very true that had a lot to do with French and European art. You call it objets trouvés, but it is a re-valorization of ignored objects whether they're found or junk. By calling it junk art, critics dismissed it, but artists at that time were trying to show beauty that had been passed over. In what I think is one of my better pieces, *Yes! For Lady Day*, I used a railroad car. When you cut a cylinder at an angle other than 90 degrees to its axis, you end up with an ellipse. It has an elliptical cut that moves, so that the viewer can get inside the piece and see the world framed in a moving ellipse. What is so stark about

the piece is that there is all of the work that happened with riveting—that was a special way of

joining steel before welding was invented. People built beautiful things then that mostly ended up in the scrap pile. Riveting was a way of handling the hot iron, the rivets themselves, and I find the pieces beautiful because of that. Those forms are part of an industrial landscape that had been dismissed. There was a whole assemblage movement with terrific artists like Richard Stankiewicz, David Smith, and Picasso. MoMA eventually gave them a show.

JGC: Let's jump to the Tuileries in 1975.

MdS: The Tuileries show was the result of one man's work besides mine, Marcel Evrard, who organized a whole experience for me and the city of Chalon-sur-Saône. He founded the Maison de la Culture, which is the concept of Malraux's animation, of bringing awareness to a population of their geology, political history, of their artisan life, of the past and of the present, of contemporary art and also past art. The idea of animation was very current in the '70s, and it became the key to the way that the cultural establishment of France was working. Evrard invited me to work in Chalon, the steel companies gave me 25 tons of steel, the crane companies gave me crane time, and the shipyard gave me space to work. I built Ave [now at the Nasher Sculpture Center in Dallas], La Petite Cléf, and Ange des Orage—a series of five works that were placed around the city—what I call an all-city show. It caused a lot of discussion, and people voted for one piece that would remain. I insisted that the children vote too. The piece that was chosen was the piece that the Guggenheim wanted to buy. The Guggenheim still does not have a piece of mine. The whole experience had such electricity that they invited me to show in the Jardin des Tuileries, where no living artist had shown before. It was a great honor.

I had left the United States because of the Vietnam War, after prison, demonstrations, stuff like that. This show happened just at the time that peace was declared. So I felt that I could return to the U.S., and that's when I did the all-city show at the Whitney.



Destino, 2003. Steel, 5.5 x 9 x 3 meters. © Ray Marklin. Courtesy of the artist and spacetime c.c. and Laumeier Sculpture Park, St. Louis, MO.

JGC: As you've mentioned, you protested the Vietnam War and titled an early sculpture *Mother Peace*. You've spoken out against the war in Iraq. Most of your works are doubly art—physical art that alludes to poetry or music or literature. Do you consciously put politics aside in your work?

MdS: I don't think that there are any politics in my work. Maybe sexual politics. No, I felt so strongly about that colonial Vietnam War because I had seen the kind

of poverty and misery in which Asians had to live in comparison to the wealth and ease in which Americans lived. There's a question of what used to be called "social consciousness," which is the kind of responsibility you feel toward other human beings. I think that there's a huge amount of current art that deals with the art market and that has absolutely no relation to social consciousness. I think that we are all related, all interconnected, if not by language certainly by some of our beliefs, whether religion or dreams or art or poetry and emotions, and that this is part of our responsibility.

I don't like the word responsibility, but if you're working a crane—I am a union crane operator—you know very well that your responsibility isn't just to the steel that you're lifting but to the lives of co-workers who depend on you doing the right thing. The

capacity for danger is as bad as the capacity for killing by people who have guns. You have to be very careful. We have, in our times, seen the tragedy of television violence, when children have taken guns, as in Columbine, and killed other students, which is the limit of insanity. Insanity and irresponsibility are great dangers whenever there is a huge amount of power involved. This colonial war with Iraq is a racist war, a war that depends on a president who lied about the reason for war and does not admit that he lied. This president has killed many more children than were killed in Columbine and is not being held responsible. They're Iraqi children. One of the horrors of American politics is that this kind of colonial war has become acceptable.

JGC: You talk with your hands, with gestures that are strong and significant. You created works in 1958 and the early '60s that were freely modeled, clenched and pierced hands in wax, plaster, and later bronze. Do you want to talk about their origins?

MdS: I work with my hands. They've allowed me to build my dreams. There's a great little essay by Henri Focillon that has to do with the hands. He is the art critic whose book *La Vie des Formes* or *The Life of Forms* became the name of our nonprofit organization—a ship in France where young artists live and work. Hands have the capacity to grasp, to stroke, to draw, to express themselves, and to handle tools. One of the earliest signs of human beings that we know of has to do with tools. Tools allow human beings to deal with the objective world in a different way: to sew clothes, to live in weather that would be murderous, to build buildings. My sister used to bring me to the Palace of the Legion of Honor, in San Francisco, which has a group of Rodin's hand sculptures. I didn't realize how deeply I was affected by them. I used them initially because I couldn't afford a model. Your hands can be your model because you only need one hand to draw the other hand. To me, hands are only a part of the human being. There are the sexual organs—you start doing sculpture with only sexual organs, and they question you.

JGC: Rodin did that at the end of his life.

MdS: Right. He used to have a couple of models walking around naked in his studio, and that is a healthy, erotic way to be. You get these other people who deny their own handcraft—and there is a great acceptance of that by the very people who do not want to do handcraft. They want to live in sterile apartments where everything is nice and pure. That's a necessary part, now, of human existence, but it is not, it seems to me, the grungy roots of where we come from.

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