

Review: “Mark di Suvero: Steel Like Paper” at the Nasher Sculpture Center, Dallas

by [Lauren Shults](#) | May 16, 2023



Installation view, “Mark di Suvero: Steel Like Paper,” Nasher Sculpture Center, Dallas, January 28 – August 27, 2023. Photo: Kevin Todora, courtesy Nasher Sculpture Center, Art © Mark di Suvero

Mark di Suvero: Steel Like Paper is an exhibition at the Nasher Sculpture Center in Dallas featuring work from the monumental sculptor’s more than sixty-year career. Remaining tethered to poetic themes of humanity are 30 sculptures and over 40 drawings and paintings. Color erupts in his images, which constantly change with perspective. The largest exhibition of di Suvero’s work since his solo show at the Whitney Museum of American Art in 1975, here his

abstract futurist gestures continue to lean towards optimism and joy — a contained, frenetic energy.

Swing (2008-2022), immediately confronts viewers in the museum entrance hall. A cantilevered cradle made of aluminum, rubber, rope, and stainless steel is only one of many play sculptures he's made over the decades. Allowing yourself to swing your legs in and have a museum attendant spin you — as they encourage — proves this towering piece is not only made for children. Di Suvero, since the beginning of his art practice, has invited his viewers to climb on and walk through his sculptures, always urging people to connect with them intimately. *Love Makes the World Go Round* (1962-63), placed in the first gallery, is an early example of his vibrant, playful work for children and art enthusiasts.



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Di Suvero's pieces are easily identifiable in public spaces with their steel beams and signature red-orange, such as *Ad Astra* (2005) at NorthPark Center in Dallas, and *Clock Knot* (2005) on the University of Texas, Austin campus. Placing these sprawling monolithic structures in open areas, di Suvero changes the experiences of the environments. The works seem to simultaneously explode and tangle at a single point, encouraging onlookers to investigate which it might be. Though the figures are much like a synthesis of conflicting information, he maintains a Bergson-esque intrigue.

Walk past *Swing*, and to your right, you will find di Suvero's *Hankchampion*, completed soon after a life-altering accident in the spring of 1960. With the help of his brother, Henry, and gallerist Richard Bellamy, the sculpture was completed as di Suvero was paralyzed and was not expected to walk again. The piece is composed of scraps, perhaps found on a construction site where di Suvero worked one of his many day jobs. The wood, steel hardware, and chain work is an introduction to his endless investigation of carefully balancing great weight. It seemingly only stands because of chains holding the beams together — if one component were removed, all would topple. As seen in this work, which stands nearly ten feet high with its greatest depth at 13 feet, the artist's colossal scale was present from the beginning of his foray into sculpting.

It was in the early 60s that, against all odds, di Suvero regained his ability to walk. Expanding his art practice, he learned the skills of welding and purchased cranes with grant funds for his Petaluma, California, studio and sculpture yard. *St. John the Baptist* (1961), is much like a baptism, marking the point at which his practice moved forward in steel. He introduced his refined style and precision with interlinked structures and step-like shapes winding around the periphery on a black base. Raw and coated in paint, in this work the artist twirls in his iconic red throughout, like a string pulling the steel slats and beams together. In a 2013 interview, di Suvero said he finds the joy of spirit in steel, and while it's been an "element of warfare

and other horrible things, it's not the fault of steel. It's the fault of human beings that it's used that way.”

He's maintained the ability to conjure something up to synthesize a poem or interpret his vibrant social activism. Many pieces intertwine sentiments of poets like Keats and Lady Day, to whom he dedicated numerous works. Remaining dedicated to the public, di Suvero uses abstractions to communicate, perhaps pulling from his time with the Beats in San Francisco or earning his philosophy degree at the University of California, Berkeley.

Cobra (1963), is a departure from his iconographic structures, but still urges contemplation in its infinite brass loop: it momentarily warps time and space as it gently turns. Reflections distort in the suspended, polished twist, and being just out of reach, there's a presence of humanity, divulging into a question of morality — the viewer can never see themselves clearly.



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Everywhere in the show you see di Suvero's mastery of craft. In small steel works, such as the steel and titanium *Reason and Chaos* (2017), he explores ideas more lightly, more freely. The piece is a classic study involving two warring ideas, but concerns the subject less metaphorically than his earlier work. Each side of the sculpture is distinctly different, one geometric and the other organic, but shift your position and the jutting canopy of titanium appears to intertwine. Compared to his large-scale works, more specific and intricate intention exists when he sizes down.

Descend to the museum's lower level and you'll find yet more work. A waxen hand from 1956 and its late 1970s bronze cast-mate spy each other at the doors of a gallery of drawings and paintings. Di Suvero works on paper have the same tenor as his sculptures, with their intense black inks and crimson slashes of paint. In a series of three

works from 2015, all untitled, he sprawls red acrylic and a stressed black sharpie from the center of the page. The red strokes recall the liveliness of his monumental sculptures, while the marker emulates their physical outlines. He says he uses color as emotion, for “its directness.”



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At almost nine by eleven feet is *Untitled* (1995), a rare, large-scale painting on canvas that brings all of di Suvero’s gestures into one work. Red, orange, and yellow strokes lay upon blue and green. The colors all move and interact with each other at various speeds, dancing upon the canvas with the same buzz as his sculptures.

In recent works, di Suvero introduced phosphorescent and fluorescent paints. *Animal Talk* (2021), stands apart from the rest with its bold primary paints and black ink. Here, the artist allows shapes to drip

into each other, making a patchwork of color and combining lines with organic strokes. Already experiencing more than one image at once, the viewer could see yet another with a blacklight.



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It’s clear that in recent years di Suvero has migrated from conglomerating his ideas to distinctly separating them. In the 80s he brought a rare blue and silver marker to the page, and later he drew on dot matrix prints that look like digital renderings or 3D drawings, such as in another untitled work from 1990. Throughout, harsher brushstrokes embody more solidified ideas, frictional with veined, bleeding ink. While all are recalling his sculptures, you can see that these gestural drawings and paintings are layered studies of clashing theories — the bones and spirit of what he would sculpt. “What is lost in large sculpture is flexibility,” di Suvero scrawled in the corner of an

undated black marker drawing. In 2005 he said, “[t]hese days, ... I just do paintings to learn, and I do sculptures because I know.”

While he diminishes figuration in his practice, di Suvero maintains humanistic thought throughout his works. Wrestling with the physicality of opposing ideas, he repeatedly creates proof of a universal human experience, always keeping his good nature.

[Mark di Suvero: Steel Like Paper](#) *is on view at the Nasher Sculpture Center through August, 27, 2023.*