

Friday, February 15, 2008

calendarlive.com

AROUND THE GALLERIES

Di Suvero
blends
basics,
elegance

By DAVID PAGEL
Special to The Times

Mark di Suvero's rugged steel sculptures combine formal refinement and industrial toughness in abstract compositions that are playful and serious, whimsical and vigorous. This mix of delicacy and bluntness forms the basis of much modern sculpture and has provided about 50 years' worth of sculptors with ample room to maneuver, each shifting the balance to suit his or her purpose.

But that leeway has never been enough for Di Suvero, whose seven new sculptures and 11 drawings at the L.A. Louver Gallery add such a strong dose of hands-on interactivity that their industrial-strength elegance is blown away by their unapologetic embrace of homegrown corniness.

At a time when corporate professionalism and digital slickness infect all aspects of culture, it's heartening to see Di Suvero's stubbornly wonderful sculptures, each of which finds heroic moments in the humble activities of tinkerers — ordinary folk who cobble together scraps of this and that to enhance their surroundings and get a little bit extra out of life's ups and downs.

Di Suvero, born in 1933, wastes no time in linking his art to common things. In the main gallery, the first piece you see, "al di la," is an idiosyncratic, nearly 10-foot-tall gong that spins and tips as you strike it with a pair of rubber hammers, both of which slip into a stainless steel pipe when not in use.

The music you make by drumming on Di Suvero's symmetrical sculpture is cathartic — and pretty good exercise if you keep it up long enough. More important, it makes you feel the cut, bent and welded steel in your body, its reverberations traveling through your hands, arms, shoulders and torso. When "al di la" comes to a rest, you know it differently than you did from a distance.



MARK DI SUVERO: "Luck's Prime" is a whimsical hammock made of I-beams, aluminum tubes, nylon rope, rough wood and rubber. The sculpture gives palpable form to the unbalanced relationship between labor and leisure.

L.A. Louver

Unlike the simple, almost illustrative big works downstairs, these smaller-scale sculptures flaunt Di Suvero's trademark touch: his capacity to make positive and negative space dance with grace, panache and a whole lot of funky verve.

His pen-and-ink drawings capture that calligraphic magic in two dimensions. They also emphasize the pictorial nature of Di Suvero's sculptures, whose silhouettes are fundamental to their overall effect.

In two small side galleries stand the showstopping highlights — body-scaled sculptures that are physically intimate and emotionally monumental.

Downstairs, "Ring Neste" marries lacy loveliness to come-what-may pragmatism. Upstairs, on a roofless balcony, "M-Axled" is a gorgeous workhorse of an abstract sculpture, its evocations of muscular strength and mental toughness perfectly calibrated, balanced, complementary.

The second piece is "Luck's Prime," a hammock made of cantilevered I-beams, aluminum tubing, nylon rope, chunks of rough wood and a thick sheet of rubber. The nearly 14-foot-tall, 20-foot-long contraption screams overkill and goofiness.

To lie back and relax in it is to be pleasantly suspended. At the same time, the mammoth sculpture gives palpable form to the psychologically charged, often radically unbalanced relationship between labor and leisure that defines so much of American life, raising troubling questions about justice, equity and civilization.

In a sunlit upstairs gallery, three tabletop sculptures — "Roister Doister," "Retrofit" and "Trinitarian" — spin like globes or like basketballs on the fingertips of tricksters. Each airy cluster of welded fragments of metal rotates atop a spiky protrusion that emerges from a similarly cut, bent and welded base.

Although Di Suvero is best known for his huge outdoor sculptures (one of which stands nearby on Venice Beach), he may be even better at mid-size works. The two here are masterpieces.

L.A. Louver Gallery, 45 N. Venice Blvd., Venice, (310) 822-4955, through March 1. Closed Sundays and Mondays. www.lalouer.com.