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Artist Mark di Suvero's Towering Vision Is on View at the Nasher Sculpture Center

KENDALL MORGAN | **FEBRUARY 23, 2023** | **4:00AM**



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Kevin Todora, courtesy of Nasher Sculpture Center Art It's art that truly moves us. Literally. You can climb into a rubber swing at Mark di Suvero's survey exhibition at the Nasher.

Every longtime Dallas resident can't help but be familiar with the work of Mark di Suvero. His epic "Ad Astra" soars to the roof of NorthPark Center, while the bright red steel beams of "Ave" established the sculpture as one of the most iconic works inside or outside the Dallas Museum of Art.

"It's striking how many people have mentioned to me that when they were kids, they remember

climbing on 'Ave' and sliding down its legs," says Jed Morse, the chief curator of the Nasher Sculpture Center's survey exhibition **Mark di Suvero: Steel Like Paper**.

"Mark has had a long history with Dallas and Dallas collections, and I also think that because his large-scale works have been on view in such public places like the Nasher and the Dallas Museum of Art and NorthPark, there's an assumed familiarity with the work," Morse says, "but this show was really conceived as a way of maybe revising what we think about when we think of Mark di Suvero as an artist. It was shocking to discover there hadn't really been a major museum survey of his work in almost 30 years."

Now casual observers and art aficionados alike can look deeper at di Suvero's practice. *Steel Like Paper* encompasses 30 sculptures, drawings and paintings that give a deeper view of the artist's heroic vision. In fact, the scope of work (from small scale to monumental) might be the biggest surprise of the show, according to the Nasher director Jeremy Strick.

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"Over the last several years, I've mentioned to people that we've been planning an exhibition on Mark," he says. "The reaction has often been immediate, 'That's wonderful, fantastic, how exciting,' then a pause [followed by] 'How are you going to do that?'"

And it's a great question.

"The thinking is Mark di Suvero is an artist that makes really big sculptures, and how are you going to get those in a museum?" Strick says. "In fact, Mark di Suvero is a preeminent public artist whose sculpture defines both urban and rural landscapes in the most extraordinary fashion, but the significant majority [of his work] is on a much smaller scale. [And those pieces] have in themselves all of the force of power, the whimsy, the imagination, and the humor we think of with his public works."

That playfulness and invitation to interactivity are in focus from the moment a viewer enters the museum. Greeted with "Swing," visitors are invited to climb into a suspended rubber hammock that feels like nothing so much as a hug. 

Sculpture as a plaything is a theme that runs throughout a great deal of di Suvero's oeuvre, as he first

began making swing-worthy structures in the early '60s, shortly after a tragedy changed the trajectory of his career.

You know artist Mark di Suvero's work, even if you don't think you know it. Now really get to know it at an exhibition running at the Nasher Sculpture Center through Aug. 27. **Kevin Todora, courtesy of Nasher Sculpture Center Art**

Just seven months before his first solo show was due to open at New York's Green Gallery, di Suvero was persuaded to climb on top of an elevator to steady a cabinet he was delivering. When the structure failed to stop, the artist was sandwiched by a thousand pounds of pressure, paralyzing him from the waist down.

Di Suvero spent a year convalescing, recovering enough to use braces and crutches. But the accident also caused him to pivot to a new methodology. Formerly using abandoned wood from all over the city for his structures, he began working with steel, using a restored crane as his "paintbrush."

"He ended up relying on family and friends to help him finish these works, [but] Mark refused to be defined by this accident," Morse says. "Within two years, he had rehabilitated himself and could walk with the aid of crutches. One of the most important things that happened to Mark after his accident ~~is~~ he learned how to weld. He was still in a wheelchair, but he'd lay an asbestos blanket over his lap so he wouldn't burn himself."

A tragedy of this magnitude could halt the career of many, but instead it drove di Suvero to create work that embodied a new playfulness. Even with pieces that don't spin or twirl, there is always a sense of the joy of space. The viewer must twist and turn around every structure to absorb it from every angle.

Steel Like Paper includes sculptures from 1959 to 2022, from di Suvero's early wooden pieces to more figurative works like a wax hand he recreated in bronze in the early 1970s. But the biggest revelation is the artist's works on paper. These colorful canvases, precise drawings and free-form sketches, displayed in the museum's lower gallery, are a rare glimpse into a master's process.

"Oftentimes the drawings capture that initial burst of imagery or inspiration, and a lot of times they capture a quick sense of the form he's interested in," says Morse. "But even those are done in such a way they convey an energy or a motion ... he said that he felt if he could capture the energy of sculpture in his drawing, he'd be able to do in the sculpture as well."

Di Suvero has noted that steel plates are akin to sheets of white paper for him. It's not what material he's working with which matters; it's the exuberance it makes the viewer feel.

"It's that aspect of objects that really speak to the dynamism of our spatial experience and that engage space in an incredibly dynamic way," Morse says. "A lot of artists who make abstract work are looking to connect with that kind of indescribable aspect of experience that we all have. Something that is transcendent.

"And to express it through that material – that arrangement of materials, whether it's paint or canvas or steel or clay or music notes or sounds or words – trying to get to that essential thing that material can express is something that is inherent to humankind but also incredibly difficult to put your finger on. This sculpture is really about trying to express the deeper meaning of these things for him."

Mark di Suvero: *Steel Like Paper is on view at the Nasher Sculpture Center through Aug. 27.*

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