

Man of Steel

*Behind the controls
of a crane,
veteran sculptor
Mark di Suvero
coaxes tons of metal
to curve and bend*

BY BLAKE ESKIN



Di Suvero in his crane earlier this year.

In the unheated hangar that serves as his studio in Long Island City, Queens, Mark di Suvero shows off his latest work, an egg-shape slab of stainless steel balanced on a tall steel column. Pieces of plate metal—like those used in road repairs—are riveted to the bottom of the column. The work is characteristic of the industrial materials and monumental style di Suvero has employed since the 1960s.

"This one I could do alone, without any assistants," he says. "This is a small piece." Small, that is, for a di Suvero; the as-yet-unnamed sculpture rises 17½ feet off the ground and weighs a ton and a quarter.

To get a better look at his newest creation, di Suvero proposes a brief excursion in his electric-powered cherry picker. From the ground, the oval slab, which has a spiral incision, looks like a slice of a giant jelly roll. As the cab of the cherry picker rises, however, the oval's third dimension is slowly revealed, and it starts to resemble a ringed planet.

"You have to understand that the whole world is moving," di Suvero explains as he tugs gently on a rope tied to the oval, which begins to rock in the joint connecting it to the column. "The world is spinning, and the spinning world is going around the sun, and the sun is moving.

Once we understand that, we have to join in the motion. You can't try to stop a wave."

Di Suvero, a spry, white-haired 67-year-old in seemingly constant motion, is something of a wave himself, and to keep up with him, one has no choice but to join in. In conversation, he is given to abruptly changing the subject, often tacking in midsentence. And, as his thoughts ebb and flow according to an ineffable, extemporaneous logic, he ambles around his sprawling waterfront studio complex, his restlessness undiminished by the lightweight metal crutches he uses to walk.

Di Suvero steps out into the crisp morning air, and his patter hopscoches from his supply of inch-thick steel plate to the ducks swimming in the East River to his infatuation with titanium, which is lighter and stronger than steel. "I started working in titanium, and the next thing I knew they cut off my hip and put some inside me," he says.

The artist acquired his Queens headquarters, he says, "for what one would have paid for a loft in SoHo" in the early 1980s, and he also maintains studios in Petaluma, California—where with the help of assistants he creates his tallest and heaviest pieces, weighing as much as 20 tons and reaching as high as 70 feet—and in Chalon-sur-Saône, France. (An earlier studio, near Manhattan's South Street Seaport, is now the apartment he shares with his wife, Kate Levin, who teaches English Renaissance literature at the City College of New York, and their six-year-old daughter.) He has installed his large-scale sculptures, towering clusters of I-beams, plate metal, and found objects, in various urban settings. The closest of these is down the block from his Queens studio, in the Socrates Sculpture Park, an abandoned lot turned outdoor exhibition space that di Suvero was instrumental in founding. "I've been asked not to show in the park now, because it's mostly emerging artists and international artists," he says. The current exhibition includes Kirsten Mosher's *glam rocks* and an installation by Clara Williams involving telephone poles.

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Di Suvero's work has been shown around the world and resides in permanent collections at the National Gallery of Art and the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden in Washington, D.C., as well as the Museum of Modern Art in New York, among other prominent national and international institutions. In 1975 he became the first living sculptor to have a show in Paris's Tuileries gardens, and a few months later, the Whitney Museum of American Art organized a retrospective that spilled into the streets of New York. In recent years, his work has been displayed at the Venice Biennale and in an outdoor exhibition staged at venues throughout Paris.

Last month, a show of new work opened at Gagosian's West Chelsea space, and *Voxal*, a 60-foot-high, K-shape sculpture was unveiled for the Venice Art Walk in Venice, California. The L.A. Louver gallery, also in Venice, will show other new works by the artist through the end of June and has planned a full-scale exhibition for the fall. Di Suvero's prices vary widely, says L.A. Louver director Kimberly Davis, from around \$60,000 for his smaller pieces to over \$1 million for a large-scale one like *Voxal*.

Born in Shanghai in 1933 to Italian parents (his father was Jewish) who came to the United States during World War II, di Suvero first discovered sculpture in the mid-1950s as a student at the University of California at Santa Barbara. He worked mainly in wood until one day in 1960, when, while on a construction job, he was crushed on top of an elevator. "I was under a ton of pressure across the middle of my back for an hour," says di Suvero. "I should have been dead." The artist feared he would never walk—or sculpt—again. "With wood, all the tools are built for a healthy human being, so you have to be big and strong," he explains. "Once I was in a wheelchair, I either had to accept that other people would make things for me, or I had to change."

He switched over to working in steel, welding with a heat apron on his lap. In time, he learned to walk again, and also to operate a crane. "Henry Geldzahler helped me get a foundation grant in 1967 or so. I was able to buy a crane with two dead motors, and I had to learn motor repair besides running the crane. A crane just changes everything."

Cranes allow him to work on such a grand scale, and they let him work improvisationally. "I do a whole bunch of drawings as I'm working, but I don't do an exact rendered drawing—I don't do blueprints. The best drawing I will do is on the plate that I will cut out and bend. By turning a piece over with the crane, suddenly I see it would go better that way." Also, with a crane and a 20-ton anchor, he can cold-bend steel, folding an I-beam like a hairpin or creating contours in stainless steel that would be impossible to achieve with heat. "I work in a very strange area of steel, between the breaking strength and the yielding strength," he says.

To handle a crane, says di Suvero, "there's a special kind of equilibrium needed and a stereoscopic vision." These qualities are also manifest in di Suvero's own large works. Beams meet at oblique angles, and, as in seminal works like *Are Years What? (For Marianne Moore)* (1967), large steel shapes pivot, rotate, and swing.

"The important thing in a work is that moment of spirit you get from it," says di Suvero. Citing examples of others who impart this spirit, di Suvero lists "the great dancers of our age": the bridge builders, high-steel workers, and skateboard riders,



Eviva Amore, 2001, installed at Gagosian's Chelsea gallery. The steel sculpture is more than 35 feet high and 47 feet across.

as well as the Mark Morris Dance Group. "Mark Morris, he is just great. He can use masses of people to do something symphonic—and he handles them all with joy." Di Suvero also derives "wide-winged inspiration" from some of his predecessors in the field of sculpture. "Brancusi and Giacometti, those are the ones that feed me, but I also love the archaic Greek, the Etruscan, the Shang vases."

He is particularly fond of David Smith. "When I went to see David Smith in the 1960s, I was interested in how to cut stainless. He said that after working in stainless, going back to steel was like working with butter. He was a terrific artist, and he was very poorly appreciated by the critics of his time. Now that he's dead, of course, they call him great. But it's too late."

Di Suvero has had his own frustrations with critics over the years. "There were people who would put down my work because it isn't up to the 21st century. I got it even from my friends, who would say to me, 'Oh, your work is too European,' or something like that. They never say too Chinese, though that's where I come from. If you are able to withstand it long enough and persevere, people do see it eventually."

"Philip Johnson saw a piece I did in 1966 called *Praise for Elohim*. It was shown during the Whitney show in Seagram Plaza. It's a large tetrahedron made of logs. It was the first piece I used a crane for. The whole thing turned. And he said that when he looked at my piece, he noticed that all the skyscrapers were moving around it. That's concentration, that's intensity. My sculpture is for people who really have that kind of sensitivity."

Blake Eskin last wrote for ARTnews on photographer Catherine Chalmers.