

# BOMB



Mark di Suvero, *Animal Talk*, 2021, acrylic and phosphorescent paint on canvas, 30 x 30 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Spacetime C.C. Photo © JSP Art Photography.

INTERVIEW

## Mark di Suvero by Jessica Holmes

Lyrical painting and sculpture.

SEPTEMBER 18, 2024

Art is inextricable from life for Mark di Suvero, a titan of twentieth-century and contemporary art who has been making work for nearly seven decades. He's best known for teasing poetry from industrial metals—steel, iron, and the like—to make abstract sculpture that alternately seems to dance, sway, or take flight. Alongside his sculptural work, di Suvero has also always been a painter. A major show of his paintings, entitled *Spacetime*, is currently on view at the Sala delle Pietre of the Palazzo del Popolo in Todi, Italy, coinciding with the fourth edition of the Todi Festival of the Arts. Organized by the Beverly Pepper Foundation, which is based in Todi, and curated by Marco Tonelli, the exhibition will also include a paragon of di Suvero's large, outdoor works, *Neruda's Gate* (2005), installed on the Piazza del Popolo. The sculpture will remain on view in the picturesque, medieval city after the exhibition closes. For di Suvero, whose parents were both Italian, it's a fitting tribute to his heritage.

### **Jessica Holmes**

At ninety years old, it must be exciting to have a major exhibition of your work in Italy, your ancestral home. Tell me about the exhibition at Sala delle Pietre in Todi.

### **Mark di Suvero**

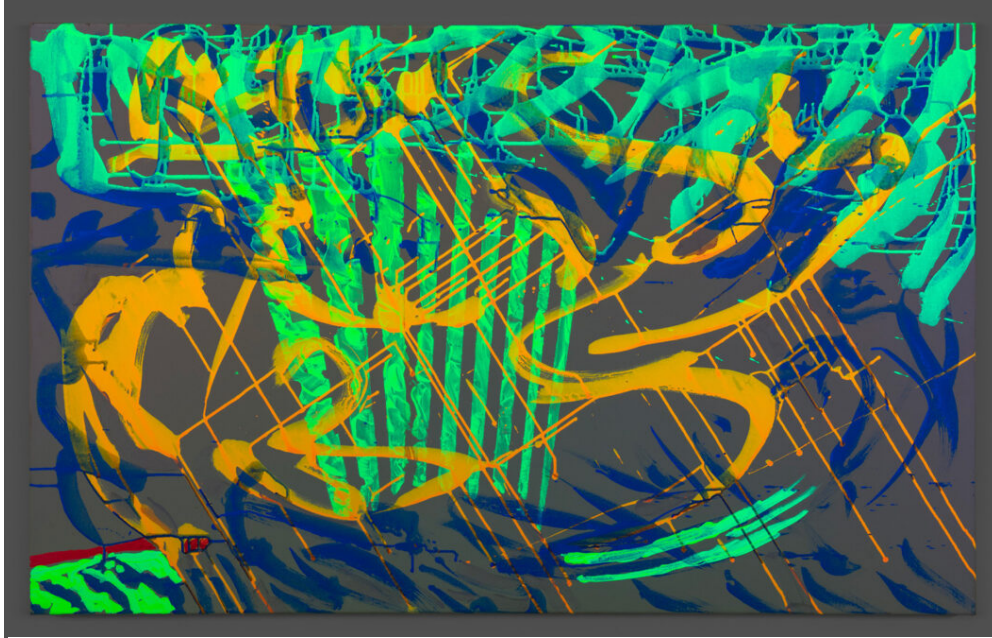
Italy is the birthplace of my parents, and I lived and taught in Venice for several years during the 1970s. Marco Tonelli was the assistant of Giovanni Carandente, who curated my citywide exhibition in Venice in 1995, the last time I had a solo show of work in Italy, so I feel a great sense of connection—of continuation—in this exhibition. It is always a great pleasure to work in Italy.

### **JH**

The Beverly Pepper Foundation is organizing the show. How did this collaboration come about?

### **MdS**

I have enormous respect for Beverly Pepper and her work. When I helped found Socrates Sculpture Park in Long Island City, New York, in 1986, it was an important moment for us when she loaned her work *Omega* to be exhibited there. The recognition of an artist such as Beverly was very important for Socrates, and installation of work in those early years by artists of her caliber, along with others like Isamu Noguchi and Mary Frank, helped establish the park. So when the Beverly Pepper Foundation reached out to me in September 2023, I was honored by their invitation to place a sculpture in the main square of Todi, which is such a beautiful and iconic location. I'm delighted I can now, in turn, contribute to the public program they are developing in Todi.



Mark di Suvero, *Pillars of Heaven*, 2021, acrylic and phosphorescent paint on canvas, 48 x 30 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Spacetime C.C. Photo © JSP Art Photography.

**JH**

Though you're probably best known for your sculpture, painting has always been an important aspect of your practice. How do you see your two-dimensional works situated within your larger body of work?

**MdS**

All my life I have learned from painting; I began as a painter. When I was in college in Santa Barbara, I saw the New York painting abstract expressionist show *Paintings from the School of New York* at the Santa Barbara Museum of Art in 1954. Seeing the Philip Guston paintings in that exhibition changed my life. I immediately got some cardboard and started painting. I also liked the Yves Klein, but it was really the Gustons that got me making art. I was also very influenced by my college girlfriend, the painter Beate Wheeler, who I followed to New York City. I learned as much about painting from her as from anyone.

Painting, in some ways, is much more abstract than sculpture because you can cancel out, with a white brush, immediately any part, and it takes a few seconds to do. But if I want to change something in my sculptures, it takes me hours, days, weeks of work before I can change it. So there is already this limit, where painting has none. It never has to deal with gravity. It hangs on the wall, yes; but inside the painting, within the frame of the painting, there is never any need to reason for gravity. There are traditional ideas of background and foreground, and things that have to do with imitational art, where the art imitates what one sees. Painting never deals with the concept of structure, of the piece of sculpture being able to support its own weight or its form.

**JH**

Do intuition and improvisation play into your painting practice, as they do in your sculptural practice?

**MdS**

Abstract painting and sculpture have a capacity, a projective capacity, that for many people is very different—an infinite capacity to project emotions. I make paintings that have strings like a guitar, except they are like a kithara, with that kind of sliding sound. Rather than just one note, when you play the guitar you change the length of the string, so that it is one sound; that's what the paintings look like.

**JH**

I like the analogy to music that you just made, as I was going to say, similarly perhaps, that there's a sense of musical movement, dance, in these paintings that is in sympathy with the kineticism—actual and implied—in your sculpture. What draws you to motion?

**MdS**

People express themselves through movement, obviously. Dance existed before history; it's just one of those things that human beings do. It can be terrible; it can be terrifying; and yet that sense of movement is what expresses it. I made a piece of sculpture for the poet William Butler Yeats [*For W.B. Yeats*, 1985–87]. He ends his great 1928 poem "Among School Children" by saying "How can we know the dancer from the dance?" It is very hard to separate the dancer from the dance. That emotion is what is needed in sculpture that moves. In order to make the space alive and work, I've found that one has to bring it into motion so that there is not just space, but there is that sense of space-time, which is really where we live. We live in a space-time continuum.

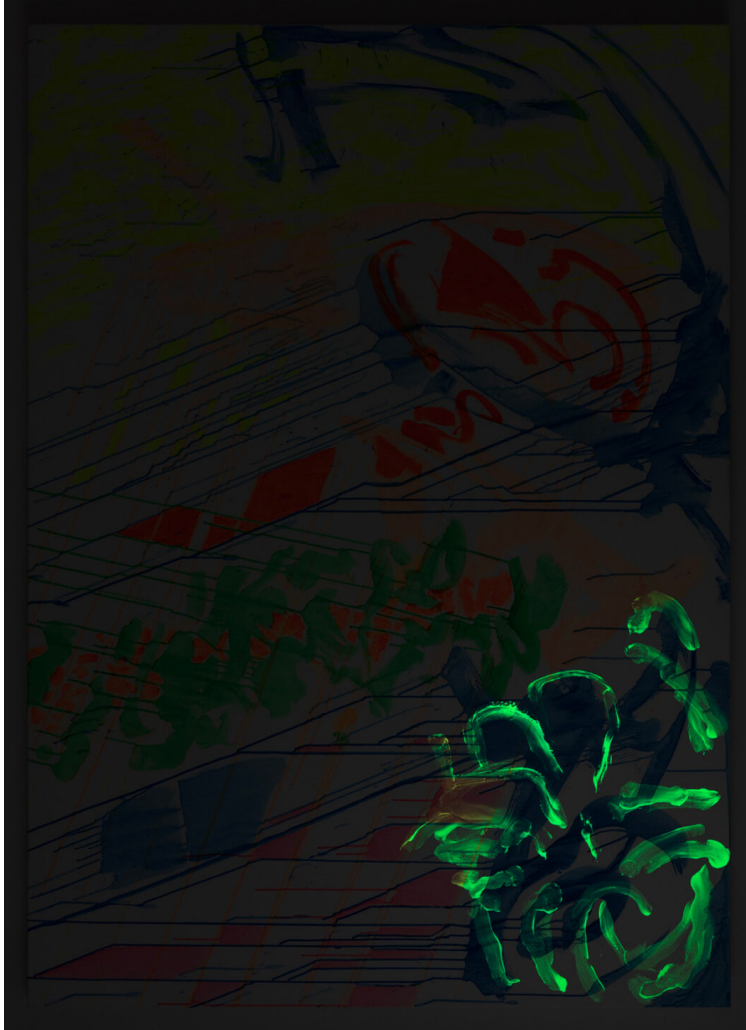
**JH**

*Neruda's Gate* (2005), named for another poet, Pablo Neruda, is installed in Todi's town square. Many admirers of your work first come to it through public installations. Can you talk about the significance of public art to you?

**MdS**

When one is an artist, one wants to do art that is meaningful to a lot of people. Most art is shown in museums and galleries, which eliminates a whole population. By putting it out on the streets, you open it up to the world. Bringing art to the people has a kind of joy, a liberation that nothing else can equal.





Mark di Suvero, *Free Fallin*, 2021, acrylic and phosphorescent paint on canvas, 84 x 60 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Spacetime C.C. Photo © JSP Art Photography.

**JH**

It's clear that poetry is integral to your life and your work. Just as in your sculpture, there is a lyric rhythm to many of these recent paintings. What kind of role did poetry play in your making of this body of work?

**MdS**

Poetry is like the phosphorescent paint, activated by blacklight, that I use in these paintings. It changes the light. I want my work to be poetry. It's a way of emotionally understanding and handling the world through language.

**“For me, painting is the truth that colors combined together cause emotions, just like wind and humidity make a storm.”**

— Mark di Suvero

**JH**

This phosphorescent and also sometimes metallic paint that you use in these canvases unsettle the typical notions of how color functions. A work like *Free Fallin* (2021), for instance, looks like a completely different painting in white light or sunlight versus under fluorescent light. How did you come to these materials, and what about them appeals to you?

**MdS**

I think of these paintings as subconscious paintings. I've been painting for almost seventy years, and the inspiration for painting has always been the ability to use color. For me, painting is the truth that colors combined together cause emotions, just like wind and humidity make a storm. In order to see the ultraviolet dimension of these paintings, they need to be in the dark and use a black light. Some of the pigments glow in the dark; some require ultraviolet light to activate them. There are many ways to see this world, and the exploration—for example, of paintings made for ultraviolet and normal light—is a hint of the complex way that the world works.



Mark di Suvero, *Neruda's Gate*, 2005, steel, 27 feet x 25 feet x 8 feet. Courtesy of the artist and Paula Cooper Gallery. Photo © JSP Art Photography.

**JH**

As you look back on your nearly seventy-year career, what do you hope will be your legacy?

**MdS**

I think again of Socrates Sculpture Park. There is an ease out there now. Where there was once abandoned warehouses on a desolate piece of waterfront land, a good feeling now comes from the flowers that weren't there before, from the gravel walks, from the pieces of sculpture that signal or speak from their feelings toward the people who are receptive to them. The idea of bringing a community together through work, through the vision of the various artists, through helping artists and having the people of the community see that it is possible to transform a place, became so important that the spirit of the place actually changed. There's a feeling there now that never was before.

*Mark di Suvero: Spacetime is on view at the Sala delle Pietre of the Palazzo del Popolo in Todi, Italy, until October 27.*

Jessica Holmes is a writer based in the New York City metro area. Among other publications, her work has appeared in *Hyperallergic*, *New York Observer*, and *Brooklyn Rail*, where she is also an editor.

<https://bombmagazine.org/articles/2024/09/18/mark-di-suvero-by-jessica-holmes/>