

Gestures in Heavy Metal

Mark di Suvero sculpture
at LA Louver

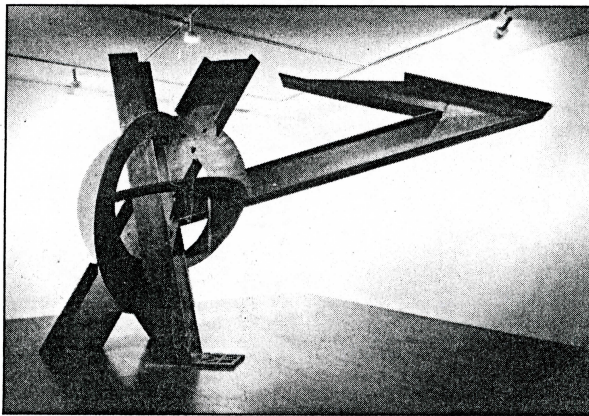
BY GREG SCHNEIDER

Mark di Suvero's work draws primarily on the artistic traditions of the abstract expressionists, and it strongly evokes the legacy of our greatest postwar sculptor, David Smith. Di Suvero's recent exhibition at LA Louver—two large-scale public works, several large interior pieces, smaller scale sculptures and works on paper—demonstrates his artistic mandate to paint in three dimensions. Like Smith's own totems, these pieces are constructed largely from industrial materials, but are not about the materiality of their construction. Di Suvero's work gains its unique power because it serves as a metaphoric emblem of the individual and the world

"there's a weird gap between what one can achieve in drawing and what one can achieve in sculpture. David Smith talked about that, too. He said he was about eight years behind his drawings. I'd like to shorten that gap."

And di Suvero has shortened it. The works here are made from formed cor-ten steel and polished stainless steel, and the smaller-scale sculptures often incorporate found objects—a pair of scissors, a hammer, a wrench. They have been manipulated into fluid calligraphic lines that express the direct handling of the materials. They invite the viewer to move them and are very playful pieces, frequently whimsical, though never slight.

This element of playfulness



Mark di Suvero, *Caramba!*, 1984-80, steel, 12' x 19' x 8',
at LA Louver, Venice. (Photo: Tom Vintz.)

around us.

The expressive gestures of di Suvero's sculptural works are clearly evident in his drawings. These seven pen-and-ink wash and four computer-generated-and-ink wash drawings illustrate di Suvero's relation to the painterly slashes of de Kooning and Kline; the pen-and-ink washes are directly reminiscent of Kline's bold calligraphic marks, while the computer-generated drawings, which juxtapose the technologically rendered lines of the computer with the calligraphic ink washes of the hand in scroll-like formats, are more closely akin to the way we perceive the sculptures. Referring to the relationship between his drawings and his sculpture, di Suvero has said that

is also evident in two pieces on Ocean Front Walk (at the end of Market Street), which are very large but not physically overwhelming. Their poetic content is signified in their titles: *For Gerard Manley Hopkins* (1989), after the Victorian poet, and *Letter to the World* (1988), from a poem by Emily Dickinson. *Hopkins* is painted bright red and *Letter* is painted bright yellow, with its top unpainted; I-beams are the raw material and the crane and the welding tool are the paintbrush, while the scale of di Suvero's sculpture, even in the large pieces, is always in relation to the human figure. Both are wind-powered and quite fluid in their movements and, like the

smaller work, they invite participation; nor are the industrial materials incompatible in that landscape.

In 1965, Donald Judd—speaking from within the critical structure of minimalism, with its emphasis on the externality of meaning and its opposition to the rhetoric of the abstract expressionists—criticized di Suvero's sculpture by saying that "(he) uses beams as if they were brushstrokes, imitating movement, as Franz Kline did. The material never has its own movement. A beam thrusts; a piece of iron follows a gesture; together they form a naturalistic and anthropomorphic image." It is these very terms of criticism that also can be used to measure di Suvero's achievement.

Historically, di Suvero functions within the sculptural traditions of Picasso, Gonzalez and

Smith. All these artists work at the building or combining of their various materials with both explicit and implicit references to the world around them. Their work adheres to the guiding principle that Rosalind Krauss has identified as a "formal strategy of discontinuity." Even within its many references, there is no core or center in di Suvero's sculpture. His work is strongly pictorial, but not, as Judd seems to suggest, debased by its imagery; it is never allowed to become simply suggestive or merely decorative. The balance di Suvero achieves in a sculpture such as *Caramba!* (1984-90) argues that the material discontinuity of the piece is perfectly matched by its metaphorical illusionism. ■

Mark di Suvero through February 2 at LA Louver, 55 N. Venice Blvd.; 77 Market St.; and Ocean Front Walk, end of Market St., Venice.