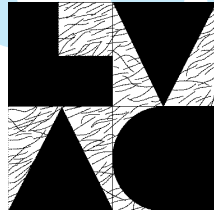


# PublicWorks



**MARK DI SUVERO**

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*Aesop's Fables, II, 2005*

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**A Percent-for-Art purchase for the NE Sector  
Landscape of the MIT campus**

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**Landscape Architect: Laurie Olin**



# The Fabulist

Aesop, if he existed, was a clever man. His simple tales of animals acting wise and foolish have long charmed listeners into regarding their own all-too-human natures.

There's something of the disarming fabulist about Mark di Suvero as well. The artist, who studied philosophy before taking up sculpture, is himself a life-long humanist, ever melding his art with populist ideals and action. And he's long acknowledged that humans who disregard their basic animal nature suppress something real about themselves.<sup>1</sup>

Like Aesop's fables, di Suvero's sculptures, moreover, are famously accessible—their abstract compositions appear straightforward; they are constructed of familiar machine-age materials and techniques, and even his most soaring shapes and structures tend to beckon and encompass, rather than overwhelm or awe. Despite their hard-edged burliness, the visceral and the physical are deeply embedded in these works; the artist starts directly with the scale and aspirations of the body and builds outward. From the reach and measure of humankind, he aims to forge a chain of relationships starting with viewers through their immediate and projected space, and on into the infinity of intuitive possibilities regarding abstraction throughout the universe.

*Aesop's Fables, II* (2005)<sup>2</sup> is one of a long line of di Suvero works embedded with a seminal childhood memory of space, scale, and structure. In 1940, the artist, only seven at the time, was taken to see the Forbidden City in Beijing. The drama of the site remains a vivid memory. The precise proportions and vistas of the then-abandoned complex, he has recalled:

...impressed me tremendously. The sense of space, the way it was modulated between the series of temples, was magnificent... An area only about a mile and half long has the capacity to charge the architecture and turn it into an aching reality, which makes us come to different levels of existence. This, of course, is what we try for in sculpture, too.<sup>3</sup>

Di Suvero was born in China in 1933 to Italian parents. His father, formerly a member of the Italian navy, had been sent to China to join the consular service. The family immigrated to California at the start of World War II. Later, in college, di Suvero earned an undergraduate degree in philosophy but by graduation, had already switched his interests to sculpture. He was inspired, he says, by watching an art professor make showers of sparks with a welding torch. Ever since, di Suvero's work has been a blend of visual drama, polymathic intellect, and a deep appreciation for the gritty skills of metalworking.

Di Suvero has been a lauded and influential figure in American and European art since his first solo exhibition in 1960 at the Green Gallery in New York City. He showed room-filling assemblages constructed from salvaged materials like barrels, tires, ladders, broken beams, and bits of heavy chain—the kind of wreckage strewn around the Lower East Side Manhattan fish market area where a former sail loft served as his studio. Among other things, the critics at di Suvero's first show saw a new American art blended from abstract expressionist painting, Russian Constructivism, and European Dada. One reviewer even declared, in italics, "From now on, *nothing will be the same.*"<sup>4</sup>

Shortly afterward, di Suvero began using cast-off steel, then gradually, as he could afford it, new plate steel and I-beams. In recent years, he has become known for architectural-sized constructions of

abstract forms which the artist and his crew cut and assemble with plasma cutters, welding torches, and cranes. Less obvious than the dramatic physicality of the works, however, are the lyrical and intellectual influences that underlie his ideas, signaled primarily by titles that often honor other visual artists, scientists, poets, writers, musicians, statesmen, even astral bodies. In one 1993 catalogue, instead of a critical text, the artist chose to pair images of his works with those from a wide range of poets. *Aesop's Fables* appears with *Sonnet 165*, by the brilliant feminist Mexican nun, Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz.<sup>5</sup>

Just as legendary in the art world as di Suvero's cultural interests are the artist's counterculture and egalitarian impulses. In 1962, he and other downtown artists established the collaborative Park Place Gallery, where they studied physicists like Einstein and discussed integrating current math and science with art.<sup>6</sup> Between 1971 and '75, he lived and worked in Europe, in protest against the Vietnam War. In 1976, he founded the Athena Foundation which gives grants and opportunities to other artists, and in 1985, established the Socrates Sculpture Park on reclaimed urban waterfront adjacent to his Long Island City, New York, studio. Socrates has become a respected art venue supported in part by New York City, where emerging and established artists continue to show large outdoor sculpture. In 1988, di Suvero also co-founded *La Vie des Formes*, an artist residency program within his French studio grounds in Chalon-sur-Saône.

Most importantly, he has consistently sought to make art to which ordinary people can relate, and place it in the public sphere where they can encounter it. Though public art installations throughout Manhattan have become commonplace, di Suvero broke *that* ground—and beyond—with his 1975 solo exhibition for the Whitney Museum of American Art. He insisted on siting twelve major works throughout each of the city's five boroughs—in open public spaces where few artworks or artists had gone before. At the time, public reaction was mixed. Though praised for efforts to reach underserved communities, the experience taught him that outside, unsupervised sculpture will be tested, and it had better be built to withstand it.

His public installations have been most widely appreciated in Europe, particularly in France, where di Suvero has maintained a studio since 1973. In 1975, he was the first living artist whose work was shown in *Le Jardin des Tuileries* in Paris. His giant, frequently red, I-beam-based works have also been installed along the *Promenade des Anglais* in Nice (1991) and in traffic circles in Brittany. Their sleek, scarlet forms have nestled up against medieval architecture in other European cities, and were particularly effective against the baroque backdrop of Venice, where di Suvero was invited to install a number of them during the 1995 Biennale d'Arte. No matter how towering, even within the most diminutive *campes* of Venice, the sculptures' airy grace and balance rendered them stunning counterpoints.

"Scale is one of the essential working parts," he has explained. "It is not just larger or smaller. There are different kinds of intensity. I try to change, compress or enlarge space—individual space itself." In many of di Suvero's most successful works, much of the concentrated energy seems to happen within a central volume of space that often has dimensions comparable to a large van or truck—about the size of the central body of *Aesop's Fables, II*.



Artist Mark di Suvero and crew during the installation of *Aesop's Fables, II* on the MIT campus, October 27, 2005.

“That certain size I often use is the radiative core of the piece,” he continued, “and then it extends from there. The smaller pieces have different kinds of compression. I often use immense scale in very small pieces, while the larger pieces can sometimes seem surprisingly comfortable, even though they might be fifty feet tall.”

In 2005, di Suvero had his third solo exhibition at Storm King Art Center in Mountainville, New York. From the park’s high point near the visitor center, viewers could gaze through the *torii*-like *Shang*, (1984–85), out over a widely spaced placement of twelve great sculptures dotting a rolling green valley. Remembering the artist’s childhood memory in Beijing, this viewer re-imagined the vista as nature’s counterpart for the empty pagoda and palaces of the Forbidden City; the surrounding hills standing in for a cloister of ancient walls. It was the closest one might come, perhaps, to di Suvero’s own pivotal moment of “aching reality.”

Meanwhile, *Aesop's Fables, II's* setting on the MIT campus is not pastoral, static, or venerable but it more than holds its own. Accompanying the debut of the first variation of *Aesop's Fables* in 1990 was a suite of large gestural drawings. Executed in broad, sweeping strokes of black and metallic magic marker, most of them focus on specific elements of the sculpture—the interlocking V’s that make up one end, or the curvilinear cluster at the other. The quick-draw effect looks as if his hand barely left the paper from start to finish.

Drawing is critical to di Suvero. The ultimate goal is to evoke the kind of sensory response to drawn scale and space that affects emotions—a kind of haptic consciousness, that he designates “that rare state of dreamtime.” He also draws freehand with chalk directly on steel plate to make the many intricate curving forms and joints, such as *Aesop's Fables, II's* interlocking crescent shapes. These are then cut with basic torches, which the artist has been using for decades.

Much has been written about the filigreed and angled forms that articulate di Suvero’s I-beam structures. They have been referred to as joints, as surrogates for the hand, as a semaphore or code, and as vestiges of di Suvero’s esthetic roots in gestural abstract painting. They may be seen as all this and more, for essentially, they are di Suvero’s continuing riffs on the forms that constitute the universe’s building blocks. He has mentioned galactic and subatomic forms; DNA and other forms that, he says, “electrify our life.”

“Everything has to do with this relative motion. We’re always in this dynamic equilibrium, these sums of motion.”<sup>7</sup>

Motility is not an abstract concept to the artist. Seriously injured in an accident in 1960, he was told he’d never walk; was confined to a wheel chair for nearly a year, yet managed to regain use of his limbs over time. All the while he persisted in being a hands-on artist. (Sculpture starting out as a maquette, then fabricated to order from the foundry, he has said, “has the smell of a soufflé about it.”)

In the same physical way that his works are realized, they should be fully experienced, as opposed to simply viewed. *Aesop's Fables, II* especially invites walking around through, and standing beneath its sheltering tent-like form. Those who do so are rewarded with an unfolding perspective and heightened sense of their own humanity. To paraphrase Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz: these are “elusive forms too readily slipped free;” one should stay awhile within their short-lived “shadow of contentment.”<sup>8</sup>

Ann Wilson Lloyd

1. During a December 1, 1989, visit to Mark di Suvero’s Long Island City, New York, studio, the author counted six dogs of all sizes and kinds. The 1993–95 sculpture *Old Buddy* (For Roscoe) honors one of the artist’s favorites.
  2. *Aesop's Fables, II* (2005) is a variant of a pre-existing work, in this case, *Aesop's Fables* (1990).
  3. Unless otherwise noted, all quotes from Mark di Suvero are from conversations with the author at his studios in Long Island City, New York, on Dec. 1, 1989, or Petaluma, California, on February 26, 1991.
  4. Sidney Geist, “A New Sculptor: Mark di Suvero,” review in *Arts*, December 1960, reprinted in the exhibition catalogue, *Mark di Suvero* (Stuttgart: Württembergischer Kunstverein, 1988), 210.
  5. *Mark di Suvero* (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, 1993), 26. (Exhibition catalogue for Gagosian Gallery).
  6. Irving Sandler, *Mark di Suvero at Storm King Art Center* (Mountainville, New York: Storm King Art Center, 1995), 29. (Di Suvero’s Long Island City studio is called Spacetime Constructs Corporation in homage to Einstein.)
  7. *Ibid.*, 35.
  8. Phrases taken from the twelfth and first lines of Sonnet 165.
- Essay © Ann Wilson Lloyd, 2005

For more information about this project please visit <http://web.mit.edu/lvac/www/percent/disuvero.html>

Sculptor **Mark di Suvero** was born in Shanghai, China, in 1933; when World War II broke out, his family moved to San Francisco, California. In college he studied sculpture and philosophy, graduating in 1956 from the University of California, Berkeley. In 1957, di Suvero moved to New York City, and he began using scrap from demolished buildings to create what he called “cubist, open spatial sculptures.” In the 1960s, he began to make the large-scale steel sculptures for which he is best known. He currently divides his time between his studios in California, France, and New York City.

Di Suvero’s sculptures have been exhibited in city-wide exhibitions in France, Italy, Germany, and the United States; and he was the first living artist to be shown in Le Jardin des Tuileries in Paris. Storm King Art Center mounted major exhibitions of di Suvero in 1985, 1995, and 2005.

Among di Suvero’s selected solo exhibitions are: The Green Gallery, New York, 1960; Park Place Gallery, New York, 1964; Dwan Gallery, Los Angeles, 1965; Stedelijk Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven, The Netherlands: city-wide, 1971–72; Wilhelm-Lehmbrück Museum, Duisburg, Germany, 1972; Chalon-sur-Saône, France: city-wide, 1974; Jardin des Tuileries, Paris, 1975; Whitney Museum of American Art, New York: city-wide, 1975; Esprit Park, San Francisco, 1983; Oil & Steel Gallery, New York, 1985; Storm King Art Center, Mountainville, NY, 1985; Württembergischer Kunstverein, Stuttgart, 1988; Valence, France: city-wide, 1990; Musée d’Art Moderne et d’Art Contemporain de Nice, Nice, France: city-wide, 1991; Chalon-sur-Saône, France, 1992; Verein für Heimatpflege, Viersen, Germany, 1992; Musée de Beaux-Arts and Passerelle, Brest, France, 1993; Gagosian Gallery, New York, 1993, 1994; IVAM Centre Julio Gonzalez, Valencia, Spain, 1994; Storm King Art Center, Mountainville, NY, 1995–97; Gagosian Gallery, New York, 1995; Venice Biennale XLVI, city-wide, 1995; Gagosian Gallery, New York, 1997; Paris, France: city-wide, sponsored by Jean Tiberi, Maire de Paris, 1997; The Hiroshima Museum of Contemporary Art, Hiroshima, 1998–1999; John Berggruen Gallery, San Francisco, CA, 1999; Gagosian Gallery, New York, 2001; L.A. Louver, Venice, CA, 2001; Paula Cooper Gallery, New York, 2002; John Berggruen Gallery, San Francisco, 2003; Laumeier Sculpture Park,

St. Louis, MO, 2003; Paula Cooper Gallery, New York, 2003; Akira Ikeda Gallery/Berlin, Berlin, 2003; Albion, Michael Hue-Williams Fine Art Limited, London, 2004; Madison Square Park, New York, 2004; Frederik Meijer Gardens & Sculpture Park, Grand Rapids, MI, 2004; Storm King Art Center, Mountainville, NY (2005–2007); Knoedler & Company, New York, 2005.

Di Suvero’s work is included in the following collections: Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC; Landeshauptstadt, Stuttgart, Germany; Cincinnati Art Museum, Cincinnati, OH; Landesmuseum für Technik und Arbeit, Mannheim, Germany; La Ville Chalon-sur-Saône, France; La Ville de Valence, Valence, France; Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles; Musée de Grenoble, Grenoble, France; Moderna Museet, Stockholm; National Gallery of Art, Canberra, Australia; National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC; Rijksmuseum Kroller-Muller, Otterlo, The Netherlands; The City of Baltimore, Baltimore, MD; The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles; The Museum of Modern Art, New York; Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, MN; Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.

**Ann Wilson Lloyd** is an independent critic and former curator. She has contributed numerous articles and reviews to *The New York Times*, *Art in America*, *Sculpture*, *ArtReview*, *Aperture*, *Smithsonian Magazine*, *The Atlantic Monthly* and many others. She has written monographs for four artist books, plus catalogue essays for the Museum of East Asian Art in Berlin; the Kiasma Museum of Contemporary Art, Helsinki, Finland; the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston; and the Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts at Harvard University, among many others. In 1991, she contributed the principle catalogue essay for Mark di Suvero’s survey exhibition held at Musée d’Art Moderne et d’Art Contemporain in Nice, France. She has also organized exhibitions at many regional New England venues, and since 1990, has been the Boston corresponding editor for *Art in America*.

**About MIT’s Percent:** MIT’s Percent-for-Art Program, administered by the List Visual Arts Center, allots up to \$250,000 to commission art for each new major renovation or building project. The program was formally instituted in 1968 but earlier collaborations between artists and architects can be found on the Institute’s campus. In 1985 architect I.M. Pei and artists Scott Burton, Kenneth Noland, and Richard Fleischner collaborated on a Percent-for-Art Program for the Wiesner Building and plaza, home to the List Center and the Media Laboratory. Other Percent-for-Art works include a terrazzo floor by Jackie Ferrara for the Tang Center; out-door sculptures by Louise Nevelson and Tony Smith; Dan Graham’s *Yin/Yang Pavilion* in Simmons Hall (designed by Steven Holl Architects); Jorge Pardo’s ceiling murals created for MIT’s Graduate Dormitory on Albany Street designed by S/L/A/M Collaborative; and Matthew Ritchie’s *Games of Chance and Skill*, a three-part map of time and space created for the Albert and Barrie Zesiger Sports and Fitness Center designed by Kevin Roche, John Dinkeloo and Associates. Other publicly sited art includes works by Alexander Calder, Henry Moore, Pablo Picasso, Beverly Pepper, Michael Heizer, Victor Burgin, Jennifer Bartlett, Bernar Venet, Frank Stella, Isaac Witkin, and Jacques Lipchitz.

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Cover: Mark di Suvero, *Aesop’s Fables, II* (2005)  
Painted steel, 11’ 5” x 32’ 4” x 13’ 7”  
All photos by Jane Farver