



Rust Angel, 1995.

Steely convictions

Mark di Suvero's pieces swing at Millennium Park.
 By Ruth Lopez

You can learn a lot about Mark di Suvero by the titles of his sculptures, many of which are homages to poets, philosophers, cultural figures and other kinds of stars. For the next year, we will get to enjoy five of di Suvero's massive energetic metal works in Millennium Park.

During the installation of *Orion*, the 53-foot-tall red steel sculpture flanking the south end of the outdoor gallery, the 74-year-old artist was a vision in primary colors. He wore a red hard hat and a royal-blue sweatshirt that he eventually peeled off, revealing a bright yellow button-down shirt with a peace sign scrawled on the front and back with black marker. "That wasn't there yesterday," observes assistant Ivana Mestrovic, who incidentally is the granddaughter of Ivan Mestrovic, the Croatian artist whose monumental sculptures of a different nature—two Native American warriors on horseback—grace Grant Park's entrance on Congress. When we get a chance to talk to di Suvero during a break in the complex installation of the 7-ton piece, he is sure to point out all of the people working with him by name

along with such personal details.

Orion required two cranes and Di Suvero, known for being very hands-on, did not just direct from the sidelines; he scrambled over to a cherry picker to go up and check the angles. This isn't remarkable because di Suvero is a hotshot, but because he's disabled. In 1960, while working a day job that involved transporting lumber atop an elevator, the load shifted, tripping the mechanism that activates the elevator. He was crushed under a ton of pressure. That he survived is one thing; that he is able to walk is another. Di Suvero relies on crutches and is amazingly nimble. To continue making sculpture, he started using a crane (for which, he proudly says, he has a union card to operate) to lift heavy pieces. This partly explains the evolution of his creative process: The work started to take on more heft. Earlier pieces, while big, mostly used materials like chain and wood. By the mid-1960s, his primary material of choice had become industrial I beams.

Described as an abstract expressionist sculptor, di Suvero is also informed by Cubism and the Russian Constructivists, in particular their use of geometry. A master of equilibrium, di Suvero understands geometric laws enough to create work that feels dangerous but is safe. He

does not build maquettes and works it all out with his crane and drawings. Still, how does he think it through?

"I love math," he says. "At the heart of mathematics there are proofs." The proofs, he says, are elegant. "When you see conformity, when you see nonexploration, then it's a dull life," he says. Di Suvero studied philosophy at Berkeley before turning to art, and all his works, even the playful ones, are thoughtful. About eight years ago, di Suvero's *Mother Teresa* was shown

"When you see conformity, then it's a dull life."

at Navy Pier. The piece was intended for a university, but school officials rejected it because of the title. "They didn't want religious art." We laugh.

Curator Elizabeth Kelley, of the Department of Cultural Affairs' public art office, organized this show. She first met di Suvero while curating the pier exhibition. When it came time to choose the first sculpture show for Millennium Park, Kelley knew exactly who to invite. But he hadn't overcome his dislike of Chicago since his 1968 arrest here at an antiwar demonstration. It took awhile to convince him. For this

show, Kelley wanted to represent different eras of di Suvero's career. His work encourages interaction. "It was important to get a piece you can ride," Kelley says. "That is quintessential di Suvero."

To test the appeal of *Shang*, for instance, di Suvero initially invited kids over to play on its swing. *Johnny Appleseed* reveals not just di Suvero's sense of humor, but how he feels about the world: The arms of the piece are recycled steam shovels and the wheels are peace signs.

Which brings us to *Peace Tower*, which will be installed at the Cultural Center next month. It depends on participation more than any of his other works. Di Suvero built the first in Los Angeles in 1966 as an art protest to the Vietnam War. The 20-foot tower was re-created for the 2006 Whitney Biennial and held work by more than 180 artists. Similarly, during the exhibition here, artists, activists and veterans are invited to display pieces on it. After almost 40 years, di Suvero returns to Chicago with the same message for a different war.

Mark di Suvero's sculptures will be on display in Millennium Park through April 2008. Instructions for contributing to the tower will be posted on chicagoartistsresource.org.