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Work Outstanding in Its Field

By DAVID LITTLEJOHN

Mark di Suvero
'Figolu' (2005-11).

San Francisco

When, in 1967, he hit on the idea in of making his supersize sculptures out of steel I-beams instead of wood, Mark di Suvero discovered a technique that has made him the most popular creator of large public outdoor sculpture

since Henry Moore. The 79-year-old now has more than 140 of his big, recognizable steel works installed in U.S. parks, university campuses, office plazas and sculpture gardens, plus 18 more overseas. In 1975, artfully spaced outdoor groupings of his works were shown throughout New York City, at the Venice Biennale and in the Tuileries Gardens in Paris. In 2011, the Storm King Art Center in New York's Hudson Valley, which owns some and shows more of his works, sent a dozen di Suveros to be placed on Governors Island off Manhattan.

It was while admiring these in May 2011 that Neal Benezra, director of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, first got the idea for "Mark di Suvero at Crissy Field." Mr. Benezra's museum was going to shut down from this month through early 2016 for a vast expansion, and he was eager to find things for the museum to do during its long time "outside the box." This is the first of his several ingenious ideas for what is being called "SFMOMA on the Road."

Mark di Suvero At Crissy Field

San Francisco Museum Of Modern Art

Through May 26, 2014

Crissy Field had been a pioneer (1919-36) U.S. Army airfield just inside the Golden Gate. Between 1994 and 2001, it was transformed into a benign, grassy park directly overlooking the bay and the bridge. In the westernmost 30 acres of this park, Mr. Benezra, as curator of the sculpture show, has spaced eight available large steel sculptures that best represent Mr. di Suvero's work between 1967 and 2012.

If you start hiking or biking from the east end of the field, the

first work you encounter is "Figolu" (2005-11), distinguished by three spherical marine buoys of gray steel that hang and rotate from the high end of a diagonal 50-foot beam. The steel structure behind the buoys consists of eight mostly diagonal red-painted beams, two of which fly off into space. A knot of cut steel circles that wraps around one intersection of beams echoes the curves of the buoys—curves that seem essential to the success of most of Mr. di Suvero's fundamentally linear works.

"Huru" (1984-85), at 55 feet, is the tallest sculpture here. A simple tripod base supports a six-ton upper section made of two long pointing pieces, like open scissors that move in the wind. Some read them as welcoming arms; to me they looked like sky-searching guns.

"Magma" (2008-12) is a giant sawhorse in which a 48-foot I-beam is supported between two of the artist's traditional, uneven tripods. It is distinguished by a big pair of cut circles (or C's, or G's) that can slide along the horizontal beam, matched by a pair of similar rings that wrap around the joint at one of the ends.

An ardent opponent of the Vietnam War, the artist carved a peace symbol into the long hanging, swinging horizontal red beam toward the bottom of "Mother Peace" (1969-70), which led officials to have it removed from the front of the Alameda County Courthouse in Oakland, Calif. (Now the property of Storm King, this is its first return to the Bay Area since 1974.) It is one of Mr. di Suvero's strongest works, built around one 42-foot vertical beam (a V-shaped horizontal piece hangs from and swings about the top), the two lower horizontals (one moving), and two long diagonal props—a

few large beams put together with an instinctively keen sensibility.

"Old Buddy (For Rosko)" (1993-95), a tribute to the artist's dog, could be read as an abstract animal. A rear upright section on two legs (which might have a tail) is joined to a front upright section on three legs (which might have a circular face and upward-pointing ears) by a straight 50-foot-long silver-painted spine. But it's far more than a sentimental gesture. The precisionist rear section and the long connecting beam are painted silver; the tripod, circles and "ears" of the front section are left rust-brown. And one can admire it—especially if viewed from either end—as a masterly complex of steel beams in perspective, framing the sky.

As Crissy Field bends to the north, we come upon the dark-brown, 50-foot-tall "Dreamcatcher" (2005-12), in which four unusually high and symmetrical tilting beams join at the top, where they blossom into an interlocked array of cut-out steel circles. Held horizontally to a stainless steel spire in the middle and above the circles is a giant hand of four splayed similar beams, joined at one end, which blow freely in the wind, catching dreams.

"Are Years What (for Marianne Moore)" (1967) is the first sculpture Mr. di Suvero made entirely with steel I-beams. Its signal feature is a steel V-shaped angle that hangs and swings freely in space, counteracting the solidity of its two vertical and four sprawling diagonal beams. (The tall beam from which it hangs—itself held in place by thin cables—is 40 feet long.) Moore ended her poem "What Are Years?" with the image of a caged bird, "growing taller as he sings," which

could be compared to the artist's chained but still-swinging V.

The final work, "Will" (1994), begins with the basic model of a tripod of diagonals at the base, joining in a whirligig of cut circles in the middle, then shooting off in four directions at the top. But the awesome finesse of the angles, the extraordinary length of the diagonal beams (the work is almost 43 feet tall), and the mad bouquet of bisecting circles that ties it all together moves it into a dynamic dimension of barely restrained energy in space. Everything wants to explode, but nothing can.