

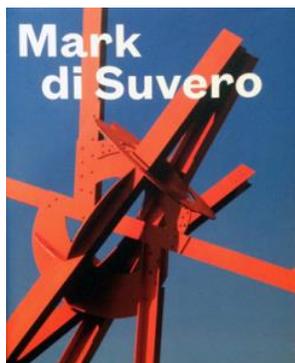
Three Directions for Sculpture

February 3, 2016 By [Jan Garden Castro](#)



Among the male sculptors over 70 who have been practicing for half a century, Martin Puryear (born 1941), Frank Stella (born 1936), and Mark di Suvero (born 1933) are quite different in terms of their main themes, media, and processes. One common thread is that each has taken great risks, chosen new directions in sculpture, and created work with universal meanings that have not been explored in depth. Three new monographs each discuss how one artist draws inspiration from a range of subjects; however, only the essays on Puryear discuss craft and process in depth. Another topic that begs to be discussed in this trio's arts is erotic allusions/tales/allegories. Mark Pascale's analysis of sensory implications in Puryear's "The Gates" gave me new ideas about additional sensory references in the artist's *oeuvre*.

The newest books on these artists are reviewed below.



Mark di Suvero. Edited by David R. Collens et. al. with contributions by Mark di Suvero, Patricia C. Phillips, Nancy Princenthal, and Ursula von Rydingsvard. New York: Storm King Art Center, DelMonico Books, Prestel, 2015. Hardbound, 240 pages with 150 illustrations, \$75.

Mark di Suvero: Coldbent Steel: Poetry in Motion

The cover of *Mark di Suvero*, Storm King Art Center's new monograph on the artist, is the same size, length, and weight as the Stella book but instead of an abstract hot red, gray, and green abstract cover, a fire engine red steel sculpture, *Figolu*, creates ovals and angles against a clear blue sky. The ample Chronology highlights the artist's life from his birth in Shanghai, China to Italian parents, his B.A. in Philosophy from the University of California, Berkeley in 1956, and his move to New York in 1957. Di Suvero's many exhibitions and honors include the Skowhegan Medal for Sculpture in 1974, a solo exhibition in the Jardin des Tuileries, Paris, in

1975, the National Medal of Arts in 2010, and a gold medal for sculpture from the American Academy of Arts and Letters in 2013.

Di Suvero's body of work includes paintings, drawings, and prints, yet this monograph focuses on di Suvero's steel inventions, many monumental in size and most created for outdoor venues. Images emphasize di Suvero's mastery of the monumental: red and two black sculptures on green grass fields line a wide boulevard in Paris, 1997. *Figolu* and other sculptures re-frame the Statue of Liberty and other vistas seen on and from Governor's Island, 2011. *Vivaldi*, a red painted steel geometry that stands on three legs as it soars 48 feet high, dazzles on a Venice pier against blue water and sky as part of di Suvero's citywide exhibition in 1995.

The volume opens with essays by Nora R. Lawrence, a curator at Storm King; by Patricia C. Phillips, a curator and dean at RISD (Rhode Island School of Design); and by Nancy Princenthal, a former senior editor at *Art in America*. What brings this volume alive is the art itself and di Suvero's conversation with Ursula von Rydingsvard. The two talk like old friends – di Suvero's Athena Foundation gave von Rydingsvard an art award in 1983 and gave other notables like Phillip Glass early funding. The two discuss the genesis of some di Suvero's works, the trials of working with monumental materials, discovering how to believe in oneself, and resolving philosophical as well as material considerations in order to create, as in this exchange:



1998

Mark di Suvero finishing *Pyramidian* (1987/1998) at Storm King Art Center, Mountainville, NY,

UvR: ... You make models once in a great while, don't you?

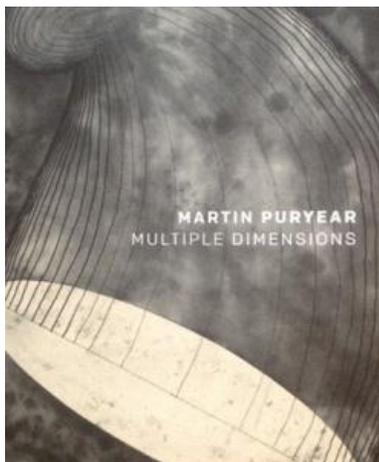
MdS: Now I do. I never used to make models. For that piece that you were talking about I must have made at least fifty to a hundred models. I work with Mobius bands, right? Now I'm working with something that has to do with a Mobius band with a hole in it. It causes me all kinds of problems. I love to draw. Ursula, drawing is ...like a cool swimming pool on a very hot day. You just dive into that paper and draw anything, and then you don't have to build it.

UvR: No, and it's not the commitment that building is.

MdS: But it suggests something else. It suggests the next step. That's the beautiful part of it.

The entire conversation discusses logic, improvisation, total immersion, materials, processes, failure, and more.

Di Suvero's names for his sculpture are important — from *Are Years What? (For Marianne Moore)*, 1967 to *Vivaldi*, 1995 to work named for Gandhi, Van Gogh, and the janitor's wife. He often alludes to poets, composers, and friends. Unlike Stella's vortexes of energy and color, di Suvero's compositions are closer to calligraphy in space, often in relation to sky and earth. His work is often painted red or is the rust hue of Cor Ten steel. The challenge for viewers is to “read” di Suvero's sculpture – his ‘writing in the sky’, which combines literal weight with figurative outjuttings of joy, mischief, and interactive parts. Touching or even rocking on the movable platform inside one sculpture, is allowed.



Martin Puryear *Multiple Directions*. Mark Pascale; with an essay by Ruth Fine
New Haven: Yale University Press and the Art Institute of Chicago, 2015. Hardbound, 160 pages, with 140 color illustrations, \$35.

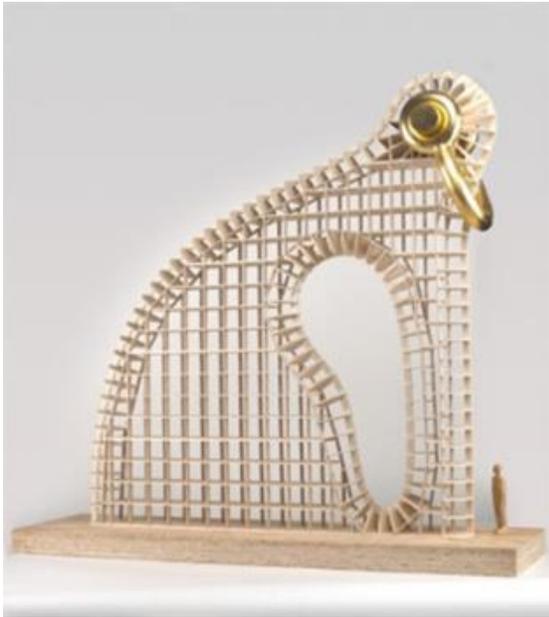
Martin Puryear: Coded Compositions in Multiple Dimensions

Anyone who has followed Martin Puryear's career knows that he encodes his images as keenly as he crafts and curves wood. *Martin Puryear, Multiple Dimensions* contains essays by Mark Pascale, the Janet and Craig Duchossois Curator of Prints and Drawings at The Art Institute of Chicago, and by Ruth Fine, formerly of the National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. that raise scholarship to the plateau on which, ideally, all essays should be written. Each shows a keen familiarity with Puryear's relatively unknown large body of prints and drawings, and these, in turn, *visually reveal* many sources for themes that run through Puryear's work.

Mark Pascale's essay “Line, Shape, Form” ties together the origins of some of Puryear's forms in multiple media with later work, starting during his years in the Peace Corps in Sierra Leone and the period following when Puryear studied intaglio printmaking and etching at the Royal Academy in Stockholm. Pascale points out that the artist's 1962 woodcut *Bull* has illusory depth, shows “careful observation,” and “shows the inside and outside of the animal simultaneously...” (p. 19). Pascale discusses the racial and sexual symbolism in Puryear's 1966 etching, *Gate*, and

another 1966 etching, *Quadroon*, two related forms, which lead to later sculpture. Quadroon is a term used to refer to a mixed race person.

Pascale and Fine limit their remarks about specific art works to materials and processes and do not directly address the ways that Puryear codes references to race, gender, and culture in his work. Despite this important omission, Pascale draws connections among many works, such as the source for Puryear's first (and recent) uses of the 'liberty' Phrygian cap, a conical red cap with a soft, forward-curling tip. The racial symbolism is obvious in a 1794 image of a dark-skinned boy in the Phrygian cap, titled "Moi Libre aussi" (I'm free too) and in a series titled "Untitled" and "Shackled," with its visual reference to slavery. Puryear's untitled drawings and maquette a work titled *Big Bling* for Madison Square Park is another work that suggests that the whole legacy of slavery was treating people like property. Puryear has also used tar in some work; his clear and ongoing attention to racial injustice as an unresolved part of America's history is an important –ironically somewhat overlooked — part of his legacy as an artist.



Martin Puryear, Maquette for Big Bling, 2014. Birch plywood, maple, 22-karat gold leaf, 40 1/4 x 9 1/8 x 40 in. (maquette); 40 x 10 x 38 ft. (projected size). Collection of the artist. © Martin Puryear. Photograph by Jamie Stukenberg, Professional Graphics

Pascale elucidates how Puryear's processes in drypoint, intaglio, and etching and his early themes show up in later work: "*Gate* remains one of Puryear's most powerful works on paper, succinct in its composition and execution and a model for much that followed" (p. 20). As Pascale notes, "For Puryear, the act of drawing helps to refine the direction a sculpture may take by providing him with a way to explore possible materials, details of form, methods of building and joining, and approaches to surfaces. Essential to all of these decisions is the dynamic between positive and negative space..." (p. 35).

Ruth Fine, in her essay "Making Drawings, Drawing as Making," continues the deep investigation into Puryear's drawings. She seems to have studied a trove of work that is not generally known. Puryear's early drawings include the woodgrain surface of a toilet, drawings of animals, nature, and birds. She discusses his *Jug* drawings of 2001 but not the *Vessel* sculpture in

the exhibition associated with *Multiple Dimensions*; the large sculpture includes a big black ampersand inside its cage-like enclosure. Fine discusses Puryear's untitled head (graphite on cut ivory wove paper) in relation to the monumental sculpture *That Profile*, 1999 in stainless steel and bronze.

Another work in the exhibition, the drawing and maquette for *Bearing Witness*, 1994, bears a relationship to the head forms that Fine analyzes. *Bearing Witness*, a monumental public sculpture in Washington, D. C. is sited in a symbolic relationship to several important federal government buildings. It is also related to the Fang culture and to the shape of his daughter's head as a baby. *Bearing Witness* is about justice and has many layers of importance, none of which are discussed. However, the spare essays by Pascale and Fine, along with 140 images connecting aspects of Puryear's art, point readers toward deeper understandings of his work.

This book is published in conjunction with the exhibition that will be seen at The Morgan Library and Museum, New York; The Art Institute of Chicago, and the Smithsonian American Art Museum in Washington, D.C. between October, 2015 and September, 2016.



Frank Stella: A Retrospective. By Michael Auping with essays by Jordan Kantor and Adam D. Weinberg, and an interview with Frank Stella by Laura Owens. New Haven: Yale University Press in association with the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York and the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, 2015. Hardcover with slipcase. 240 pages, 157 color illustrations, \$65.

Frank Stella: Spatial & Material Ingress

Frank Stella's art charged each decade, cutting a wide swathe as he literally changed the ways we think about painting, sculpture, art history, and criticism. *Frank Stella: A Retrospective*, printed in Italy and published by the Whitney Museum, made Roberta Smith's list for notable exhibitions of 2015, yet she doesn't discuss the book at all. Michael Auping's main essay proposes that Stella's entire body of work creatively considers "the relationship between materiality, illusionistic space, and three-dimensional space" ... and that Stella's art is "about seeing literal space through and around materiality (pp. 38-39).

The colorful hardback cover is cut out on its lower portions to echo the cover's abstract lines. The book is hefty in weight, and its 64-page Chronology is notable. Stella, born in 1936, had important classmates and teachers at Phillips Academy, Andover and at Princeton University; he joined charmed art circles as soon as he moved to New York in 1958 and Leo Castelli mounted his first solo show by 1960. Early reviews by Irving Sandler, John Canaday, William Rubin, Emily Genauer, and other critics of his generation paid attention to Stella's black paintings, his Aluminum and Copper Paintings, and his shaped canvases. Over time, Stella created art with its own skewed geometries, humor, and new strategies for engaging viewers.



Frank Stella, *East Broadway*, 1958. Oil on canvas. 85 1/4 x 81 in. (216.5 x 205.7 cm). Addison Gallery of American Art, Phillips Academy, Andover, Massachusetts; gift of the artist (PA 1954) 1980.14. © 2015 Frank Stella/Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY.

The color plates, including foldout images of some large works suggest Stella's Minimal to Maximal range. Exhibition curator Michael Auping's essay "The Phenomenology of Frank: Materiality and Gesture Make Space" is the textual heart of the book. Auping takes readers to Stella's jungle-like mixed media studio and proceeds to talk his way through Stella's influences and periods. Part of Stella's attraction for art historians is that his art may simultaneously allude to influences and decades even as it veers in other directions. Auping characterizes Stella's Black Paintings as having a "moody and ambiguous spatial depth" ... with "the inexplicable emotional effect of their dark, vibrating space" (pp. 17-18). Stella's use of "cheap and available" aluminum paint and household paint gave a nod to the working class, and he titled the talks he gave at Harvard in 1983, as the Charles Eliot Norton Professor of Poetry, "Working Space." Even though his origins were far from working class, Stella cultivated a working class aura. His geometries on canvas led him to experiment with CAD and other imaging software; his *Moby Dick* series (1986-97), his *Çatal Huyuk* cycle, and other work begun in the 1980s launched his period of working in all media – painting, relief, collage, print, drawing, and large to monumental sculpture.

Jordan Kantor's essay on "Frank Painting/ Some Aspects of Stella's Work" discusses Stella's approach to complex series including *Moby-Dick*. Stella's short conversation with Laura Owens shows Stella as an unsentimental pragmatist, not the wordsmith who lectured at Harvard.

Frank Stella A Retrospective is one man's art odyssey over the course of six decades. His most recent aluminum, steel, and fiberglass constructions are mostly monochromatic. I personally like their silvery finishes and find Stella's uses of color uneven – but better than Picasso's. Neither was a colorist; to me, Stella's loaded, clashing spectrums seem mostly arbitrary and pedestrian. The art in this exhibition and catalog was carefully chosen from Stella's colossal total body of work. I value the early work for its pioneering spirit; the late work has riddles – from themes to construction methods — that need to be examined.

Footnote I was introduced to the art of Stella and di Suvero in St. Louis over twenty years ago and to Puryear's art in Seattle around 18 years ago. Along the way, my poem for Stella's print "Then Water Came and Quenched the Fire" appeared in *Exquisite Corps*, and my essay "Dragons in the Sky" became the title as well as the essay for di Suvero's 2005 exhibition at Laumeier Sculpture Park, St. Louis. My essays on Martin Puryear's art came out in *Sculpture Magazine* in 1998 and 2008. It's significant that each artist has developed *his own abstract language* loaded with sensory, cultural, and cognitive associations over many decades, and that each has developed unique approaches to making art. These are top books in the field with high production values, yet all leave much unsaid. The Pascale and Fine essays and the di Suvero-von Rydingsvard interview deliver new insights. By [Jan Garden Castro](#)