

PAULA COOPER GALLERY

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Mark di Suvero & Leonard Contino

521 W 21st Street

October 22 – December 19, 2020

NEW YORK—Opening on Thursday, October 22 at 521 West 21st Street is a two-person exhibition of work by artists and close friends Mark di Suvero and Leonard Contino. The presentation will include early sculptures by di Suvero, ranging from compact tabletop pieces to large-scale steel abstractions, alongside paintings and sculpture by Contino highlighting the self-taught artist's keen manipulation of color and form. A new work by di Suvero will also be on view in the gallery's ground level vitrine space. The short documentary film *Leonard Contino and Mark di Suvero: Brothers in Art*, by Williams Cole and Dirk Van Dall, can be streamed online throughout the duration of the exhibition on PCG Studio: paulacoopergallery-studio.com.

Lifelong friends, di Suvero and Contino first met in 1960 at the Rusk Institute in New York City where both were patients. In 1959 at the age of nineteen, Contino was severely injured in a diving accident. Paralyzed from the shoulders down, he retained some mobility in his arms and hands, and needed to use a wheelchair for the rest of his life. In 1960, di Suvero was involved in an accident while working at a construction site. Suffering a broken back and severe spinal injuries, he arrived at the Institute as a paraplegic. Contino: "The elevator opens up and there is this crazy guy in a red wheelchair [...] And then he started drawing." During his four-year recovery, di Suvero expanded on his artistic practice—learning to use an electric arc welder to produce small sculptures, some of which are included in the current exhibition. Through the encouragement of di Suvero, Contino turned to art as well, making drawings and eventually teaching himself to paint. "He brought me brushes, paint and canvases. He took me around and explained to me about art," Contino explained, "He taught me without teaching, which is a good way to do that. He made me *want* to do it."

Created by di Suvero between 1961 and 1975, the selection of sculptures on view represent some of the artist's earliest works of art. Wood proved difficult to manipulate by hand following his injury, so he turned with greater frequency to metal, using machinery to bend, cut, and weld the material into evocative forms. In contrast to his later iconic public installations, these early works are smaller in scale, supported by pedestals or placed directly on the ground. Ranging from referential to pure abstraction, they demonstrate the artist's acute mastery of three-dimensional construction and ability to activate space. Composed of beams of wood and painted steel, the manifold planes of *Untitled (hungblock)*, 1962, extend with a kinetic yet whimsical thrust. In his abstract untitled work of 1965, industrial parts that have been twisted and reassembled appear weightlessly balanced upon a thin vertical point. In a similar way, Contino manipulates form to create a shifting narrative and dynamic optical plane. The artist described his process as one of improvisation, erasure, and phenomenological acuity. In his "floaters" series, Contino paints bold linear shapes set against colorful backgrounds—a misty ether of orange, blue, red, or yellow. Merging architectural linearity and whimsical biomorphism, the variable forms resist structural clarity as their illusionistic modeling opposes a consistent or logical ordering of space. Contino's sculptures are reminiscent of his

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paintings in their geometric approach to composition: synthesized shapes and constructional elements recede and protract, producing a radiant and lively spatial tension.

Mark di Suvero (b. 1933, Shanghai, China) first came to international prominence in 1975 with a display of his work in the Jardin des Tuileries in Paris—the first for any living person—and a major retrospective that same year at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York, which was accompanied by a citywide exhibition of large-scale works. The artist has had acclaimed international exhibitions in Nice (1991), Venice (1995, at the 46th Venice Biennale), Paris (1997), Governors Island, NY (2011), and San Francisco (2013), among many others. His numerous accolades include the 2000 International Sculpture Center's Lifetime Achievement in Contemporary Sculpture Award, the 2010 National Medal of Arts awarded by President Barack Obama, the 2010 Medal of the Archives of American Art, and the 2013 American Academy of Arts and Letters Gold Medal. His works appear permanently installed in public spaces all over the world. The artist currently lives and works in New York and in Petaluma, California.

Leonard Contino (b. 1940, Brooklyn, NY) remained dedicated to artmaking for over fifty years. In the 1960s and early 1970s, his work was exhibited at such New York venues as the Green Gallery, Park Place Gallery, Paula Cooper Gallery, and P.S. 1 Contemporary Art Center as well as Janie C. Lee Gallery in Houston. More recently, the artist's paintings were exhibited at the CUE Art Foundation in a show curated by di Suvero in 2013, and at Mitchell Albus Gallery in 2015. A retrospective of Contino's career titled "Totally Dedicated: Leonard Contino, 1940-2016" was presented at the Samuel Dorsky Museum of Art at SUNY New Paltz earlier this year (January 22 – April 5, 2020). His works are in a number of museums and private collections including the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden in Washington DC, the Dallas Museum of Art in Texas, and the Foundation of Contemporary Art, Geneva. Contino passed away in 2017 in Queens, NY.

For more information and images, please contact the gallery:
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