

JOHN VAN ALSTINE



**ACKNOWLEDGING
THE FIGURE**

**SEPTEMBER 4 — OCTOBER 18, 1998
PLATTSBURGH ART MUSEUM
BURKE GALLERY**

STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK



Implement XXVII Stout Handle, 1996
granite/steel, 30"h x 48"w x 21"d

a system and they *have* an identity that will accompany us if we please.

There will be much more to be said about John Van Alstine's works after we live with his objects during this exhibition. The Plattsburgh Art Museum at the State University of New York is honored to present this material to the college community.

—Edward R. Brohel

*You are cordially invited to a reception on Friday,
September 4, 1998 from 4 until 6 p.m. at the Burke Gallery
in the Myers Fine Arts Building.*



Chalice IV, 1998, bronze/aluminum/granite, 74"h x 30"w x 24"d

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Figurative References in the Work of John Van Alstine

The scale of the human body is critical in how we understand and relate to all things—landscape, architecture, furniture, domestic objects, and certainly sculpture. Although very few, if any, of my works are considered traditionally figurative, there are many ways in which the human figure is influential. This exhibition acknowledges the role the figure plays in some of these works and provides an opportunity to examine them more closely.

I received my art training in what I would consider a typical 70's university art department where minimalism and cool abstraction were the focus. Serra, Smithson, Morris, deSuverio, and the later work by David Smith were some of the people that shaped my early thinking about sculpture. The figure was not part of this path, and for many years I denied its existence when it seemed to appear in my work. I have, however, come to realize that good work operates on many levels and the more ways it can be seen and interpreted, the richer it becomes.

My work is certainly not solely about the figure. In fact, for the most part, it is centered around assemblage. Found objects with their individual histories and associations are plucked from one context and combined with others creating new "things." These new entities present us with fresh and innovative ways to view, relate and think about familiar objects—making the common powerfully uncommon. Even the stone, which is traditionally employed in sculpture through a subtractive process—starting with a block and removing all that is not wanted—in my work is used as a *found* assemblage element with little or no carving.

A few of my pieces rely on the formal aspects of a recognizable figure as a general framework or point of "entrance" for the piece. *Odalisque* 1989, a large floor work, was one of the first "mature" works where I recognized and embraced the figure. The title, combined with the arrangement of its formal elements, suggests a reclining female "chamber companion." (*Odalisque* has appeared a number of times in art history, perhaps most notably by the French Romantic painter Ingres.) This sensuous notion, contrasted with the raw and ragged character of the rough-hewn granite, heavy rusted steel, and actual iron anvil, creates a compelling sculptural statement generated by pairing

opposites. Similarly, in a more recent large outdoor work *Atlas (Highroller)* 1995, the idea of a figure shouldering a globe acts as a starting point for understanding the piece. The two-pronged title, referring to the mythic bearer of the Earth and indeterminacy of gambling, sets up the idea of possible planetary disaster. (The globe here is represented by a casting of an actual explosive mine casing resembling a round fused bomb.) *Sentinel (Tool for Alberto)* 1998, incorporates a small hand tool—an inoperable set of calipers—the shape and positioning suggesting a figure standing at attention and on guard. Its relatively tall, thin character evokes a connection and conveys homage to the lean and sinewy figurative work of the influential Italian sculptor Alberto Giacometti.

Portraits are most often associated with the figure. It is a common belief that all art is, in a sense, a portrait of its maker—a mirror of all the aspects that created it. A few of my works consciously incorporate this notion. *Reconsidering Sisyphus* 1992-94 was built as a self-portrait expressing my own creative struggle with stone. The formal arrangement of the granite and steel elements suggests a figure frozen in the act of prying or pushing a stone. This struggle parallels that of the mythological Sisyphus who was cast to a life of perpetual labor pushing a stone to the top of a mountain, only to have it roll back down. I am continually (and often literally) pushing stones to a creative peak, and once reached, compelled to start again on a new work. The title arises from the ideas put forth in Camus' *Myth of Sisyphus* where he "reconsiders" Sisyphus' labors. For the artist, the creative experience is not a goal. One never reaches and stays at the "top," but rather spins in a continual regenerative cycle where value and reward emerge from the process.

In the *Juggler Series*, the multi-layered idea of "portrait/self-portrait" is also central. Often during the process of creating work, I quite literally become a "juggler," balancing and keeping afloat many heavy elements such as anvils, large chunks of stone, pieces of bronze, etc. The finished sculptures in this series possess a whirling and teetering character which dramatically showcase objects "frozen" in midair. It is especially impressive when the work reaches the height of 10 to 12 feet as in *Juggler I* 1994. This same drama and sense of precariousness are also present in the pedestal scaled pieces such as *Juggler II* 1995 and *Juggler IV* 1998. The notion of juggling evokes the likes of jesters and circus clowns. This series, in addition to being a reflection of the artist, also conveys



Slate Cudgel, 1998, slate/steel, 25"h x 18"w x 9"d

realm reminding us that we *all* are jugglers on our own stage, keeping all aspects of our lives—family, career, finances, friends, fun, etc.—up, floating and vital. Perhaps like the circus jester the secret of sane survival is maintaining joyfulness and a sense of humor through it all.

Movement within a sculpture can also be expressed using the human figure. One of my sculptural objectives is to breath “life” and airiness into the heavy, earth-bound elements I use. In this sense I am a choreographer. The idea of choreographed movement is demonstrated in the *Pique à Terre* series. Here the title is taken from a specific position in classical ballet where the pointed toe (*pique*) touches lightly on the ground (*terre*), the other foot is firmly planted while one arm makes a sweeping, connecting, gestural arc. While the piece does not resemble a figure in the traditional sense, once clued to the title, it is easy to see the suggested human movement. *Pique à Terre VI* 1997, clearly exudes the sense of motion and levity even though its elements are extremely dense and heavy. Choreography of a different type is demonstrated in *Angler* 1998, where the swishing curves and implied flexibility of the upper element of the sculpture allude to the graceful and alluring movement of someone engaged in the act of fly fishing.

Some works reference specific *parts* or *portions* of the body. In *Pompadour* 1997, the oversized upper stone playfully suggests the “poofy,” exaggerated hairstyle swept high from the forehead, named for the Marquise de Pompadour, mistress of Louis XV and sported in our own century by the likes of Elvis and Elvis wannabes. *Strange Fruit III* and *Strange Fruit VI*, both 1989, might be first interpreted as strange “fruits of labor” harvested from the studio. The central elements of both pieces simultaneously suggest vagina and phallus. When these ideas are coupled they imply ripe-

sized work *Phalanx* 1992 (from Latin—bones



Juggler IV, 1998, bronze/granite, 25”h x 22”w x 8”d

forming the fingers) the manipulated pitchfork element is presented as an extension of the artist’s hand. In this piece, as in all my works, tools are presented as the artists’ allies, helping them reach their aspirations and symbols of their labors and accomplishments. A further twist on the *phalanx* theme is evident in *Fingers* 1997, where the shape of a bronze-cast animal antler is suggestive of a hand.

Scale as determined by body size is vital in sculpture. In the last group of works discussed, our relationship with them vis-a-vis our body size is what imbues them with their power. In *Chalice IV* 1998, which is 74 inches high, a section of an aeronautical fuselage is transformed into an upward reaching, “cup of life.” It is precisely the fact that it is larger than life, wildly exaggerated in terms of any human function that recasts it into a dynamic, aspiring, spiritual vessel. *Longhandle (Echo I)* 1995, *Implement XXVII (Stout Handle)* 1996, and *Slate Cudgel* 1998, are all presented as tools or implements. Much the way architecture and furniture address the human scale, these works, whether you see them as axes, adzes or weapons with suggested handles and blades, are un-



Longhandle (Echo I), 1995, bronze, 24”h x 41”w x 8”d

My sculpture operates on many levels and is open to a variety of interpretations. I believe its power is generated by the juxtaposition of impure found objects, layers of association, symbolism, and narrative. The figure is one more important element that, when added, enriches this complex mix.

—John Van Alstine, June 1998

SELECTED PUBLIC COLLECTIONS

BALTIMORE MUSEUM OF ART, Baltimore, MD
CARNEGIE INSTITUTE OF ART, Pittsburgh, PA
CORCORAN GALLERY OF ART, Washington, DC
DELAWARE MUSEUM OF ART, Wilmington, DE
DENVER ART MUSEUM, Gift of List Foundation, NYC
HIRSHHORN MUSEUM AND SCULPTURE GARDEN, Washington, DC
HERBERT F. JOHNSON MUSEUM, Cornell University, Ithaca, NY
NATIONAL MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC
NATIONAL RESERVE BOARD, Washington, DC
NEWARK MUSEUM OF ART, Newark, NY
MUSEUM OF MODERN ART, Gulbenkian Foundation, Lisbon, Portugal
PHOENIX ART MUSEUM, Phoenix, AZ
THE PHILLIPS COLLECTION, Washington, DC

SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS

NOHRA HAIME GALLERY, New York City, 1998, 1996, 1994, 1991, 1990, 1989, 1988
DECORDOVA MUSEUM, Lincoln, MA "Vessels and Voyages" 1996-97
GRIMALDIS GALLERY, Baltimore, MD, 1997, 1995, 1992, 1984
KENDALL CAMPUS ART GALLERY, Miami-Dade Community College, Miami, FL, October 1997
DARTMOUTH COLLEGE, Hanover, NH, Studio Art Exhibition Program, 1995
TROYER FITZPATRICK LASSMAN GALLERY, Washington, DC, 1994
ART GALLERY, UNIVERSITY OF NEW HAMPSHIRE, Durham, NH, 1994
ART GALLERY, CLEVELAND STATE UNIVERSITY, Cleveland, OH, April 1994
SUN VALLEY CENTER FOR THE ARTS, Sun Valley, Idaho, February 1993
SONSBEEK INTERNATIONAL ART CENTER, Arnhem, The Netherlands, Sept.-Nov. 1991
NATIONAL ACADEMY OF SCIENCES, Washington, DC, "Documents" (drawings and related documents produced in conjunction with large-scale site-specific solstice projects,) January-March, 1991
MORRIS MUSEUM, Morristown, NJ, "New Jersey Artist Series," January-March, 1991
GERALD PETERS GALLERY, Santa Fe, NM, 1991, 1989
THE PHILLIPS COLLECTION, Washington, DC, April-June, 1987
OSUNA GALLERY, Washington, DC, 1989, 1985, 1983, 1981
DIANE BROWN GALLERY, New York, NY, 1984
ST. LAWRENCE UNIVERSITY, Brush Gallery, Canton, NY, 1984
HENRI GALLERY, Washington, DC, 1981
MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY, MI, 1980



Sentinel (Tool for Alberto) 1998
granite/steel, 13"h x 15"w x 4"d

Acknowledgments

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Pique à Terre VI, 1997, granite/steel, 58"h x 106"w x 50"d

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The Museum is comprised of over 4450 antique to contemporary works, which are displayed within our three main galleries, a developing sculpture park, and exhibition areas throughout the campus. Expanding upon the pluralistic ideal of Andre Malreaux's concept of a *Museum Without Walls*, the Plattsburgh Art Museum has become an open visual art resource for the college and the Champlain Valley/Adirondack Region.

The Museum is a result of the vision and generosity of many individuals and groups. The arts were given a significant place in the initial concept of the State University and this ideal is maintained by the current administration. The Student Association, College Auxiliary Services, and the College Foundation support the exhibition program. The unique permanent collection has been given by artists and collectors.

It is located in the Myers Fine Arts Building between Rugar St. and Broad St. on the Plattsburgh State University Campus. **DIRECTIONS—From Burlington:** Commuter air from Burlington International Airport which services all major cities. Ferry service from Burlington to Plattsburgh runs year-round every 20 minutes; from North Burlington, take Interstate 89 to Exit 17; 12 miles to Grand Isle Ferry. Ferry docks at Cumberland Head, NY; take Route 9 to Plattsburgh. The Port Kent Ferry docks within walking distance from downtown Burlington; approximately 1 hour ferry trip to Port Kent, NY; 3 miles to 9N or Interstate 87 to Exits 36 or 37 to Plattsburgh. **From Montréal:** Montréal is 60 miles north of Plattsburgh, highway travel takes approximately 1 hour. South-bound, take Canadian Highway 15 to the US/Canadian border (where it becomes Interstate 87) to Exits 36 or 37 to Plattsburgh. **From New York City & Albany:** Amtrak and motor coach; daily service. All highways north, then via Interstate 87N, through Albany to Exit 37; approximately six hours by car from New York City.

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