



JOHN VAN ALSTINE

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Sculpture and Drawings
1988-1993

April 1-29, 1994

Essay by
David M. Gariff

Art Gallery
Cleveland State University
Cleveland, Ohio 44115



Overcast, 1990
pastel and charcoal on paper
30"h x 20"w

PREFACE

The sculptures of John Van Alstine represent a significant contribution to contemporary American art. This contribution is born, in part, from Ohio roots. Van Alstine's artistic training began in earnest while a student at Kent State University in the 1970s and examples of his early work were included in the 1973 and 1974 May Shows at the Cleveland Museum of Art. Since that time, Van Alstine has developed into one of the most exciting and accomplished sculptors on the American art scene.

It is with extreme pride and pleasure that the Art Gallery of Cleveland State University presents this first one-person exhibition of John Van Alstine's sculptures and drawings in Ohio. A special debt of gratitude is extended to the artist for donating his time and energy to the production of this exhibition and catalog. The Art Gallery is also indebted to David Gariff, Assistant Professor of Art History at Cleveland State University, who graciously agreed to curate the exhibition and to write the catalog essay. Additional thanks are due the members of the Art Gallery Committee and the chairperson of the Cleveland State University Art Department, John Hunter, for sustaining this important project. The gallery is particularly pleased that the College of Graduate Studies at Cleveland State University supported the production of this catalog as did the George Gund Foundation, The Cleveland Foundation and the Ohio Arts Council. We extend our deepest appreciation to all these agencies. Finally, thanks to Jo-Ann Dontenville who designed the catalog and helped to keep this project on track.

Robert Thurmer
Director, Art Gallery
Cleveland State University
March, 1994

JOHN VAN ALSTINE

SCULPTURE BETWEEN A ROCK AND A HARD SPOT

David M. Gariff

The art of John Van Alstine is a highly personal amalgam of many of the technical and aesthetic concerns that have shaped the recent history of 20th-century sculpture. Combining the techniques and materials of carved granite, cast bronze and welded steel, Van Alstine's sculptural vocabulary reflects the improvisational aspects of Abstract Expressionism, the elemental shapes of Minimalism, and the concern with natural materials and processes of Post-Minimalism. Beyond their formal properties, Van Alstine's sculptures also address a wide array of themes relating to the sources of artistic creativity, the labor and tools involved in making art, and the search for meaning in abstract forms.

An artist now in mid-career, Van Alstine has produced a large and distinguished body of work that warrants closer critical examination not only for its formal beauty but also for its original and inventive engagement with so many of the fundamental premises of the sculptural art form. Indeed, taken as a whole, his work addresses most of the issues that have obsessed sculptors past and present. Among these concerns may be cited the respective potentialities and limitations of carving, casting and construction; the nature and language of materials; the physical laws that govern sculpture; the use and importance of found objects; the continuing debate between figuration and abstraction; and the unique ability that three-dimensional forms have to activate space and to interact with a viewer on both a physical and a psychic level.

There is a special excitement and accomplishment in the way that Van Alstine's sculptures explore formal contradiction and the opposition of forces: gravity and weight work for a piece, not against it; natural and man-made materials compliment each other and subvert our expectations about their characteristics and behavior; refinement and rawness coexist in a delicate yet forceful balance; a sense of both the intimate and the monumental is implied and a reconciliation between logic and subjective expression is always evident. This impressive array of visual and physical tensions, of actual and implied formal conflicts, lends an air of immediacy and poise to Van Alstine's work that seems to hold the laws of nature in abeyance. The viewer who chooses to engage the aesthetic dialogues that these works elicit is always challenged and rarely disappointed.

John Van Alstine received his artistic education and training in American universities during the 1970s. Contemporary American sculpture at that time was undergoing a change from the cool surfaces, objectified forms and personal detachment of Minimalism, typified by the works of Ronald Bladen, Donald Judd and Tony Smith, to the more process-oriented, mutable and anti-formal vocabulary of Post-Minimalist artists like Robert Smithson and Richard Serra. It comes as no surprise that Van Alstine's personal style is indebted, in part, to both of these avenues of expression. He differs from the above-mentioned artists, however, in his desire and ability to move beyond the exploration of only those formal elements essential to the work of art itself, to a more expansive and densely layered sculptural language. In this regard, his method is less analytic and more synthetic than one at first realizes.

Like many artists, Van Alstine tends to work in series, concentrating on specific formal and thematic issues in each one before moving on to the next. An inevitable carryover and cross-fertilization occurs in his work as a result, allowing one to trace the emergence and evolution of particular ideas throughout his entire oeuvre. Early works like *Torque I* (1977), *Prop III* (1979) and *Ballast I* (1979) (from series bearing the same titles) explore the formal problems related to gravity, balance, tension and compression. The weight of stone is used in an active and positive way. It becomes an asset, not a liability, allowing the component parts of the sculpture to be held together without the use of welds, pins or bolts. This formal principle remains a mainstay of the artist's most recent work as well, where the precarious balance between stone and steel is often maintained by forces that push against each other much like the voussoir and keystone elements in an arch.

Other serial themes in Van Alstine's art refer to vessels, tools or implements, balance beams or scales, portals and passages, and finally, a more Surrealist-inspired series called *Strange Fruit* that brings together a diverse array of cast bronze objects rich in poetic symbolism and metaphor. The variety of these themes attests not only to Van Alstine's interest in formal problems in sculpture, but also to his concern with more literary and symbolic ideas.

His use of Latin words and titles like *incus* (anvil) and *ara* (altar) in *Vessel V (Incus)* (1988-89) and *Ara* (1989) immediately suggests deeper levels of meaning. The anvil is a found object (cast from life), a place of labor referring especially to the blacksmith (and to David Smith?), a site where not only physical objects are forged but creative ideas as well and, therefore, a kind of artistic altar.

Physical and poetic paradox often exist side by side in a Van Alstine sculpture. *Sledge* (1992), for example, conflates the ideas of a sled and its load into one unified sculptural form. The stone is both the bed of the vehicle and its cargo. Implications for movement and whether the sledge is meant to be seen as empty or loaded are just a few of the intriguing questions raised by the work. Additional symbolism accrues when one recalls that the historical function of a sledge relates to the American tradition of clearing boulders from the land. They very often appeared to be stone boats (vessels) skidding low over the ground. *Odalisque* (1989), through its title, encourages us to recall the pictorial and sculptural traditions of the reclining female nude in Ingres and Canova while it negates those same traditions through its abstract formal language, materials and technical principles.

References to tools, to the hard work involved in being a sculptor and to a sculptor's kinship with those who engage in physical labor for a living are all leitmotifs in Van Alstine's art. Real tools are often incorporated into his works as in *Implement V* (1992); bronze casts of an anvil and a prong from a forklift appear in *Vessel V (Incus)* (1988-89) and *Untitled (Stone with Stick)* (1989) respectively; and sculptures whose forms echo or refer to the shapes of tools — *Cudgel II* (1991), *Upshot II* (1992) and *Slider I* (1992) — appear with great frequency. Tools are seen as an extension of the artist's hand, allies in his aspirations and symbols of his labors and ultimate accomplishments. Such sentiments recall the values and beliefs of past sculptors as varied as Michelangelo, Rodin and David Smith. Van Alstine's *Implement* series is especially relevant in form and close in spirit to sculptures from Smith's *Agricola* series (1951-52) composed, in part, of farm machinery and tools. Smith also frequently used Latin and Greek words, phrases and titles in his works.

Van Alstine often exploits the expressive potential of industrial materials and found objects salvaged from the shipyards of New York harbor and Jersey City where he once resided. Crimped I-beams, broken flanges, cut steel pipe, linkage from anchor chains and parts taken from a winch or capstan have all been reborn and recontextualized in his sculptures. Particularly distinctive objects in this regard are often cast in bronze if possible and may very well appear in more than one work.

In recent years Van Alstine has been more involved with large-scale outdoor public sculptures. The huge *Solstice Calendar* (1986) installed on the campus of Austin College in Sherman, Texas returns us to the primordial power of rough-hewn granite blocks set upright in the earth like so many prehistoric menhirs or dolmens. Standing over twenty-three feet high and weighing over seventy tons, *Solstice Calendar* is a work of formal simplicity, calendrical sophistication and totemic presence that recalls aspects of Stonehenge in both its form and function. A more relevant source of inspiration, however, is the artist's long-standing fascination with the landscape and rock formations of the American west — especially in Wyoming, Colorado and New Mexico.

Van Alstine has always believed in allowing the raw stone to speak for itself. Evident in all his sculptures, large and small, this “language of the stone” is among the most provocative aspects of his art. He has moved away from the traditional concept of carving as a refined manipulation of the chisel through which a sculptor imposes his will on inert material, towards an approach that thinks of each raw stone as a found object already possessing formal integrity. Recognizing, selecting and roughly hewing a stone in order to bring out its hidden potential as sculpture is his personal variation on an ancient subtractive method. The results are perhaps most apparent in his outdoor commissions where the relationship of the stone to the quarry is easier to recreate visually and where the “quarry graphics” (how the stone has split and what its features reveal) are most obvious.

Drawings fulfill a variety of purposes in the art of Van Alstine. They clearly exist in a symbiotic relationship with his sculptures but frequently change their character and nuances. Some are used in problem solving while a sculptural project is underway. Others investigate a specific detail or motif that may or may not find its translation into three-dimensional form. Frequently a finished sculpture serves as inspiration for a drawing, and even more common is a free, improvisational drawing based loosely on a sculptural model. In all cases, drawing is a source of pleasure and immediate gratification for the artist. An increased sense of energy and the exploration of coloristic effects are hallmarks of his two-dimensional works.

John Van Alstine is among the most gifted sculptors of his generation. At a time when most, if not all, of the basic premises of sculpture have either been called into question or blatantly rejected, Van Alstine's art reasserts the continuing relevance of a three-dimensional language predicated on a clear set of formal principles and conceptual ideas. His vision reunites us with sculpture's origins at the same time that it gives us a glimpse of its future possibilities.



Vessel V (Incus), 1988-89
granite and bronze
88"h x 44"w x 15"d



Sledge, 1992
granite and steel
30"h x 64"w x 42"d

EXHIBITION CHECKLIST

Sculptures

1. *Vessel V (Incus)*, 1988-89
granite and bronze
88"h x 44"w x 15"d
2. *Untitled (Stone with Stick)*, 1989
granite and bronze
67"h x 19"w x 9"d
3. *Odalisque*, 1989
granite and steel
81"h x 98"w x 60"d
4. *Portal (Ad Augusta per Angusta)*, 1990
granite and steel
21"h x 35"w x 13"d
5. *Platte*, 1990
granite and steel
62"h x 101"w x 62"d
6. *Astraea's Beam*, 1991
granite and bronze
55"h x 72"w x 18"d
7. *Link II*, 1991
granite and steel
74"h x 48"w x 30"d
8. *Cudgel II*, 1991
slate and steel
32"h x 31"w x 10"d
9. *Implement V*, 1992
granite and steel
16"h x 12"w x 4"d
Private Collection
10. *Sacandaga Vessel*, 1992
granite and steel
73"h x 28"w x 12"d
11. *Sledge*, 1992
granite and steel
30"h x 64"w x 42"d
12. *Beam II*, 1992
granite and steel
18"h x 38"w x 3"d
13. *Implement X*, 1992
granite and steel
32"h x 60"w x 16"d

14. *Untitled III*, 1992
granite and steel
14"h x 10"w x 5"d
15. *Slider I*, 1992
granite and steel
13"h x 8"w x 5"d
16. *Upshot II*, 1992
granite and steel
17"h x 17"w x 5"d

Drawings

1. *Go-Round*, 1989
pastel and charcoal on paper
20"h x 30"w
2. *Full-Support*, 1989
pastel and charcoal on paper
40"h x 30"w
3. *Sidewinder*, 1989
pastel and charcoal on paper
30"h x 40"w
4. *Ascent*, 1990
pastel and charcoal on paper
30"h x 20"w
5. *Overcast*, 1990
pastel and charcoal on paper
30"h x 20"w
6. *Adze*, 1990
pastel and charcoal on paper
40"h x 30"w
7. *Slider*, 1993
pastel and charcoal on paper
40"h x 30"w



Odalisque, 1989
granite and steel
81"h x 98"w x 60"d



Implement V, 1992
granite and steel
16"h x 12"w x 4"d
Private Collection