

John Van Alstine: Vessels and Voyages



DeCordova Sculpture Terrace/Sculpture Terrace Gallery

DeCordova Museum and Sculpture Park, Lincoln, Massachusetts

June 1, 1996 – May 11, 1997



Preface

The exhibition *John Van Alstine: Vessels and Voyages* is the first in DeCordova's new Sculpture Terrace and Sculpture Terrace Gallery. This 4000 square foot outdoor space with its attendant indoor gallery round out the mission of the DeCordova Sculpture Park. The Sculpture Park presents an ongoing, rotating group exhibition of contemporary American outdoor sculpture. Now, for the first time, artists of national and regional significance will be able to show entire bodies of outdoor sculpture along with related indoor works in annual one-person exhibitions. This program is unique in New England, and rare among American museums and sculpture parks.

We are proud to have John Van Alstine inaugurate the Sculpture Terrace and Sculpture Terrace Gallery. He is an artist of rapidly rising national significance, and his work addresses a host of formal and conceptual issues relevant to late twentieth-century sculpture. His bold, dynamic outdoor works perfectly complement the dramatic site of the Sculpture Terrace, and his beautifully rendered drawings add to the elegance of DeCordova's recently renovated galleries.

Paul Master-Karnik, *Director*



Chalice (checklist #2)

John Van Alstine: Vessels and Voyages

During the last decade John Van Alstine has created an ambitious body of remarkably interrelated outdoor and indoor sculptures, site-specific installations, public art projects, and drawings. His prolific and consistently engaging output, ranging in size from the small and delicate to the vast and monumental, has earned the artist a reputation as one of America's most important sculptors of the late twentieth century. This exhibition of recent sculptures and drawings exemplifies the major visual, emotional, and intellectual threads which run through Van Alstine's art, with a thematic focus on the crucial notions of vessel and voyage.

Van Alstine's work in all media relies on mutually reinforcing strategies of cohesive juxtaposition — of materials, formal issues, association, and content. A balanced yet dynamic tension between integrity and disintegration unites his widely disparate objects and images. Through carefully calculated compositions, based on natural laws and the suggestive properties of materials, Van Alstine creates sculptures which, while rock-solid, strain with potential energy. This ability to bind physical matter also serves to bind the immaterial connotations of the work in interwoven layers of meaning.

An inventory of art-historically sanctioned sculptural materials coexist throughout the artist's oeuvre. Van Alstine uses both stone and bronze, the mainstays of pre-Modernist sculpture, as well as the major innovation of twentieth-century sculpture — the found object. The aesthetic juxtaposition of objects of human design and fabrication has its roots in Cubist and Futurist sculpture, as well as in Surrealist assemblage. Van Alstine's work hearkens back to these

traditions, especially through its engagement with space and suggestions of motion, but finds a more firm lineage in his American predecessors David Smith and Mark di Suvero. Like Smith, Van Alstine includes in his assemblages tools of the sculptor's trade such as compasses and anvils. Like di Suvero, he is attracted to huge cast-off products of industry, especially marine and aeronautical parts. Thus, through his choice of method and materials, Van Alstine extends one of the most vital currents in the art of this century, while acknowledging a far older heritage.

The plastic qualities of Van Alstine's work engage all the formal preoccupations of Modernist sculpture. On a purely visual level, his sculptures address issues of mass and void, shape and texture, volume and spatial extension, motion and stasis, and complete three-dimensional realization. What makes his work unique, and is its primary unifying agent, is his complex approach to the force of gravity. Many of Van Alstine's sculptures display a profound vertical or diagonal aspiration. Large shapes thrust upward, or seem to float away from their literal moorings — massive stones, marine cleats, or anchors. In other



Charting the Course II (checklist #4)



Tether (Boys Toys) (checklist #7)

sculptures, extended shapes are arrayed along circular paths. Almost all of the sculptures contain a physical or suggested pivot point from which forms radiate to describe arcs, sections of circles and spheres. In this way, the many different objects in each sculpture seem held together not so much by the true force of the Earth's

gravity, but by an illusion of a potential centrifugal force. The massive forms seem weightless, a condition which would imply imminent disintegration. Yet, they are smoothly held together by compositions which suggest, but do not actually create, orbits. Orbital composition is the keystone which prevents Van Alstine's sculptures, with their far-flung forms, from visually falling apart.

The idea of orbit also circumscribes, as it were, the associational content of Van Alstine's work. An orbit implies motion, time, distance, and space — all components of the theme of voyage. The circularity of the orbit also suggests, for this artist, the circularity of the voyage of life. The journeys through Van Alstine's metaphoric stages of the life course are further elaborated

through his suggestions of vessels of two types: vessels as modes of transportation, and vessels as containers. Moreover, his judicious assignment of titles helps to guide interpretation and unify meaning.

In *Charting the Course II*, a small indoor sculpture, the splayed arms of a compass

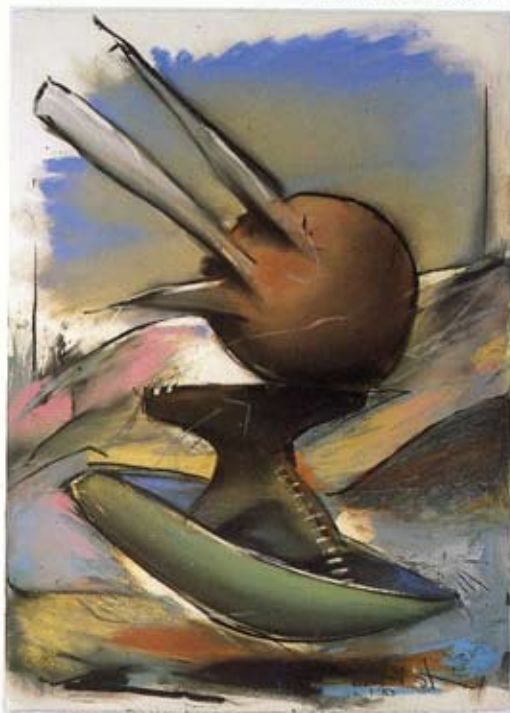
establish an illusion of radial motion around an anchoring stone. A small abstract form, suggesting both a boat and a pod, is attached to the outer end of the raised arm. The size and delicacy of this work, along with its navigational found object and title, indicate a voyage just underway. In *Tether (Boys Toys)*, a large outdoor piece, a huge airplane fuel tank seems to gently waft upward before being restrained by its tethering anchor and chain. While buoyant and playful, *Tether (Boys Toys)* also involves undercurrents of danger. The fuel tank is battered and distressed, and looks not unlike an ascending missile (a vessel which reinforces the orbital leitmotif of Van Alstine's work).

The element of threat is even more evident in *Atlas (Highroller)*. Here, a menacing black mine casing — an actual weapon that resembles a round fused bomb — seems to revolve about its stone base. The two-pronged title, referring to both the mythic bearer of the Earth and the indeterminacy of gambling, provides an interpretive context of possible planetary disaster. Our world whirls about in a monumental orrery of doom.

Van Alstine's use of mythological reference also occurs in *Charon's Steel Styx Passage*, his most recent outdoor sculpture. In this abstract evocation of the final voyage, Van Alstine interprets death as a universal experience both frightening and exhilarating. Charon's ferry to the Underworld swings in a wide arc above a large buoy which suggests yet another planetary orb. The ferry, its extended oar, and a coin (the token price of the voyage) are held aloft by a mast which is anchored by a marine cleat and a stone. With this complex interweaving of symbols, forms, found objects, and title, Van Alstine merges the waters of Styx with the spiritual ether of the cosmos. Death seems grim, but also transcendent.

In *Chalice*, a large section of an aeronautical part is transformed into an upward-reaching, radiant yet scarred, Cup of Life. By attaching this tapering conic form to its stone base at an angle just slightly off from true vertical, Van Alstine again manages to suggest a slowly rotating motion. His *Chalice* is dynamic, a moving, aspiring spiritual vessel — not just a static, symbolic icon.

John Van Alstine's drawings share many of the themes found in his sculptures, and the two media exist in a complex mutual relationship. Many of the drawings relate directly to particular sculptures or iconographic themes. Some are fields for intuitive explorations of certain juxtapositions which later are realized in three dimensions, and others are made in response to finished sculptures. But in works like *Passage (Red Ball with Points)*, Van Alstine gives his imagination free rein. A boat, an anvil, and



Passage (Red Ball with Points) (checklist #11)

a sphere with projecting forms zoom along together over a highly charged abstract landscape. These objects, all familiar players in Van Alstine's repertory, embark on a voyage which is as much narrative as symbolic. Here, in two dimensions, the artist is free to create relationships which would be impossible in three dimensions given the physical laws which firmly limit the possible actions and interactions of objects.

A number of writers have suggested that John Van Alstine's work owes a debt to Minimalism. Such contextualizations are based on the artist's use of geometric forms and his chronological position vis-a-vis the great march of Art History. But the deployment of cones, spheres, and circles is neither necessary nor sufficient evidence of a Minimalist aesthetic. Moreover, Minimalism — an end-game of Modernist formalism — involved the reduction not only of mass and volume, but also of content. Van Alstine's work, with its juxtaposed impure found objects, and rich layers of association, symbolism, and narrative, could never be construed as reduced. Van Alstine does indeed borrow from the formal innovations of Modernism, but he extends them into a realm fraught with extra-visual meaning, a realm of the mind and soul (and not just the eye), which is truly contemporary, post-Minimalist, and post-Modern.

Nick Capasso, *Associate Curator*

Exhibition Checklist

All works are lent by the artist, Courtesy Nohra Haime Gallery, New York, NY. For dimensions, height precedes width precedes depth.

SCULPTURE

1. **Atlas (High Roller)**, 1995
granite, steel,
10' 6" x 6' x 3' 6"
2. **Chalice**, 1995
aluminum, granite, steel,
10' 8" x 4' 2" x 3'
3. **Charon's Steel Styx Passage**, 1996
granite, steel, bronze,
18' x 20' x 6'
4. **Charting the Course II**, 1995
granite, steel,
9' x 11' x 3"
5. **Cornua**, 1994
granite, bronze,
10' 4" x 4' 7" x 4' 2"
6. **Diagonal Tendencies II**, 1994
granite, bronze,
7' 3" x 6' 4" x 2' 8"
7. **Tether (Boys Toys)**, 1995
aluminum, granite, steel,
16' x 14' x 10'
8. **Tiller II**, 1994
bronze, granite,
5' x 7' 1" x 2' 7"
9. **Vessel V (Incus)**, 1988/1989
granite, bronze,
7' 4" x 3' 8" x 1' 3"

WORKS ON PAPER

10. **Charting the Course**, 1991
pastel, charcoal, gesso,
40" x 30"
11. **Passage (Red Ball with Points)**, 1990
pastel and mixed media,
40" x 30"
12. **Slider (Blue)**, 1993
pastel, charcoal, gesso,
40" x 30"
13. **Untitled (Vessel/Gold)**, 1992
pastel, charcoal, gesso,
30" x 22"

