

arts

Creative balance

Exhibit features many facets of sculptor John Van Alstine's art

By Amy Griffin

Though sculptor John Van Alstine lives in the Capital Region, he's not really what you would call a regional artist. At 58, he enjoys an enviable career. With a wide exhibition record, works held in the collections of museums across the country and public art-works installed around the world, including the Beijing Olympic Gardens, he's a full-time artist with a studio compound-cum-sculpture garden on the banks of the Sacandaga River. And yet, it took moving to Santa Fe, N.M., for curator Ruth Hall Daly to discover an artist she'd never heard of but who lived only 90 miles from her former home in upstate New York. She visited his studio with Jim Richard Wilson, director of the Opalka Gallery, and an exhibition was born.

That exhibition, "John Van Alstine: Arrested Motion/Perilous Balance," is on view now at the Opalka Gallery on the Sage College campus. Since much of what Van Alstine does is public sculpture on a grand scale, it was a challenge to curate an exhibit in an enclosed gallery space, Hall Daly writes in her catalog essay. But by mixing smaller works, scale models and drawings in the gallery and including three large sculptures on the grounds outside, she makes it work.

The title of the show is apt as the primary focus of Alstine's work appears to be upward motion and heavy objects precariously balanced, though marrying natural with man-made materials is also clearly at the forefront of his motivation. In most of the works, steel forms precariously hold aloft large rocks or chunks of slate. The natural surface of the stone contrasts with the steel, usually pigmented black or a color, most often a deep red.

In many works, such as "Sisyphus Circle XLII (Circle)," the rock appears to be balanced ever so carefully, as if the slightest movement might send it toppling over. The work reflects the artist's ongoing interest in the mythological character Sisyphus, who was forced to spend eternity pushing a rock up a hill only to have it roll back down repeatedly.

On the artist's website, he embraces Albert Camus' interpretation of the tale as a metaphor for the creative process. That process is as much the point as the final product. This is a mantra for many process-oriented artists. It doesn't mean the end result — the art object itself — is unimportant, but that it should reflect the process.

The interest in Sisyphus and his struggle doesn't mean there isn't humor in these works. Some of the works have a playfulness about them. "Juggler '12 (Red Ara)," incorporates a red anvil and what looks part of a garden tiller. Here, though, the objects take on a birdlike quality with spikes that act as feathers and a long, narrow piece of red steel outstretched with a stone on the end of it. The stone is small and though precariously balanced, it looks like food ready to slide into a bird's mouth.

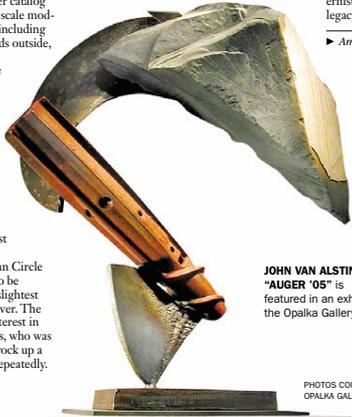
One of the few pieces that doesn't feature a rock balanced in air is "Splay." A large red balloon-like steel piece extends from the rock almost as if it's in the midst of inflating, tethered to the ground only by the rock. It's a newer piece, so perhaps it represents a shift

away from the use of suspended rocks, though it might still be a reference to Sisyphus in that the rock, i.e. the process, is what holds it all together.

Van Alstine doesn't only work in three dimensions. His works on paper are looser, less controlled than the sculptures and, because of the use of color and gesture, there's a vibrancy not found in the sculptures. Some are studies for sculptures, some exist on their own and some, Van Alstine notes, are for "problem solving." That's the case for the two "Tempered by Memory" drawings. Van Alstine, in collaboration with Noah Savett, created a sculpture by the same name from five pieces of steel from the World Trade Center. The sculpture, installed in High Rock Park in Saratoga, was dedicated on Sept. 9.

A modernist in a postmodern world, Van Alstine credits as an influence modernist sculptor David Smith, one of the giants of his era. Though just a teenager in 1965, when Smith died, he does seem to be continuing a conversation Smith started. By mixing materials and metaphors and making the most of the mainstream of acceptance of abstract modernist sculpture, Van Alstine builds on Smith's legacy.

► Amy Griffin is a freelance writer from Delmar.



JOHN VAN ALSTINE'S "AUGER '05" is featured in an exhibit at the Opalka Gallery.

PHOTOS COURTESY
OPALKA GALLERY



JOHN VAN ALSTINE'S "PIQUE" is made of granite and pigmented and sealed steel.

On exhibit

"JOHN VAN ALSTINE: ARRESTED MOTION/PERILOUS BALANCE"

- **When:** Now through October 14; hours: Monday through Friday, 10 a.m. to 8 p.m., Sunday, noon to 4 p.m. and by appointment on Oct. 9.
- **Where:** Opalka Gallery (on Sage College

campus), 140 New Scotland Ave., Albany

- **Admission:** Free
- **Info:** 518-292-7742; <http://www.sage.edu/opalka/>
- **Event:** At 7:45 p.m. Friday, Ellen Sinopoli Dance Company will perform a site-specific dance in three 15-minute segments, choreographed in response to the exhibit.