

**JOHN VAN ALSTINE**  
**SCULPTURE BETWEEN A ROCK AND A HARD SPOT**

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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 carry-over 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.