

**AMERICAN VISTAS**



# AMERICAN VISTAS

THE LIFE AND ART OF  
**JOHN VAN ALSTINE**

BY TIM KANE







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*SISYPHEAN CIRCLE LIV*, 2011, private collection Amherst, MA.

Previous spread: *Estes Easel Landscape*, 1979, steel easel photographed in Rocky Mt. National Park, CO. PHOTO: John Van Alstine.





INTERNATIONAL  
STONE  
SCULPTING  
EXPOSITION  
KETTERING OHIO

## John Van Alstine United States

John Van Alstine is a professional sculptor living in Wells, New York. John uses stone as a found object and makes minor adjustments to the original shape to integrate steel or wood into the form. He received a master of Fine Arts from Cornell University in Ithaca, New York, in 1976 and a Bachelor of fine Arts from Kent State University in Kent, Ohio, in 1974. He has received numerous awards, fellowship grants and honors for his work from private and public sources as well as internationally. As a celebrated U.S. artist, his work has been displayed in solo exhibitions, both domestically and in international galleries, since 1976.

John Van Alstine's proposal includes metal incorporated with stone which may function as a solar calendar or sundial.



## Preface

It was a glistening summer day in 2010. Intense light bounced off waves of water, reflecting back at John Van Alstine and I as we sat waist deep in the Sacandaga River on folding lawn chairs seeking refuge from the hot sun. We had just finished kayaking and had beers in hand. Then unexpectedly the rather idle chatter turned to something more poignant.

“You know,” Van Alstine said, turning directly to me. “Every artist needs a writer.” I responded almost instinctively: “and every writer needs an artist.” So began the journey that led to this book more than a decade later.

We had met two years earlier when I traveled to his home/studio in Wells, New York to interview him for a story about him being one of only a handful of American sculptors invited to exhibit in the Sculpture Park commemorating the 2008 Beijing Olympics.

Over the intervening years we kept in contact. I’d make occasional trips to his place from Albany learning more about his process and depth of his work, but, for the most part, it was mostly social and recreational involving hiking, paddling and snowshoeing. And, of course, sitting next to his large stone fireplace on frigid winter days. We were very much at ease with each other as our relationship grew.

As time went on, I encountered all the myriad phases of his work, organizing them into a somewhat coherent form. After much discussion about what I saw in his work, he asked if I could help with the cataloguing of it. With more than 800 objects at the time, it was a daunting task.

Not only was his collection extensive, but he also restlessly darted in and out of concepts in a non-linear fashion, returning to older ideas with new twists derived by tangentially exploring something new. Over the next three years, we pieced things together intermittently.

By 2015, an overall theme began to emerge that was different from the numerous articles and reviews on his work. Isn’t Van Alstine really a sculptor in the American landscape tradition?



While there are many themes from classical mythology to 20th century constructivism prevalent in his works, isn't his outlook, temperament, and process in the same vein as the American landscape art movement?

After all, Van Alstine's work is, through his essential materials of stone and steel, about the dichotomy between pristine nature and the man-made environment, a reoccurring theme in American landscape art from its earliest beginnings in the 1820s. It was a breakthrough in interpreting his art. After I submitted several drafts in chapter form in the summer of 2015 the idea of a major catalogue publication emerged.

In 2016, financial support needed to publish a catalogue came from a program at the New York Foundation for the Arts, which allowed benefactors to donate to the book and receive tax incentives. In 2017, The Artist Book Foundation (TABF) was chosen as publisher.

But after a two-year editing process it became clear that TABF had a different vision than the heavily biographical format and the manuscript delivered was structurally reformatted leaving numerous chapters out and was published in a radically altered form.

What was omitted became the basis of this companion book. As a true monograph and biography, much more of Van Alstine's character, personality and mindset emerges, providing a fuller picture of his life beyond just the art. There's no question this book is about his art, but it also sheds light on the backstory to the art. *American Vistas: The Life and Art of John Van Alstine* is much more than just recycled material from the catalogue, it contains additional material that presents a broader, more comprehensive picture.

The entire manuscript has been reworked and some of the chapters are completely new. The COVID chapter is new. *Steel* is, by in large, completely repurposed. *Tensegrity* is a fresh version pulled out of the "Out West" chapter. So too is *At Work in the ADKs* which is the crescendo of the book created at the very end of the process in the winter of 2021/22 capturing how his move back to the Adirondacks in 1990 led him to move towards a pure landscape aesthetic and underscores the whole thrust of *American Vistas*.

Although separate works, both the TABF catalogue, *John Van Alstine: Sculpture 1971-2018* and *American Vistas* are connected by their differences highlighting the same body of work by an artist over nearly a half century. Combined they are meant to be a singular and complete examination on one of the most important sculptors in the last half century.

## Introduction: Stone, Steel and the American Landscape

For nearly fifty years, John Van Alstine has created abstract sculptures forged with stone and steel. At their essence, they explore natural forces and man-made elements, conveying the American experience as the confluence/conflict between wilderness and industrialization.

Ever since the early 19th century, as the nation moved west, landscape artists have depicted this juxtaposition as a particularly American dichotomy, a friction between the march of economic progress and the vast expanses of open space—the Garden of Eden spoiled by modernity and machinery.

Van Alstine's sculpture adds to this epic dialogue by keenly expanding on the 19th century narrative, while injecting 20th century ideas of abstraction, constructivism, cubism, assemblage, collage, and found objects as a standard-bearer of the modernist tradition. By grappling with the inherent divergent qualities of stone and steel, the sculptures seek a balance; they are measured and calculated, but, at the same time, provide a sense of narrative, even the poetic, with swooping angular lines creating expansive space beyond their frames, suggesting much more than mere abstraction.

It is through this construct that history and the imagination are unveiled as if portals on American culture, thus illuminating the American experience. Through themes such as mythology, navigation, gravity/tension, and urban architecture and density, Van Alstine weaves various viewpoints into his sculptures representing myriad topics like landscape artists before him. Beyond the steel and stone frame, these views define the essence of his work and interpret the "vistas" before him and then us.

He has been described as an abstract artist with a keen sense of composition in modernist terms, a sculptor who finds balance and energy in the moment, an artist who evokes narratives from inanimate objects, or even a figurative artist with implied ideas of the human form. All of those descriptions are accurate, but analyzing his oeuvre and life in its totality, a more





encompassing definition emerges; one that places his objects and life in the greater context of American art and the landscape. With “found” stone as a foundation through all of his creative phases, much like American landscape artists depiction of geological forms, Van Alstine is first and foremost an American landscape artist in the tradition that spawned American culture in earnest during the 1830s.

Known as the Hudson River School, artists such as Thomas Cole, Asher Durand, Frederic Church and Sanford Robinson Gifford, saw wilderness as unique to the young nation’s experience—an American artifact spawned by natural forces over thousands of years. They saw raw stone as the bedrock of culture; America’s own ancient ruins rivaling Europe’s remnants of civilization.

For both Van Alstine and the early American landscape artists, rock, formed by geologic movements over millions of years, are timeless and also of-the-moment expressions of nature and culture. With steel, Van Alstine interjects industrialization on this timeline, much like earlier landscape artists who incorporated factories, skyscrapers and railroads interspersed with wilderness as commentaries on American society as it modernized. Landscape artists can work in many mediums and materials but an underlying connection between each other is their interpretation of what is before them, their perspectives of place and time – geography and history – gathered from their personal experiences.

This publication not only offers a critical assessment of his art, but it delves into biographic elements that drive his creative process. It explores the intellectual foundations of what he makes beyond merely aesthetics, and provides a window into the process that reveals the person as much as the art.





## Provenance

*We are born into a landscape.* — John Constable

John Richard Van Alstine was born August 14, 1952 in Johnstown NY, an old industrial city just south of the Adirondack Park and north of the Mohawk River and Erie Canal. He was the oldest of three boys raised by Richard and Audrey Van Alstine. His father worked at the Knox Gelatine plant as a packaging engineer, eventually rising to plant superintendent. He was the last employee to leave the building when its owner, Lipton Tea Co., moved operations overseas.

Although John Van Alstine didn't grow up in a particularly artistic family, there is a strong tradition of his family working with their hands in the building trades, a legacy that impacted Van Alstine early on. His great-grandfathers were carpenters, building homes and other buildings in the Mohawk Valley during the early 20th century. The Van Alstine family has roots in America stretching back to the Dutch Colonial period in 1689, according to the records of the Dutch Reform Church in Albany N.Y. In Dutch, Van Alstine's name means, quite appropriately, "from the 'old' or 'high' stone."

With such a family background, Van Alstine has worked with his hands from an early age. One particular project was his family's summer camp. At five, Van Alstine remembers taking an active role in building it in Caroga Lake, which is within the Adirondack Park, with his father. They hammered, sanded and sawed, a vivid experience that would be repeated when he purchased his studio in Wells, NY in 1987 in the heart of the six-million-acre park. Building the camp illustrates his "DIY" experiences in his childhood, including constructing tree forts and boats, and activities like fishing and sailing and skiing, a sport he excelled at throughout his youth.

"All three boys were very active, but building the camp was a something that John connected with, in particular, with his father," recalled Audrey Van Alstine, his mother, in a July 21, 2015 interview. "He was always focused and goal-oriented. He likes to accomplishing things." But "we never had any thoughts he would work with hands, or do art as career. We always thought he would be a coach."



Richard and Audrey Van Alstine skiing on John Dunn's Hill, Johnstown, NY, 1949.

Van Alstine building impromptu slate sculpture in Ludlowville gorge, 1975. PHOTO: Jennifer Van Alstine.



His parents weren't the only ones to be surprised about Van Alstine wanting to become a sculptor. Knowing John was a jock, his younger brother Mark recalls expecting him to be a coach, a teacher, or something along those lines, but "when I heard about the sculptor idea, 'it was like...you're kidding right? An artist...right, okay, sure...'"

#### Taking 'Flight': From Athlete to Artist

Van Alstine was a competitive skier, which he continued at St. Lawrence University in Canton NY, reaching the highest level at the collegiate Division I level in his freshman year. With his interest in competitive skiing waning by the end of his freshman year, he took his first formal class in sculpture in the spring of 1971.

*I actually wanted to sign up for the pottery class, but discovered it was full. The professor, Mike Lowe, who also taught sculpture, suggested I take that instead, saying 'you will not only get to work with clay, but have the opportunity to weld, carve stone, make molds.'* Van Alstine said in a June 25, 2015 interview.

*I wasn't thinking sculpture at all, it's interesting how those small serendipitous decisions can have such an impact, especially at that age. At the time, I was burnt out with competitive skiing, and I was searching for something, something that I could do with my hands. There was a big "back to the land" movement then. I initially was attracted to pottery—partly because my brother had taken it in high school—and it looked exciting and fun.*

While Van Alstine took a spattering of art classes in high school, the sculpture class at St. Lawrence in 1971 was a transformational experience. Two important early sculptures—*Flight*, 1971 (FIG. 3.) and the next semester *The Cellist (homage to Pablo Casals)*, 1972 (FIG. 4.) were created there.

Those works set forth some critical ideas that would lay the foundation for the early stages of his career. Both were metal and made in the *Constructivist* vein by welding different pieces together into "assemblages." The early 20th century movement founded in Russia and developed in Paris, stressed the assemblage of utilitarian materials, not normally associated with art. It reflected the arrival of the mass mechanization and industrialization occurring at a rapid pace.

*Flight* (FIG. 3.), finds motion in the bending of metal through sleek and simple lines, while *The Cellist (homage to Pablo Casals)*, (FIG. 4.) portrays a seated musician emerging from a cacophony of severely curved, even twisted forms, conveying the complexity of playing an instrument at the high levels of creativity. Both rely on the sense of action and motion, with *Flight* illustrating speed, a Futurist concept which would influence Van Alstine's later work to an extent, especially in the 1990s and 2000s. *The Cellist (homage to Pablo Casals)*, captures



Jock Days -1969, Van Alstine (r) with co-captain, John Ruppert, longtime friend and now accomplished sculptor and Art Department Chair (1998-2011), University of Maryland, College Park. PHOTO: Farrell Ruppert.

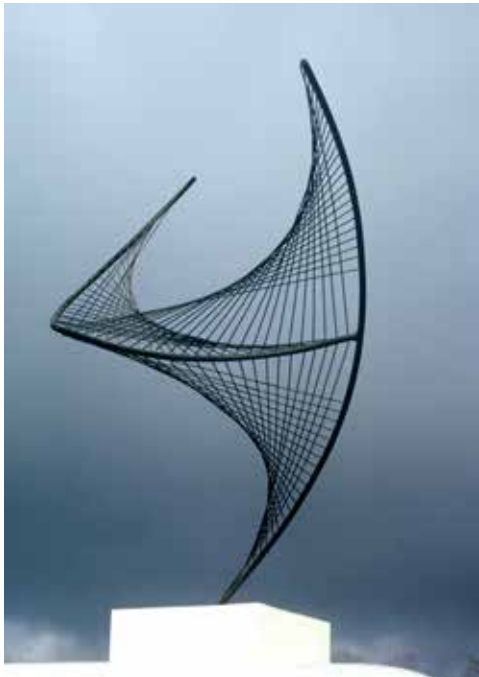


FIG. 3. *Flight*, 1971, welded steel, 57 x 36 x 40 in. (145 x 91 x 102 cm). Van Alstine's first welded steel sculpture.



FIG. 4. *The Cellist (homage to Pablo Casals)*, 1972, welded steel, 60 x 40 x 40 in. (152 x 102 x 102 cm). Van Alstine's second welded sculpture. Private collection.



two themes that will resonate throughout his career: metal as motif for modern life, and a bendable medium expressing movement and potential energy.

Finishing the class, Van Alstine declares art as his major, but realizes the St. Lawrence department is inadequate for his needs, and begins searching for a school offering a better sculpture program. At the time his high school girlfriend and future first wife, Jennifer Foss, had just been accepted to graduate school at Kent State, Ohio, for theater and performance art after earning her Bachelors of Arts at SUNY Potsdam, a mere 10 miles from St. Lawrence University where Van Alstine recalls spending “more time in the studios in Potsdam” than St. Lawrence. With Kent State offering a strong studio art program and Foss, very much an early supporter of his nascent efforts at sculpture headed there, it was natural for Van Alstine to follow.

### A Community, Fundamental Changes and a Generational Divide

More than anything, Foss introduced Van Alstine to a new community and its creativity by *introducing me to a whole set of friends that were set designers, actors, musicians and dancers that was very nurturing. I was opened to a world of arts that was not available to me prior to Kent State*, Van Alstine recalls. Foss remembers the move to Ohio (Kent State) as hugely transformative for both. For her, it marked a series of fundamental changes that had been occurring since both left the “insular” Johnstown for the world outside. Although both attended high school in Johnstown, Foss “bounced around’ due to her father’s occupation, while Van Alstine was born in Johnstown and had lived there all his life. She was also two years older and had been at Potsdam State for two years prior to Van Alstine attending St. Lawrence.

“As a backdrop, you have to remember the times. The anti-war movement was at its peak, traditional gender roles were being challenged,” Foss said in the same interview. “It was very tumultuous. John and I started out thinking I would teach English and he would teach Phys Ed. Suddenly, I was deeply involved in theater and rejecting a lot of what we thought we were going to do and John was turning to sculpture, which as I remember, at first, didn’t sit too well with his father.”

Though his parents were initially not thrilled by the change, they never discouraged it. *I think they were more concerned with the whole hippie thing ... my long hair, beard, clothes, etc., which were reflective of the anti-establishment atmosphere in the country then. Like many of my generation we pushed against the older generations middle class, patriotic values*, Van Alstine adds. The move to Kent State only hastened personal and professional changes rapidly occurring for both Van Alstine and Foss. They arrived at Kent State in the fall of 1972 and lived in a farmhouse outside town and the main campus. Van Alstine focused on carving stone while also spending a considerable amount of time delving into glass blowing, ceramics and metal work, some with curves suggesting the figure in varying degrees of abstraction.



Foss and Van Alstine (both left), 1970.



FIG. 6. *Gaea*, 1973, Vermont marble, 20 x 10 x 10 in. (51 x 25 x 25 cm). Private Collection.



FIG. 7. Joseph Konzal, *Gateway*, 1974, cor-ten steel, Dayton Courthouse, OH, Van Alstine witnessed its fabrication at Kent State.

### The Origin of All Things

His first stone sculpture, *Gaea*, 1973 (FIG. 6.), was titled after the Greek’s personification of the Earth as a goddess and the origin of all things. Its soft curves carved from marble allude to the pregnant human form in the early 20th century modernist vernacular, coincidentally, a subject reflecting his embryonic efforts at the medium. In the stimulating Kent environment forged by writers, poets, theater designers and techies, along with access to first-rate facilities, Foss remembers John as, “a kid in a candy store. He was absorbing so much since it was his first experience at truly focusing and developing his sculpture.”

During his first year, he continues to work primarily with stone, honing in different approaches to volume and space with Professor Ira Matteson. Although Matteson had an impact, Van Alstine finds the camaraderie and sharing of ideas amongst fellow students more formative than his relationship with faculty.





FIG. 8. *Untitled (Kiss I)*, 1973, Vermont marble, 36 x 24 x 12 in. (91 x 61 x 30 cm). Private collection.

*A lot of the students were working with metal in simple geometric forms, influenced by the work of Tony Smith – a kind of Midwest minimalism championed by Kent State professor Joseph Konzal. I was influenced by some of this, incorporating the reduced geometry aesthetic into my stone work. It provided a good counterpoint to the softer, more sensual shaping of contours, it was a combination I found expressive, yet solid,* Van Alstine said in a June 23, 2017 interview.

Urged by contemporaries and the scene itself, Van Alstine submitted works to regional juried exhibitions in Northern Ohio and around the country in 1973. By far the most important was the Cleveland Museum's *May Show* known for exhibiting seasoned professionals as well as emerging artists. *Untitled (Kiss I)*, 1973 (FIG. 8.) a blocky stone sculpture, influenced by the work of Constantine Brancusi, with rounded edges split in half with two eye-like indentations emerging, was exhibited and sold – his first.

That summer Van Alstine was awarded a Blossom Festival scholarship and began work with three established metal sculptors, Konzal, Richard Stankiewicz and Richard Hunt, effectively



FIG. 9. *Vertical Series 1*, 1974, Vermont marble, 48 x 12 x 8 in. (122 x 30 x 20 cm). Private collection.



FIG. 10. *Vertical Series 2*, 1974, Vermont marble, 55 x 22 x 8 in. (140 x 56 x 20 cm). Private collection.

diverting his focus from stone to steel and assemblage, something that would play a big role in the future. The following year, he sold two more pieces, *Vertical Series 1*, 1974 (FIG. 9.) and *Vertical Series 2*, 1974 (FIG. 10.) at the CMO's May show. *It was early reinforcement that I was doing the right thing and that I was on the same stage with my professors. I began to think maybe I could make a go of this,* he said in the same interview.

In addition to sculpture, Van Alstine had other concurrent artistic interest. He finally took the "Pottery I" class, the one he had been turned away from at St. Lawrence, by enrolling in an adult/continuing education night class at Kent State where he meets Diane Jenkins and later





FIG. 11. Van Alstine's blown glass, 1974.



FIG. 12. **Orange Peel Teapot**, 1977, raku, 14 x 10 x 5 in. (36 x 25 x 13 cm). Private collection.

with her husband David and together with Foss start their collaboration in a production pottery business. Also because the off campus Kent sculpture studio building was shared by the glass blowing department he became intrigued, signing up for several classes with professor Henry Halem, a well-known figure in the national art glass world. As a result of Halem's charismatic nature and the thrill of working molten glass at the end of a blow pipe from a raging 2000 F degree furnace, Van Alstine became quite involved, mastering the technique and creating some very good work, even considering glass as a MFA major.

#### A Return to Maine and the 'Good Earth'

The summer before graduating Cum Laude from Kent State with a BFA, Van Alstine travels back to Kennebunkport, ME, assisting friends David and Diane Jenkins in opening their pottery shop "The Good Earth," which as of 2022 is still open. Van Alstine had spent the three previous summers in Maine working at resorts, but this was a different experience entirely. The Jenkins' were students at Kent State in the Performing Arts department, and further cemented their relationship with Van Alstine through Foss's theater connections. Van Alstine, Foss and the Jenkins headed out to Maine largely on a whim, as David recalls. "We were like... hey, 'let's make some pots and why not in Kennebunkport...it was in the spirit of those days."

Once settled on the Maine coast, all of them created their own designs and sold them in a retail storefront they renovated. Each was responsible for equipment and materials and shared half of the proceeds from each sale for rent. They were learning about the market, Jenkins said, finding out what sold and what didn't. To be able to create with their hands and sell anything provided them with a sense of value. Van Alstine was pretty quick to adapt to what he sold and produced to match market demand, but also would commit time toward more sculptural, non-functional pieces.

*Although there wasn't a big market, Van Alstine remembers in a June 24, 2017 interview, the more sculptural works would occasionally sell – mostly to the vacationing French Canadians, who totally outclassed the typical American tourists that would frequent the shop looking for bargains on mugs and hanging planters.*

"He would make the functional ones and sell them, which motivated him more" Jenkins remembers, "yet he would also make things, like large jars, purely for the artistic expression." While everybody did their own thing, there were informal "critiques." "I remember John as more than willing to offer his own ideas about how someone else's design might be improved. He was driven and had keen sense of himself," Jenkins said, "but he always was willing to have input on other work. While he was hard working, he would go with us to the beach, but often he'd come back and work in the studio until 2 a.m. Others didn't always do that."





FIG. 13. **Raku Urn**, 1975, raku, 12 x 5 x 5 in. (30 x 13 x 13 cm). Private collection.



FIG. 14. **Stoneware Teapot**, 1976, stoneware, 13 x 10 x 7 in. (33 x 25 x 18 cm). Private collection.

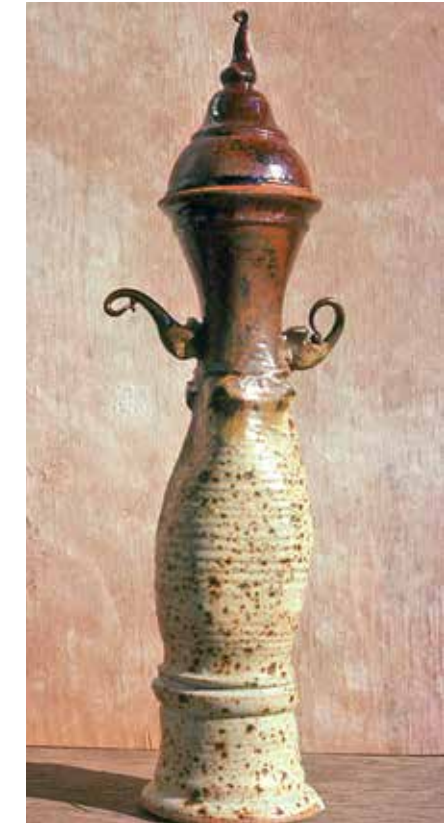
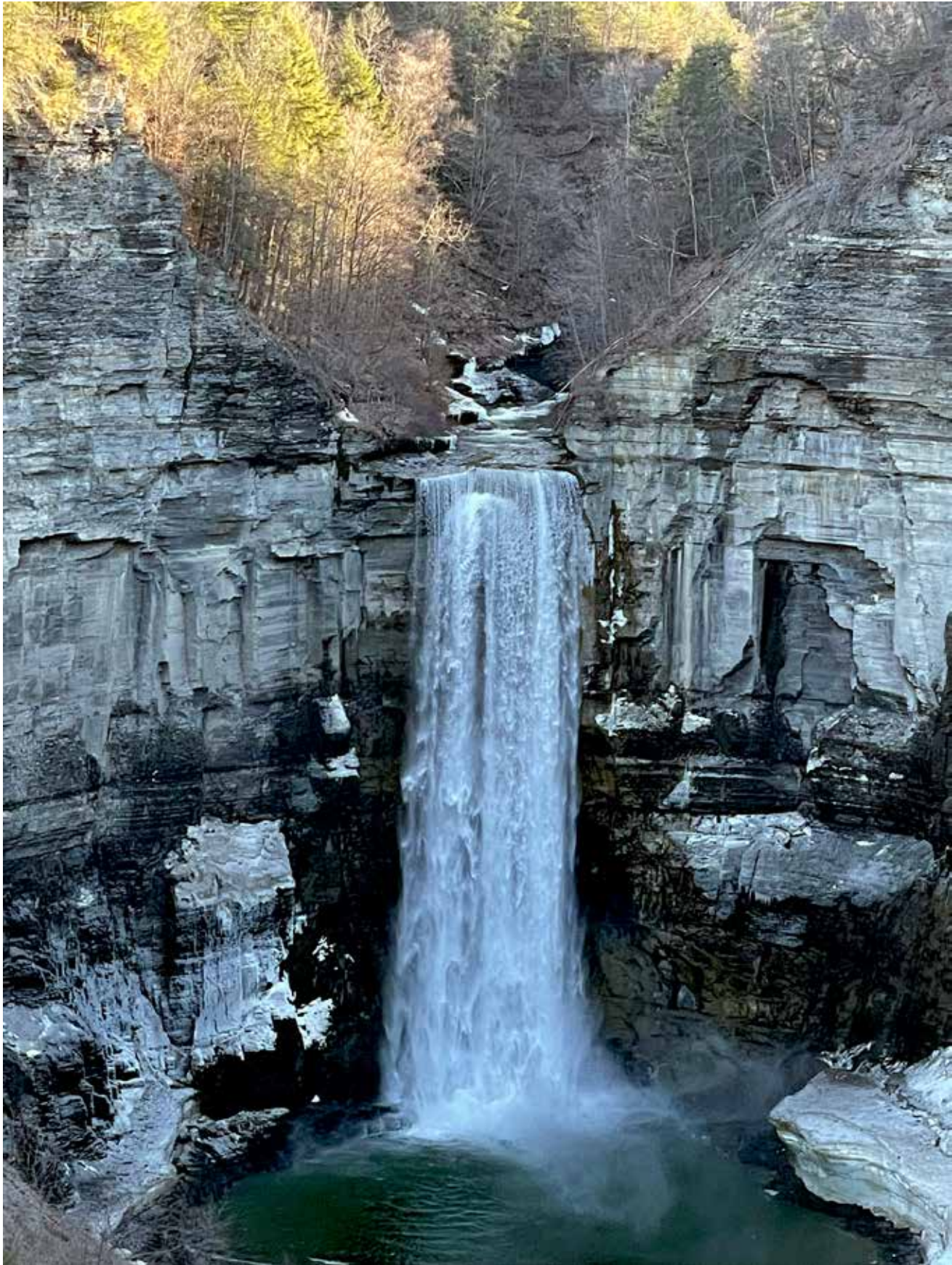


FIG. 15. **Tall Stoneware Covered Urn**, 1976, stoneware, 18 x 8 x 6 in. (46 x 20 x 15 cm). Private collection.

“John worked hard, played hard,” said John Ruppert, a close friend (see *page 14*) and now an accomplished sculptor and professor at University of Maryland, who spent a few of those early summers in Maine with Van Alstine working at the Shawmut Inn. “He would always have a plan and work hard to execute it, but he also had a sense of humor and an engaging personality, too.” By the mid 70’s, after seven summers, Maine had become a special place for Van Alstine. It was the place where, as an adolescent he went on his first solo trip out of Johnstown, where he encountered a shoreline dotted with natural stone, and the place where he first made the connection between art-making and art markets. While these experiences contributed to his development as an artist, there was more he wanted to explore.

At this juncture, there was an important decision: he was offered a full fellowship at Cornell School of Art and Architecture to earn an MFA in sculpture - without pottery or glass blowing - a pursuit that might be less marketable and professionally more risky. In the summer of 1975 he accepted the offer, a decision that would lead him to one of his first breakthroughs.





Van Alstine (l), J. Foss, (center), with theater friends James and Pauline Thornton and their twins Matthew and Leah, Ludlowville, 1975.



FIG. 18. Van Alstine (l) during Raku pottery firing, Ludlowville, NY, 1975. PHOTO: Jennifer Van Alstine.

#### An Accident at Cornell

In the fall of 1974, Van Alstine and Foss moved to the small town of Ludlowville, NY outside of Ithaca near Cornell where they were able to construct a small pottery studio and Raku kiln. The farmhouse was on the Salmon River amid deep gorges formed by receding glaciers and deeply eroding waters, etching long, angular crevices in the rolling hills of the Finger Lakes. The result was “stacked” layers of exposed shale tens of thousands of years old in the form of gorges. Easy access to this canyon-like landscape, with its unique and powerful geology, gave Van Alstine ample time to ponder and interpret their formations, which he says, “laid” the seeds for future work with sedimentary stone in Wyoming and more recently with slate in the early 2000s and continues to this day.

Van Alstine studied with professors Jason Seley, Victor Colby, and Jack Squier but Seley had the most influence. The Cornell program had a strong New York City connection and an exceptional visiting artist program exposing students to top artists, gallery owners and museum directors/curators of the day. Emphasis was on becoming a working artist – mainly with a New York focus versus teacher training.

The Cornell sculpture studio, referred to as “The Foundry,” was a total misnomer. *The space was large but minimal; there was no big foundry, furnace, lifting equipment or other fancy*

Taughannock Falls, sedimentary stone formation, Ithaca area gorge. PHOTO: Jennifer Van Alstine.





FIG. 19. **Wedge I**, 1975, Vermont marble, 21 x 27 x 5 in. (53 x 69 x 13 cm). Photographed without wood wedge.



FIG. 20. **Wedge II**, 1975, Vermont marble, 22 x 16 x 3.5 in. (56 x 41 x 9 cm). Photographed without wood wedge. Private collection.



FIG. 22. **Monolithic Monument**, 1975, Vermont marble, 42 x 24 x 6 in. (107 x 61 x 15 cm). Private collection.

tools, Van Alstine remembers. *Ironically, this turned out to be an advantage, inadvertently forcing students to focus on basic techniques that were easily duplicated once leaving the program, an advantage that assists emerging artists to work and continue to produce with minimal equipment.*

Van Alstine's first works at Cornell, like *Monolithic Monument*, 1975 (FIG. 22.), were minimally carved marbles with strong "frontal" orientation. He soon began to combine materials, a characteristic that would come to define his mature work. The *Wedge* series that followed were his first multi-material works with carved mahogany "wedges" inserted into slots, or negative space cut in the stone, inspired by the historic quarry practice of splitting stone by inserting wood wedges and soaking them in water causing them to expand.

As 1975 progresses, Van Alstine sets wood aside temporarily (it reappears later in the larger, Japanese influenced architectural pieces) and continues exploring stone, employing a strong sense of line and minimalist geometry combined with seductive curves. These works strongly referenced the post-World War II non-figurative "Biomorphic/Organic Abstraction" movement led by Jean Arp, Henry Moore, and Barbara Hepworth. By the year's end, the studio production evolves, with Van Alstine moving away from the classic biomorphic shapes. He says in the 2015 interview:

*I was attracted to the original rectangular marble blocks. I liked the clean geometry, pure and white - just the way I found them at the quarry yard. Many of my works at this time*



FIG. 23. **Falling Stone**, 1975, Vermont marble and stainless steel, 24 x 24 x 10 in. (61 x 61 x 25 cm).

*were minimally carved, often at the edges. I look back on it now and recognize this as the very beginning of a philosophy that developed later: accepting stone as I find it – using it as a found object, letting the material have its own voice without me overly imposing myself on it.*

The influence of the rectangular shape of the original block and the pervasive minimalist style of the time, a holdover from Kent, resulted in works that were less organic, minimal and squared off. It was at this time, something unexpected happened:

*I was working on a 3rd "wedge" piece and was almost finished, propped it up and stepped back to take a final look from a distance. Suddenly it began to tip, falling away from me; I watched helplessly as the marble crashed to the floor ... I was devastated; I walked around in a daze for what seemed like an hour. When I finally pulled myself together and started to look carefully at the scattered shards; the fresh, clean, crystalline surface of the broken areas caught my eye. It was like a light went off. I picked up a couple of the largest pieces and began to set them in angled positions to reveal the fragmented surfaces. I am not sure I realized it fully then, but this seemingly unfortunate event was the beginning of something important.*

Van Alstine reassembles it on the table into a radically different sculpture. With jagged surfaces exposed, the resulting sculpture, two elements are pinned to a polished stainless steel plate, angled and precariously positioned, creating a cascade-like sensation. *Falling Stone*, 1975 (FIG. 23.) was the first work to have "broken" or "raw" surfaces that would later be a central element of his vernacular. In addition, Van Alstine sees the idea of "perceived" visual and real



tension emerging from this work partly from the elements positioning, but also from the perceived energy of the marble breaking apart, a concept which is an integral part of most all his work going forward.

Foss doesn't remember the "accident," but recalls Seley having a particularly significant impact on Van Alstine. With only two sculpture students in the Cornell MFA program at a time, Van Alstine received a lot of one-on-one attention that altered his primary direction as a young sculptor. "They were somewhat isolated from others on campus," Foss added. "The sculpture studio was set apart, so there was the space and time for John to explore new ideas and to work things out," Foss says. Van Alstine recalls:

*There was not a lot of specific critique on your sculpture; no one on the faculty was offering advice on formal design or specific details of shape, color, materials, I guess they figured we were young professionals and respected our aesthetic; you were pretty much on your own. What they did provide, and this was especially true of Jason Seley, was positive role models of what it meant to be a professional working artist especially with connections to NYC, the place we all had our eyes on.*

#### The Nature of Stone Found and Finding a Direction

For his last year at Cornell, Van Alstine was awarded a Teaching Assistantship and continued to hone the steel/stone combination in what became the *tensegrity* works. This series would spawn a number of important sculptures, including *Nature of Stone I*, 1976 (FIG. 24.), now in the Smithsonian, and frame his experience in Wyoming, providing a foundation for a maturity in his work to unfold in the next several years when he moved back east in the 1980s.

This new relationship with stone, outlined in his MFA Thesis exhibit *The Nature of Stone*, describes his revised perspective and a desire to accept, not overly manipulate the material; it became something almost untouchable. Stone was not to be shaped, yet would have shape from its natural or other (quarry or other non-artistic) formation; for him it isn't a medium for the artist to alter physically, but reshape by redirecting context and place.

From a June 25, 2015 interview:

*I accept stone and use it generally the way I find it. Some are totally from nature (no human intervention), others, like stones split or blasted out of a quarry or cut into shapes at a stone mill, have a "non-natural" intervention. What is significant is all are treated as found objects.*

From his 1976 MFA thesis at Cornell:

*The sculptor must transform, not destroy the stone. I have not carved since I left Cornell. I knew from that moment when the stone fell off the pedestal and smashed into many pieces,*



FIG. 24. *Nature of Stone I*, 1976, granite and forged steel, 34 x 69 x 44 in. (86 x 176 x 112 cm). Collection: Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC.

*I let go of the stone and the need to manipulate it. Isamu Noguchi became a guiding force. He did carve, but often let the ridges, undulations, colors, textures, the grains of stone have their own vocabulary, a revelation for me. His philosophy and art drove this transformation in my thinking. Now it's a process of honesty. I don't draw the sculpture first; I don't conceptualize exactly what I'm going to do and then go look for the parts. It's quite the opposite really. The sculpture begins with the search and discovery of the "right stones", ones that "speak", yield the inspiration.*

First and foremost, the process is as about the "spiritual" as much as design. Van Alstine goes into great detail in his thesis about this.

*Prior to 1975, I carved stone, creating forms by means of reduction. I worked with marble, developing true, smooth, slick surfaces in a very Brancusi or Arp-like manner. In many instances I wanted to produce stone works that had the appearance and feeling of being shaped by the natural forces of wind and water. This method of stone sculpture is closely related to the ancient activity of rubbing or polishing stones. Certain cultures believe that the spirit of their ancestors continues to exist in stones, and if rubbed the divine power within these stones would increase to benefit both the living and the dead. I believe a similar thing occurs when I carve and polish stone – a life force is freed.*





FIG. 25. **Sea Stone**, 1973, Vermont marble, 37 x 35 x 8 in. (94 x 89 x 20 cm). Private collection.

*I also feel that the shape of a stone has a great deal to do with the spirit it exudes. Stones with particular shapes are often suggestive of a certain “life spirit”. In such instances the sculptor needs to do very little to bring this spirit forth. Beyond shape, stones that have an ordered crystalline structure seem to possess an even greater “spirit”. Crystals are often seen as a symbol of the self. The mathematically precise structure evokes a feeling that even in a so-called*



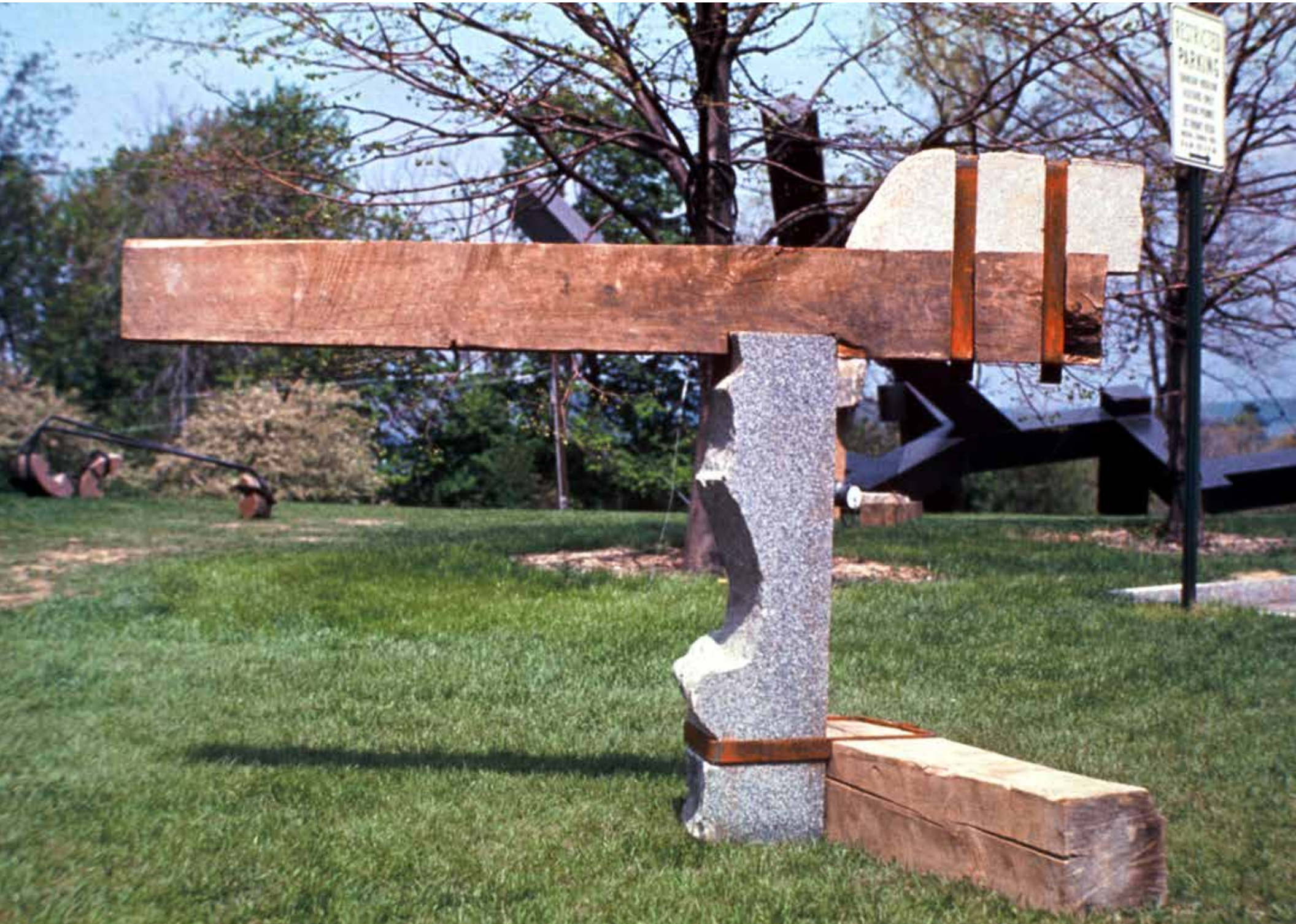
FIG. 26. **Carnegie Rounder**, 1985, Vermont granite and steel, 60 x 84 x 48 in. (152 x 213 x 122 cm). Collection: Baltimore Museum, Baltimore, MD.

*“dead material”, there is a spiritual ordering principle at work. The crystal represents the union of extreme opposites, matter and spirit. Stones that possess both a “life spirit shape” and internal crystalline structure have the most universal appeal.*

Van Alstine’s connection to stone remains integral to his work and provides a sturdy link to the American landscape tradition, and earlier centuries of Western Culture. While steel contributes much to his body of work, stone is most often the base for metal’s shapes and allegories in his sculptures as the Earth’s crust is the origin of everything else. Yet by the 1980’s, steel was playing a larger role, one that would blossom even more fully by the mid-1980s, altering his relationship with stone in profound ways.

Nonetheless, stone will lead his creativity for several years in the late 1970s inspired by interaction with the landscapes of western United States; its mountains, rock formations and vast open spaces that altered the scale and scope of his sculptures, resulting in deep ramifications for his artistic trajectory well into the late 1990s and beyond. Moving from the East to the West after graduating Cornell to accept a teaching position triggered an almost “overwhelming sense of awe” like so many landscape artists before him.





## Tensegrity – Finding the Balance



Example of Greene and Greene Architecture.

By the end of 1975, Van Alstine comes to terms with stone as more or less a found object as highlighted by his Cornell MFA thesis exhibit *The Nature of Stone*. But something else happens. Freed from conventional notions of carving, he explores other materials, including, most importantly, steel. While the accident at Cornell, when he hinged fragments of a broken sculpture with steel, was a watershed moment, Van Alstine always had a connection to metal by way of his study with Richard Stankiewicz and Richard Hunt, his attraction to the work of David Smith and, in particular, a 1950s movement called Kinetic Art.

With non-figurative, abstract sculpture dominant in the second half of the 20th century, the “energy” of a three-dimensional object was becoming as important as space, or line. Kinetic Art emerged to expand on the idea of energy and movement in sculpture. Steel increasingly becomes the medium by which Van Alstine seeks to harness the “potential” energy of stone. At first glance, one is hard pressed to describe Van Alstine as a kinetic artist, yet he draws much from the movement due to his interest “in the dynamics of animate form” as he calls it.

In 1975, inspired by the Japanese influenced work of California architects Greene and Greene, he starts to combine stone with wood and steel focusing on how the individual elements/ materials are connected or assembled. *Because I was creating assembled sculptures I wanted the ‘content or subject matter’ of these works to be about how they were put and held together – the pins, the straps, the joints were out front, in plain sight, honest, not hidden or disguised*, Van Alstine stated in 1975. While still the driving force in his art, stone becomes an additive element rather than subtractive. This combination ultimately led to the kinetic-related “arrested motion” or *tensegrity* series of the late 70’s. This opens a multitude of paths to many different ideas over the remainder of his career that suggest a sense of motion and/or a precarious balance at the moment when the sculpture seems poised to fall apart.

All of this is loosely based on the concept of tensegrity, a 1960s engineering /architectural treatise developed by philosopher Buckminster Fuller and expanded by sculptor Kenneth



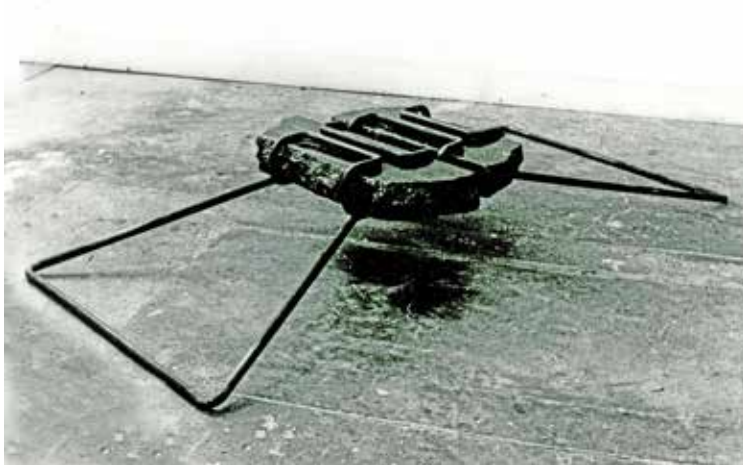


FIG. 2a. **Crimp**, 1976, granite and forged steel, 27 x 81 x 46 in. (69 x 206 x 117 cm).



FIG. 3. **Torque I**, 1977, granite and forged steel, 67 x 156 x 57 in. (170 x 396 x 145 cm). Private collection. PHOTO: Robert Schaefer.

Snelson. It is commonly defined “as a stable three-dimensional structure consisting of parts under tension and compression that are contiguous to others that are not.” By the late 1970s Van Alstine’s objects incorporate the use of isolated components (stones) usually connected via linear steel, harnessing gravity to hold the sculpture together in suspended motion. In a January 21, 2018 interview he explains how it came about.

*I came across to the idea of “tensegrity” first set forth by Buckminster Fuller and later used in the elegant sculptures of Kenneth Snelson. I was also very much aware and excited by what I refer to as “danger” sculptures like “Prop” of Richard Serra where he used gravitational forces to hold these works together. There was sense of a new “realism” that attracted me and was very much in sync with what I was trying to communicate.”*

Within this construct, pieces such as *Crimp*, 1976 (FIG. 2a.), and *Torque I*, 1977 (FIG. 3.) were created with the weight of the stone applying the energy to “crimp” or “torque” the steel rods together and actually provide the “glue” that holds the works together. He continues in the same interview:

*I wanted the works to have a sense of arrested motion and be kind of a static energy event. A large part of the content of this series focuses on the idea of assemblage and I needed the work to speak directly to that; it is assemblage about assemblage, sculpture about sculpture. In later years, the works move away from the direct focus on “in your face” gravitational energy as the main driver or subject matter and gradually began to incorporate implied energies; works creating visually precarious arrangements, or situations that suggested a sense of falling, off balance, or teetering.”*



**Torque I**, 1977, granite and forged steel, detail. Private collection. PHOTO: Robert Schaefer.



FIG. 4. **Untitled (up and over)**, 1975, detail. First piece to use 1-1/2 in. dia. solid steel rod for “fastener”.

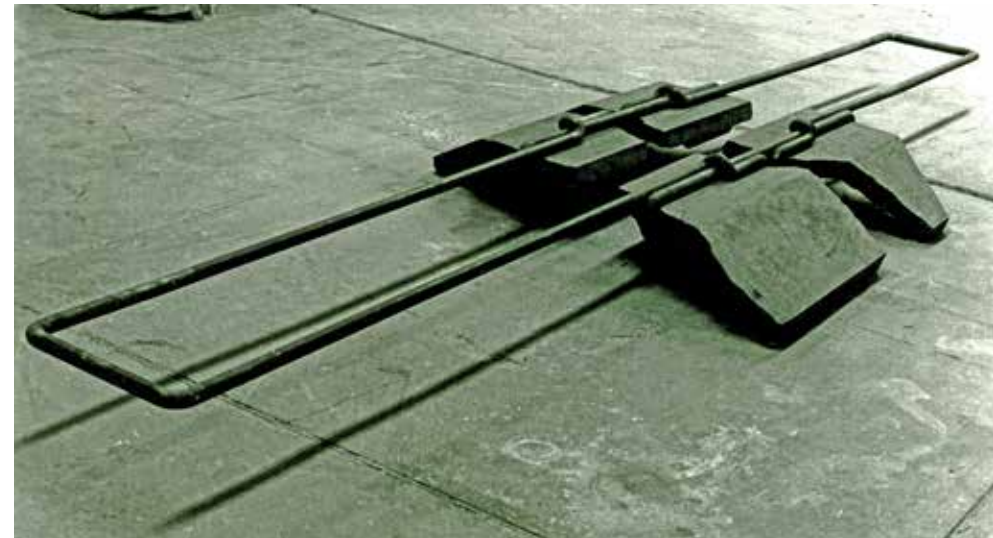


FIG. 5. **Boundary**, 1976, black granite and forged steel, 12 x 156 x 49 in. (30 x 396 x 124 cm).

*The first of these early constructions were architecturally inspired, larger mixed-material works employing stone, steel and wooden beams. The drilling channels, which I purposely left visible in the rough stone, gave the work a “quarry graphic” adding a visual cadence and revealed, in effect, the history of how the material was extracted from the ground. Also, because of their cylindrical nature, the channels suggested a logical way to connect the stone via solid round bar.*

*Soon, however, I realized that these works were not really harnessing the full expressive potential of the materials. If the sculpture was about assemblage and the nature of the materials, I felt the need to create a more dramatic situation where each material revealed more convincingly their essential intrinsic characteristics.*

In these early works, because of their particular arrangement and materials, the steel could have just as well been binder’s twine or rope. He then eliminated the wood and refocused the structures in order to take greater advantage of the structural capabilities of stone and steel. He created systems of interlocking steel rod to control and to hold the stone.

Pieces like *Boundary*, 1976 (FIG. 5.), have the granite literally “bound” by the steel in a way that the four stones rest on their edges with an opening underneath. To assemble the work the stones are propped up and the formed steel rod is wrapped around them. Then the blocks are kicked out and the individual elements settle into a bound, unified whole.



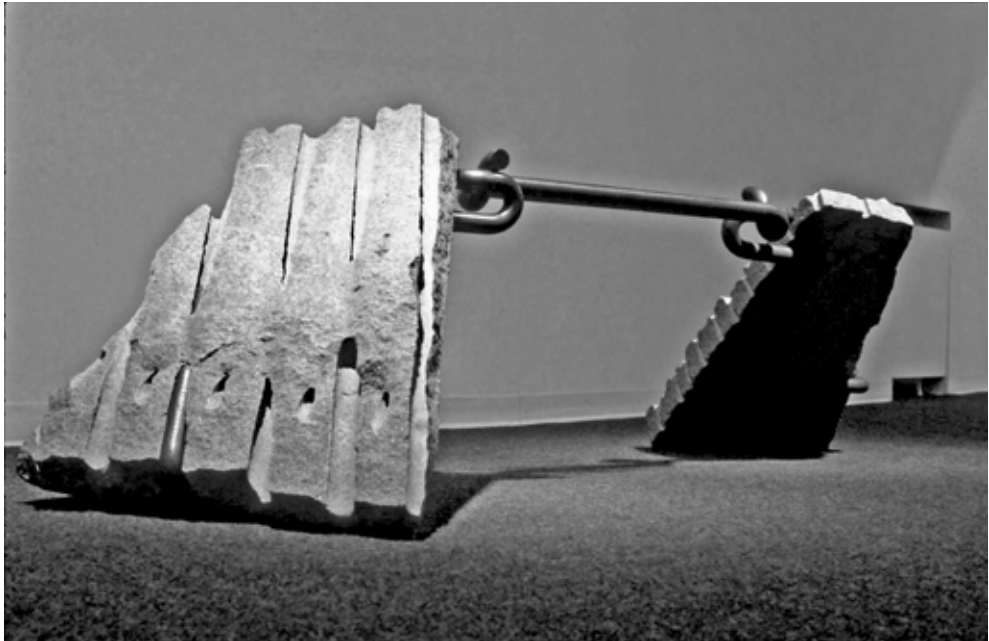


FIG. 6. **Torque IV**, 1981, pink granite and forged steel, 46 x 105 x 59 in. (117 x 267 x 159 cm). Private collection.

Because of the tremendous gravitational and real internal energy involved, these works were virtually “loaded” or “set” much like a mousetrap. *“In fact, one thing that was exciting about this series was that I felt I was creating very “realistic” sculpture precisely because of the real energy involved; much more than say traditional sculpture or painting that relies on illusion.”*

Although the assemblages do not exactly follow the formal definition of tensegrity set forth by Fuller, their intellectual foundations are a clear influence on Van Alstine’s process. They are, by conscious design, laden with a real internal energy. The individual parts of these works do not rely on pins, welding, glue, etc. for structural integrity, but instead use the energy captured by the interaction and the position of stone and steel. The interlocking steel rods trace and harness the natural gravitational energy of the stone and use it as the “glue” that holds the assemblages together. He adds in the same interview:

*By doing so the works are self-referential - they are assemblages (noun) that speak to or call attention to how they are assembled (verb). Many of the titles “Pile,” “Torque,” “Crimp,” “Wedge,” and “Splay” are simultaneously nouns and verbs - indicating that they are intentionally both things and events and meant to be viewed that way. Like all of my work, this series is informed by nature and landscape (geology, material characteristics, gravity, etc.) although they are not the primary focus.”*



FIG. 7. Isamu Noguchi, **The Roar**, 1966, white marble, 52 x 91 x 24 in. (132 x 231 x 61 cm). Photo: John Van Alstine used with permission of © The Isamu Noguchi Foundation and Garden Museum, New York /Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

Here Van Alstine draws upon the idea of Kinetic Art and the potential for the form to “change” over time, such as “a muscle tensed in preparation for movement, the edge of a situation, like a rock about to fall, or a body of water about to rush over its banks, an object poised to roll, swerve and perhaps collide” as wrote sculptor George Rickey in his seminal essay *The Morphology of Movement* published in 1958 on page 26. At this point, stone is still the primary expressive element in his work, while steel is very much functional and is subordinate to the overall compositions. He continues to draw much inspiration from the great Japanese-American stone sculptor Isamu Noguchi as much as Kinetic sculpture and tensegrity. From a May 2017 interview:

*I was also very attracted to the stone work of Isamu Noguchi and the way he captured and used the natural or what I perceived as Asian spirit of stone. I was trying to find my own voice and ultimately ended up combining the tensegrity concepts of Fuller, Snelson and Serra with my sensitivity to found stone informed by Noguchi.”*

Although Steel would be employed differently over the years, its role in developing “tensegrity” in the late 1970s and refined in the early 1980s (FIGS. 8-19.) was a breakthrough for Van Alstine. Coupled with the move away from carving, allowing stone to “speak” for itself as a found object, the understanding of steel as a “harness” of potential energy adds a dynamic force that will define his works for decades. Yet stone remains the bedrock of his creativity, connecting him firmly with the American landscape movement.



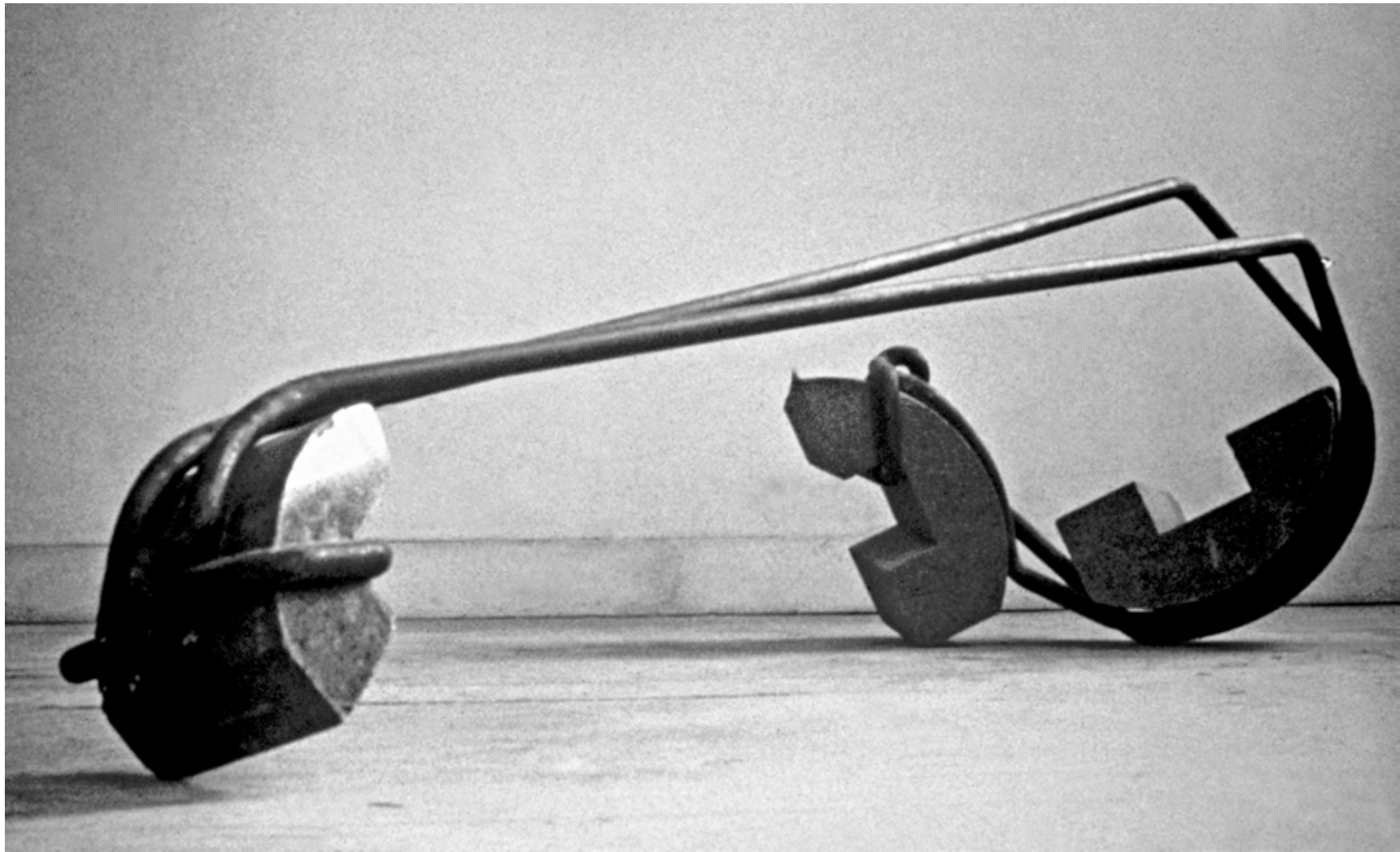
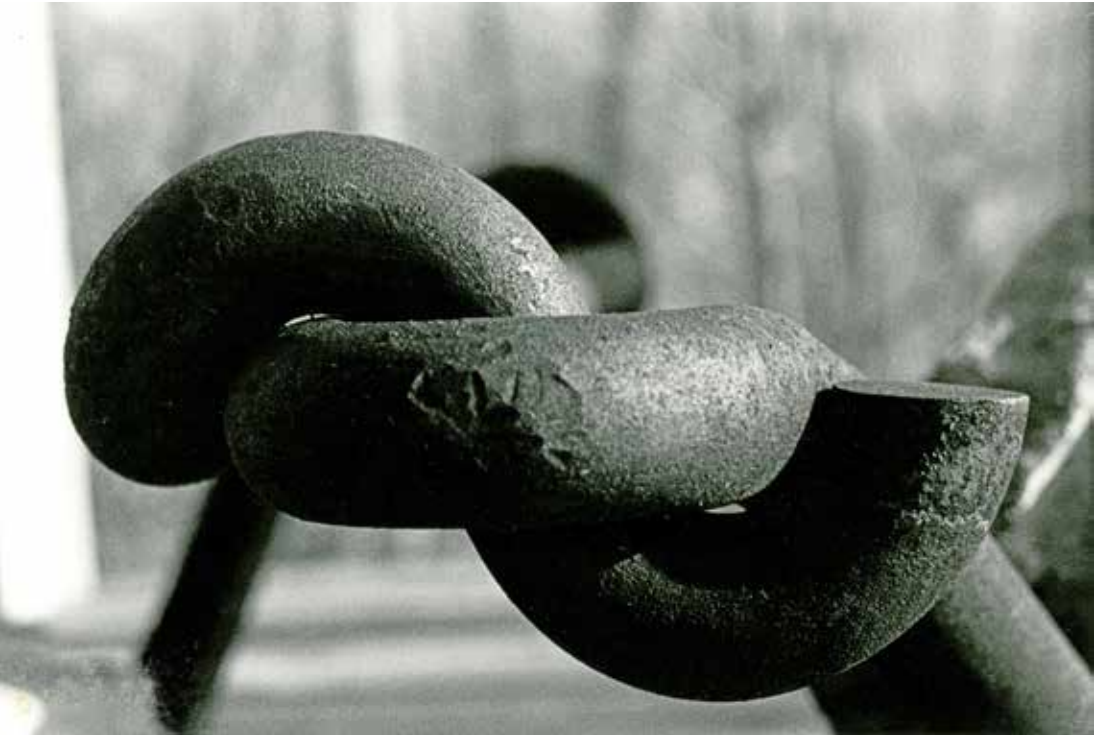


FIG. 8. *Untitled (3 curved stones)*, 1976, pink granite and forged steel, 36 x 108 x 48 in. (91 x 274 x 122 cm).  
 See Page 29: FIG. 9. *Nature of Stone I*, 1976, granite and forged steel, 33 x 69 x 43 in. (84 x 175 x 109 cm). Collection Hirshhorn Museum, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC.



Top: FIG. 10. *Nature of Stone I*, 1976, granite and forged steel, detail. Collection of Hirshhorn Museum, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC.  
 Bottom: FIG. 11. *Nature of Stone I*, 1976, granite and forged steel, detail. Collection of Hirshhorn Museum, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC.





FIG. 12. **Stone Pile 3**, 1978, Colorado flagstone and forged steel, 108 x 34 x 56 in. (274 x 86 x 142 cm). Private collection, Washington, DC.



Top: FIG. 13. **Prop 4**, 1980, Colorado flagstone and forged steel, 16 x 50 x 50 in. (41 x 127 x 127 cm).



Bottom: FIG. 14. **Stone Pile 6**, 1980, Colorado flagstone and forged steel, 60 x 72 x 72 in. (152 x 183 x 183 cm). Collection: Grounds for Sculpture, Hamilton, NJ.





FIG. 15. **Wedge Column**, 1981, granite and forged steel, 77 x 21 x 18 in. (196 x 53 x 46 cm). Private collection.

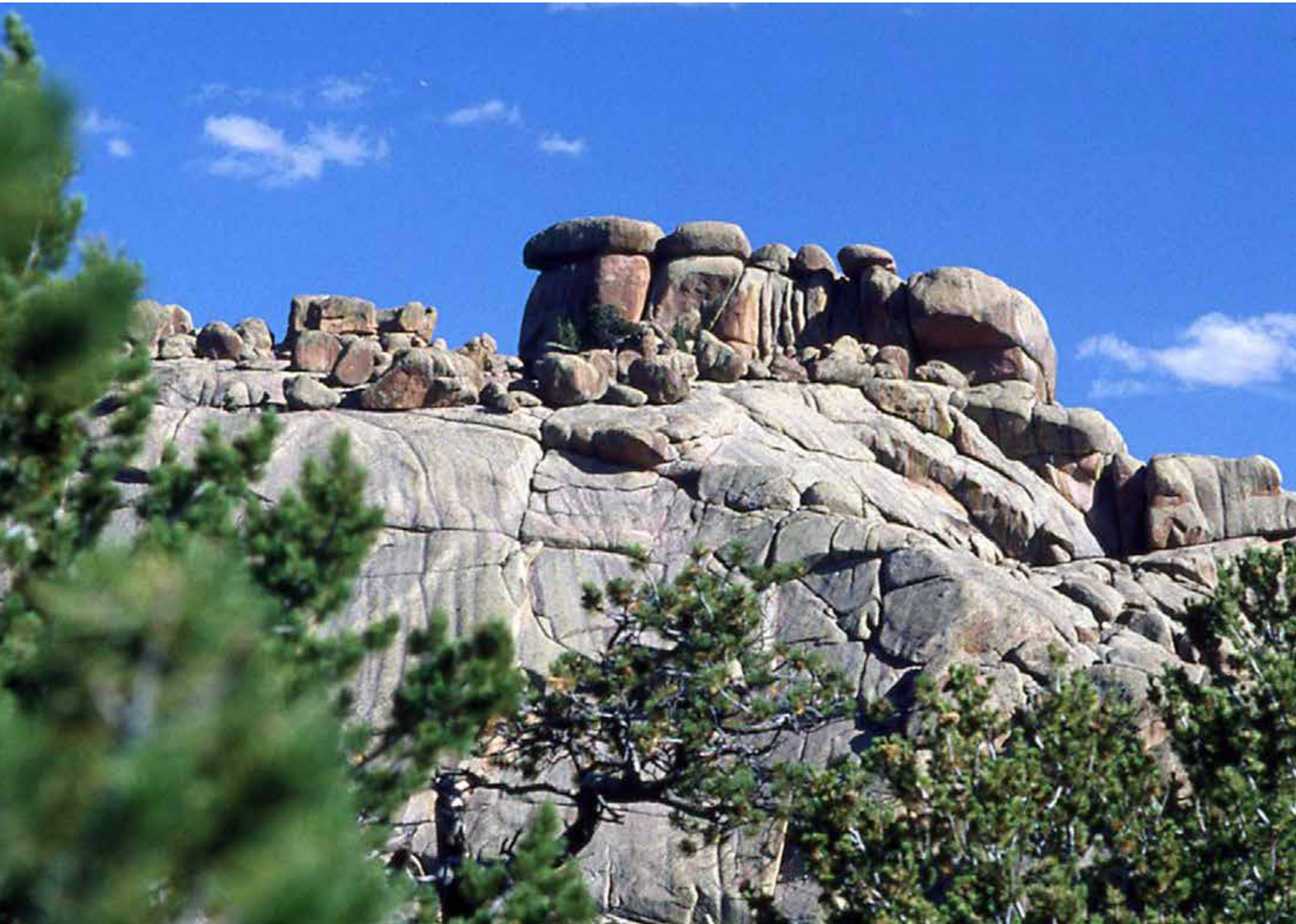


FIG. 16. **NMAA Wedge**, 1982, granite and forged steel, 11 x 7 x 5 ft. (335 x 213 x 152 cm). Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, DC. Gift of Scott H. Lang.









## Out West

*The best material for an artist in the world.* — Albert Bierstadt



FIG. 1. Albert Bierstadt (American, 1830-1902), *Lander's Peak*, 1863, oil on canvas, 74 x 121 in. (188 x 307 cm). Collection: Metropolitan Museum of Art, NYC.

Ever since Albert Bierstadt painted *Lander's Peak* in 1863, the American West has captured the imagination of a nation on the move towards the Pacific Ocean. Based on more than 100 sketches completed during an 1863-64 expedition to Wyoming, led by survey and military man Frederick W. Lander, the painting has sharply pointed granite peaks reaching toward the heavens, jutting through fantastical clouds floating above a tranquil scene.

The painting is at once expansive and detailed, a discourse on the magnitude of the Western scenery and how humans, going about cultivating such pristine territory, are small but not insignificant in this landscape. It romanticizes the rugged terrain as something between heaven and earth—an unspoiled Eden.

To cross the Rockies was an American rite of passage with spiritual connotations. Other artists were to follow Bierstadt, but he was the pioneer who established the “Western Scene” genre, a major impact on the idea of “Manifest Destiny”—the philosophy that Americans were destined to live from coast to coast. Bierstadt made a hugely successful career out of painting the West after being an important member of the Hudson River School and described the Rockies as “the best material for an artist in the world.”

This also is true for John Van Alstine. His move to Wyoming and the Rockies was imbued with a sense of the spiritual, and, like many before him, the practical. The University of Wyoming in Laramie, not far from Lander's Peak—with essentially the same topography—hired him as an assistant professor in the summer of 1976 to begin in the fall of that year.

Packing a U-Haul and towing their van, Van Alstine and then wife Jennifer Foss drove across the Midwest, the Great Plains and finally to the vast mountain ranges of the West. They lived on the outskirts of Laramie, a railroad and ranching town between the towering Rockies and the undulating, spread-out topography of the Great Plains. Filled with rising and falling curves of a land borne from weather extremes, creating what Van Alstine remembers as,

FIG 2. Vedauwoo Range, Medicine Bow-Routt National Forest near Laramie. PHOTO: John Van Alstine.





Van Alstine carrying his steel easel at the “Muffin Rocks” near Laramie, 1977. PHOTO: Julie McNair.

*environments similar to Japanese gardens and stone ‘sculptures’ recalling the work of Henry Moore and Isamu Noguchi.*

Laramie could not have been more different than where the Van Alstines had come from. Northern forests and rounded, older granite peaks of the East gave way to a wide-open prairie filled with buttes, arches, “spirals” and domes. He remembers watching mile-long trains snake their way across the countryside like “rivers of steel.” While Van Alstine actually brought stones with him from the Northeast, the western landscape seduced him quickly. With such a contrast, he became mesmerized with the scenery, recalling: *“I was in awe of the endless space before me.”* The expansive views stretched his compact sculptures, often horizontally, coupled with sedimentary laden gorges—experienced at Cornell—triggers a new awareness of geology and stone:

*I hadn’t seen anything comparable; it took time to really absorb it all, to let it seep in. I’d drive, or even just walk around and was inundated by so many feelings and emotions, things that spoke to me as a sculptor. It was exhilarating and at the same time immensely overwhelming, I was constantly confronted with the thought – how can I ever compete with this,* he said in a September 16, 2016 interview.

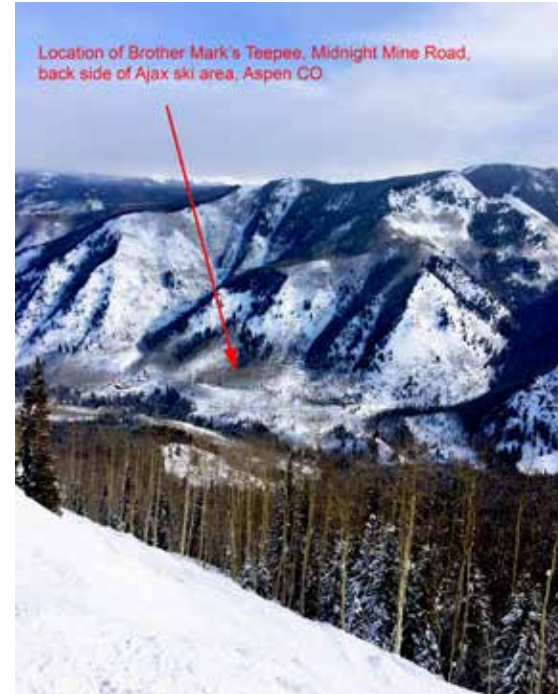


FIG. 4a. Location of brother Mark’s Teepee, Midnight Mine Road, back side of Ajax ski area, Aspen CO, 1977. PHOTO: John Van Alstine.

Like many Americans, Van Alstine had fantasized about the West as a young man through western movies, TV animations and other cultural artifacts, but as an avid skier and hiker, there was an added dimension for him. The opportunity to ski and climb new terrain with such iconic mountains and valleys was a spiritual experience. *“It wasn’t religious in the traditional sense, but uplifting ... an awakening,”* he recalls in the same interview.

Another element to Van Alstine’s western experience was his brother Mark living near Aspen (FIG. 4a.). John’s teaching schedule permitted long weekends, so he and Foss would often drive four hours to the resort area to meet Mark, who, early on, was living in a teepee. “We bonded quite a bit in those days. I remember John as being quite invigorated by the landscape and I recall talking about how the topography was altering his understanding of stone; he was seeing it in new ways,” said Mark in a July 2016 interview. As a skier, Foss was along for the ride, recalling “how John was imbued with a sense of a new-found creativity amid the scenery and landscape out there, and that he might never come back East in a 2016 interview.

After a year and a half, Foss moved back to Ithaca without Van Alstine. Both describe the eventual split as “amicable” and they have remained close friends since. “I guess I missed Ithaca,” Foss said in the same interview. “There were a lot of changes going on for both of us.” Van Alstine agrees that as much as anything the unfamiliar lifestyle in Laramie compelled Foss to return to Ithaca. “It was limited socially and culturally; it wasn’t the so-called “refined” eastern, Ivy League environment we had become familiar with. There were primarily cowboys and ranch hands and a few ‘full of themselves’ academics,” Van Alstine said in the September 2016 interview.

*Besides the incredible landscape there wasn’t much else. We had been together since high school and a lot had changed; we had changed. We were both still young with our entire lives and careers ahead of us and felt it best for each to follow our individual paths and not try to adapt or change the other. I think it turned out OK – after 50 years we are still very good friends and have great mutual respect, it could have been much different if we tried to force things.*



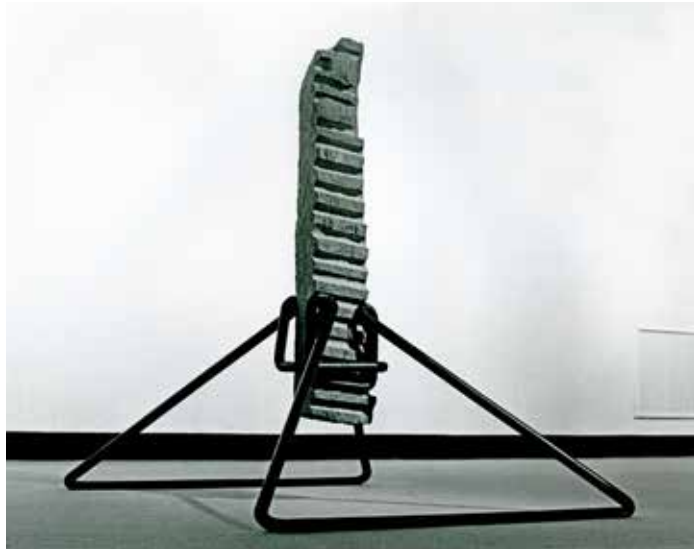


FIG. 5. **Laramie Stone Totem**, 1976, Maine pink granite and forged steel, 72 x 56 x 56 in. (183 x 142 x 142 cm).

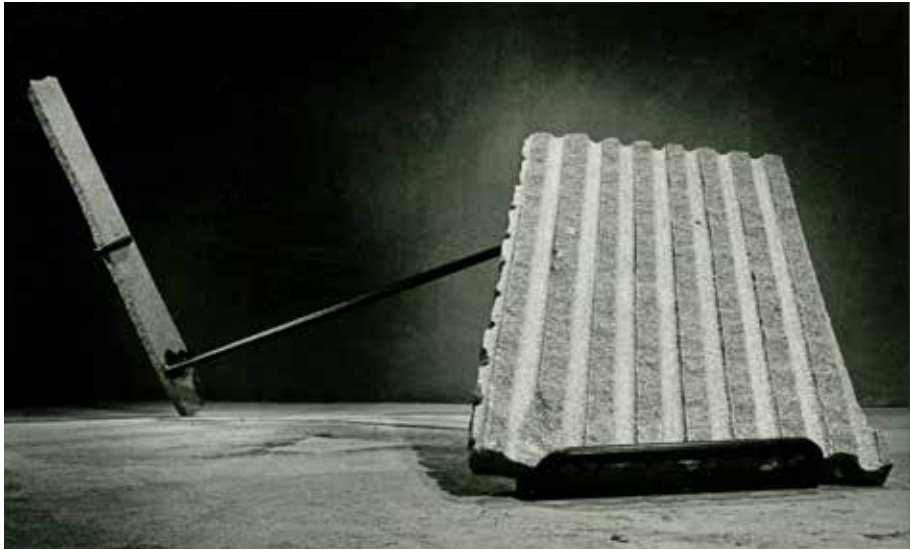
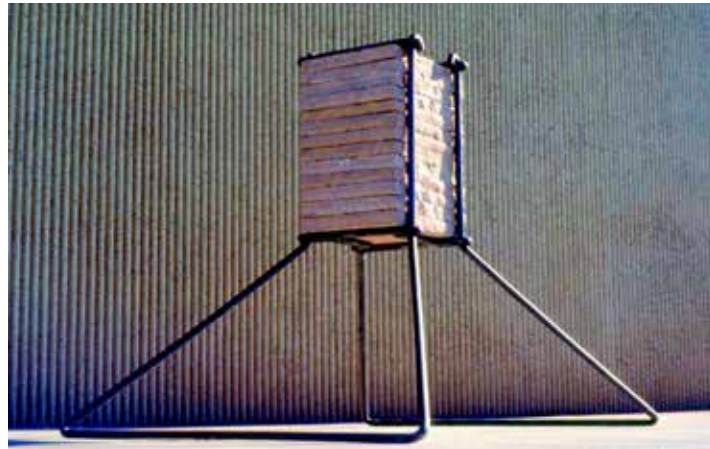


FIG. 6. **Torque I**, 1977, Vermont granite and forged steel, 67 x 57 x 156 in. (170 x 145 x 396 cm). Private collection. PHOTO: Robert Schaefer.

#### Eroding Stone, Systems and a New Aesthetic

For Van Alstine, whatever was lacking in the culture of Laramie, the landscape easily made up for it. The layers of sedimentary rock, exposed through thousands of years of erosion, led him to experience stone as a system, not just as a singular object. Although he began 1976 using stone he brought from the east in works such as *Laramie Stone Totem*, 1976 (FIG. 5.) and *Torque I*, 1977 (FIG. 6.), applying the principles of tensegrity, and, in effect, continued his “Nature of Stone” series in Wyoming, his interpretation changes significantly. Lying horizontally or standing vertically, the new works have a stacked quality echoing the sedimentary layers of rock in the western Great Basin. Horizontal pieces such as *Sag*, 1978 (FIG. 7.) and *Prop 3*, 1979 (FIG. 8.) channel the expansive high plains and broad valley floors, often with layered stone, sprawling out along the terrain, almost hugging the horizon and unfolding as intricate systems of mounds, ledges and arches formed by a multitude of natural forces. Vertical works like *Stone Pile 2*, 1978 (FIG. 9.) and *Arch 6*, 1980 (FIG. 10.), are inspired by this topography.

*I was taken by the towering buttes and unbelievable natural arches which ultimately led to the Totem, Arch and Prop series. I was also struck by the overwhelming amount of sedimentary stone, created by millions of years of layering. Sparked by Jackie Ferrara’s 1970’s stacked plywood pieces (FIG. 11.) and the way they were informed by the layers in that material, I started building works that incorporated stacked Colorado flagstone to echo or reiterate the nature of the material and how it came into existence,* he said in the *Bones of the Earth* book published in 2000 by Editions Ariel Washington, DC.



Top Left: FIG. 7. **Sag**, 1978, Colorado flagstone and forged steel, 10 x 62 x 172 in. (25 x 157 x 437 cm).

Top Right: FIG. 8. **Prop 3**, 1979, Colorado flagstone and forged steel, 16 x 144 x 24 in. (41 x 366 x 61 cm). Collection of Delaware Museum of Art, gift of Lynn Herrick Sharp.

Middle Left: FIG. 9. **Stone Pile 2**, 1978, Colorado flagstone and forged steel, 60 x 84 x 84 in. (152 x 213 x 213 cm).

Middle Right: FIG. 10. **Arch 6**, 1980, Colorado flagstone and forged steel, 46 x 102 x 39 in. (117 x 259 x 99 cm). Collection Arvada Museum of Art, Arvada, CO.

Bottom: FIG. 11. Jackie Ferrara, **A2 1/2, A - C7, C3**, 1974-76, Birch plywood, 6 x 24 x 21 in. (16 x 61 x 53 cm).



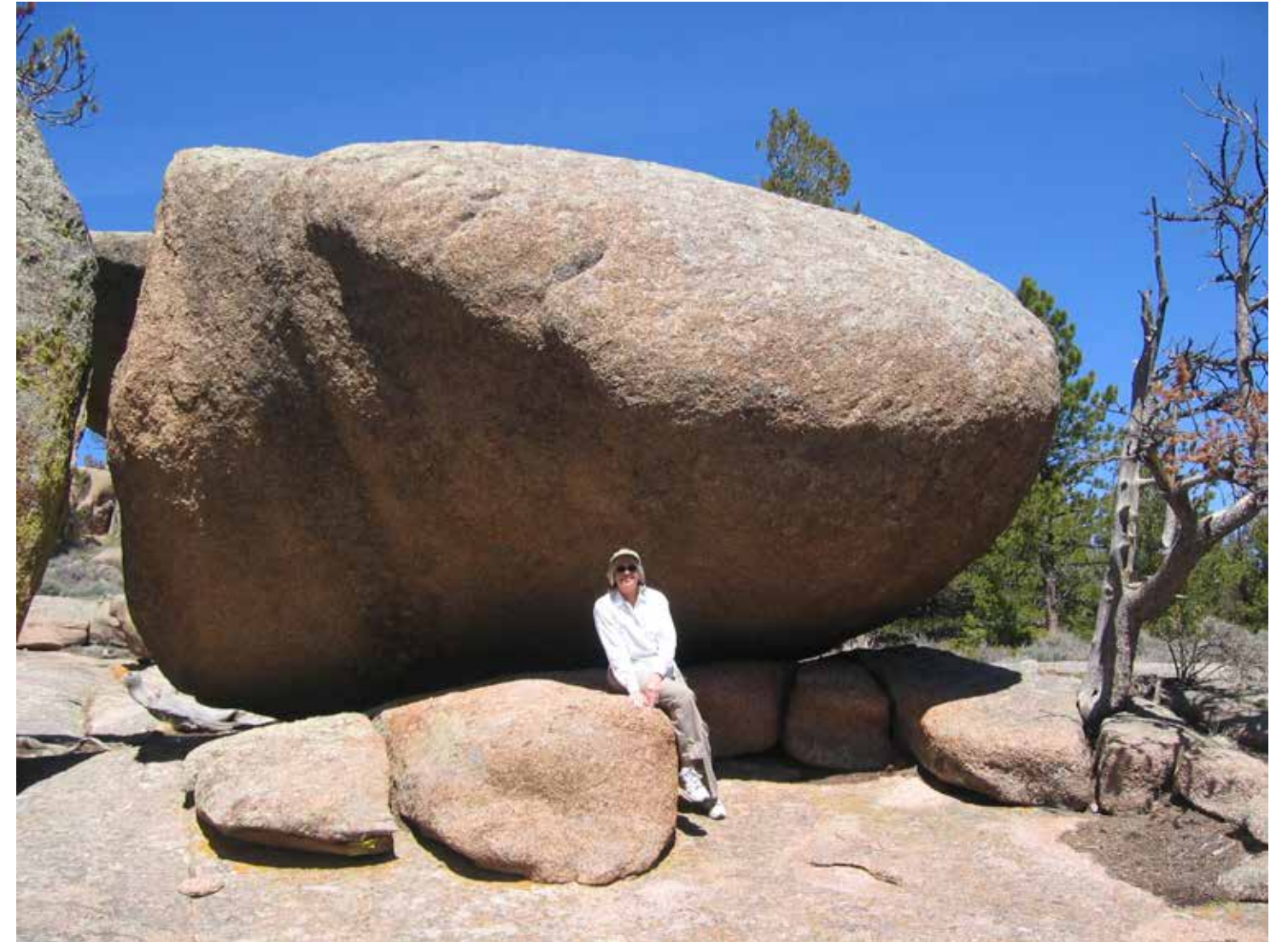


Natural “totem” towers at Monument Valley, UT. PHOTO: John Van Alstine.

Van Alstine elaborates in a 2022 interview: *Ferrara’s minimal plywood sculptures helped me see the significance of the sedimentary layering in the flagstone and how I could use it as conceptual driver in my stacked pieces. The “stone pile” series puts the layering front and center, and together with their “tensegrity” concepts – channeling the stone’s intrinsic gravitational pull - were central in making sculpture about sculpture. It was important to employ stone to talk about stone – not, for example, use it to represent some outside idea like bird or horse.*

The experience offered a new aesthetic. From the September interview:

*With such extremes of temperatures—it could be 100 degrees in the summer and subzero in the winter and being on the edge between mountain ranges and the plains—Wyoming’s landscape was defined by these micro-climates where erosion would occur through intense wind, flowing water and blowing sand. There would be flash floods seemingly out of nowhere, and then sand blowing the next day, and, over time, creating wonderful environments where boulders, some as large as a school bus, were left perched only on a small ledge, precariously balanced as if ready to roll off its pedestal. I recall spending a lot of time in an area called “Vedauwoo,” just east of Laramie. The name comes from the Native American word meaning “earth bound spirit.” It is a fascinating and unique environment—the formations appeared as if magically sculpted by some higher power”*



Bottom: Unidentified visitor at Vedauwoo, Medicine Bow-Routt National Forest, east of Laramie. PHOTO: Donna Peters Bagby.



### From Sensual Forms to Anti-Form

Van Alstine arrived at the University of Wyoming at an interesting time. Described as viewing anything made after 1945 as irrelevant, he joined an arts faculty that was entrenched in early Modernism and out of touch with then current trends in sculpture. David Reif, a 1970 graduate of Yale University's MFA program, had been teaching at UW for several years prior to Van Alstine's arrival, and had been battling the establishment. Reif recalls Van Alstine bringing an ardent voice for change at the school.

While Van Alstine was influenced by modernism, he wasn't stuck in the early 20th century, Reif said in a July 2015 interview "John's work wasn't as progressive as some of the post-minimalist, conceptually-based sculpture being churned out in New York at the time. He was a kind of a bridge for the school to cross in updating its perspective. Better than me; I was a little far-out for them. In the short time we were together here, we made significant inroads that were lasting," he said. Reif, who retired from the University of Wyoming in 2003, remembers Van Alstine as a sculptor very much in transition from the "sensual anthropomorphic" works he made as a carver to ones that relied on the "physical properties of the material alone" for their compositions. Work that "delved" into the essential qualities of what sculpture could be with the essence of its own dynamics. Or as Reif puts it, objects that were "about anti-form."

Van Alstine's "gravitational fields" experimentations, holding stones seemingly suspended in the air by steel rods, directed the viewer's attention toward their purely functional elements based on the extant forces of nature. While Cornell presented Van Alstine with the conceptual framework to advance beyond carving and the figurative toward assemblage and cubist-like abstraction, the Rockies and Wyoming solidified this transformation through his experience with all of the wide-ranging elements of nature present.

All of this triggered a series of exhibits from 1977 until 1979 effectively launching his career in earnest, including his first true solo exhibition, which was organized by the University of Northern Arizona/Flagstaff. At this time, Van Alstine began to incorporate the indigenous flagstone with its "putrid" pink colors, adding an unapologetic, pointedly un-aesthetic tone to his "brute" exteriors. In a Q&A with Sculpture magazine in 1999, he elaborates:

*"The stone in the early stacked pieces is Colorado flagstone; it's kind of neutral "pukey" pink in color. I would stack and slide them on the truck and because of their weight the surfaces would often rub and scrape making interesting marks, creating an exterior that spoke to their history. Since the stones were all flat and rectilinear, the marks appear like writing on a tablet. That weird color was wonderful because I wanted the viewer to focus on the stone's volume, its weight, its history, its geological layering, not how pretty it was. I have always*



David Reif and Van Alstine, Central City, CO, 1976.  
PHOTO: Jennifer Van Alstine.



FIG. 16. **Prop 3**, 1980, Colorado flagstone and forged steel, 12 x 36 x 144 in. (30 x 91 x 366 cm).



FIG. 17. **Lanyon Quoit (Giants Table)**, Cornwall, England, 1978. PHOTO: John Van Alstine.



FIG. 18. Men-an-Tol stone in Cornwall, England 1978.  
PHOTO: John Van Alstine.



FIG. 19. Van Alstine passing through Men-an-Tol stone in Cornwall, England 1978. As local legend has it, to prevent a variety of medical maladies. PHOTO: John Van Alstine.



FIG. 20. **Trough**, 1982, granite and welded steel, 12 x 25 x 15 ft. (366 x 762 x 457 cm). Public commission, Billings, MT.

*been put off by stone that seems too "pretty" or polished and looks like plastic. They attract attention for the wrong reason and seem too sweet. They hurt my "aesthetic" teeth.*

In 1978, he was a finalist for the prestigious Rome Prize Fellowship at the American Academy in Rome, and received a University of Wyoming Faculty Development Grant allowing him to travel to standing stone sites in England and Scotland, which along with exposure to Native American culture, calendar sites, such as Medicine Wheel near Sheridan, Wyoming, spurs larger works like *Trough*, 1982 (FIG.20.), in Billings, Montana and the "celestial/calendar" works that would lay the foundation for the more encompassing *Navigations* series interwoven throughout his later career.

In the same year, Van Alstine staged another solo exhibit at the University of Colorado at Ft. Collins and he was also included in the Cornell's exhibit "Cornell Then/Sculpture Now" opening at the I.M. Pei designed Johnson Museum in Ithaca, NY. The show travels to the venerable Max Hutchinson's *Sculpture Now Gallery* in NYC—significant because it was at this exhibit that his work was first seen in person by Howard Fox, curator at the Smithsonian's Hirshhorn Museum in Washington, D.C., a major turning point.

In 1979, Fox includes Van Alstine's work in the "Brute Sculpture" section of the important *Directions/79* survey exhibition that pinpointed key trends during a very tumultuous period in





FIG. 21. Construction of ***Solstice Calendar*** at Quarry, Marble Falls, TX 1986.



FIG. 22. ***Solstice Calendar***, 1986, granite, stainless steel and sunlight, 21 x 40 x 20 ft. (640 x 1219 x 610 cm). Austin College commission 1986. PHOTO: Holly Hallman.

art. In the *Directions 79* exhibition essay by Fox, he writes: “that such non-art industrial materials as Cor-ten steel, concrete and Plexiglas were used by minimalists and conceptual artists to produce works that were cool, precise and invisibly crafted. A sculptor like Sol LeWitt, Tony Smith, or Donald Judd might design a work, and then, in an effort to do nothing more or less than serve as conceptualizer, send the design to someone else for fabrication. It was considered ethically proper and aesthetically sound that the artist did not interfere in the physical creation of the object; the object was to be perceived by the viewer as the product of a kind of Immaculate Conception.”

In the late 1970s, a more direct and aggressive sculpture has begun to emerge, Fox adds, “that is brute in appearance and under structural stress. Sculptors such as John Van Alstine, George Kuehn and Loren Madsen, among others, share fascination with industrial materials—especially those compelling for their strength and rawness—and they impose tension, balance, gravity, and other forces on these materials to make their sculpture. Cement blocks, stone slabs, bricks, or steel pipes are suspended by cables, girded with chain, compressed or stretched. The physical coercion, and the viewer’s awareness of it, provides the active drama of these works.”



FIG. 22a. ***Nature of Stone I***, 1976, granite and steel, 33 x 69 x 43 in. (84 x 175 x 109 cm). Collection of Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC.

The 1979 Hirshhorn exhibit was one of the major highlights of Van Alstine’s early career, placing his work on the national stage, representing a culmination of the process to incorporate a realistic representation of natural forces in three-dimensional designs. During the four years since Cornell, the twenty-something-year-old artist found a vocabulary expressing the potential energy of sculptural materials, often precariously balanced with the sense of drama and danger, moving from the realm of static form to actual in kinetic movement.

The Western landscape, along with his earlier exposure to the gorges near Cornell, influenced Van Alstine in this process of understanding stone, leading to works that are physically stacked, playing off their layered sedimentary nature. Stone, now local, was still the dominant medium over steel in this fertile period.

Hirshhorn Museum acquires *Nature of Stone I*, 1976 (FIG. 22a.), for its permanent collection. In 1980, he stages a solo exhibit at the University of Colorado at Boulder and is awarded Louis C. Tiffany Foundation Individual Artist Fellowship.

In addition to *Directions 79* exhibit, Van Alstine is awarded several grants and is included in an increasing number of exhibits and collections, all the while he continues studio work with local Colorado flagstone and steel.



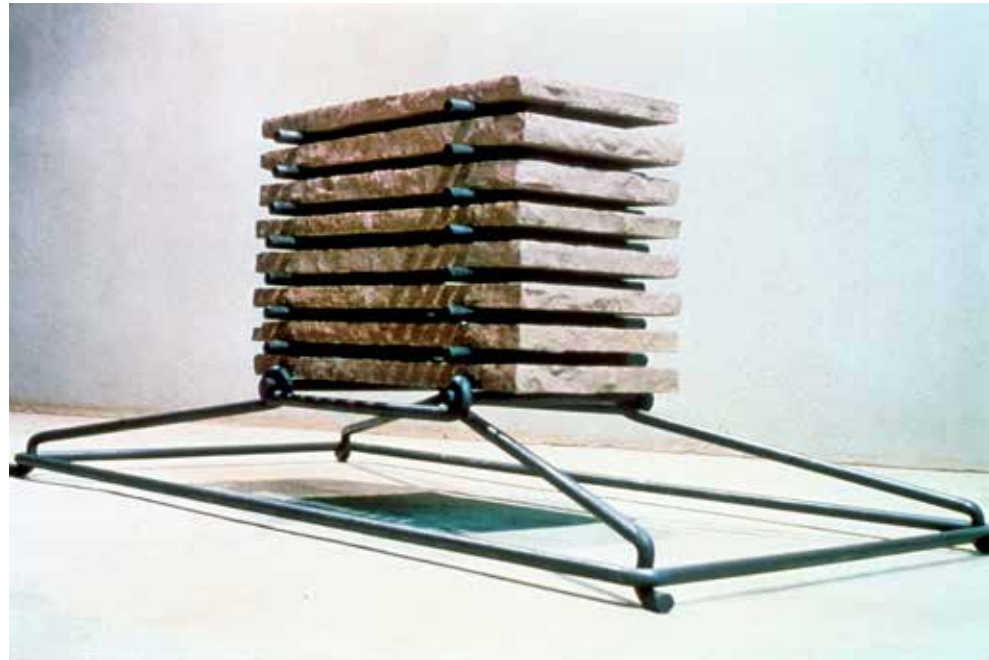


FIG. 25. **Stone Pile 4**, 1979, Colorado flagstone, 40 x 102 x 48 in. (102 x 259 x 122 cm).

In 1979 Van Alstine exhibits *Stone Pile 4*, 1979 (FIG. 25.) at the Henri Gallery in Washington D.C. He is also included in the touring *First Western States Biennial* exhibit representing the State of Wyoming with an uncharacteristic work comprised only of steel, *Gallery Ladder*, 1978 (FIG. 26.) which from 1979 to 1980 tours to Denver Art Museum, San Francisco Museum of Art, Seattle Art Museum and the National Museum of American Art.

*Gallery Ladder* is part a “spur” *Gallery Drawing Series* created 1977-78 where Van Alstine “backed away” from stone to explore and comment on the indoor gallery spaces as the “white cube” and their power to sanction what was in or on it as “art.” It is from this series that Van Alstine takes a steel frame “easel” outdoors, creating a new photo documentary series influenced, among other things, by paintings such as “The Human Condition” by the French surrealist Rene Magritte, and used it as another artistic avenue to comment and come to terms with the western landscape that had influenced him so much during this period. In 1980 he was awarded an Individual Artist Fellowship, for photography, from the Wyoming Council on the Arts to continue and expand his “Easel Landscape” photo series. In 1981 portions of the photo series were exhibited in Washington, DC at the Henri Gallery and at Marlborough Gallery in NYC, several are in private and public collections including the Carnegie Institute, Pittsburgh and the Corcoran Museum in Washington DC. *Like my stone and steel sculpture, the Easel Landscape Series was “another way – another lens - for me to view, digest, and*



FIG. 23. **Trough**, 1979, Colorado flagstone and forged steel, 36 x 48 x 144 in. (91 x 123 x 366 cm). PHOTO: Robert Schaefer.



FIG. 24. **Ballast**, 1979, Colorado flagstone and forged steel, 25 x 76 x 22 in. (66 x 193 x 56 cm). Private Collection.

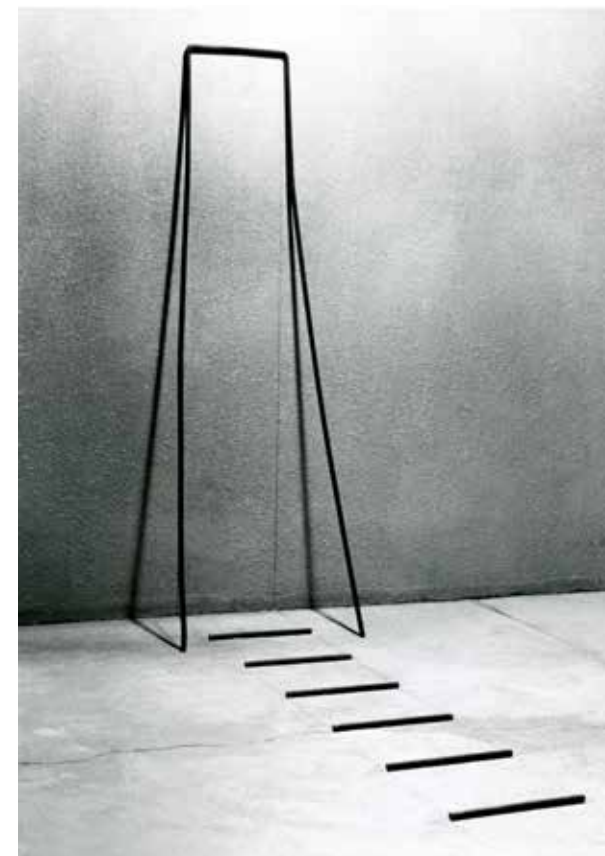


FIG. 26. **Gallery Ladder**, 1978, steel and chalk line, 87 x 32 x 76 in. (221 x 81 x 193 cm). Collection of Denver Art Museum. Gift of the Vera List Foundation.



FIG. 27. **Gallery Easel**, 1978, steel, 72 x 42 w x 95 in. (182 x 107 x 241 cm).

*comment on our amazing western landscape and how we engage and interact with it*, he said in a March 23, 2017 interview.

By 1980, Van Alstine was well on his way to establishing a significant place in the discussion about contemporary sculpture, but another critical transition will take place in a relatively short amount of time.

What is telling about the *Easel Landscape Series* is, not only did Van Alstine use the metal frame to create another perspective on the landscape and its topography, the photos series, and the *Gallery Drawing series* in general, reflect his changing perspective and how steel is becoming more dominant over the found stone. This change accelerates as he transitions back to the East for a teaching position at the University of Maryland and eventually exposes him to a different landscape. Steel is on the ascendancy and the idea of *Tensegrity* provides the conceptual springboard.





FIG. 28. René Magritte, *The Human Condition*, 1933, oil on canvas, 39 x 32 in. (100 x 81 cm). Collection of National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC.



FIG. 29. *Untitled Easel Landscape*, 1980, digital print on archival paper, 24 x 30 in. (61 x 76 cm). Beartooth Pass, Montana, approaching north entrance to Yellowstone National Park.

FIG. 30. *Wyoming Easel Landscape*, 1979, digital print on archival paper, 24 x 30 in. (61 x 76 cm). Near Gillette, Wyoming.



FIG. 31. *Grand Junction Easel Landscape*, 1980, digital print on archival paper, 24 x 30 in. (61 x 76 cm). Near Grand Junction, CO.

FIG. 32. *Abstract Easel Landscape*, 1979, digital print on archival paper, 24 x 30 in. (61 x 76 cm). Nebraska.





FIG. 33. *Dance Hall Easel Landscape*, 1980, digital print on archival paper, 24 x 30 in. (61 x 76 cm). Bosler, Wyoming.

FIG. 34. *Monet Easel Landscape*, 1980, digital print on archival paper, 24 x 30 in. (61 x 76 cm). Eastern Wyoming.

FIG. 35. *Colorado Easel Landscape*, 1979, digital print on archival paper, 24 x 30 in. (61 x 76 cm). Near Marble, CO.





FIG. 1. Berenice Abbott, *Waterfront South Street, NYC*, 1935, PHOTO: Courtesy of WPA.

## Urban Forms

*Numberless crowded streets—high growths of iron, slender, strong, light, splendidly uprising toward clear skies; the countless masts, the white shore-steamers, the lighters, the ferry-boats, the black sea-steamers well-model'd....The beautiful city, the city of hurried and sparkling waters! The city of spires and masts!* — Walt Whitman

Morning reveals New York harbor as sunlight shimmers off its wharves and bridges. A ferry boat docks, releasing its teeming throngs hurrying towards a thick forest of rising skyscrapers. People move briskly along Wall Street amid the entangled concrete and steel landscape.

An ironworker balances on a high beam after a crane drops him off high above the streets, while an arriving ocean liner, flanked by tugboats, turns to dock. Emerging from the darkness of a tunnel, a locomotive belches steam as it chugs with brute power to an unknown destination.

These scenes are from a short, but influential documentary titled *Manhatta*. Made in 1921 by artists Paul Strand, an experimental photographer delving into abstraction, and Charles Sheeler, who later formed the American genre called Precisionism, the silent film marvels at urban density and its aesthetic qualities.

With quotations from Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, the quintessential collection of poems about New York City life, the film finds virtue in industrialization, promise in progress and artistic aesthetics in the sharply angled shapes and forms that steel and concrete construct.

*Manhatta* dutifully records the bustling and rhythmic activity of the metropolis with admiring affection but offers little social commentary about the ill-effects of mass urbanization facing America then; only the lyricism of machines moving at faster speeds, bridges spanning longer and buildings rising to ever new heights. To Strand and Sheeler, the urban form is, in its own way, beauty; perhaps even surpassing nature's own.

Almost all the early modern American artists were, at some point, engaged with industrialization's forms. From the late 19th through the early 20th century, the nation was radically transformed from an agriculture-based economy to a world industrial power, and the structures it created fascinated painters and sculptors alike. This continues today. Van Alstine is no exception.





FIG. 3. *Stone Pile 7*, 1980, (center). One of the last *tensegrity* series, at Marlborough Gallery courtyard, NYC, 1983.

#### From Western Summits to Eastern High Rises

After four years in Wyoming focusing on stone but also finding a role for steel through the idea of tensegrity, Van Alstine moves east to Washington D.C. to take faculty position at the University of Maryland in 1980. Living in the middle of a decaying neighborhood, Van Alstine encountered the sprawling density of the big city for the first time in earnest after living in a rural and small-town setting all his life. Eventually in the summer of 1982 moving to a work/live space in Jersey City to create sculptures for numerous exhibits in the go-go-80s New York art world, Van Alstine's work took a marked turn, a transition that would propel steel as a source of inspiration equal to stone—if not greater.

Stone was still very much a part of his oeuvre, but steel unfurled his compact constructions in a profound way that always is, in varying degrees, evident since then. Responsible for all this was Van Alstine's immersive interaction with the urban architectural landscape in Washington DC, New Jersey and New York and his response was like other American artists: respond as if it is a landscape itself with its own rhythm, patterns and vistas. The vast expanse of industrial machinery, with all its moving parts, produces a seemingly unlimited amount of material, especially for a sculptor.



FIG. 2. Van Alstine's 57 N St. NW studio, Washington, DC, 1980-82.



FIG. 6. *Beam Torque*, 1982, granite and steel, 64 x 176 x 90 in. (163 x 447 x 229 cm). Private collection.



FIG. 7. *Cronus*, 1982, granite and steel, 144 x 144 x 48 in. (366 x 366 x 122 cm). Corporate Collection, Washington, DC.



FIG. 5. *Tripod with Umbilical I*, 1982, 72 x 80 x 92 in. (183 x 203 x 234 cm). Private collection.

Van Alstine never lost connection with Wyoming and the power and influence of the western landscape, but by 1980, after absorbing and incorporating its important core qualities—the vast horizons, clearly visible natural forces of erosion and gravity and tension—his work began to develop a more mature vocabulary building on the experiences of four years out west. At first in Washington, his sculptures were rudimentary experiments—east-coast versions of work done in Laramie—but with more sophistication, more lyricism and a developing narrative about the urbanscape. He encounters significant “structural” changes in his life and work as he accepts a teaching position at University of Maryland while living in Washington D.C.

As he completes his first major public commission in Billings, Montana, *Trough*, 1982 (see page 44 and 55.), the largest and only public work from the *tensegrity* series, Van Alstine creates a new work, *Tripod with Umbilical I*, 1982 (FIG. 5.), signaling a major departure from the spare geometric “static energy event” or “Brute” style. He begins using steel as an element on its own aesthetic terms.

In the fall of 1982, Van Alstine gains access to a Washington construction site and its steel plates, I-beams, pipes and large granite slabs. A flurry of activity results, including *Beam Torque*, 1982 (FIG. 6.), and *Cronus*, 1982 (FIG. 7.), the first two works in which steel takes a



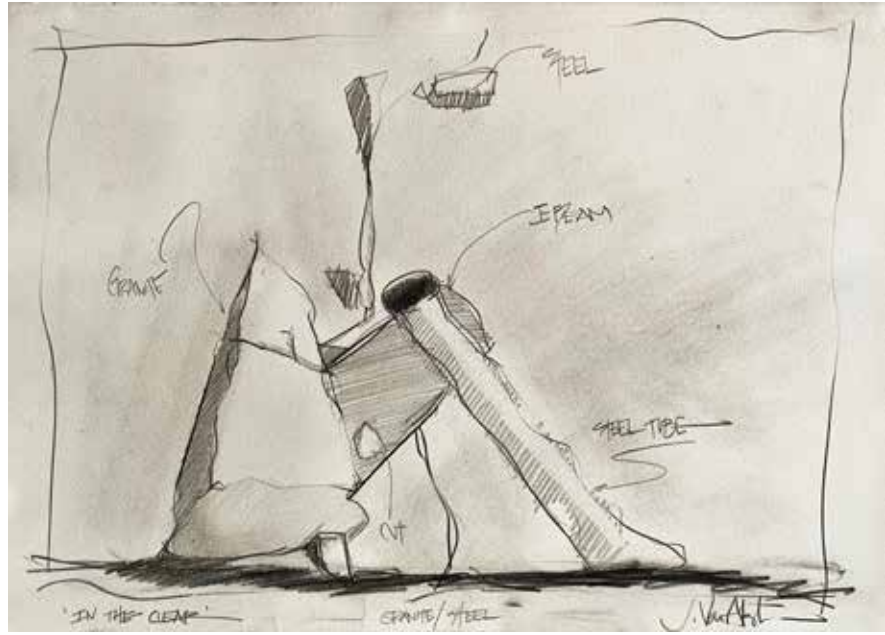


FIG. 8. *In the Clear*, 1983, granite and steel, 96 x 120 x 72 in. (244 x 305 x 183 cm). Collection: Museu Calouste Gulbenkian, Lisbon, Portugal.

FIG. 8a. *In the Clear*, 1983, pencil on rag paper, 10.5 x 15 in. (27 x 38 cm).

FIG. 9a. *4th Beast*, 1983, charcoal on rag paper, 30 x 20 in. (76 x 51 cm).

FIG 9. *4th Beast of Daniel*, 1983, granite and steel, 84 x 144 x 60 in. (213 x 366 x 152 cm). Collection of Hirshhorn Museum, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC.



FIG. 10. *Pulaski Skyway*, near Newark, NJ.

more prominent role, ushering in his “Urban Forms” period. They are followed by *In the Clear*, 1983 (FIG. 8.), *4th Beast of Daniel*, 1983 (FIG. 9.), with their bending steel beams forming arches as if bridge trestles, anchored by slabs of stone, similar to the seas of concrete present in the urban landscape surrounding Van Alstine. At this time he establishes a studio in Jersey City for increased activity in New York City.

#### A Commute through Industrial Remnants

During this time, the commute through the heart of industrial northeast from Jersey City to teach at College Park, MD. continues to engage him and advance his relationship with steel. This interaction with what he calls *industrial architecture* added more fuel to his increasingly large sculptures, with more free flowing with arches, beams and riveted towers, combined with stone, often twisting and looking like concrete, while steel holds them together as it juts outward, sometimes like limbs of Leviathans. Van Alstine describes how his process merged with steel and its larger meanings.





FIG. 11. **Annie Bridge**, a bascule bridge with concrete counterweight near Newark NJ.

*Because I use found objects, I respond to the environment that I'm in. In the early 80's I was driving through some of the most industrialized parts of the country, Kearney NJ, Newark, Philadelphia, Wilmington, Baltimore...weekly. My studio was near the waterfront of Jersey City directly across from the World Trade Center towers. I was continually searching out physical material for my sculpture. The marine and industrial setting on the west bank of the Hudson was amazing; huge riveted-beam draw bridges, the Pulaski Skyway, deserted industrial warehouses, abandoned ship piers were all around. It was visually gritty, sweaty, blue collar, it was pervasive; it entangled you, immersing and penetrating into your senses." It is no surprise that all of this began to seep into his work. "I would visit scrap yards, boat yards and select steel remnants much like I did with stone quarries. I was looking for a narrative, a prose about metal fabrication, industrialization and urban life. These discarded elements were left for the taking, orphaned excesses from the great production of 20th century industry.*

Jersey City was firmly rooted on the Hudson; the waterway was an integral part of its history and identity as it was for kindling American society in the 19th century. Van Alstine stumbled on a number of marine salvage operations that harbored all kinds of discarded early 20th century ship related elements; huge chains, anchors, tillers and large steel buoys. "Intuitively I shifted focus, merging nautical with the urban landscape; the surrounding (and) immense built- environment forged by steel, built of stone and concrete".



FIG. 12. Ocean chain at Jersey City Marine Salvage Yard, 1984. PHOTO: John Van Alstine.



FIG. 12a. Dry docked vessel, Jersey City marine salvage yard. PHOTO: John Van Alstine.

At first, this convergence got him thinking about shipping, trade, the massive commercialized side of plying the waters, but soon he started seeing it in terms of the journey; human migration and movement, the journey of the human endeavor. All of this converged and began evidencing itself in new works.

### Steel Ascending and a Departure from Academia

With a new-found relationship with steel, two important exhibits are staged at the Diane Brown Gallery in DC and the C. Grimaldis Gallery in Baltimore, representing a pinnacle of the 1980s for Van Alstine. While his commercial activity is increasing, his academic career is pushed to the sidelines, leading to a major decision by the end of the year.

To facilitate work on several large commissions and continue building private gallery relationships, Van Alstine took several unpaid leaves from Maryland. Finally, after a third consecutive request, the department chair expressed his disapproval, conveying a positive attitude toward the professional achievement, but stressing the need to be an active part of the department. For Van Alstine, more gallery opportunities were emerging. Diane Brown had moved to New





FIG. 13. *Drastic Measures* (l.) and *Rockslide I*, (r.) both 1984, granite and steel, exhibition Diane Brown Gallery, NYC, 1984. Private collections.

York and he was happy working from the New Jersey studio. The eight-hour weekly round trip commute on the NJ turnpike from New Jersey to Maryland was also beginning to take its toll.

Van Alstine recalls; *I was at a crossroads: I was getting traction in the New York gallery scene, receiving commissions, but income and security from teaching was no doubt attractive.* Jack Burnham, Maryland's department chairman presented him with an ultimatum, according to Van Alstine: *"It's great what you're doing, more power to you", Van Alstine recalls Burnham saying ... "you're making the University look good but you need to be here and teach."*

*I decided to leave. I was in my mid-thirties, not married. It was a big jump because I was on a tenure-track slot; definitely a gamble, but one I have never regretted. There are advantages to staying in academia, but I felt by doing so I was compromising both my teaching and my opportunities of being taken seriously as an artist. As the situation stood I was unable to be the best teacher I could or the best artist, I felt like I was short changing both sides."*



FIG. 14. *Rockslide II*, 1984, granite and steel, 102 x 48 x 36 in. (259 x 122 x 91 cm). Collection of Dayton Art Institute, Dayton, OH.





FIG. 15. **Rounder I**, 1984, granite and steel, 78 x 90 x 42 in. (198 x 229 x 107 cm). Private collection.

Meanwhile, work outside academia is increasing. In 1984 he's awarded an *Individual Artist Fellowship* from NJ Council on the Arts. More urban forms pieces emerge, including *Drastic Measures*, 1984 (FIG. 13.), *Rockslide I*, 1984 (FIG. 13.), *Rockslide II*, 1984 (FIG. 14.), *Rounder I*, 1984 (FIG. 15.), *Gimp*, 1985 (FIG. 16.), *From Melancholy to Mystery*, 1985 (FIG. 17.), *Los Arcos*, 1985 (FIG. 18.), *Rounder II*, 1985 (FIG. 19.), *Carina*, 1989 (FIG. 20.), *Hamilton Go-Round*, 1989 (FIG. 21.), *Kouros*, 1989 (FIG. 22.).

A re-focused philosophy of steel spurs a surge in exhibits, particularly in New York City from 1984 to 1988, putting Van Alstine in a resurgent art market as New York City returns as the global center of visual culture after struggling in the 1970s.



FIG. 16. **Gimp**, 1985, granite and steel, 78 x 55 x 48 in. (198 x 140 x 122 cm).



FIG. 17. **From Melancholy to Mystery**, 1985, granite and steel, 38 x 50 x 16 in. (97 x 127 x 41 cm). Private collection.



FIG. 18. **Los Arcos**, 1985, granite and steel, 96 x 144 x 72 in. (244 x 366 x 183 cm). Private collection.

FIG. 19. **Rounder II**, 1985, granite and steel, 72 x 96 x 48 in. (183 x 244 x 122 cm). Collection: Newark Museum, Newark, NJ.

FIG. 19b. **Rounder II**, 1985, granite and steel, 72 x 96 x 48 in. (183 x 244 x 122 cm). Collection: Newark Museum, Newark, NJ.

FIG. 20. **Carina**, 1989, granite and steel, 82 x 32 x 19 in. (208 x 81 x 48 cm).

FIG. 22. **Kouros**, 1989, granite and steel, 103 x 29 x 22 in. (262 x 74 x 56 cm). John Hechinger Collection.

FIG. 21. **Hamilton Go-Round**, 1989, granite and steel, 86 x 86 x 42 in. (218 x 218 x 107 cm). Private collection.





FIG. 23. Van Alstine's Jersey City studio 1990, from left to right: *Ara I*, 1989, *Odalisque I*, 1989, *Rockslide IV*, 1990.



FIG. 24. *On the Edge (artist passage II)*, 1988, 85 x 22 x 27 in. (216 x 56 x 69 cm). Private collection.



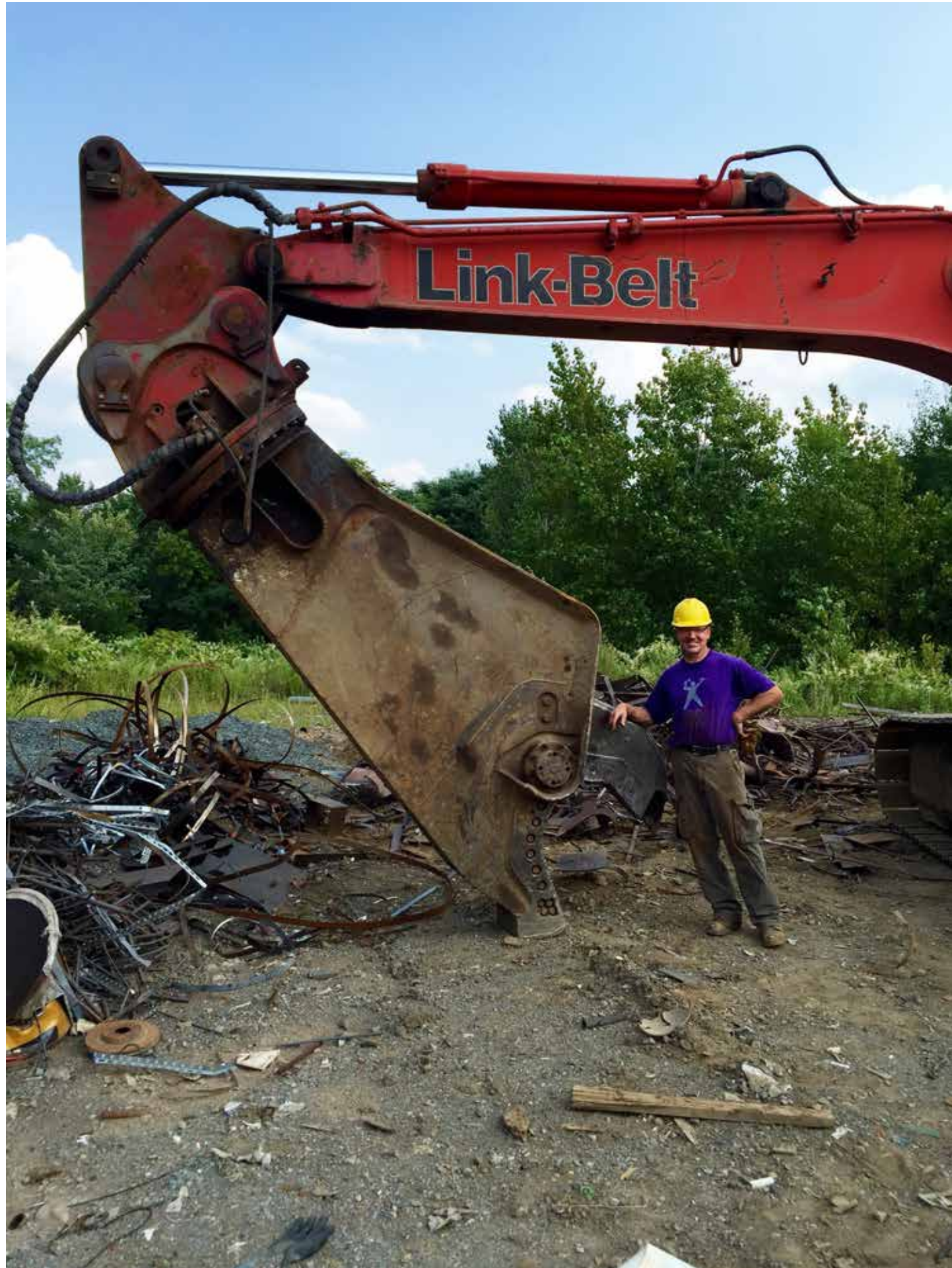
FIG. 25. Solo exhibit at Jersey City Museum, 1988, drawings on left, *Crosscurrent*, 1988, and *Portals and Passages I*, 1988. Both in private collections.

In 1988, Van Alstine continues incorporating the vessel forms, a metaphor for passage, in painted stone and steel pieces, a reoccurring theme that permeates through the 1990s and the 2000s "Navigation" series. Many of these changes—his big forms begin to "loosen up," which is reflected in his solo exhibit at the Jersey City Museum.

He's also invited to make a large scale sculpture for the Austin College campus in Sherman TX, near Dallas, called "*Solstice Calendar*", 1986. It is his first "celestial" sculpture that leads to a number of future commissions.

By the end of the 1980s, Van Alstine has established a strong presence in New York City, Baltimore, New Jersey and Washington DC, married Holly Hallman, the mother of his two daughters, purchased and is renovating his upstate Wells studio, which will become his permanent living and studio space by the early 1990s. With his sculptures "loosening up," Van Alstine embarks on further explorations with steel and stone that, while maintaining his core aesthetic principles, expand his ideas into the next decade.





## Steel

*Steel isn't a utilitarian object, but an expression of the landscape we live in; our desires, our hopes. It's nothing less than civilization itself.*

—David Smith

Driving along a dusty road in Albany, NY's Warehouse District along the old Erie Canal in 2015, John Van Alstine suddenly hits the brakes hard as he simultaneously grabs his truck's door handle to jump out. He has spotted a mass of twisted steel weighing tons next to a huge lift and a crusher with a jagged set of gnarly teeth, much like a prehistoric beast.

*Look at those shapes, the bent metal like arches. They're perfect,* Van Alstine says as he surveys the pile. *It's just the way the steel was when it arrived here. These are really expressive.* The recycling site has its own metal machinery reducing the incoming steel into smaller parts, a process that eventually will melt it to its original state, only to be remade into an industrial product again.

Van Alstine intercedes in this cycle by diverting a small amount of the industrial debris produced to be coupled with stone, reuniting the seemingly opposite Earth-borne materials into a sculptural whole. They are both forged from materials in the Earth's crust; steel from iron ore, while stone is made from natural forces taking place over millions of years. Steel is man-made, stone is created and shaped by wind, water, temperature and the planet's fiery core. With his process, these inanimate objects project a sense of life all their own. Spend enough time with Van Alstine's "harvested" steel; and characters emerge, adding a whole other dimension to his work and process.

This trip in 2015 has been repeated for years since steel began to play a more crucial role in his art after he was backed into an "aesthetic" corner with the ideas of tensegrity and the found-stone process when he was out west. For a brief period, he embraced steel as his only material. This process allowed him to accept steel as a primary rather than secondary element. Like the breakthrough he had with stone in 1975 to let it "speak for itself" he has, over time, let steel remnants have their say through their essential qualities inherent in the

FIG. 1. Van Alstine at Albany scrap yard 2015. PHOTO: Tim Kane.





FIG. 2. Albany scrap yard, 2015. Photo: Tim Kane.

material. The following period from the 1980s with him interpreting the industrial side of the Northeast with its skyscrapers, old factories and ports with huge amounts of marine debris available for the taking, only accelerates the process of steel playing a greater part in his production.

Tons of discarded metal arrive daily at the scrap yard in Albany. Appliances, old cars and even parts of bridges and other infrastructure are shredded and disassembled eventually down to their core essence. They're like orphans of the industrial age, used and cast out to the garbage heap of history, left like fossils of mechanization. Entering the recycling plant is to enter something akin to an archaeological dig with menacing jagged edges, glaring bolts peering at you as if steely eyes and snarled beams, like appendages, reaching outward.

For Van Alstine, steel is a metaphor for the march towards mechanization, and industry encroaching on wilderness, placing him firmly in the 20th century modernist tradition of interpreting the impact of modernization on life and the environment. Gravitating towards factories, skyscrapers, bridges and highways, often in bold presentations, 20th century American abstract artists also turned to the landscape for inspiration in a similar vein that Van Alstine does. Even as far back as Thomas Cole, American landscape artists saw industrialization as a threat—in particular, the railroad. In 1836, Cole writes “We are still in Eden; all that shuts us out is our own ignorance and folly.” From the essay *On American Scenery*, September 14, 1838.

At the site, Van Alstine continues rummaging through the entangled mass before him, separating those which might qualify for art. “I’m looking for unique forms, ones that speak to me. See here, this section with the series of triangular indentations suggests a certain movement.” Although Van Alstine’s finished sculptures are assembled with calculation, they owe much to randomness like the raku pottery that he was very involved with early in his career.

This randomness was initially primed by Van Alstine’s turn away from manipulating stone to accepting it as it is, as a found object while at Cornell. This transition also indirectly led to a similar approach with steel in about 1980. Steel initially was used as a support mechanism for stone under the broad principles of tensegrity. As the 70s end, steel and stone dance between materiality and the metaphysical. But by the early 1980s, steel not only becomes as important as stone, it begins to shape his production and his intellectual perspective more fervently. This intensity connects him with a series of 20th century movements that triggered a new aesthetic for him in the 1980s.

Surrounded by the greenery of nature, the scrap metal at the recycling plant clashes with its pristine surroundings. Van Alstine sees the bent and twisted metal as the source of a narrative in his artwork that wrestles with two things diametrically opposite—stone and steel. This conflict is the essence of the early American culture and Van Alstine returns to it in an abstract, constructivist way.

### A Constructivist Bent and ‘New Tendencies’: A Vision Emerges

In his first welded steel work, *Flight*, 1971 (see *page 14*), Van Alstine draws upon the Russian constructivists in the 1920s, and its associated genres, including Bauhaus, DeStijl and the Art Concrete movement, which emerged in Paris during the 1930s. For the first time, these movements saw industrial elements truly expressive of modern life at a time when technological advancements were accelerating at a rapid pace. Constructivism was born after World War I in Moscow, moved to Paris after the Russian Revolution, and challenged cubism as the dominant form for sculptors, especially Americans, by the 1930s. American artists like David Smith would gravitate towards metal in a major way following World War II echoing America’s rise as an industrial and cultural power at a global level.

Founded by Naum Gabo and Antoine Pevsner, constructivism saw metal as a perfect medium for the Twentieth Century following the atrocities of World War I, but also progress—a defining material for society. At an aesthetic level, metal provided a medium to produce sculpture that was about volume rather than mass, space rather than form. Along with the brief but intense period of Futurism, a European art movement focused on depicting modern speed and how





FIG. 3. *Above/Below*, 1973, steel, 12 x 84 x 52 in. (30 x 213 x 132 cm).

it alters our perceptions and society, Constructivism deviates from the prevailing sculptural principles through experimentation with time, space and matter.

As a whole, Van Alstine's early steel works like *Above/Below*, 1973 (FIG. 3.), also reflect an era when the non-figurative was ascendant. With the figurative in the decline after World War II, the "New Tendencies" movement in the late 1940s and early 50s sought to redefine sculpture as less commemorative, more mobile and placeless. And the movement reconfigured sculpture to be about the laws of 20th century physics. These ideas guided sculptor David Smith, whose main medium was steel and added his versions of these new tendencies. Writing about David Smith in the 1949 "The New Sculpture" essay Clement Greenberg found his sculpture to embody a new aesthetic that is "more linear with a flattened volume more like a canvas with collage-like elements of everyday objects pieced together instead of a carved form, which relates to a protean expressiveness." Van Alstine's sculptures are driven by linear design much in the way Greenberg found Smith's work to be.

As stated in the influential treatise "The New Vision" (1946), by Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, the accent on motion is seen as fundamental, an idea that informs Van Alstine's creative output. In it Moholy-Nagy writes that volume and mass were no longer "appropriate" for sculpture but



FIG. 4. Antoine Pevsner, *Third and Fourth Dimension*, at the Johan de Wittlaan, Congress Building, The Hague/The Netherlands.



FIG. 5a. *Teddy's Wedge*, 1981, granite and forged steel, 108 x 72 x 60 in. (274 x 183 x 152 cm). Collection: The Herbert F. Johnson Museum, Cornell University.



FIG. 6. *Pierced Figure-St. Sebastian*, 1982, charcoal on rag paper, 20 x 12 in. (51 x 30 cm), detail.



FIG. 7. *Tripod with Umbilical II*, 1982, granite and forged steel, 13 x 24 x 15 in. (33 x 61 x 38 cm).

that "energy, or its expression, represented reality better than solid form, and movement was closer to the heart of the modern."

When Van Alstine begins to move away from the very calculated and measured *tensegrity*-centered work, like *Teddy's Wedge*, 1981 (FIG. 5a.), where stone dominates, his work slowly starts to migrate into a new territory with steel taking on a more playful and expressive character. His drawings, like *Pierced Figure-St. Sebastian*, 1982 (FIG. 6.) and many others (FIGS. 8a-d, FIG. 9.), from this period lead the way signaling a conscious break from the past. His titles and ideas move from very specific references of implied action—*Wedge*, *Crimp*, *Torque*, *Pile*, *Splay* to works such as *Tripod with Umbilical I* and *II*, both from 1982 (FIG. 5, see page 67 and FIG. 7).





FIG. 8a. **Rounder**, 1984, charcoal on rag paper, 30 x 20 in. (76 x 51 cm).; FIG. 8b. **Branches**, 1982, charcoal on rag paper, 30 x 20 in. (76 x 51 cm).  
FIG. 8c. **In the Clear**, 1983, charcoal on rag paper, 30 x 20 in. (76 x 51 cm).; FIG. 8d. **Rounder**, 1984, charcoal and conte on rag paper, 30 x 20 in. (76 x 51 cm).



FIG. 9. **4th Beast**, 1983, charcoal on rag paper, 30 x 20 in. (76 x 51 cm).

They suggest a reversal of sorts. The stone is supporting the unfurling steel, which still provides an interlocking framework, but steel adds an expressive flourish – a twisting and jutting outward indicating a breaking free from previous compositions, yet stone still is the anchor. This is rather explosive. Spurred on by the drawings, sculptures like *In the Clear*, 1983 (FIG. 10.), *Off and Running*, 1983 (FIG. 11.), *Rockbottom*, 1984 (FIG. 12.), *Thorned Marble Arch*, 1984 (FIG. 13.), *Wrangler*, 1984 (FIG. 14.), *Drastic Measures*, 1984 (FIG. 15.), *Straight from the Top*, 1984 (FIG. 16.), *Holding Pattern*, 1984 (FIG. 17.), *PAHOTI (Put a Handle On To It)*, 1984 (FIG. 18.), *Uppercut*, 1984 (FIG. 19.), *Luna*, 1985 (FIG. 20.), emerge. In these, Van Alstine finds an expressive “pendulum” that swings far from the tight, calculated works that preceded them. Moving forward, steel will play a more dominant role and introduce aesthetic ripples for years to













FIG. 14. **Wrangler**, 1984, granite and steel, 22 x 42 x 10 in. (56 x 107 x 25 cm). Private collection.



FIG. 15. **Drastic Measures**, 1984, granite and steel, 12 x 12 x 8 ft. (3.7 x 3.7 x 2.4 m). Unpainted version. Private Collection.





FIG. 16. *Straight from the Top*, 1984, granite and steel, 10 x 9 x 6 ft. (305 x 274 x 183 cm).



FIG. 17. *Holding Pattern*, 1984, granite and steel, 24 x 50 x 12 in. (61 x 127 x 30 cm).

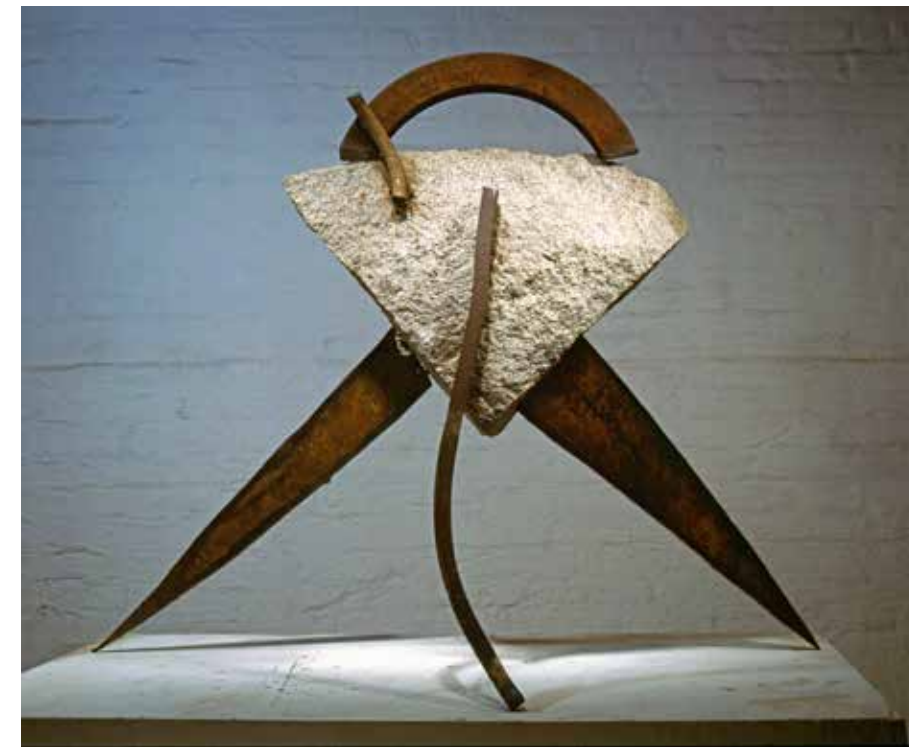


FIG. 18. *PAHOTI (Put a Handle On To It)*, 1984, granite and steel, 32 x 39 x 18 in. (81 x 99 x 46 cm). Private collection.





FIG. 19. *Uppercut*, 1984, granite and steel, 24 x 30 x 16 in. (61 x 76 x 41 cm). Private collection.



OPPOSITE: FIG. 20. *Luna*, 1985 (original unpainted version), granite and steel, 120 x 84 x 60 in. (305 x 213 x 152 cm). Private collection.





FIG. 21. **Falling**, 2005, volcanic stone and steel, 25 x 30 x 6 in. (63 x 76 x 15 cm). Private collection.

come. More than stone, steel becomes the “energy” of Van Alstine’s sculptures as the 1980s unfold. Stone certainly still plays an integral role, but steel, with slight alterations through touches of fabrication, provides a higher level of expression. Combined they twist and turn around each other as opposites that eventually merge into a seamless whole.

As with many of the themes and series Van Alstine has developed, he tends to rework and refine. Two works from the mid-2000s, *Falling*, 2005 (FIG.21.), and *Complications From A Fall II*, 2007 (FIG. 22.), are examples of the steel again unfurling. They present the cubist idea of distilling individual parts from the greater whole and rearranging them to alter perspective. However, unlike other cubists, whose paintings and sculpture are, for the most part, detached from the representational world, Van Alstine’s abstractions often include representations of real things. The Dadist Movement, which emerged more than a 100 years ago in Europe, also plays a part in Van Alstine’s body of work through his use of chance and found objects of stone and steel, but it is another movement that informs his sculpture more profoundly in his use of steel.



FIG. 22. **Complications From A Fall II**, 2007, slate and steel, 21 x 35 x 8 in. (53 x 89 x 20 cm). Private collection.

Other steel work like *Rounder I*, 1984 (FIG. 24.), *Los Arcos*, 1985 (FIG. 25.), *Rounder II*, 1985 (FIGS. 26. and 27.), and *Triad*, 1986 (FIG. 28.) that followed are more “tame” - indicating the pendulum has come back more to the middle to the more classic “urban forms.”

There is, as mentioned before, the constant conflict between pristine nature (stone) and the built environment (steel) that has received much commentary from American landscape artists but steel itself is a landscape unto its own due to the forces of nature that created it.



FIG. 23. **Complications From A Fall II**, 2007, detail. Private collection.









FIG. 26. *Rounder II*, 1985, granite and steel, 72 x 96 x 48 in. (182 x 244 x 122 cm). Collection: Newark Museum of Art, Newark, NJ.  
 FIG. 27. *Rounder II*, 1985, detail.



FIG. 28. *Triad*, 1986, pink granite and painted steel, 138 x 120 x 60 in. (351 x 305 x 154 cm).





### At Home in the Adirondacks

*Thousands of tired, nerve-shaken, over-civilized people are beginning to find out that going to the mountains is going home; that wildness is a necessity; and that mountain parks and reservations are useful not only as fountains of timber and irrigating rivers but as a fountain of life.* — John Muir, "The Wild Parks and Forest Reservations of the West," *Atlantic Monthly*, January 1898.

During the past 30 years, Van Alstine has produced hundreds of sculptures from his studio/work space in tiny Wells, New York in the expansive Adirondack Mountains, sending them in all directions of the compass to collectors, galleries and museums. These days, with partner Austrian sculptor Caroline Ramersdorfer, the two oversee the property, a nerve center of activities, with its warehouse spaces, galleries and landscaped sculpture gardens displaying works for the numerous visitors that arrive regularly.

A cluttered studio is where a large crane hoists heavy stones and steel for his assemblages, iron is welded and stone is adjusted. In the "north," or sawmill studio building, Ramersdorfer works marble for her white abstractions with a diamond-bladed grinder. While it's a thriving commercial operation once again, it is also home.

It is where sun-splashed summer days end with a dip in the cooling East Branch of the Sacandaga River, a kayak trip, or a bit of fly fishing before dinner. It is where frigid temperatures are met with a cross-country ski trip, or a snowshoe jaunt to see the ice formations at places like Auger Falls. While the hum of clamoring tools signals its past as an industrial site, the crackle of the big stone fireplace inside the main house is about warmth and congeniality.

Renovations by Van Alstine began in the late 1980s on the industrial site where milling, tanning and manufacturing took place as far back as the early 1800s—when Lewis and Clark were charting the unknowns of the Western frontier. Van Alstine's nine-acre studio complex keenly reflects the idea of adaptive reuse in post-industrial America where former commercial sites are re-purposed for contemporary use—often cultural.

Known most recently as the Adirondack Lumber Company, the mill was the life-blood for several communities in the central Adirondacks during much of its history. With continuous

FIG. 1. Wells residence Fireplace, built by Van Alstine, Bernie Dunn, and Caroline Ramersdorfer, 2007. PHOTO: John Van Alstine.





FIG. 3. Vintage postcard of Wells mill property, c.1900.



FIG. 4. Wells mill property, c.1880.

operations since Jefferson was President, it ceased operations in the late 1960s, falling into serious disrepair. The six buildings site, is located along Route 30, a main north-south arterial through the vast Adirondack Park.

### Putting Down Roots

Relocating permanently from the urban Jersey City in the early 1990s, Wells is where Van Alstine raised his two children, Eden and Chloe, with wife Holly Hallman, reconnecting with his roots. The Wells studio is the place he has completed his most important works from the 1990s until today. Van Alstine describes it “as a never-ending project” that requires constant attention. The site, in essence, is a sculptural project—the largest Van Alstine has undertaken. It might be Van Alstine’s greatest work of all. Any discussion of his sculpture has to include the Wells complex for personal, intellectual and aesthetic reasons.

Over the years, much of Van Alstine’s granite and slate has been gathered in the Adirondack Mountains and Vermont surrounding his base in the center of the six-million acre park. This heavily protected area created by the famous “forever wild” clause in the 1888 New York State Constitution that aimed to curtail mining, railroads, logging and paper production from “rampant exploitation of natural resources for a few rather than the many, depriving them of the joys and happiness wilderness can bring,” stated a New York Assembly member just prior to its passage.



FIG. 5. Sacandaga River, 2021, runs through Wells property, used in the early 20th century to transport logs. PHOTO: John Van Alstine.



FIG. 6. 1961 snapshot of mill property – much the way it looked when Van Alstine purchased it in 1987.

Although the first National Parks such as Yellowstone had been designated, the “forever wild” clause set a precedent for other conservation measures across the nation well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century and beyond as the park system expanded. The law created a framework and administrative guidelines to achieve a balance between development and protection. Ever since then, there have been pitched battles between those that see the Adirondack Park Agency as an intrusive meddler in landowners’ rights and others who view it as a tool to preserve the essential character of the mountain range.

Given the materials of Van Alstine’s sculpture—natural stone and man-made steel—it’s fitting the center of his creative life would be located in the Adirondacks. For more than two centuries, the Adirondacks have been the stage where the conflict between economic development and preservation has played out in a particularly ardent way, especially with the rise of the environmental movement in the 1960s, as the pressure to build additional tourist destinations crucial to the local economy increased. Like the stone and steel that meet in Van Alstine’s work, often seeking a precarious balance, these pressures still very much collide today across America and the Adirondacks.

### A Drive North

Van Alstine’s involvement with the Wells studio began by pure chance. In 1986, he was in Saratoga Springs at the Yaddo Institute, a prestigious arts residency. From there Van Alstine drove north on Route 30 to visit St. Lawrence University, where he attended college his first two years, passing by the site’s dilapidated structures, noticing “four or five” *For Sale* signs plastered all over the hulking shell.

At the time, Van Alstine and Holly Hallman were living an on-the-edge, “bohemian” lifestyle in a live/work space in a converted warehouse in Jersey City not far from the Hudson River waterfront across from lower Manhattan. While near the epicenter of the New York art scene, it provided just enough space for him to ply his trade. *It was incredibly tough living there. We had converted raw warehouse space into a rugged but livable space. It was not a good neighborhood, and it was brutal in the extremes of summer and winter*, he remembers in an October 2016 interview.

At Yaddo, Van Alstine was reinvigorated by the “natural beauty, calmness and bucolic feel” reminiscent of his youth spent in upstate New York. Not since leaving Wyoming in 1980 had Van Alstine lived in “nature.” The residency sparked a rekindling of his relationship with wilderness, although, he admits, moving out of Jersey City was the farthest thing from his mind



at the time. After all, he had carved out a successful career in New York City and elsewhere on the East Coast at a handful of well-known galleries and museums.

On his way back from St. Lawrence he took a look at the complex:

*It was incredible in terms of its scale and potential, the price was extremely reasonable for nine acres on the river with six incredible buildings, but it was totally a gut rehab. I didn't have enough money to buy it let alone make it workable and going to a bank for a loan seemed unrealistic - I was a sculptor no longer employed at a university with a steady income.*

So he approached his dad about the financing.

*For some reason my dad saw great potential in the property, I also think he liked the idea we would be closer to my mom and him, Van Alstine recalls in the October 2016 interview. He borrowed \$20,000 for the down payment and paid his father monthly for 10 years. The closing was in March, 1987 with snow on the ground. We came up from Jersey City for a final walk-thru of the property just before heading to the lawyers to sign the papers. In less than two hours we returned to find one of the roofs had collapsed from the snow. I remember thinking: 'This is not a good start.'*

Not only did his father provide capital, he worked hand-in-hand with John for the rest of his life.

*It's really been a never-ending project. In those early years my father was very instrumental in making it happen. He had all sorts of skills...electricity, plumbing and carpentry. It reminded me when we worked together on our summer camp when I was a kid. I look back on those early years on the (Wells) project with fondness and a special connection with my father.*

#### Scraping, Sawing and Painting: A DIY Project Unfolds

Work began in earnest in the summer of 1987. While the property had nine acres about three were under the Sacandaga River, leaving six usable acres. *There was no real living space, studio or electricity, and with so much to do we had to adapt a sort of triage attitude. It was beautiful, but that first year we were basically camping.* Without power tools, the Van Alstines chipped away at the various chores; scraping, cleaning and then painting the planing mill. *I remember cutting a lot of wood with a handsaw.*

By the following summer, the main studio area was usable and the big bridge crane was built in preparation for a large commission, a site-specific work, *East River Totem* for Democracy



FIG. 7. Aerial view of property, 1987. PHOTO: John Van Alstine.



FIG. 8. Holly Van Alstine in front of old planing mill, first summer 1987 – later renovated into home. PHOTO: John Van Alstine.



FIG. 9a. Wells planing mill home interior 1988. PHOTO: John Van Alstine.



FIG. 10. Richard and John Van Alstine erecting studio bridge crane, 1988. PHOTO: Holly Van Alstine.



FIG. 10a. Van Alstine working on *East River Totem* under new bridge crane, 1988. PHOTO: Holly Van Alstine.



FIG. 11. *East River Totem*, 1988, installed Democracy Plaza, Washington, DC, 1988, Richard Van Alstine (l.) John Van Alstine (r.).



FIG. 9. Wells planing mill before renovation June 1987. PHOTO: John Van Alstine.

Plaza in Washington D.C. *It had one very large stone that needed to be moved and held vertically ... Van Alstine remembers ... we needed a big outdoor space with a big crane.*

He and his dad designed and erected the 25-foot-high crane, welding massive I-beams with the aid of scaffolding borrowed from a friend. It was one of the first times he used a recently acquired hydraulic “knuckle” crane, which was attached to his truck. *It was one of the most important purchases I've ever made*” Van Alstine says, *I still use it today.*

*East River Totem* was finished on Halloween that year. It was getting cold, particularly because the main house was only partially restored and not winterized. It was even more of a challenge because Holly was pregnant with Eden who was born New Year's Eve in 1988. The following summers of 1989 and 1990 were focused on finishing the “planing mill,” the main living area. Custom windows were purchased and installed and together with his dad and a few dedicated friends, completed the plumbing, insulation, electricity, drywall and sanding of the floors.

In 1991, with “the house” restored and winterized, Holly, Eden, and Chloe, who was born in March of that year, decided to remain through the Christmas holidays, returning to Jersey City in early January 1992. *It was a 'trial run' to see how we would fair, Van Alstine commented, It worked out well and the next spring we moved up full time, returning to Jersey City regularly to stage shows in NYC, Baltimore and Washington.*





FIG. 12b. Van Alstine working on **Broad Reach**, 1994. PHOTO: Holly Hallman.

Throughout the 90's, continual improvements were made to the gallery, carpentry shop, studios, and the landscape. In 2000, the site was awarded “*Best Adaptive Re-Use*” of a Commercial Property in the Adirondacks by AARCH (Adirondack Architectural Heritage Organization). In 2005, the guest house, called “Studio B”, a separate building on the south east corner of the property was restored. In 2007, with stone mason and good friend Bernie Dunn, the big natural stone fireplace was completed in the main house. Renovation of “Studio C” as a guest apartment for visiting clients, friends, and family took place in 2011. The original sawmill building at the north end of the property was totally renovated in 2019 creating a beautiful studio overlooking the river. In 2022 the William G. Pomeroy Foundation awarded the property a historic state road sign commemorating its significant commercial and cultural contributions to the Wells community and the Adirondack Park. More improvements, projects and events are planned in the years to come, including a proposed collaboration with the Ellen Sinopoli Dance company in 2023.

#### Connecting the Circle: Work, Family and Friends

The fateful drive through Wells, on the way to someplace else, would significantly alter the course of Van Alstine's life and career. Every other move he had made—Ohio, Maine, Ithaca, Wyoming, Washington and Jersey City—had resulted in something entirely different



FIG. 12a. Eden on **Sledge**, Wells studio, 1992. PHOTO: John Van Alstine.



FIG. 13. Chloe (l.), Eden (r.) in Van Alstine's welding studio, c. 1994. PHOTO: John Van Alstine.



FIG. 14. Holly, John, Chloe and Eden, in Wells Garden with **Strange Fruit VIII (Close to the heart)**, 1993. PHOTO: John Van Alstine



FIG. 16. Renovated sawmill studio, 2019. PHOTO: John Van Alstine.



FIG. 17. Restored planing mill, 2020, with **Sisyphes Circle LXIV**. PHOTO: John Van Alstine.



FIG. 17a. NYS Historic Sign awarded in 2022 by the William G. Pomeroy Foundation.



FIG. 15. Guest space - Studio C, 2011. PHOTO: John Van Alstine.

artistically. Wells wasn't any different. It triggered a transformation of his life and art with more long-term ramifications than any other move. It would take several years for what Van Alstine once described as a “white elephant” to be the agent of change, but by the early 1990s, he and Hallman, and their two children, would call it home, becoming the focal point of their activities.

In October 2017 Van Alstine reflects, *I would have never guessed in a million years I'd end up back in this part of the country. It's kind of coming home, completing the circle. Relocating did have risks - we had low overhead but transporting sculptures and maintaining connections to galleries in New York, Baltimore and Washington was a challenge, but it has certainly proved worth it. We lived quite happily as a family – some of the best years of my life.*

His daughter Eden describes growing up in Wells as like living in a bubble. “Most kids would have to go somewhere to play, but we didn't - we had it all”, she said in a June 10, 2017 interview. They were living in a park, swimming in their front yard, with all kinds of neat spaces to build forts and ice skate. There was constant activity of two artists. “We always had clay and paint and were continually encouraged to be creative”, she added. Both Eden and Chloe are not artists per se, but Eden believes the “Wells” experience planted the seeds for her current





FIG. 18. Restored planing mill now the main residence, winter 2015. PHOTO: John Van Alstine.

passion to create “artistic spaces” at home and at work as a Child Life Specialist. Although she now lives in Philadelphia, Eden views Wells as “her home at heart” and now very much a place of refuge.

For Chloe, Wells instilled a sense of “exploration.” From a June 18, 2017 interview: “With so many things to do and having two artists living and working so close encouraged creativity, being yourself, and reaching out for new places and experiences”.

After graduating college Chloe worked for a year at an international corporate travel firm in a traditional 9-to-5 job in downtown Philadelphia. Unhappy with its “restrictive” nature, she struck out on her own embarking on a world travel/work adventure. She spent five years working in Prague, Miramar, Australia, and Hanoi, and as of 2022, is living and working in Bordeaux, France with her French husband Luc. “Growing up with creative parents working independently and encouraging travel and exploration has certainly had an impact on me”. Both girls were married in 2021, Chloe on the Wells property, Eden in Hawaii. Because of the Covid epidemic restriction their wedding events had to be reduced. The family had a large joint celebration in the Sculpture Garden July of 2022.



FIG. 19. Chloe and Eden at Chloe’s wedding in the Wells sculpture garden, November 2021. PHOTO: John Van Alstine.



FIG. 20. John and Caroline, Wedding Day, Sept 17, 2017, in Wells sculpture garden standing on Van Alstine’s, **Charon’s Steel Styx Passage**. PHOTO: Eden Van Alstine



FIG. 21. Sculpture Garden, view south toward Moose Mountain, 2012. PHOTO: John Van Alstine.

Another important addition to Wells is Caroline Ramersdorfer, an accomplished Austrian sculptor who Van Alstine met in 2002. She eventually took up part-time residence in 2005, and as their personal relationship deepened she joined him year-around in 2009 and in 2017 they were married in their sculpture garden. Ramersdorfer has lived and maintained studios in Florence, Carrara, Vienna and Japan, has led an impressive, somewhat nomadic life as an artist, installing sculptures on five continents through various symposia and exhibitions, but now considers the Wells studio as a home base for her international projects. While Chloe views her connection to Wells as spurring her to a more global life, for Ramersdorfer, it has been a place to put down roots, find a center, after so much travel.

“The Wells environment energized my sculpture”, Ramersdorfer said in a July 2016 interview. “The surrounding scenery—the place itself, the solitude, the light—created a new vision that expanded their design. At first I was ‘overwhelmed’ by the number and enormity of the buildings, the vastness of the Adirondacks and how ‘wild’ things were. Over time, though, because it was a place to reflect in relative isolation, it has become a very nurturing and productive space”. Asked in the same interview where home for her really is with such a worldly life and maintaining a studio in Austria, she said; “It is where you find balance”.

For Van Alstine, and now Ramersdorfer, Wells is at the core of their personal and professional worlds. For Van Alstine particularly, it has influenced his life and art more than perhaps any other factor or place and is the embodiment of his longest running and most encompassing “art project”.





FIG. 22. Van Alstine at work in Wells outdoor studio, 2005. PHOTO: John Van Alstine.



FIG. 23. *Charon's Steel Styx Passage*, 1996, in north garden, 2020. PHOTO: John Van Alstine.



FIG. 24. View north in long concrete building, 2012. PHOTO: John Van Alstine.

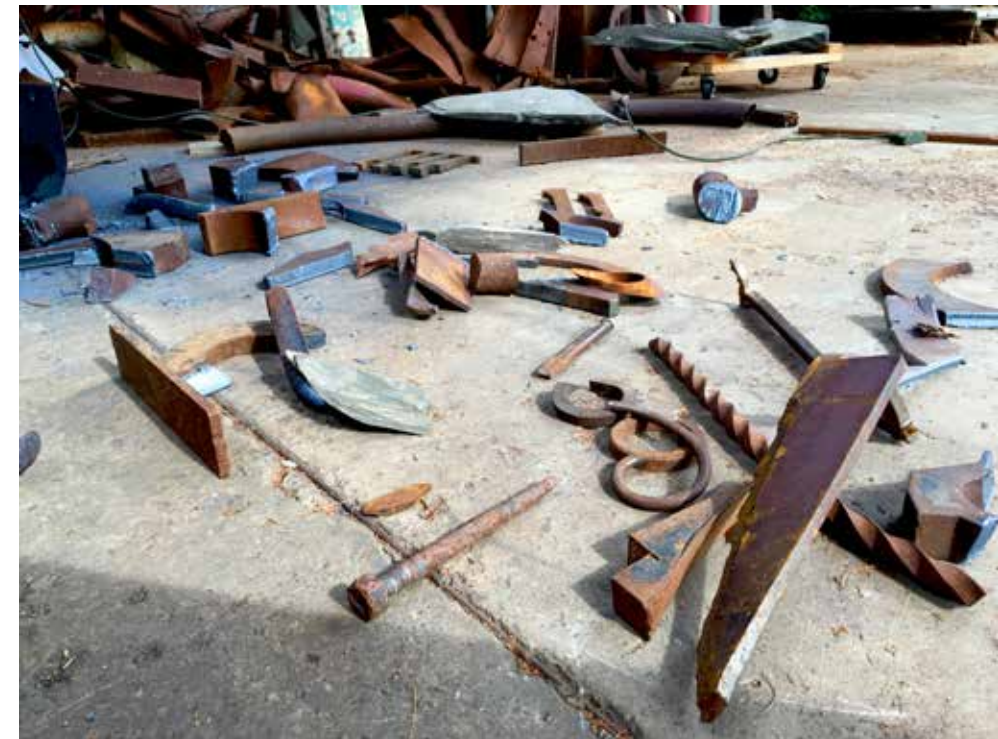


FIG. 25. Welding pad work floor, 2021. PHOTO: John Van Alstine.





FIG. 26. Garden and house, with marble Ramersdorfer sculpture, 2014. PHOTO: John Van Alstine.; FIG. 27. *Doryphorus*, 2000, in Wells garden. PHOTO: John Van Alstine.  
FIG. 28. Winter ice sculpture in garden, 2005, PHOTO: John Van Alstine.; FIG. 29. Welding shop, 2019. PHOTO: John Van Alstine.  
FIG. 30. Van Alstine and Ramersdorfer kayaking on nearby Gilman Lake, 2021. PHOTO: John Van Alstine.; FIG. 31. Interior - Wells planing mill residence, 2021. PHOTO: John Van Alstine.



FIG. 32. Van Alstine fly fishing in front of house, Sacandaga River, 2018. PHOTO: Caroline Ramersdorfer. / FIG. 33. Early Spring - Wells sculpture garden, 2021. PHOTO: John Van Alstine.  
FIG. 34. *Buoy*, 1995, granite and steel, 130 x 120 x 60 in. (330 x 305 x 152 cm). Wells garden 2022. / FIG. 35. *Sisyphean Holiday (portals and passages)*, 2009, riverstone and steel, 150 x 150 x 48 in. (384 x 384 x 122 cm).





## At Work in the Adirondacks

### The Adirondacks as Muse

By 1990, John Van Alstine was living and working full time in the central Adirondacks at his studio in Wells, NY after acquiring the expansive property in 1987, a former mill dating back to the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. During this period, he and his family split their time between Wells and their work/live space in Jersey City as he maintained a robust exhibition schedule in New York City and elsewhere.

Many hours were spent on the road between the two places as Van Alstine increasingly became frustrated with the complexities of urban living and questioned more and more whether his creativity was being negatively impacted by living in New Jersey. After all, he had grown up in a small-town environment not very far away from Wells and had spent a good amount of time in the American west, easily adapting to its topography as he launched his career in the 1970s. He had also connected with the rural environment in Ohio, Maine and the Finger Lakes in New York as a student. He had spent more years in a country setting than not. While he had produced some of his strongest works interpreting the urban geography of New York City during the 1980s in his “Urban Forms” period, by 1987 it was running its course. He recalls how just buying the Wells property began a process of wondering if living in the New York City area was optimal since he was spending an increasing amount of time in the Adirondacks. With the first of two children, Eden, born the year before, there was added impetus to relocate full time to Wells. He also built his overhead crane in the main studio, which dramatically increased his production capacity making living in Wells economically feasible.

*There were a number of things that made living and working in Jersey City less than ideal. Although we lived close to New York City, which made it easy to get my work into galleries, and there was this amazing steel material to work with in the urban environment, I was still frustrated by the confined living and working space,* he said in a January 18, 2022 interview.

FIG. 1. Van Alstine constructing bridge crane, 1988. PHOTO: Richard Van Alstine.



The Jersey City building was surrounded by concrete. Van Alstine’s truck was constantly getting broken into. The last straw was when his heavy riveted steel beams, which were stored outside the studio, were stolen. *At my core I was then - and maybe still now – a “hippie” at heart, a back-to-the-lander. I always knew that the Jersey City time was going to be temporary – I was never really comfortable there – I viewed it as a period of “paying your dues” and in 1987 I saw the opportunity to turn the Wells property into my dream*, he said in the same January 18, 2022 interview.

In a short time, the Adirondacks were revitalizing him and his art. *I came with a renewed perspective. I was seeing things with different eyes. I was away from the stress of the city. Wells was a very rural setting which meant being around fewer and different people. There also was a very diverse range of seasons and different raw materials. The mill complex was a much larger space to create, store material and display finished sculptures. It all added up and made sense. I have now been here for nearly 35 years, and it has had an unmistakable influence on me and my work.*

It could be argued that it has been the single most influential factor in his career. Although there were changes taking place in his works in the late 1980s that set the stage for what was to come, his interaction with the Adirondack landscape pushed him in a new direction and spawned series like *Implements/Tools, Anglers, Taxidermy, Sisyphus, Portals and Passages, Vessels and Navigation, including Pyxis Awry, a drawing series and his sublime and picturesque Adirondack Landscapes*. There was also a move towards color, reflecting the mood and luministic atmosphere of the vibrant scenery around him. All of this sparked a reconnection to bronze as well. The natural features of the Adirondacks became a primary muse and source for his art, physically as well as metaphysically, during the 1990s and beyond. This was a critical juncture. In a December 18, 2021 interview, Van Alstine continues:

*I am often asked how the Adirondacks have influenced my work. I am never sure exactly how to answer, as the influences are many, some are subtle and often so connected to my “being” that they are not always obvious to me. One thing I can say for sure - it took moving away to appreciate and better understand its impact.*

### Back in the ADKs

The new studio in Wells is on the dynamic and ever-changing Sacandaga River. It rekindled his interest in being on the water, especially kayaking. He also made frequent trips to the nearby Adirondack Museum. His favorite section was the boat pavilion that featured locally-built vessels spanning from 18th century flat-bottom bateaus to indigenous guide boats and



FIG. 2. Sacandaga River running through Wells property, 2022.  
PHOTO: John Van Alstine.



FIG. 3. Mahogany racer, Adirondack Museum, Blue Mt. Lake, NY, 2013. PHOTO: John Van Alstine.



FIG. 4. Van Alstine at Caroga Lake, NY, summer 1957.  
PHOTO: Richard Van Alstine.

sleek mahogany racers that graced the waters of nearby Lake George, setting world speed records in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. All impressed him with their superb functional design. *I began to consider the idea of the vessel and passage and how they could be incorporated into the narrative of a sculpture through symbolic and metaphoric associations with the Adirondacks*, he recalls in a November 13, 2021 interview. A sense of the human dynamic emerges within the landscape from what was a largely abstract and material-based oeuvre.

His return to a rural, agrarian environment also generated an interest in implements and tools, suggesting the human figure, which accelerated the use of the implied figure in his work. Being closer to wildlife triggered sculptural ideas about fishing and hunting suggesting the human figure, which accelerated the use of the implied figure in his work. Although he was always attracted to nautical and navigational themes, it was enhanced by being around water and boats. A “spiritual” and aesthetic change was underway.

It makes sense Van Alstine reconnected to the Adirondacks. He had grown up not too far from Wells in Johnstown, about 40 miles to the south. While the Adirondack environment had an obvious impact, there was a deeper connection drawing out the new perspective and aesthetic.

His early experiences in the Adirondack’s provided a base on which his artistic life as a sculptor was built. His do-it-yourself attitude, early exposure to working with his hands, the ability to work independently and a can-do spirit, all came from growing up in the small town environment. He had come full circle.

Both of Van Alstine’s great grandfathers were builders and had the “you could build it if you set your mind to it,” spirit, he says, and that got passed down to his dad and ultimately to him and his two brothers. Much of this was centered around the Caroga Lake at a camp his father built. All through his early years, renovations at the camp took place, providing an intergenerational project and an exposure to saws, hammers, and an array of other tools. Van Alstine recalls countless summer days hiking, swimming, fishing, sailing, canoeing, and building boats, rafts and tree houses amid all the renovations. It was a work hard, play hard ethos at work.

*There was a very positive sense of community, a sense of tradition, of handing a way of life down to the next generations. Everybody worked on each other’s projects,”* Van Alstine said in a December 8, 2021 interview. *This is where my confidence in working with my hands came from. It was instilled in me early on. I don’t recall thinking about becoming a sculptor, but I thought I might work with my hands somehow. It took moving away for me to truly appreciate the Adirondacks. A different place most certainly would have produced a different artist.*





FIG. 5. Van Alstine in first competitive ski race, age 12, North Creek, NY, 1964. PHOTO: Richard Van Alstine.

His deep connection to mountains and their interaction with man-made structures also comes from Alpine skiing. His parents would “drag” him and his brothers to competitive races all over the Adirondacks and New England. *I vividly remember during the many road trips being impressed not only by the rugged outcroppings of rocks or slides naturally occurring in the mountains, but also by the human made, roughhewn granite fences and gate posts, the sprawling network of stone walls and the giant slate slab sidewalks*, he says in the December 2021 interview.

#### Closer to the Source and the Rock of Ages

Another significant change with the move back to the Adirondacks was the proximity to Vermont’s *Rock of Ages* quarry where for years Van Alstine had gathered stone for his assemblages. From Wells it took only four hours driving instead of eight from New Jersey, leading to many more “harvesting” trips. With nine acres and six buildings versus a limited workspace and a modest city warehouse in Jersey City, Van Alstine began constructing larger works from a bigger stockpile of materials, including *Symplegades II (first version)*, 1988 (FIG. 6a.), *Hamilton Go-Round*, 1989 (FIG. 6b.), *Kouros*, 1989 (FIG. 6c.), *Pique a Terre III*, 1990 (FIG. 7.), *Non Semper Ea Sunt Quae Videntur*, 1991 (FIG. 8.), *Delta*, 1991 (FIG. 9.), and *Splay*, 1992 (FIG. 10.).

But around 1992 things suddenly changed. After about 20 years, Van Alstine’s access to the Barre, VT quarries was abruptly cut off when its new corporate owners deemed him being on their property, using a crane and taking home stones for free, an unacceptable insurance risk.

FIG. 6a. *Symplegades II (first version)*, 1988, bronze and granite, 80 x 42 x 18 in. (203 x 107 x 46 cm).

FIG. 6b. *Hamilton Go-Round*, 1989, granite and steel, 86 x 86 x 42 in. (218 x 218 x 107 cm). Private collection.

FIG. 6c. *Kouros*, 1989, granite and steel, 103 x 29 x 22 in. (262 x 74 x 56 cm). John Hechinger collection, Washington, DC.

FIG. 7. *Pique a Terre III*, 1990, granite and steel, 52 x 91 x 41 in. (132 x 231 x 104 cm). Private collection.

FIG. 8. *Non Semper Ea Sunt Quae Videntur*, 1991, granite and bronze, 85 x 60 x 27 in. (216 x 152 x 69 cm). Private collection.

FIG. 9. *Delta*, 1991, granite and bronze, 110 x 42 x 24 in. (279 x 107 x 61 cm). Collection: American University Museum, Katzen Arts Center, Washington, DC.

FIG. 10. *Splay*, 1992, granite and steel, 64 x 134 x 56 in. (163 x 340 x 142 cm).







FIG. 11. *Beam IV*, 1992, local Adirondack granite/steel, 15 x 34 x 7 in. (38 x 86 x 18 cm). Private collection.

This was a huge setback and forced him to frantically find new sources. As an alternative to the Barre granite, Van Alstine began collecting crisply fractured, sharp angled green granite exposed along nearby mountain roadways as a result of blasting. Many works like *Beam IV*, 1992 (FIG. 11.) and *Ara III*, 1996 (FIG. 12.) emerged as examples of this period.

He began gathering rounded river stones while kayaking or fishing, incorporating them into his assemblages, something that continues to this day. Their smooth, naturally curved shapes and surfaces are a striking counterpoint to the ragged, roughhewn Vermont granite in his previous work. He also started to mine the more easily accessible slate from the eastern edge of the Adirondacks near the Vermont border with its dark color and eye-catching aged patina surfaces. Its sedimentary nature made it tricky to work, he remembers, but the layered surfaces created a unique “micro-macro” scale dynamic, giving the sculptures a “topographical” landscape feeling. (FIGS. 20, 21, 22.).



FIGS. 20, 21, 22. details, slate with “topographic” surfaces.



FIG. 12. *Ara III*, 1996, green granite, steel, wood, 33 x 16 x 8 in. (84 x 41 x 20 cm). Private collection.



FIG. 13. *Juggler X*, 2000, riverstone and bronze, 15 x 17 x 6 in. (38 x 43 x 15 cm). Private collection.

















FIG. 18. *Sisyphus Circle - Covid VIII: One Must Imagine Sisyphus Happy*, 5/2020, riverstone and bronze, 9.5 x 20 x 6 in. (24 x 51 x 15 cm). Private collection.



FIG. 19. *Catapulta 3-19*, 2021, riverstone and steel, 7 x 16 x 4 ft. (213 x 488 x 122 cm). Collection: Wuhu Museum Sculpture Garden, Wuhu, China. PHOTO: China Sculpture Institute.



### Adirondack Fantasies

There's another development, often overlooked, that emerged related to his exposure to the ADK scenery – his new landscape inspired drawings. Although Van Alstine always employed drawings as a means to stimulate his sculptural efforts, they took on a new importance in the late 80s. Within months of purchasing the Wells studio, Van Alstine was responding to his new-found environment with a flurry of activity using paper, pastels, charcoal and gesso wash. This is quite reminiscent of the 19<sup>th</sup> century American landscape artists who would sketch thousands of pictures on their travels and return home to the studio to create paintings based on the drawings. The quickness and ease of drawing, coupled with a new countryside full of ideas, tightens his connection to the American and Adirondack landscape more clearly than any other time before the late 1980s.

Full of color the drawings capture the verdant nature surrounding him in swirling lines and broad gestural strokes. Instead of focusing on drawing solely related to his sculpture, the Adirondacks triggered what he calls “fantasied landscapes” inspired by water, rivers, boats, kayaking. They often incorporate architectural elements; doorways, staircases, ladders and spiral forms as well as tools, anvils, creating a compelling, surreal counterpoint to the underlying landscapes. (FIGS. 23-30.)

They're very much improvisational and have a feel that's whimsical and off the cuff. Unlike sculpture making, which takes much more planning and time, the drawings happen in minutes. Unshackled from the base and pedestals holding weighty stone and steel, his sense of freedom pervades in the drawings. He expands on this in a 2019 essay published in the catalogue, *John Van Alstine: Sculpture 1971-2018*.

*Drawing is fun. It's of the moment. Improvisational. Straight forward. And it's very different from sculpture. It fulfills needs not satisfied when working with stone and steel, materials that dictate a process that is often slow and methodical. They have a complex relationship with my sculpture, many explore the same ideas or similar iconographic themes, others are intuitive musings that may, or may not be realized in three dimensions. Unlike sculpture where the physical realities of the three-dimensional space intercede, the drawings are freed from those constraints.*

Looking at his drawings created over the years, you'll see them transform his process in the sculptural realm as he interprets the Adirondacks anew. His drawings are created with a directness similar to Japanese calligraphy, “in the moment” expressions that are fresh and focused without revision. *“In sculpture the process is long and plodding, full of tinkering and*



FIG. 23. **Passage (blue boat)**, 1987, pastel and charcoal on rag paper, 41 x 29 in. (104 x 74 cm). Private collection.

FIG. 24. **East River Passage**, 1988, pastel and charcoal on rag paper, 41 x 29 in. (104 x 74 cm). Collection: Adirondack Museum, Blue Mt. Lake, NY.

FIG. 25. **Red Door**, 1989, pastel and charcoal on rag paper, 41 x 29 in. (104 x 74 cm). Private collection.

FIG. 26. **PAX**, 1989, pastel and charcoal on rag paper, 41 x 29 in. (104 x 74 cm).





reworking, fitting and shaping. Drawing is different; the ones created quickly are usually the most successful. The more time I spend on them, the greater the chance they become over-worked, losing their freshness,” he said in an October 23, 2017 interview.

Over time, I found myself drawn toward the direct, “to the point” philosophy and aesthetic of Asian calligraphy. Its underlying principle of using a minimum of elements and creating in the moment with no revision, moving on to the next creative effort has very much influenced my way of working in both sculpture and drawing. Working a series that develops over many years, allows principal concepts to manifest and become clearer, more fully flushed out. In my early sculpture particularly, each work was conceived and executed directly and efficiently, paired down to its essence; every element contributing, nothing extraneous or frivolous. Like calligraphy, the physical elements in my work are sparse but essential and the overarching messages of each series evolve by way of repetition and refinement.

It’s hard to underestimate the influence the combination of drawing and the Adirondack environment have had on Van Alstine-personally and professionally. It’s true that everywhere he’s lived, whether it’s Maine, Wyoming, Washington DC, Ithaca, NY, or New York City area, has impacted his art, yet Van Alstine’s return to the Adirondacks and the work that has been created there since, is ever-so critical in understanding his standing in the American landscape art tradition.

FIG. 27. **Strange Fruit**, 1989, pastel, charcoal and gesso wash, 41 x 29 in. (104 x 74 cm).

FIG. 28. **Strange Fruit II**, 1989, pastel, charcoal and gesso wash, 41 x 29 in. (104 x 74 cm). Private collection.

FIG. 29. **Overcast**, 1990, pastel, charcoal and gesso wash on rag paper, 30 x 20 in. (76 x 51 cm). Private collection.

FIG. 30. **Echo**, 1989, pastel and charcoal on rag paper, 41 x 29 in. (104 x 74 cm). Private collection.





## Pushing the Stone—The Mythological Stage



FIG. 2. *Symplegades I*, 1987, painted granite and steel, 87 x 32 x 34 in. (221 x 81 x 86 cm).

One of most recurring themes in Van Alstine's work is mythology. For him, Greek mythology is an underlying literary story to convey an ancient narrative updated in modern terms. By invoking Western literature from antiquity, Van Alstine imbues his assemblages with drama about the human condition. There's a Baroque quality to them. Where the forces of nature once drove his work, the adoption of these storylines creates scenes, as if played out on stone-and-steel stages, where immortal Gods and mortal humans play out the universalities of existence.

Mythology goes as far back as his first stone sculpture, *Gaea*, 1973 (FIG. 1), the Greek personification of Earth as a goddess. From 1973 to 2022, he's completed more than 300 works using mythological themes with nearly 250 centered on Sisyphus alone.

With works like *Cronus*, 1982 (FIG. 7., see page 67), *4th Beast of Daniel*, 1983 (FIG. 9., see page 68), *Symplegades I*, 1987 (FIG. 2.), *Symplegades II (first version)*, 1988 (FIG. 6a., see page 121), *Nike*, 1989 (FIG. 3.), *Mercury's Caduceus*, 1991 (FIG. 4.), *Atlas – Highroller*, 1995 (FIG. 4a.), *Labyrinth Trophy I*, 1996 (FIG. 4b.), *Charon's Steel Styx Passage*, 1996 (FIG. 23., see page 112), *Actaeon (trophy head)*, 1998 (FIG. 5.), the *Amalthea series*, 1996-2001 including *Almathea IV*, 2001 (FIG. 5a.), *Icarus (frail wings of vanity)*, 2010 (FIG. 6.), Van Alstine returns to Greek and Roman literature like many artists before him.

FIG. 1. *Gaea*, 1973, Vermont marble, 20 x 10 x 10 in. (51 x 25 x 25 cm). Private Collection.





FIG. 3. *Nike*, 1989, bronze and granite, 84 x 22 x 26 in. (213 x 56 x 66 cm). Private collection.  
 FIG. 4. *Mercury's Caduceus*, 1991, granite and bronze, 89 x 41 x 21 in. (226 x 104 x 53 cm).  
 FIG. 4a. *Atlas – Highroller*, 1995, bronze, 126 x 72 x 42 in. (320 x 183 x 107 cm).  
 FIG. 4b. *Labyrinth Trophy I*, 1996, bronze and granite, 110 x 53 x 31 in. (279 x 135 x 79 cm).



FIG. 5. *Actaeon (trophy head)*, 1998, bronze, 39 x 16 x 22 in. (99 x 41 x 56 cm). Private collection.

FIG. 5a. *Amalthea IV*, 2001, bronze and pink granite, 28 x 19 x 9 in. (71 x 48 x 23 cm). Private collection.



FIG. 6. *Icarus (frail wings of vanity)*, 2010, slate/pigmented and sealed steel, 34 x 43 x 9 in. (86 x 109 x 23 cm).

In these works, Van Alstine frequently finds the point of danger, or the foreboding sense of it, tracing the potential energy to the moment of action much like Baroque artists used light in *tenebrism*—one beam in an otherwise dark canvas—to intensify and direct the eye to where the action and suspense is happening. In the Sisyphian series, for instance, there isn't anything resembling a human at all, but through the juxtaposition of all materials, including the literary backstory, the human experience is revealed. A recurring theme over a 30-year period is found in Sisyphus.

The first sculpture in the series was *Reconsidering Sisyphus* (FIG. 7.), made in 1992 when he was starting to incorporate figurative references more as he transitioned from purely non-objective works. As with most of his production after 1992, the human form is semi-representational and implied through abstract motifs of stone and steel.





FIG. 7. *Reconsidering Sisyphus*, 1992, granite and steel, 10 x 16 x 6 ft. (304 x 488 x 183 cm), with daughter Eden Van Alstine on Wells work pad, 1992.



FIG. 8. *Rings of Unity-Circles of Inclusion*, 2008, stone and steel, 18 x 18 x 6 ft. (549 x 549 x 183 cm). Beijing Olympic Park, China.

This particular myth is traditionally interpreted as a fable about rebellion and upsetting the power structure and suffering the consequences when the system you’re fighting strikes back with the ultimate power—a life sentence of hard labor rolling a boulder up a hill forever. It’s also about honesty and deceit, life and meaning, intentions and actions, and what’s truly evil and good.

For Van Alstine, the Sisyphean series, made in a range of sizes and compositions, including his monumental work *Rings of Unity-Circles of Inclusion*, 2008 (FIG. 8.), unveiled at the 2008 Beijing Summer Olympics, is the most repeated metaphor in his career; an ongoing commentary about sculpting itself - pushing stone around, making one after another to seemingly no end, then doing it all over again.

*My references to mythology aren’t about teaching a lesson, or a moralizing message. It’s a way to define the universality of the collective experience of being human and all that it entails - they connect us as individuals to the greater whole*, he said in a September 7, 2017 interview.

### Ancient Muses and American Art

Since the Age of Pericles in the 5th century BC—the so-called Golden Age of Hellenistic art—Greek literature and mythology has been a source of inspiration for artists, and deeply woven into the fabric of European and American culture. Its lyrics and prose about immortal gods with human frailties, and mortals with special powers, have resonated through the ages from Homer’s *Iliad* on with poignancy.

A revitalization of classical themes occurred in America during the 19th century. The revival resulted in the neo-classical movement, which permeated all forms of visual culture through things like Doric columns, and monumental history paintings from the likes of Benjamin West. They illustrate how contemporary events, combined with Classical narratives, can be construed as moralizing lessons about history and those doomed to repeat it.

This was particularly true for the earliest American landscape painters such as Thomas Cole and Asher Durand, among many others, who utilize Western antiquity as a foundation for the young Republic against the backdrop of wilderness in the New World. Early American sculpture thrived on the neo-classical bust. Van Alstine draws upon this American tradition but avoids the moralizing aspect as well as the full-fledge “Grand Portraiture” style, while adding abstraction.

After World War II and its atrocities, Greek myths became less about the specific message of the ancient narratives and more a way to express the collective suffering of people in the face of tragedy. Twentieth-century artists have tended to be less concerned with illustrating the “teaching” content of myths, and more with interpreting them symbolically in accordance with personal experiences, using them to heal rather than instruct. This is where Van Alstine finds his narrative material.

Instead of dwelling on the traditional superstructure of myths, Van Alstine personalizes them to grasp their deeper, more remote significance at an individual level. For Van Alstine, Western mythology isn’t used as a didactic tool, but to provide a context to examine the human endeavor within its emotional and psychological dynamics. This idea lends itself to his “self-referential” works that grapple with society and individual expression, rather than specific lessons about how events play out as history unfolds. While 20th century artists have primarily focused on the Sisyphean story as about torment and captivity, a negative viewpoint, Van Alstine sees it in more uplifting terms.





FIG. 9. *Sisyphean Circle I*, 2005, slate and steel, 25 x 24 x 9 in. (63 x 61 x 23 cm). Private collection.

### A Nod to Camus

Van Alstine views the Sisyphean myth as about toil, the never-ending cycle of pushing the proverbial rock up a hill, the elation and ennui of the creative process; the toil as a cathartic experience. He cites Albert Camus' essay *The Myth of Sisyphus* published in 1942, as a guide. In a March 15, 2022 interview Van Alstine elaborates on his use of the myth.

*In the Sisyphean Circle series, the formal arrangement of the stone and steel elements abstractly 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. In many ways this series is a self-portrait as I am continually (and often literally) pushing stones to a creative peak and once reached, compelled to start again on a new work.*

*Viewing the creative process simply as “endless toil” is undeniably negative and I prefer to view the myth and metaphor through the lens of French existentialist Albert Camus. In his*



FIG. 10. *Sisyphean Circle (Beijing Series XV - red pillow)*, 2008, slate and pigmented steel, 66 x 62 x 22 in. (168 x 157 x 56 cm). Private collection.



FIG. 11. *Sisyphean Circle (open)*, 2016, slate and galvanized and powder coated steel, 41 x 42 x 10 in. (104 x 107 x 25 cm). Private collection.

*essay The Myth of Sisyphus, he points out that the idea of reaching one's final destination is not always the most important. In fact, if one “reconsiders Sisyphus” as Camus suggests, the struggle or journey reveals itself as ultimately the most meaningful. As in life, this notion is at the core of the creative process where the act of making triumphs over the object or final product.*





FIG. 12. *Sisyphean Circle* 2013, 2013, slate and powder coated steel, 54 x 56 x 12 in. (137 x 142 x 30 cm). Photographed in Wells garden 2018.

FIG. 14. *Sisyphean Circle (homage to Major Taylor)*, 2019, granite, galvanized and powder coated steel, 80 x 70 x 16 in. (203 x 178 x 41 cm). During 2019 construction.



















FIG. 20. *Sisyphean Circle-Covid IV: The Long Arc Of Covid Bends Toward the Truth*, 4-2020, riverstone and bronze, 9.5 x 29 x 6 in. (24 x 74 x 15 cm).

### Taking a Break

Van Alstine has mined the myth of Sisyphus heavily, providing twists on the central theme, such as the series within the series he has entitled *Sisyphean Holiday* where the stone is carried away in a canoe or vessel like form. Two early examples are *Sisyphean Holiday XVI*, 2009 (FIG. 21), and *Sisyphean Holiday XVII*, 2009 (FIG. 22.), which absurdly upends the ritual of endless toil with a lighthearted break as if Sisyphus goes to the Adirondacks for a vacation with canoe paddle in hand – an idea Camus would surely understand.

Like the Sisyphean Circle Series, Van Alstine returns to the “Holiday” series frequently with over 35 works as of 2022. From a 2009 exhibition Artist’s statement Van Alstine writes, *These new works are presented in a light hearted “tongue in cheek” way that suggests giving Sisyphus (and me) a break or “holiday.” Here the “Sisyphean Stone” is placed in a form reminiscent of an Adirondack guide boat or canoe and seemingly slides effortlessly down river giving the series a playfully ironic, local summer twist.*



FIG. 21. *Sisyphean Holiday XVI*, 2009, slate, pigmented steel, riverstone, 5 x 17 x 8 in. (13 x 43 x 20 cm). Private collection.



FIG. 22. *Sisyphean Holiday XVII*, 2009, slate, pigmented steel, riverstone, 5 x 15 x 8 in. (13 x 38 x 20 cm). Private collection.





Flood damaged sculpture, November 2019.

Rescuing flood damaged bronze sculpture, lower garden, March 2020.

## Covid as Creative Trigger—The Day the World Stopped

In March 2020, John Van Alstine was remanded to his home and studio deep in the Adirondack Mountains in Upstate New York when Covid shut everything down. Like other artists, he suddenly had loads of studio time. For a sculptor, the studio is always part of the equation, but this was totally different.

In the past, his creative time was interspersed with installations for exhibits far and wide along with a robust itinerary of leisure travel. These travels often moved him in different aesthetic directions. After all, artists respond to what they see and experience. For the first time in his 40-year career this was all cut off. But it was a freak storm in the fall of 2019 that really set the stage for the series in bronze. It resulted in historic flooding of the nearby Sacandaga River that rose almost to his home, toppling two large bronze sculptures on display on his property in Wells NY.

Rather than “restore” the damaged pieces he instead decided to use the disfigured bronze to make new work. This coincided with the start and intense production of the first Covid-related works and after the original damaged material was consumed it led to the searching out and use of other bronze remnants left in his studio from years past.

*I was enjoying working with bronze again ... The flood, the destroyed sculpture, the lock-down ... for some reason I felt things were different and intuitively I knew my work should reflect this. After using all of the bronze in the original flood-damaged sculpture, instead of returning to steel, I began to eye and cannibalize older “B-team” pieces - existing finished bronze and stone works that were never exhibited or sold and for whatever reason were still hanging around. I’ve made more than one hundred new works with bronze I had on the property, an unprecedented creative output.*

Van Alstine’s new works were becoming more reflective of current events, the resulting sculptures, especially the ones in 2021, are like entries in a diary, reflecting the highly-charged



moments, the ups and downs of the public health and political crisis, providing a glimpse into how he interpreted events as they unfolded in real time. They are powerful archival documents of a specific time and place. With many titles and dates stamped into the bronze, there's an archaeological feel to them.

*During this time, I thought of, and have been inspired by, artists in the past that were able to use dangerous and uncertain times, and the isolation imposed, as a catalyst to spur on their creativity: Shakespeare during the black plague, Gustav Klimt and Egon Schiele during the 1918 Spanish Flu pandemic. Although my situation was nowhere near as dire, what is similar and inspires me, is how these artists were able to face a new paradigm; specifically, isolation, and how it affected their creative process. I believe my new works, in their own unique way, are an important and personal record that reflects our unusual time, not only of pandemic but one of the most uncertain political situations in recent American history,* he said in an October 22, 2021 interview.

Something else that was different in this period after all those years, in some works stone didn't seem as necessary and many of the new pieces were bronze only. To put this in perspective, most of the sculpture Van Alstine has created in the last four decades has focused on the marriage of stone and steel, the central axis of his vocabulary. In addition these new works have an evocative tone, a sense of urgency not normally found in his sculpture, which rarely waded into overt political commentary.

Without the complication of combining materials there was a new freedom to develop a different narrative and tell the story. This was particularly true in the works incorporating vessels evident in the *Pyxis Awry* and *Portals and Passages* series. From the same October 2021 interview: *This past two years' (2020-21) production has reminded me how much I like working with bronze and it will be a bit difficult to go back to steel. Also, it has been somewhat liberating realizing that I can say something important without stone, and to a limited degree this might continue.*

#### A World Gone Awry

One of the series that re-emerged and blossomed during this period was *Pyxis Awry* originally started in 1987 as a stealthy comment on climate change. *Pyxis* is a constellation in the Southern hemisphere – the so-called “mariners’ compass”. The series title was concocted by Van Alstine to comment on a person, group, or situation that is adrift, or off course. Juxtaposed against the period of Covid, the works comment on his feeling that America in 2020 was seriously off course in its response to the crisis. The political climate that allowed things to seemingly careen out of control compelled him to put the series front and center, give it a new focus. He stated in a 2021 interview; *It is not unusual for me to revisit and*



FIG. 2. Hieronymus Bosch, *Ship of Fools*, 1491. Panel painting, Louvre Museum, Paris.



*Pyxis Awry - America 2020*, 8/2020, bronze, 11 x 22 x 12 in. (28 x 56 x 30 cm). Private collection.



*Pyxis Awry - America 2020 II*, 8/2020, bronze, 20 x 27 x 14 in. (28 x 69 x 36 cm).

*further mine series from the past - Juggler, Funambulist, Implements, Mythology, etc. - what is different about the Covid works is they are more “confrontational”, something one doesn’t usually associate with my work.*

*Like the “mariners” in Bosch’s painting “Ship of Fools” (FIG. 2.) who have lost their navigational bearings (their inner compass), the vessel and its occupants will likely end up adrift, untethered, off course ... in a bad place. My intent with the “Pyxis Awry” series is to*





FIG. 4. *Pyxis Awry 2021 (river jam break)*, 1/2021 bronze, 6.5 x 21 x 13 in. (17 x 53 x 33 cm).

*raise questions/search for answers relative to personal or group decisions and courses of action to shed light on the resulting consequences, whether they are personal, political, or environmental.*

In 2020 Van Alstine created twenty works in the *Pyxis Awry* series that reflect, in a general way, the Covid and political situation we were all going through. As 2021 rolls around his work begins to focus and comment on specific events as they happen day to day, one is *Pyxis Awry 2021 (river jam break)*, 1/2021 (FIG. 4.). Living and working in a historic lumber mill on a river where not too many years ago log drives (and log jams) were common, Van Alstine is keenly influenced by its history and often uses it as a creative springboard. On January 17, 2021, when the piece was nearing completion he was sensing a bit of hope and optimism on the horizon in the aftermath of the January 6th insurrection at the US Capitol and in anticipation of a new President and a vaccine to help overcome Covid. Like others in the series, “river jam break” suggests a positive release from the pent-up energy after witnessing the recent tumult, and as the catapulting vessel in the piece symbolizes, moving us “down river” towards something better.



FIG. 5. Early 20th century log jam on Hudson River.



FIG. 6. *Pyxis Awry 2021 (tilting plinth/shifting sands)*, 1/2021, bronze, 12 x 24 x 12 in. (30 x 61 x 30 cm).

Another work commenting on a specific event is *Pyxis Awry 2021 (tilting plinth/shifting sands)*, 1/2021 (FIG. 6.) completed on January 19, 2021, the inauguration eve of the Biden presidency and like the others in the series, suggests on a country adrift. But there is also a hopeful side conveyed through its sub-title and unsettling arrangement of formal elements. The off-kilter, diagonally sliding plinth and cascading vessel suggest upheaval is underway; the gears of democracy are turning, we are on the verge of a tectonic political shift and as the careening vessel suggests, we are all in the “boat” together.

Van Alstine continued the expansion of the series completing twenty-one more *Pyxis Awry* works in late 2020 and 2021. *Pyxis Awry 2021 (plunge II)*, 2/2021 (FIG. 7.), *Pyxis Awry 2021 (plunge VIII-red bilge)*, 2/2021 (FIG. 8.), *Pyxis Awry XXX*, 6/2021 (FIG. 9.), *Pyxis Awry XXVI*, 4/2021 (FIG. 10.), and *Pyxis Awry (theta)*, 11/2020 (FIG. 10a.), are examples, many with red pigment adding a dramatic color accent.

Concurrent with the creation of the *Pyxis Awry* pieces, five new works from the closely related *Portals and Passages* series were made. Originally begun in 1987, the same year of the first *Pyxis Awry*, they featured openings or portals that suggest entrances or passages into spaces and places, both real and imagined. Over the course of his career Van Alstine has frequently













FIG. 10a. *Pyxis Awry (theta)*, 11/2020, bronze, detail.

incorporated the vessel or boat form in his work. It is historically understood as a metaphoric “container or carrier” of an individual, a group, or society as a whole; in the *Portals and Passages series* it is typically careening through a portal or circular opening. In the context of 2020, it suggests a “passage” from a dark and politically stymied place into a new decade and a brighter more hopeful future, or the reverse - from optimism to gloominess of a society caught in endless despair and crisis.

Works like *Portals and Passages 2020 V*, 11/2020 (FIG. 11), illustrates and conveys the back and forth, the “in and out” everybody was experiencing at the time. The slide into darkness with the pandemic restrictions and back out to a more open society through various stages, including mass testing, a limited opening in the summer of 2020, and then the slide back into the darkness of lockdown over the winter of 2020-21, the introduction of the vaccine, attempting to achieve herd immunity, society open again and then threat of variants and another surge in the summer 2021 with the low vaccine rates nationally and the questioning of its effectiveness by a broad segment of society.



FIG. 11. *Portals And Passages 2020 V*, 11/2020, bronze, detail.





FIG. 12. *We Must Imagine Sisyphus Happy*, 4/2020, bronze and riverstone, 6 x 27 x 4 in. (15 x 69 x 10 cm).

#### New Realities – tough Path Upward

Van Alstine also revisits the *Sisyphean* myth that he has turned to frequently to comment on the creative process. He created 14 new works in the series that are particularly germane in a different way in relation to the Covid period. He states in 2020; *As the world struggles with the Covid pandemic and political regimes which deny science, we are all confronted with the symbolic task of pushing our stone upward, a seemingly unending task as we deal with the new realities that have been thrown in our path.*

These new 2020 *Sisyphean* works employ a similar formal vocabulary as in previous periods – circles, stones, arcs, incline planes - but the focus is shifted to confront and give an artist's voice to the Covid period. In several of these works poignant titles and text, stamped directly into the bronze, add new expressive elements that forcefully hammer home his point.



FIG. 13. *We Must Imagine Sisyphus Happy*, 4/2020, bronze and riverstone, detail.

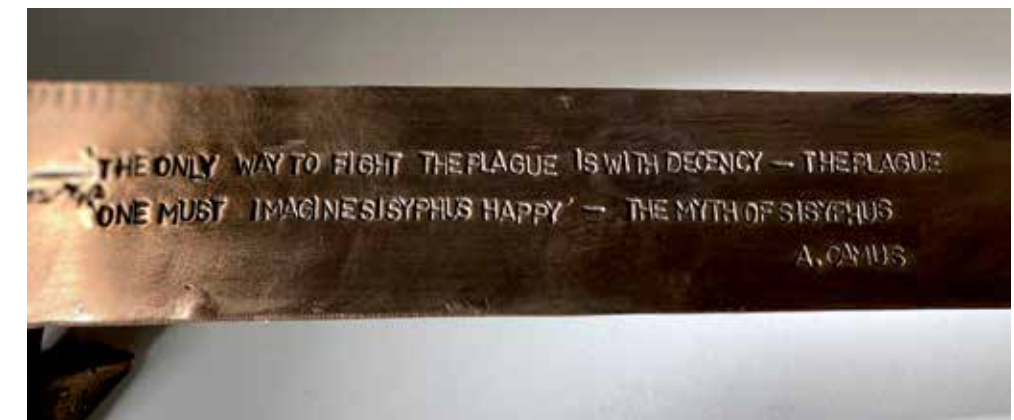


FIG. 14. *We Must Imagine Sisyphus Happy*, 4/2020, bronze and riverstone, stamped text, detail.

Van Alstine goes on to say, *Confront. Yes, it's a strong word and not typical of my work or usual intent. But this period was different. Not only were we all faced with the spread of a virus the likes not seen in a century, but with the inept, downright selfish, self-promoting response of "I alone can fix it" mentality of our political powers—basically one big asshole—that purposefully spread propaganda, worked against and demeaned "experts", all to gain*





FIG. 15. *Sisyphean Circle-Covid VI: The Arc Of Covid Is Long – But It Bends Toward Science*, 5/2020, riverstone and bronze, 9.5 x 20 x 8 in. (24 x 51 x 20 cm). Private collection.

*more personal political power. The inclusion of the embedded/stamped text on the bronze is new for me, prompted by outrage, and the need to better communicate, “speak up” in the only way I knew how, through my sculpture.*

Van Alstine expands his comments on the Covid situation by effectively incorporating the words of Martin Luther King in several *Sisyphean* pieces, stamping them directly into the bronze. In his paraphrasing the civil rights leader’s quote “Let us realize the arc of the moral universe is long but it bends toward justice”, the work *Sisyphean Circle-Covid VI: The Arc Of Covid Is Long - But It Bends Toward Science*, 5/2020 (FIGS. 15. and 16.) reflects on the disregard of science by many Americans. It shines a light on the absurd refusal to accept science, effectively erasing the trajectory of rational thought and the scientific revolution which over the past centuries replaced superstition and myth as the primary intellectual thrust for western Civilization.



FIG. 17. Initial working arrangement of *Sisyphean Circle-Covid VI: The Arc Of Covid Is Long - But It Bends Toward Science*, May 2020.



FIG. 16. *Sisyphean Circle-Covid VI: The Arc Of Covid Is Long – But It Bends Toward Science*, 5/2020, riverstone/bronze, text detail. Private collection.

The MLK quote came to him through a confluence of events when he was mining his old bronze remnants inside his studio. One was a long arching bronze tube that had points, or barbs, welded to it. (FIG. 17.). He connected it with the then widely circulating media images illustrating the “crown like” similarities of the Corona virus when viewed under a microscope. At the same time there was much public discourse about “flattening the curve” to reduce the number of cases and how this change would be visually reflected on a scientific graph. From the October 2021 interview:

*I had a section of the “barbed” curved bronze tube on my work bench. (FIG. 17.). I also had the sense that the pandemic was going to be a very long battle, and the only way things were going to get better, i.e. flattening the curve, was through science and facing the truth – for the most part exactly the opposite of what the political powers were doing.*

*The concept of a curve or “arc” reminded me of the oratorical ring and historical importance of the MLK’s “arc of the moral universe” quote. Initially I adapted it to “The Arc Of Covid Is Long – But It Bends Toward Truth” and stamped it directly onto the sculpture. In subsequent pieces I substituted what I felt was the equally effective word “science” for “truth” to pick up on the alliteration effect of the “s’s” – to pay further homage to MLK and the power and effectiveness of his oratory.”*





FIG. 18. *Juggler 5-20*, 5/2020, bronze and riverstone, 25 x 19 x 9 in. (63 x 48 x 23 cm).



FIG. 19. *Fleche (diagonally down)*, 8/2020, bronze, stainless steel, granite, 34 x 38 x 8 in. (86 x 97 x 20 cm).

### The Choreography of Covid amidst the Hope and Despair

Humans are intensely social animals, but this was severely restricted by Covid, forcing us to adapt to a more insular, bubble-like life where danger of infection lurked every moment. While life has always had its precarious balance, the pandemic upended that into a real and constant destabilizer, only enhancing our sense of foreboding doom. When we did venture out, minding the ever-changing social distancing restrictions led to a whole different dance between people, profoundly altering our movement patterns and our relationship with each other. Many of Van Alstine's works such as *Juggler 5-20*, 5/2020 (FIG. 18.), *Fleche (diagonally down)*, 8/2020 (FIG. 19.) and *Lunge (cornu)*, 12/2020 (FIG. 20.), take inspiration from the movement of the human body like other past works, but with Covid these works take on a whole new meaning.

The concept of juggling as an expressive tool has been long employed in Van Alstine's work and reappears in *Juggler 5-20*, 5/2020 (FIG. 18.). It's used to convey universal idea in that, in a certain sense, we are all jugglers of a kind, something that in 2020-21, faced with the



FIG. 20. *Lunge (cornu)*, 12/2020, slate and bronze, 17.5 x 26 x 5.5 in. (44 x 66 x 14 cm). Private collection.

extraordinary new rules imposed by the pandemic, we struggled to keep our responsibilities and activities such as family, work, play, etc. normal. Covid also spurred Van Alstine to re-visit other of his "figure related" series featuring fencing, tight-rope walking, even gymnastics, and in the Covid context, capture the human dance choreographed by the virus and social distancing.

*Fleche (diagonally down)*, 8/2020 (FIG. 19.), with its pointed, dramatic slicing diagonal element exhibits aggressiveness. It takes its title from the old French word meaning arrow or to fly. In architecture *fleche* refers to a slender spire above the intersection of the nave and transepts of a church. In the sport of fencing, it is defined as a *running attack with arm extended*, symbolizing our instinctive reflex to attack Covid with a leap into it. Van Alstine stated in a 2020 interview, *The aggressive nature of the work conveys my, and I think most of the world population's, instinctive reflex to defend against this new unseen enemy of the virus.*

*Lunge (cornu)*, 12/2020 (FIG. 20.), (cornu is Latin for horn - think cornucopia) also refers to human movement and like *Fleche*, was created at a time in 2020 of a rapidly spreading novel





FIG. 21. **2020-2021: Our Clarion Call**, 5/2021, bronze, 6.5 x 28 x 10 in. (16.5 x 72 x 25 cm).

virus; both sculptures were created to convey a sense of determined confrontation; fighting or pushing back the virus and to be proactive in dislodging a political regime that is anti-science and he felt was unmistakably moving our country toward fascism.

#### Final Call—the Capstone Piece

In May 2021, *2020-2021: Our Clarion Call*, 5/2021 (FIGS. 21-23.), an outgrowth of the *Pyxis Awry series* and what Van Alstine refers to as the “capstone” sculpture of the Covid period, was created. It encapsulates his feelings of frustration and the need to call out and is a strong request or demand for something to happen. *Clarion* is derived from three Latin words: the noun *clarior* (trumpet), the adjective *clarus* (bright or clear), and the verb *claro* (to make clear). Those familiar with American Western movies know the *Clarion* as the small horn used to lead the cavalry charge.

*2020-2021: Our Clarion Call*, is a low, horizontal piece that features a long conical element reminiscent of a horn or trumpet which is anchored by a tablet-like form bearing the inscription “2020-2021: Our Clarion Call”. The angled position of the “tablet” is reminiscent of a grave marker or even the *Ten Commandments* handed down in tablet form, suggesting the seriousness of life and death and connecting it to the biblical “code of conduct.” The inside of the “horn” has red pigment, emphasizing the urgency of the message. In the same October 2021 interview:



FIG. 23. **2020-2021: Our Clarion Call**, 5/2021, bronze, detail.



FIG. 22. **2020-2021: Our Clarion Call**, 5/2021, bronze, 6.5 x 28 x 10 in. (16.5 x 72 x 25 cm).

*I feel “2020-2021: Our Clarion Call” is the capstone piece of the last year or so. It combines the sentiment and focus of almost all the bronze works created during the “lockdown” and distills my strong feelings that 2020-2021 has demonstrated, without a doubt, that our country needs a gigantic wakeup call amid the disastrous political climate that has impeded most all sensible movement on all important national issues; the pandemic, vaccines, masks, climate change, immigration, infrastructure, etc. etc. My “Clarion Call” is: Hey people—as a country we need to stop with the nonsensical political division if we are going to survive as a democracy!!*

Although most of Van Alstine’s sculptures made during Covid in 2020 and 2021 are an extension of previously long worked series, they extract new meaning given the context of the upheaval caused by the Covid virus, while providing a keen insight into the impact of what such turmoil has on creativity, and how art and artists adapt to a changing environment through new thoughts and emotions. There undoubtedly will be many other exhibits and events examining other artist’s reaction to the Covid crisis, but for Van Alstine it has brought on three important developments: a more ardent, “confrontational” disposition, a return to bronze, and a reevaluation of his bedrock and career long practice of combining materials—stone with steel. These may only be temporary but represent a vivid account of a certain time and place that might well mark a drastic alteration in his creativity that will, at some level, reach well into the future.





*Hangar 17*, JFK airport, NYC, remnants of a roof TV antenna.

## Tempered by Memory—A Unique Public Project

In the Spring of 2011, Saratoga Arts, a community non-profit contacted me about working on a 9/11 Memorial sculpture in Saratoga Springs, New York, using recovered World Trade Center steel. The plan was to install by September 11th on the 10-year anniversary of the disaster. My answer was an enthusiastic YES! After all, as a sculptor working primarily with found steel, there would be no bigger opportunity and challenge than to have access to the most famous “mother lode” pile of bent steel.

I was determined not to just plop a piece of WTC steel down like some of the other 9/11 Memorials I had seen. I wanted to create a sculpture that resonated; one that marked the profound importance of the event ten years after in a reflective way and create a place with an atmosphere of healing. Knowing I could not handle the scope of the project I had envisioned alone, I reached out to my good friend and sculptor Noah Savett to collaborate.

Noah worked in steel, had a studio in Saratoga and owned a large steel fabrication business and construction facility in nearby Gansevoort. He had also worked with many of the top ironworkers in our area. A few of them had just recently retired and jumped at the opportunity to help construct the proposed sculpture.

Noah and I traveled to JFK airport and toured ‘Hangar 17’, where mountains of steel recovered from the fallen towers were stored, all with the “forensic engineering” information tags, designating their precise location in the towers, along with the scientific data regarding the stress factors as a result of the intense heat and eventual collapse. One particular pile was very different and caught my eye. It was from the point where one of the planes had entered the building and, as a result, the very volatile aviation fuel leaked, and caught fire. The beams had been burnt and distorted, almost beyond recognition.

It was one of the most memorable days of my life. We walked around in the cavernous space for hours, surrounded by the most amazing torqued and contorted steel. I was totally in a





Savett (l.) and Van Alstine (r.) at JFK airport with WTC steel on Van Hall's truck fully loaded for Upstate delivery, 2011.  
PHOTO: Elizabeth Dubben.

daze. At some point we realized we needed to pull it all together and start making selections. Because we were representing the Art Center, and our project request had been approved by the Port Authority, we could pick as much steel as we wanted, provided we could get it out and transport it home. No small task. We would need help.

At this point we thought of our good friend Charlie Van Hall, an imaginative businessman, scrap metal dealer, and a sculptor in his own right. He also, conveniently, had a fleet of large flatbed tractor trailers. He generously agreed to help, even offering his yard crane for assistance.

Because of the number and size of our beams, special trucking permits were required. Loads could only travel across certain NYC bridges during the wee hours of the night. The move was on. The steel finally arrived and was delivered in Gansevoort early the next morning where, with some serious effort, it was unloaded and arranged. We planned to start construction in June.

After years of sculpting, this was my first collaborative project. I was a bit unsure how it would all unfold. Noah and I decided we would independently start working on ideas, creating a series of drawings and scale models. I was envisioning a piece that was poised yet



*Tempered By Memory, scale model 3*, 2011, found steel,  
29 x 13 x 7 in. (74 x 33 x 18 cm).



*Tempered By Memory, scale model 14*, 2011, pigmented found steel,  
31 x 15 x 6 in. (79 x 38 x 15 cm).



*Tempered By Memory 13 (orange)*, 2011, pastel and mixed media on paper,  
30 x 20 in. (76 x 51 cm).

precariously balanced. I wanted to convey a sense that, “the steel was falling” while, at the same time, “lifting up”, a kind of visual irony that generally animates my work. This was easier said than done, especially facing our tight deadline, we needed to merge two individual artists’ ideas quickly.

By late June we had agreed on a general design, and using the crane began laying pieces out on the ground, welding some together and lifting them upright. There was a lot of improvisation. We agreed, when possible, to use the beams the way we found them, allowing the shapes and character created by the collapse to speak for themselves. Given the circumstances this seemed reasonable. I also intuitively knew this was going to make it harder for me to get the result that I had envisioned, but pressed forward hoping for the best.

The actual construction of the piece was fun, especially working on that scale with an on-site crane and the very talented union ironworkers. For their entire careers they had built





Gansevoort worksite, July 2011. PHOTO: Lawrence White.

huge projects, but always with a set of plans. The “creative freedom” that this collaboration presented was liberating and they definitely got into it offering many creative and practical suggestions. It was becoming a real team effort, but, with “a lot of cooks in the kitchen”.

By early August the piece, now christened “Tempered by Memory”, was nearing completion. It had grown to a height of 35 feet and was massive. It was too large for the planned site in front of the new convention center on Saratoga’s Broadway a busy main street. Meetings were set up with city officials to discuss how we might “trim” the piece, but in the end, we decided it was not an option. The piece, as it stood was big, bold and appropriately reflected the event it was meant to commemorate. We were not about to budge.

There were more meetings with the Saratoga City Council; one was a public forum, in their chambers that brought dozens of people out to voice their opinions and concerns. It had caught the attention of the community in a big way and it was now covered in the local news media. It became politicized and divisive. At the outset I thought such a project denoting the 9/11 tragedy would be supported by everyone. This was not the case. Conspiracy theorists started coming by our construction site asking disturbing questions and spewing unwanted misinformation.



Bill Dobroski, Noah Savett, Van Alstine at jobsite, Gansevoort, NY, 2011. PHOTO: Lawrence White.



Van Alstine during construction, Gansevoort, NY. 2011. Tripod selfie.



Saratoga Springs City Council meeting, man with the “hanging” sign, August 2011. PHOTO: Lawrence White.



**Illustration of Sir William Johnson's visit to High Rock Spring.**  
Image from the Bolster Collection.

Another group was pushing back because they “didn’t want to be reminded” of 9/11. There was even one guy, who stood up at the public meeting in front of the TV cameras, convinced that the sculpture would be a place for depressed or drunk people to hang themselves. He even brandished large colorful posters to illustrate his point.

To find an alternative site Noah and I scoured the city making several elaborate proposals to the city council. One was near the fire station on Lake Avenue across from the Armory, another in the large green space in front of the historic bottling facility on Broadway, and there were several in Congress Park. None of them worked.

Finally, in late August, with September 11th fast approaching, a committee of local elected officials, businesspeople and other town residents was formed to locate a site. Our team was particularly miffed that no one in our group was asked to be on the committee, and to our disappointment, the installation and dedication was postponed. We missed the hard sought deadline. Our enthusiasm was deflated; we had lost control of the very thing that for the last several months had been a central focus of our creative lives.

The winter came and went and nothing seemed to be happening. To our surprise in the Spring of 2012 the committee announced their selection, an unexpected site in the city’s High Rock Park. Despite being frustrated that we weren’t involved, we had to admit it was the perfect spot and much better than the original or any of the alternatives we had proposed.

It was a quiet, peaceful place, perfect for private reflection. A large and encompassing stone escarpment acted as a backdrop and framed the sculpture. In addition, the piece was to be sited between two of Saratoga’s most famous “healing” mineral springs where, as legend has it in 1771, Sir William Johnson, wounded in the Battle of Lake George was carried there by his Native American Mohawk allies, and after four days of “taking the waters”, made a miraculous recovery, even walking 30 miles home to Johnstown. The site, and the lore, all reinforced our central goal – create a monument that would help set the tone for healing.

In late summer 2012, the piece was installed, the site landscaped and finally to big public fanfare, dedicated on September 11th. ***Tempered by Memory*** is a success on many levels and was a unique collaborative experience for me. I am proud of our team and all the people who donated time and money to help create a Memorial that continues to have such an important place in the community. It is truly a piece of Public Art.

*John Van Alstine*  
*Wells, New York*  
*2021*







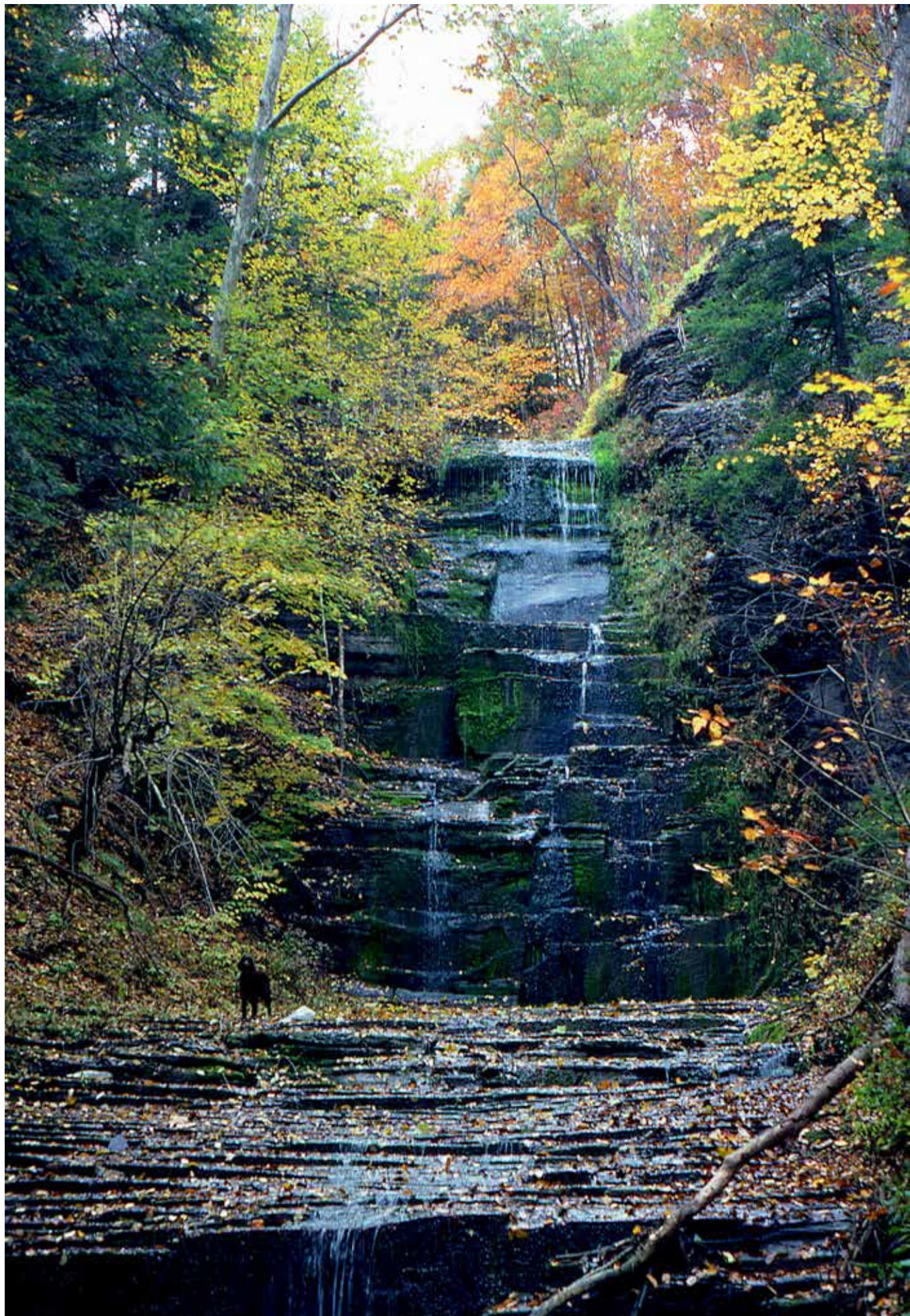


FIG. 1. Ludlowville area gorge with JVA's dog Goldmund, 1975.  
PHOTO: John Van Alstine.

## A Move to the Pure Landscape—A Long Journey

In *American Vistas: The Life and Art of John Van Alstine* his sculptures have been cast in the tradition of the American landscape art. Although he's moved between many ideas and themes for nearly 50 years, his oeuvre, in its entirety, can be viewed like other landscape artists before him, as an exploration of the landscape around us, the forces of nature and the human interaction between them.

At first glance, this focus may not be so obvious. Like his use of the figurative form beginning in the 2000s, which was latent, even veiled, but increasingly an emerging foundation in his sculpture, so too is his use of the landscape. This book reveals the extent that he employs the principles of landscape art as far back as the mid-1970s all the way until now. There are few reasons why his work has not previously been presented in this vein.

First of all, he works mostly in the sculptural form, which isn't normally interpreted in the context of the landscape where painting, often large oil canvasses, has been dominant for centuries. During the 19th century American sculpture was about busts and grand portraiture in the neo-classical vein. More recently sculpture has been viewed through the lens of abstraction and its preoccupation with form and line without much concern for pristine nature on its own terms—the power of geologic and meteorological forces, stunning, awe-inspiring vistas, or how humans cultivate the wilderness.

Van Alstine most certainly can be evaluated through the prism of abstraction, constructivism and cubism. Since the 1970s this is where critics and curators typically focused. They are not wrong. He has a rich vocabulary in those genres that rival any 20th century sculptor. On a thematic level, it's not as straightforward, either. For almost 50 years, he's darted in and out of ideas from mythology to vessels/navigation to implements/tools to astronomy to even the figure, including jugglers, funambulists, fencers, and modern dancers, to mention a few, all in a basically abstract way seemingly devoid of any traditional landscape elements.





FIG. 2. Streambed of Ludlowville gorge, 1975, foreshadowing interest in the natural formations that emerge in the slate and steel work of the 2000's. PHOTO: John Van Alstine.

This restlessness is indicative of his personality-he's always moving forward, endlessly investigating the world around him, pushing forward and evolving, returning to older ideas to repurpose them with new vigor and meaning only to hatch an entirely new series. Subject matter wise and aesthetically, his output has been quite peripatetic. On the surface that is.

#### Early Influences

But all of this creative movement artistically does, in fact, underline a primacy in his work: the American landscape. From an early age his experiences living near the vast Adirondacks



FIG. 4. *Nature of Stone III*, 1976, pink granite and forged steel, 29 x 48 x 144 in. (74 x 122 x 366 cm). Private collection.



FIG. 3. *Nature of Stone III*, 1976, pink granite and forged steel, 29 x 48 x 144 in. (74 x 122 x 366 cm). Private collection.

in northeastern Upstate New York imbued him with a deep understanding of natural forms. Surrounded by the rivers, lakes and mountains, not to mention the wildlife, and flora and fauna of the Adirondacks, he couldn't help but absorb this rich environment.

Although often not clearly apparent, this foundation, in varying degrees, is evident throughout most of his career. It has a stealthy quality: sometimes it's more noticeable than other times. As a graduate student in sculpture at Cornell he lived outside of Ithaca making pottery, including Raku (FIG. 18., see *page 25*) while carving and shaping biomorphic forms-hardly landscape oriented. Yet he was connecting with nature in his mind; the first step in his journey to the landscape.

The farmhouse he lived in was on the Salmon River amid deep gorges formed by receding glaciers and eroding waters, etching long, angular crevices in the rolling hills of the Finger Lakes. These "stacked" layers of exposed shale tens of thousands of years old in the form of gorges gave Van Alstine ample time to ponder their formations as a young artist, which he says, "laid" the seeds for future work with sedimentary stone in Wyoming and more recently with slate in the early 2000s, which continues to this day. (FIG. 1. see *page 183*) and (FIG. 2.)

The *Nature of Stone* series is a keen example of this early transition to the landscape. *Nature of Stone III*, 1976 (FIGS. 3 & 4.), is abstract, even cubist, in its design contemplating space and volume in technical ways yet it is also about balancing through the interaction with gravity



and other physical properties inherent around earth-born material. It is a contemplation of the world around us and our place in the environment and landscape. This is true with *Boundary*, 1976 (FIG. 5, see *page 35*), which spreads itself along the floor like a horizon giving shape, dimension and measurement to the world, something essential to landscape art.

In addition to holding and “binding” the four stones, *Boundary*, 1976, also alludes to the act of surveying, establishing boundaries – measuring the known world, an act of identifying and quantifying the landscape before us. It is the first form of landscape art. Cartography can’t be seen as the same as a romanticized landscape painting, but it does convey a sense of place defined by dimension and therefore line and form. While mapping is more of a science than art, it is doubtful there would be landscape renderings at all if cartography was not developed. Fittingly, Van Alstine has a copy of Verplanck Colvin’s 1870’s pioneering survey book of the Adirondacks that charts the areas around his Wells, NY studio. In a May 22, 2022 interview Van Alstine mentioned his interest in surveying, conveying that “sometimes I muse that if I had not pursued sculpture as a career, surveying – a job being out in nature - with its central tenant of overlaying a human metric on the landscape, appeals to me and would have been an interesting alternative”.

In the mid-1970s, even though aesthetically his sculpture was not what could be described definitively as landscape art, nature begins to shape Van Alstine’s creativity more and more. Since then, practically every phase of his work increasingly conveys the sense of landscape, albeit sometimes covertly in subtle ways, but the forces of nature are always there to some degree.

### Move West

Out west in Wyoming in the late 1970s, his sculptures were described by the Smithsonian curator Howard Fox as “brute” sculpture. They were rigid and sparse with a form-follows-function aesthetic, yet at their essence the “gravitational field” experimentations, holding stones seemingly suspended in the air by steel rods, were based on the extant forces of nature. Like other landscape artists, Van Alstine was exploring the sublime, the phenomena of the physical world’s raw power.

While Cornell gave Van Alstine the conceptual framework to advance beyond carving toward assemblage and cubist-like abstraction, the Rockies and Wyoming, like so many American landscape artists before him, solidified his transformation to a purer form of landscape art through his exposure to the topography of the area with all of its wide-ranging features. The works from the late 70’s which include *Arch*, *Stone Pile*, *Trough*, and the low horizontal *Sag*



FIG. 6. Figure in arch, Arches National Park, Moab, UT, 1980. PHOTO: John Van Alstine.



FIG. 9. *Stone Arch 1*, 1979, Colorado flagstone and forged steel, 32 x 64 x 24 in. (81 x 163 x 61 cm). Collection: McKissick Museum, University of South Carolina.

and *Ballast* series, moves him more directly into landscape art. They were, as Van Alstine states in a May 2022 interview, “a direct response to places like natural formations at Arches National Park, the towering buttes of Monument Valley, the vast natural canyons or “troughs” cut into the land formed by years of wind and water erosion, and the hugely expansive horizontal high plains filled with sedimentary stone I was newly exposed to and visited frequently.”





FIG. 16. *Ballast 2*, 1979, Colorado flagstone and forged steel, 11 x 50 x 128 in. (28 x 127 x 325 cm).

### Back East

With stone still very much the centerpiece of his oeuvre, steel begins to unfurl his compact constructions in a significant way. The inclusion of found industrial steel elements introduces the human-made environment to the equation, creating the dichotomy of nature and human intervention, an idea that is prevalent in the American landscape tradition, a further connection to the genre.

This was taken to the next level through Van Alstine's immersive interaction with the urban architectural landscape in Washington DC, Jersey City and New York after he moved back East in the early 1980s, entering his so-called Urban Forms period. His response was like other American landscape artists: treat it as a landscape unto itself with its own rhythm, patterns and vistas. The vast expanse of this industrial environment, with its decaying early 20th century infrastructure of riveted steel drawbridges, elevated highways, tunnels and towers, provided an unlimited source of inspiration.

Works like *Thorned Marble Arch*, 1983 (FIG. 13., see page 89.) and *Rockbottom*, 1984 (FIG. 12., see page 88.) illustrate keenly his transition from the Western sources to urban. The *Rockslide Series* from this period (FIGS. 28-30. see page 191) and (FIG. 20.) suggest giant sink holes on

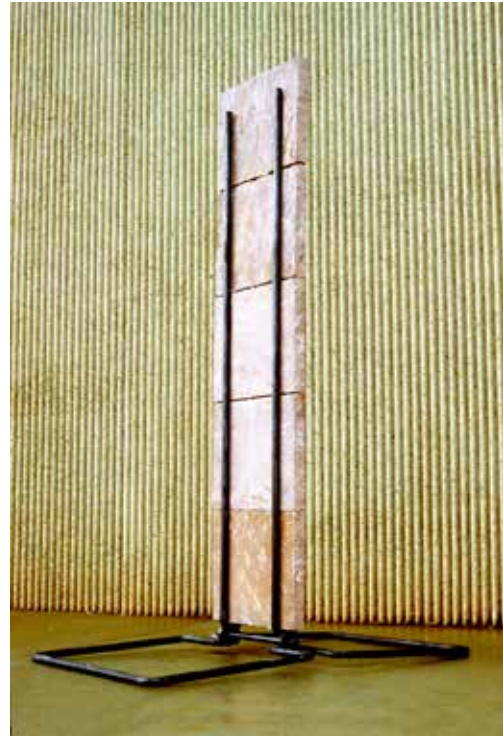


FIG. 11. *Stone Pile 3*, 1978, Colorado flagstone, 108 x 34 x 56 in. (274 x 86 x 142 cm). Private collection.



FIG. 21. *Stone Totem I*, 1982, granite and steel, 96 x 48 x 36 in. (244 x 122 x 91 cm). Private collection.



FIG. 22. *Stone Totem II*, 1983, granite and steel, 90 x 48 x 36 in. (229 x 122 x 91 cm). Private collection.



FIG. 20. *Rockslide IV*, 1990, bronze and granite, 69 x 44 x 39 in. (175 x 112 x 99 cm). Private collection.

roadways beaten down by wear and tear, resulting in urban decay and the post-industrial era. *The Totem series* (FIG. 21.), (FIG. 22.), (FIG. 23.), (FIG. 24.) like skyscrapers, are monuments to American Capitalism in the post-World War II era. The precarious arches, such as *Schiabo Rounder*, 1985 (FIG. 25.) and *Los Arcos*, 1985 (see page 99), suggest spanning bridge forms and the delicate balance and fragile web of urban life.





FIG. 23. *Mazeroff Quarry Totem*, 1996, Vinalhaven granite and steel, 85 x 61 x 30 in. (216 x 155 x 76 cm). Private collection.

FIG. 24. *Sacandaga Totem*, 1997, granite and steel, 113 x 66 x 43 in. (338 x 168 x 109 cm). Collection: City of Alexandria, VA.

FIG. 25. *Schiabo Rounder*, 1985, granite and steel, 44 x 77 x 40 in. (112 x 196 x 102 cm). Collection: Grounds for Sculpture, Hamilton, NJ.



FIG. 28. *Rockslide 97*, 1997, granite and steel, 30 x 26 x 8 in. (76 x 66 x 20 cm). Private collection.



FIG. 30. *Rockslide (hook)*, 2020, slate, pigmented and sealed steel, 37.5 x 18 x 6 in. (95 x 46 x 15 cm).



FIG. 29. *Rockslide 7-02*, 2000, green granite and steel, 67 x 36 x 17 in. (170 x 91 x 43 cm). Private collection.

### A Significant Move

His return to the Adirondack's in the late 1980s was perhaps his most important move after being away for nearly two decades; not only the American West, but Ohio, the Finger Lakes and coastal Maine. He had grown up in a small-town environment not far from the Adirondack hamlet of Wells, NY, where he would move permanently by 1991, establishing a base that would rekindle his creative fire and move him further towards a “pure” landscape that firmly ties him most directly to the American landscape genre.

It is here that the *Rockslide Series* (FIG. 28.), (FIG. 30.) morphs into a full-fledge sublime experience with cascading stone crushing steel structures with the full force of nature. Inspired by the myriad of “Falling Rock” warning signs (FIG. 27.) he saw along the many mountain roads he traveled, the series brings a real sense of threat, impending danger, even doom, something past American landscape artists thrived on to engage the public and connect with viewers emotions. It is this moment of precarious balance that John Van Alstine has mined for years, revealing itself in a new way inspired by his experiences with the landscape around him.





FIG. 31. *Round Mountain-Rushing Water*, 2001, oil enamel on stone and steel, 15 x 34 x 4 in. (38 x 86 x 10 cm). Private collection.

Many other Adirondack influences also emerged. One sees water gushing in *Round Mountain-Rushing Water*, 2001 (FIG. 31.), geologic fissures and sliding plates in *Midriff*, 1997 (FIG. 32.) and *Fault Line*, 2014 (FIG. 33.). You can imagine massive thunderstorms chugging across the countryside in the *Storm Warning Series*, (FIG. 34.), (FIG. 35.), (FIG. 36.), (FIG. 37.). The rounded green mountains of the Adirondacks are reflected in *Round Mountain Landscape*, 2001 (FIG. 38.). In *Thunderhead (red rain)*, 2010 (FIG. 39.), with its suggestion of descending red, acid rain, one senses a stealthy environmental message especially relevant for the Adirondacks.



FIG. 32. *Midriff*, 1997, pink granite and bronze, 144 x 60 x 24 in. (366 x 152 x 61 cm). Private collection, Germany.

FIG. 33. *Fault Line*, 2014, slate, pigmented and sealed steel, 22 x 48 x 7 in. (56 x 122 x 18 cm).

FIG. 36. *Storm Warning IV*, 2014, slate and pigmented and sealed steel, 27.5 x 31 x 7 in. (70 x 79 x 18 cm).

FIG. 34. *Storm Warning I*, 2004, slate and steel, 27 x 23 x 7 in. (69 x 58 x 18 cm). Private collection.

FIG. 37. *Storm Warning V (red rain, 3.14)*, 2015, slate and pigmented and sealed steel, 23 x 41 x 6 in. (58 x 105 x 15 cm).

FIG. 38. *Round Mountain Landscape*, 2001, granite and steel, 63 x 104 w x 30 in. (160 x 264 x 76 cm).

FIG. 35. *Storm Warning II*, 2014, slate and pigmented and sealed steel, 25 x 43 x 7 in. (64 x 109 x 18 cm). Private collection.

FIG. 39. *Thunderhead (red rain)*, 2010, stone/pigmented and sealed steel, 21 x 16 x 6 in. (53 x 41 x 15 cm). Private collection.







FIG. 40. *Sacandaga River Landscape (Confluence)*, 2022, Vermont slate, pigmented and sealed steel, 13.5 x 20 x 4.5 in. (34 x 51 x 11 cm). Private collection.



FIG. 41. *Mountain River Landscape – Auger*, 2014, slate and pigmented and sealed steel, 11.5 x 20 x 6 in. (29 x 51 x 15 cm). Private collection.

These influences have continued and are pervasive in his most recent work. We see the twisting, turning course of a river in *Sacandaga River Landscape (Confluence)*, 2022 (FIG. 40.). Sheer energy of nature is unveiled in *Mountain River Landscape-Auger*, 2014 (FIG. 41.), where Van Alstine draws upon his experiences at nearby Auger Falls conveying the intensity and turning motion of massive amounts water gushing over boulders exuding enough power to chew up man and beast, while intense light and tone, suggesting *tonalism*, a branch of American Landscape genre, is captured in *Blue Mountain Landscape*, 2016 (FIG. 42.).

Although there were changes taking place in his works in the late 1980s that set the stage for what was to come, his interaction with the Adirondack landscape pushed him in a new direction and spawned series like *Anglers*, *Taxidermy*, *Portals and Passages*, including *Pyxis Awry*, plus an important drawing series, his *Adirondack Landscapes*, that are sublime, picturesque and pastoral. There was a new and fresh move towards color, reflecting the mood and luministic qualities of the vibrant environment around him.

During the 1990s and beyond, the natural features of the Adirondacks became a primary muse and source for his art, physically as well as metaphysically. This was a critical juncture. The new studio property in Wells purchased in 1987 on the dynamic and ever-changing Sacandaga River, rekindled his interest in being on the water, especially kayaking which triggered the first use of the “vessel” or boat form which has developed into a significant expressive metaphor he has continued to employ.



FIG. 42. *Blue Mountain Landscape*, 2016, enamel on slate and steel, 9 x 20 x 4 in. (23 x 50 x 10 cm).





FIG. 43. *Passage (red pyramid)*, 1987, pastel and charcoal on rag paper, 29 x 41 in. (74 x 104 cm). Private collection.

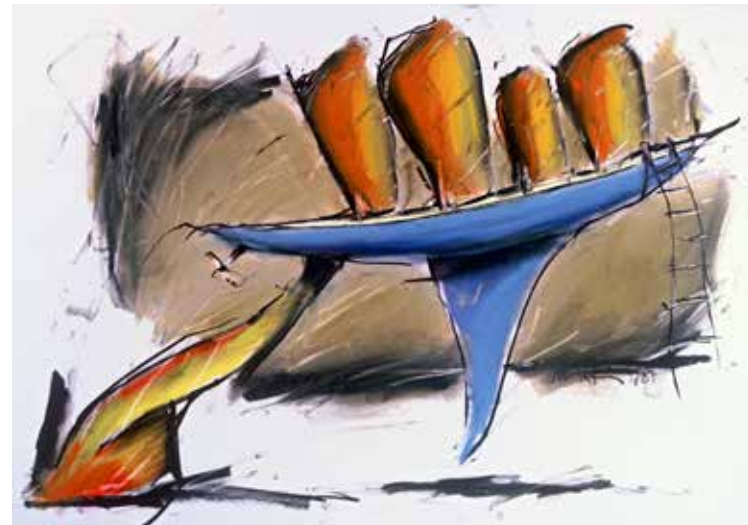


FIG. 44. *Passage (Four Stacks)*, 1987, pastel and charcoal on rag paper, 29 x 41 in. (74 x 104 cm). Private collection.

#### New Landscape Drawings

There's another very important development that occurs at this time, often overlooked, that emerged as a result of his return and "re-exposure" to the Adirondack scenery: his *landscape-inspired drawings* (FIGS. 43-51). Although Van Alstine always employed drawings as a means to stimulate his sculptural efforts, they took on a new importance in the late 1980s. Within months of purchasing the Wells studio, and with the sculpture studio not yet operational, Van Alstine was responding to his new-found environment with a flurry of activity using paper, pastels, charcoal and gesso wash. This creative burst continued for several years. This was reminiscent of 19th century artists who would sketch on their travels and return to the studio to create paintings based on the drawings. Something quite similar was happening for Van Alstine, but instead of oil paint and canvas, his new landscape inspirations were manifest in stone and steel.

These powerful drawings coupled along with the many related 3-d related works that were created, further tightens his relation to the American landscape. The impact of this reconnection on his creative output is arguably the most important and influential of his career. What emerge are full-fledged landscape sculptures. As the eminent 19th century landscape artist John Constable said "we are born in a landscape." This was also true for John Van Alstine.



FIG. 45. *River on Fire*, 1988, pastel and charcoal on rag paper, 29 x 41 in. (74 x 104 cm). Private collection.

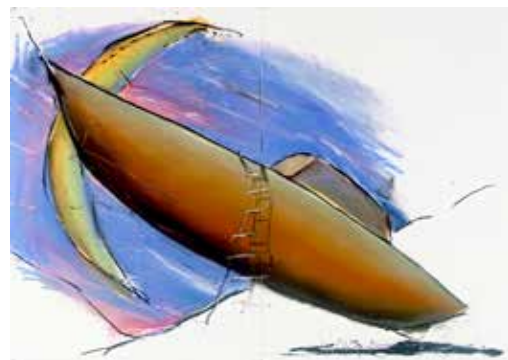


FIG. 46. *Lunar Passage*, 1988, pastel and charcoal on rag paper, 41 x 59 in. (104 x 159 cm).



FIG. 47. *East River Passage II*, 1988, pastel and charcoal on rag paper, 41 x 29 in. (104 x 74 cm). Private collection.

FIG. 48. *Black River Passage*, 1988, pastel and charcoal on rag paper, 41 x 29 in. (104 x 74 cm).

FIG. 49. *Pyxis Awry*, 1988, pastel and charcoal on rag paper, 41 x 29 in. (104 x 74 cm).

FIG. 50. *Passage (Storm Warning)*, 1989, pastel and charcoal on rag paper, 41 x 29 in. (104 x 74 cm). Private collection.

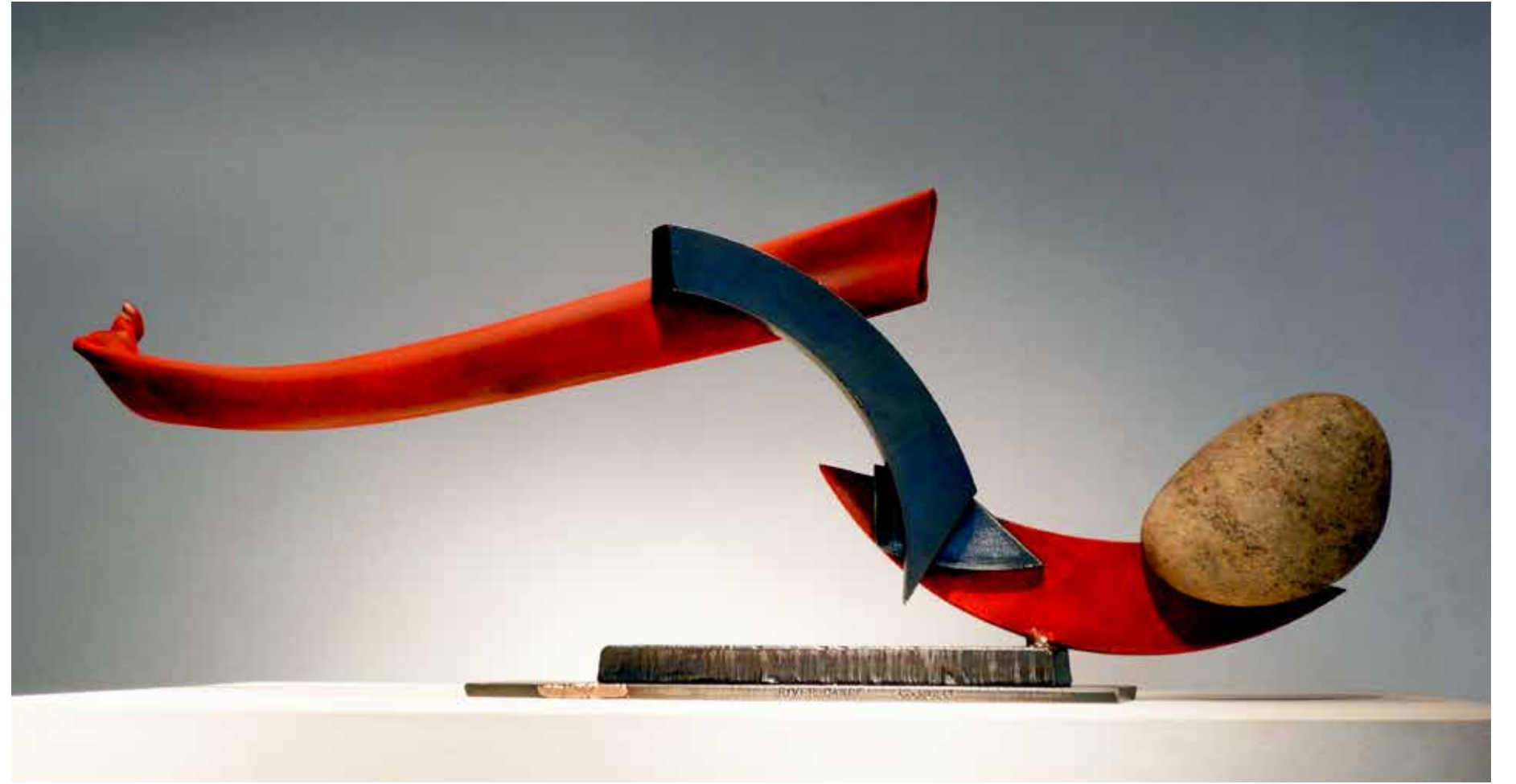
FIG. 51. *Sphere with Spikes*, 1990, pastel, charcoal, gesso wash on rag paper, 41 x 29 in. (104 x 74 cm). Private collection.



























(l. to r.) Mark, Eric, John Van Alstine, Johnstown, NY, 1958.



Mark and John Van Alstine at Caroga Lake, NY, 1957.



Van Alstine setting school record in 440, May 1970.



Van Alstine and Jennifer Foss, Kennebunkport, ME, 1971.

Van Alstine with **Red Hips Hula II**, Wells studio, 2007.

## Chronology

**1952**

Born August 14 Gloversville, NY, to Richard and Audrey Van Alstine.

**1952-70**

Lives in Johnstown, NY. Father worked at the Knox Gelatine Inc., rising to plant superintendent while mother raises John and two younger brothers, Mark (b. 1954) and Eric (b. 1957).

**1958**

Begins public school in Johnstown, NY. Father starts building family “summer camp” at nearby Caroga Lake, NY, in the southern Adirondacks. Throughout his early years was involved in “helping” camp construction and other DIY projects, exposing him early on to working with his hands. Early exposure to water and boats has major influence on future artwork.

Excels in athletics and begins competitive skiing.

**1961-66**

Attends Johnstown High School and meets Jennifer Foss in 1966 (married in 1972). Letters in all four years in football, track and skiing, wins New York State High School State title of “best overall skier” in junior and senior year.

While in high school takes electives in art. Competitive skiing takes him all over the Adirondacks and New England, exposing him to glacial rock formations.

Graduates in June 1970. With close friend John Ruppert (now also a well-known sculptor) travels to Kennebunkport, ME, for a summer job at the Shawmut Inn. Spends much time around water-eroded rocky coast line. He connects with the landscape, returning for next three summers.

**1970-72**

Attends St. Lawrence University in Canton, NY because of skiing opportunities and proximity to Foss, who is a theater major at SUNY Potsdam. Foss was a major influence on his direction towards the arts, introducing her circle of friends in theater, dance, music, literature and the visual arts.

**1971**

In January enrolls in first college sculpture class; produces first steel sculptures, *Flight*, 1971, and *The Cellist (homage to Pablo Casals)*, 1972.

**1972**

Marries Foss in September. Declares art as major and decides St. Lawrence is lacking adequate studios and curriculum. Together they enroll at Kent State University, Foss for the Master’s Program in Theatre and Van Alstine accepted into the BFA program.

**1972-74**

While at Kent concentrates on direct metal assemblage, stone and wood carving, glass blowing and ceramics.

Meets David and Diane Jenkins, joins them in developing their production pottery business, *The Good Earth Pottery*, in Kennebunkport, ME, where he and Foss spend the next four summers.

Creates first stone sculpture *Gaea*, 1973.

First professional juried exhibition, *The Cleveland May Show*, Cleveland Museum, a major regional exhibit and sold first sculpture, *Untitled (Kiss I)*, 1973.





Kent State friends. (l. to r.), David Jenkins, James Thornton, Pauline Thornton, John Van Alstine, Jon Harper, Diane Jenkins, David Prittie, Jennifer Foss Van Alstine.



Van Alstine with Professor/sculptor Jason Seley, MFA Thesis show, Johnson Museum, Cornell, 1976. PHOTO: Jennifer Van Alstine.

1973

Awarded full scholarship to summer session Blossom Festival School, Cleveland/Kent Ohio, works with visiting sculptors Richard Stankiewicz and Richard Hunt.

1974

Continues to work in sculpture, ceramics and glass blowing. Juried into Cleveland Museum May Show for a second time.

Earns BFA from Kent State cum laude.

Moves to Ithaca, NY to attend Cornell University's Art and Architecture MFA program in Sculpture with full graduate fellowship. Lives with Jennifer Foss Van Alstine in Ludlowville, NY, a small community on the banks of the Salmon River eight miles north of Ithaca in the Finger Lakes region of New York State. Sets up small pottery studio and raku kiln to continue work in "crafts" not offered at Cornell.

1975

Begins carving "frontal" oriented marble works. Spends a lot of time in nearby gorges. Exposed sedimentary stone around Ithaca greatly impact him.

A studio "accident" where a finished marble sculpture falls off a work table shattering into many pieces, prompting the reexamination and "reassembling" of some of the remaining parts into new sculpture, *Falling Stones*, 1975. First work to combine *natural* broken surfaces and stones pinned to stainless steel base in angled and precarious positions suggest a sense of falling and create visual tension – a direction he would follow and expand for the rest of his career.

Becomes aware of sculptor Isamu Noguchi. Work shifts away from, carved smooth forms to acceptance of roughhewn, natural shapes. Begins using stone as "assemblage" element in *Nature of Stone*, title of his MFA thesis project.

Begins combining raw stone with wooden beams to increase scale. Feature pins and straps as a deliberate focus and "honest" demonstration on how the elements are held together.

Finishes *Gate*, 1975, first work using the actual weight of the stone to physically balance sculpture.

1976

Awarded Teaching Assistantship at Cornell. Continues work towards completion of MFA. Begins the interlocking *tensegrity* concept employing the forged steel rods to cradle roughhewn stone and trace the gravitational energy force within sculpture. Buckminster Fuller's engineering theories and the sculpture of Kenneth Snelson and Richard Serra influence his new work. Mounts MFA thesis exhibit, *Nature of Stone*, at the Johnson Museum, Cornell University.

Awarded Master of Fine Arts, Cornell University School of Art and Architecture.

Spends the last of four summers working with David and Diane Jenkins at the Good Earth Pottery production business, Kennebunkport, ME. In addition to standard production wares, experiments with more sculptural forms.

Hired as assistant professor University of Wyoming, moves to Laramie in late August, continues the *tensegrity* focused *Nature of Stone Series*.



Van Alstine in Wyoming, 1977. PHOTO: Jennifer Van Alstine.



"Stacked and stickered" lumber in France. One of many influences that spurred on the stacked *Stonepile Series* created 1978-80. PHOTO: Van Alstine.



Haystacks, Italy. Inspires Van Alstine's stacked sculptures 1978-80. PHOTO: Van Alstine.



Van Alstine in Laramie with *Stacked: 4-Point*, 1979, Colorado flagstone and forged steel, 16 x 82 x 82 in. (41 x 208 x 208 cm).

1977

Feeling the strict *truth to the materials* aesthetic he has been pursuing has been creatively exhausted, begins the *Gallery Drawing Series*, 1977-78, without stone using only linear steel rod as a graphic element, they are essentially 3-D "drawings" that move off the wall and pierce the "clean white gallery cube."

A parallel effort of documentary photographs also emerges, *Easel Landscape Series*, 1977-81, and develops into an outdoor counterpart exploring the sanctioning aspects of the frame in landscape.

The *Gallery Drawing Series* culminated with solo exhibit at the West Broadway Gallery, his first in New York City. With some distance and new perspective, he pivots back to the *tensegrity* works and for the first time would incorporate the local, pinkish, rectangular sedimentary Colorado Flagstone slabs.

Amicable split and subsequent divorce with Jennifer Foss Van Alstine.

1978

First trip to Europe, facilitated by University of Wyoming Faculty Development Grant, toured standing stone sites in England/Scotland on motorcycle. The experience furthers his interest in the magical powers of stone and plants seed for large works like *Trough*, 1982, Billings, MT, and other "celestial/calendar" works that follow.

1978

Returning to Laramie he continues to be inspired by western landscape, particularly buttes, spires, arches and sedimentary geology. Further incorporates local western flagstone (layered sedimentary) into work. Influenced by surrounding natural western landscape and the stacked plywood work of sculptor Jackie Ferrara.

Finalist for Rome Prize Fellowship in Sculpture, American Academy in Rome. Group exhibition; *Cornell Then/Sculpture Now* at the Johnson Museum, Ithaca, NY. Exhibit travels to Max Hutchinson's *Sculpture Now* Gallery, NYC.

1979

Invited by curator Howard N. Fox to exhibit in the *Brute Sculpture* section of *Directions '79* at the Hirshhorn Museum. Hirshhorn acquires *Nature of Stone I*, 1976, for permanent collection.

Tours Belgium, France, Switzerland and Italy. Moved by the Alps and major art centers, Florence, Pisa, and Venice. In Pietrasanta, Italy (near Carrara) spends five weeks carving white marble in local ateliers. Leaves Italy in late August. Takes freighter from Livorno to Nice, France and train to Paris for first visit.

Meets gallery owner Henrietta Ehram, aka Henri, during a trip to Washington, DC. Invited to exhibit 1979 piece *Stone Pile 4*, 1979, at her P Street Henri Gallery near DuPont Circle, first exposure with commercial gallery.

Selected by the Western States Arts Foundation to represent Wyoming in the *First Western States Biennial*. Exhibit tours to Denver Art Museum, San Francisco Museum Of Arts, Seattle Art Museum, National Museum of American Art, Washington, DC.





Van Alstine (l.) in Pietrasanta, Italy, summer 1979.



Van Alstine in Laramie just before leaving for DC, with *Stone Totem 80*, 1980.



Van Alstine (blurred figure) and Jill Elisofon at Robert Indiana Studio, Vinalhaven ME, 1981. Tripod selfie.



Van Alstine in 57 N St. studio, Washington, DC, working on *NMAA Wedge*, 1982.

1979

Denver Art Museum acquires *Gallery Ladder*, 1978, gift of the Vera List Foundation, New York.

Meets Holly Hallman (married in 1987).

1980

Awarded Louis C. Tiffany Foundation Individual Artist Fellowship.

*Solo exhibit*; University of Colorado Art Museum, Boulder.

Hired as assistant professor at the University of Maryland to replace sculptor Martin Puryear.

Moves to Washington DC, sets up studio at 57 N Street near North Capital Street in a multi-artist studio building, first experience living in dense urban area. Continues with *tensegrity* series.

Meets gallery owner Ramon Osuna, schedules first solo commercial gallery exhibition at his new 7<sup>th</sup> Street gallery, Washington, DC.

Meets Murray Bring, collector who becomes friend and longtime patron.

Meets Jill Elisofon who was working at Osuna Gallery and together visit Vinalhaven Island, Maine. Collects granite from quarries there and trucks back to DC. Begins using granite from VinalHaven in tension/tensegrity/prop pieces.

Meets artist Robert Indiana, a longtime Elisofon family friend on Vinalhaven. With Jill invited to stay at his home and studio, *Star of Hope Lodge*, a converted Odd Fellow home, during subsequent visit to the island.

1981

Pierre Levai of Marlborough Gallery, NYC visits N Street studio in DC and invites Van Alstine to exhibit two sculptures in the gallery’s outdoor garden on 57<sup>th</sup> Street. *Untitled (Trough)*, 1979, and *Stone Pile 7*, 1980, are installed and exhibited alongside well-established sculptors Barbara Hepworth, Henry Moore, Arnaldo Pomodoro and others.

First Major Commercial Gallery solo exhibit at Osuna Gallery, Washington DC, September.

*Group Exhibit*; *Color Photographs - Five New Views*, Marlborough Gallery, NYC, selections from the Easel Landscape Series documentary photographs. Reviewed in Art Forum Magazine.

Awarded *Individual Artist Fellowship*, DC Commission on the Arts and *Creative and Performing Arts Award*, University of Maryland.

1982

Installs *NMAA Wedge*, 1982, at entrance of National Museum of American Art (now Smithsonian American Art Museum, SAAM), commissioned by curator Harry Rand who became familiar with work when Van Alstine exhibited there during the *First Western States Biennial*. Work later acquired for museum permanent collection.

Installs *Cronus*, 1982, in the courtyard of the American Institute of Architects’ National Headquarters, Washington, DC.



Van Alstine in Luck Stone factory working on *Big Go-Round*, 1983. PHOTO: Holly Hallman.



Van Alstine installs *4th Beast of Daniel*, 1983, at Hirshhorn Museum. Van Alstine (l. with hat), father Richard (standing with black hat).



Van Alstine solo exhibit, Diane Brown Gallery, NYC, 1984. PHOTO: Holly Hallman.



Holly Hallman at Chichén-Itzá pyramid, Yucatan, Mexico, 1985. PHOTO: John Van Alstine.

1982

Purchases and moves with Holly Hallman to Jersey City warehouse building owned by artist Michael Todd, whom he meets through DC and later NYC gallery owner Diane Brown. Continues teaching at University of Maryland commuting from Jersey City, but is increasingly focused on growing number of gallery relationships in New York City. Takes the first in a series of unpaid sabbaticals from teaching.

Completes first major public commission, *Trough*, 1982 for the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Billings, MT. Its design reflects the “trough” the Yellowstone River cuts through the high plains.

Creates *Tripod with Umbilical I*, 1982, a pivotal sculpture that formally and conceptually signals a conscious move away from the narrowly focused *tensegrity* works.

Solo exhibit, *New Sculpture and Drawings*, Osuna Gallery, Washington DC.

Completes second major outdoor commission, *Big Go-Round*, 1983 for Luck Stone Co., Richmond, VA using stone from company’s quarry.

Awarded second *Creative and Performing Arts Award*, University of Maryland.

Awarded *Individual Artist Fellowship*, New Jersey Council on the Arts.

Takes second leave without pay from University of Maryland teaching.

*4th Beast of Daniel*, 1983, acquired by Hirshhorn Museum and installed on museum plaza with help from father Richard Van Alstine who makes special effort to be there. Work is later moved to the lower garden and remains on display for 10 years.

In May travels to Lisbon, Portugal to install *In the Clear*, 1983, at the Museum of Modern Art, Gulbenkian Foundation, in their garden permanent collection.

Solo exhibits, Diane Brown Gallery, NYC. and C. Grimaldis Gallery, Baltimore, MD.

Travels to Tulum and Chichén-Itzá, Yucatan, Mexico and is impressed with architecture and Mesoamerican Maya calendars, influencing the “celestial works” that followed.

Mountain hiking trip to Himalayas in Pakistan and China with small group including brother Mark, and Holly Hallman. Organized by brother as a reconnaissance trip looking for new travel areas for his recent startup, an adventure travel company. Trip had a reinforcing effect on the power of nature, the shaping of stone by natural forces, including tectonic plate movement, erosion, glaciers, etc.

Awarded *Yaddo Residency Fellowship*, Saratoga Springs, NY. Explores areas around Saratoga and Upstate NY which “reawakens” interest in the Adirondacks and plants the idea of a summer studio away from Jersey City.





Van Alstine (yellow shirt) during installation of *Solstice Calendar*, 1986, Austin College, Sherman, TX. PHOTO: Richard Van Alstine.



*Sundagger Calendar-Fajada Butte*, created in Quimixto, MX, 1986.



Original Adirondack Lumber Company sign, Wells, NY, 1987.



Richard Van Alstine, building bridge crane in Wells, July, 1988.

1986

Awarded *Individual Artist Fellowship in Sculpture* by the National Endowment for the Arts.

Resigns tenure track assistant professor position at University of Maryland to concentrate full-time on studio work. Supports self and family on sales of work since then.

Invited by Austin College Art Department Chair, Joseph Havel, to design large scale sculpture for campus in Sherman, TX, near Dallas. Completes *Solstice Calendar*, 1986, first “celestial observation/calendar” sculpture.

Solo Exhibits; Richard F. Brush Art Gallery, St. Lawrence University, Canton, NY and George Ciscle Gallery, Baltimore, MD.

Spends November in the small fishing village Quimixto, Mexico with Hallman, and several other artist friends. Creates over 70 “sun calendar” drawings.

1987

NYC Art consultant Ann Richard Nitza introduces Nohra Haime, owner of Nohra Haime Gallery who invites him to join gallery and is included in her inaugural 57th Street gallery show in the Fuller Building, NYC.

Marries painter Holly Hallman in Souderton, PA, her family hometown in May.

Purchases and begins life-long renovation of the Old Adirondack Lumber Company property in Wells, NY. With the help of his father converts the first of six industrial buildings on nine acres along the Sacandaga River in the Adirondack Park into permanent home/studio. It later becomes the Adirondack-Sacandaga Sculpture Park.

Solo exhibit in garden in front of The Phillips Collection, Washington, DC. Three painted stone and steel sculptures; *Drastic Measures*, 1987, *Luna*, 1987, and *Triad*, 1986.

1988

Solo exhibits; with Nohra Haime Gallery, (first of nine), Fuller Building 41 E 57th Street, NYC and George Ciscle Gallery, Baltimore.

Awarded *Individual Artists Fellowship* by New Jersey, Council on the Arts.

Builds large overhead bridge crane early summer with father Richard at Wells studio in order to complete major commission *East River Totem*, 1988, for the Artery Organization at Democracy Plaza, Washington, DC.

Solo exhibit; Jersey City Museum, Jersey City, NJ.

First daughter, Eden Van Alstine born New Year’s Eve.

1989

Public Installation of *SCR Sunwork*, 1989, a functioning sundial and solstice calendar, for Institute for Defense Analysis - Super Computing Research Center, Washington, DC.

Continued major restorations/renovation of Wells home and studio during the summer.



Daughter Eden in Wells studio with *Platte*, 1990, summer 1990.



Van Alstine working on *Reconsidering Sisyphus*, 1993, Wells studio. PHOTO: Holly Hallman.



*Artery Sunwork*, detail, Washington, DC, 1993.



Van Alstine leading tour of his sculpture, deCordova Museum, Lincoln, MA, 1996. PHOTO: Holly Hallman.

1990

Solo Exhibits; Nohra Haime Gallery, NYC and Franz Bader Gallery, Washington DC, a special exhibition in conjunction with The International Sculpture Conference.

Group exhibit; *Sculpture of the Americas into the 90’s*, Museum of Modern Art of Latin America, Organization Of American States, Washington, DC.

1991

Solo Exhibits; Sonsbeek Art Center, Arnhem, the Netherlands first solo exhibit outside US; Nohra Haime Gallery, NYC; Gerald Peters Gallery, Santa Fe, NM; National Academy of Sciences, Washington, DC (drawings related documents produced in conjunction with large scale sitespecific solstice projects); Morristown Museum, Morristown, NJ.

Two-Person Exhibit; *Van Alstine-Ruppert*, C. Grimaldis Gallery, Baltimore, MD. Named “Best Gallery Exhibit in Baltimore” for 1991 by Baltimore Sun.

Second Daughter Chloe Van Alstine born on Spring Equinox, March 20.

1992

Solo Exhibits; C. Grimaldis Gallery, Baltimore; Sun Valley Center for the Arts, Sun Valley, Idaho.

Completes *Reconsidering Sisyphus*, 1993, a large-scale public commission for Jersey City State College sponsored by NJ Council on the Arts.

1993

Installs *Artery Sunwork*, 1993, 18-foot bronze and granite Solstice Calendar for Artery Organization LLC, Washington, DC.

1994

Solo Exhibits; Nohra Haime Gallery, NYC; Troyer-Fitzpatrick-Lassman Gallery, Washington DC; Cleveland State University, Cleveland, OH; University of New Hampshire, Durham.

1995

Solo Exhibits; C. Grimaldis Gallery, Baltimore; Hopkins Center, Dartmouth College part of Studio *Art Exhibition Program*.

Group Exhibits; Phillips Collection, *Recent Acquisitions*, Washington DC; *The Creative Process: Drawings by Sculptors*, New Jersey Center For The Visual Arts, Summit, NJ.

*Residency Fellowship* at Casting Institute, Art Department, University of Buffalo (Amherst), NY.

Solo exhibit; deCordova Museum, Lincoln, MA, *Vessels and Voyages*, 1996-97, curated by Nicholas Capasso.

1997

Solo Exhibits; C. Grimaldis Gallery, Baltimore, MD; Kendall Campus Art Gallery, Miami-Dade Community College, Miami, FL.

Group Exhibitions; Hirshhorn Museum, *The Hirshhorn Collects: Recent Acquisitions* 1993-96, Washington, DC; FIAC, *Drawings* Nohra Haime Gallery, Paris, France; Socrates Sculpture Park, *From the Ground UP*, NYC; *PierWalk '97*, Chicago Navy Pier, Chicago; *Tool as Art II*, National Building Museum, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC; *Works on Paper*, Nohra Haime Gallery, NYC; *Inaugural Exhibition-Sculpture Terrace*, Plattsburgh Museum, State Univ. of New York.





Don and Kathy Lougheed with art student, S.U.N.Y. Potsdam attending Lougheed Arts Festival they sponsor.



Van Alstine working on 'Memorial for 9/11' Monument, Kettering, OH, 2002. PHOTO: Connie Campbell.



Van Alstine, Wells studio 2005 working on Fleche III, 2005.

**1998** Solo Exhibits; Nohra Haime Gallery, NYC; *Acknowledging the Figure*, Burke Gallery, State University of New York, Plattsburgh, Art Museum.

**1999** Solo exhibits; C. Grimaldis Gallery, Baltimore; Hyde Art Collection, Glens Falls, NY.

Meets Don and Kathy Lougheed who become close friends and major patrons.

**2000** Release of hardcover book, *Bones Of The Earth, Spirit Of The Land: The Sculpture of John Van Alstine*, essay by Nick Capasso, interview by Glenn Harper, published by Editions ARIEL Press, Grayson Publishing, hardcover 96 pages.

Solo exhibitions; Nohra Haime Gallery, NYC; C. Grimaldis Gallery, Baltimore.

**2001** Solo exhibit; Bannister Gallery, Rhode Island College, Providence, RI.

**2002** Awarded *Pollock-Krasner Foundation Individual Artist Grant*, New York.

Selected as US representative to *Kettering International Sculpture Symposium*, Kettering, OH, along with other artists from Austria, Bulgaria, Germany, Italy, Japan, Mexico and Spain. Creates public 9/11 Memorial sculpture, the first of two 9/11-related works. Meets Austrian sculptor Caroline Ramersdorfer.

Installs two major commissions; *Updraft*, 2002, 16-foot black granite and steel sculpture at Dulles Trade Center for Buchanan Partners Inc. Washington, DC; *Reed Memorial*, 2002, Harleysville, PA, 11-foot granite and bronze monument with solstice calendar honoring local FBI agent killed in the line of duty.

Solo exhibit; Buschlen-Mowatt Gallery, Palm Desert, CA.

**2003** Two Person Show; James Gallery, Pittsburgh, PA with painter Chuck Olson.

Separates from Holly Hallman Van Alstine.

**2004** Installs *Second Street Sunwork*, 2004, NJ Light Rail, Hoboken, NJ. Commissioned by the NJ Transit, Project administered by NJ Council on the Arts.

Solo exhibition; Nohra Haime Gallery, NYC.

With Caroline Ramersdorfer flies to Palm Desert, CA. Retrieves sculpture from Buschlen-Mowatt Gallery and drives rented truck back across country to Wells, NY, visiting impressive geologic sites.

**2005** Due to restrictions acquiring granite at quarries in Barre, VT, begins to gather and use slate from Granville, NY.

Awarded *Individual Artist Grant* from Gottlieb Foundation, New York.

Divorce finalized with Holly Hallman Van Alstine, retains Wells property. Hallman gets couple's Jersey City warehouse/apartment/rental apartment property and moves to Jersey City.



Van Alstine and Ramersdorfer setting her piece, *ARThaus*, Bolton Landing, along Lake George, NY. PHOTO: Tara Sweet.



Construction of Beijing Olympics' *Rings of Unity-Circles of Inclusion*. PHOTO: John Van Alstine.



Ramersdorfer (center with white scarf) Monument Valley, 2008. PHOTO: John Van Alstine.



Van Alstine with *Cardinalis*, 2006, wrapped after installation. Indianapolis International Airport, 2008. PHOTO: Harry Gordon.

**2005** Selected as a finalist for large scale outdoor sculpture for new Indianapolis Airport. Kris Ackerbauer, childhood friend then Wing Commander of a Navy airbase in Kingsville, TX arranges for Navy donation of F-14 wing for use in sculpture *Cardinalis*, 2006. Wing is delivered to Wells studio in fall.

**2006** Awarded Indianapolis Airport project. Contracts with Art Resources Inc., Lancaster, PA to do fabrication.

Completes and installs *Via Solaris*, 2006, a 16-foot bronze/granite solstice calendar commissioned by the State University of Indiana, Terre Haute.

Submits *Rings of Unity-Circles of Inclusion* proposal for large-scale outdoor sculpture to the Olympic Park Art Committee for 2008 Summer Games in Beijing.

Solo exhibits; Nohra Haime Gallery, NYC; John Davis Gallery Garden, Hudson, NY.

Father Richard Van Alstine dies in March. Holly Hallman Van Alstine dies November.

Work continues on Indianapolis Airport project.

Meets Suzanne and Les Carter become friends and major supporters.

Two person show; *Confluence of Opposites*, Lake Placid Arts Center, Lake Placid, NY with Caroline Ramersdorfer.

In August receives notice from the Beijing Olympic Park Art Committee that commission proposal for large scale outdoor sculpture *Rings of Unity-Circles of Inclusion*, 2008 has been selected for construction and permanent installation at 2008 games. Travels to Beijing in October to work with fabrication studio.

**2008** *Rings of Unity-Circles of Inclusion* is completed and installed in Beijing Olympic Park. Receives Merit Award.

Road trip across US from Los Angeles to Wells, NY with Caroline Ramersdorfer. Tours western US including Monument Valley, Rocky Mountains and great plains.

Group exhibition; *Dialogues in Balance*, Lake George, NY. First of six annual exhibitions collaborating with furniture makers Barney Bellinger, Jonathan Sweet, and sculptor Caroline Ramersdorfer.

Installs *Cardinalis*, 2006, large-scale sculpture commission outside Indianapolis Airport.

Solo Exhibits; Cline/Dale Gallery, Scottsdale, Arizona; C. Grimaldis Gallery, Baltimore, MD; Gerald Peters Gallery, Santa Fe, NM; John Davis Gallery, Hudson, NY.

Contacted by Michigan State University and invited to submit proposal ideas for large scale sculpture to be sited in front of new Snyder-Phillips Hall building on campus. Visits campus in November. Design agreement signed in June 2008. *Funambulist* proposal selected and contract signed in December 2008.





MSU *Funambulist*, 2008, installation.  
PHOTO: John Van Alstine.



Van Alstine with *Tempered by Memory* model, Saratoga Springs, NY, 2011.  
PHOTO: Lawrence White.



Chet and Karen Opalka at Van Alstine's opening, Opalka Gallery, Sage College, Albany, NY. PHOTO: John Van Alstine.

**2009**

Meets Marilyn Burns and Jeffrey Sellon and become good friends and major patrons.

**2010**

Completes and installs Michigan State University commission, *Funambulist*, 2008.

**2011**

Two-person exhibition; *Confluence of Opposites-Panta Rei*, Van Alstine and Ramersdorfer, C. Grimaldis Gallery, Baltimore, MD.

Attends *Abu Dhabi International Sculpture Symposium*, United Arab Emirates, gives joint public lecture with Caroline Ramersdorfer at Zayed University.

Contacted by Saratoga Arts Organization about creating 9/11 Memorial sculpture for Saratoga Springs, NY constructed of New York's World Trade Center steel to be dedicated Sept 11, 2011 the 10-year anniversary. Reaches out to friend and fellow sculptor Noah Savett to collaborate. Develops and submits a proposal, *Tempered by Memory*, 2011, which is accepted by the NY/NJ Port Authority.

Group exhibitions; *Uncommon Grounds*, Bridgehampton Gardens-Peconic Land Trust Bridgehampton, NY; Houston Fine Arts Fair with C. Grimaldis Gallery, Houston TX.

Flies to Beijing to attend public sculpture symposium and install large scale outdoor commission, *Passage*, 2011 at Tsinghua University, Beijing, China, as part of University's Centennial Celebration.

Work begins on *Tempered by Memory*, 9/11, Memorial sculpture in Gansevoort near Saratoga Springs, NY. Enlists help of retired Iron workers and crane operators from Albany Local Ironworkers Union 12. Sculpture becomes too large for original site. Committee of local citizens formed to locate new site, High Rock Park is selected and plans made for installation dedication September 11, 2012.

**2012**

Solo exhibition: *John Van Alstine: Arrested Motion/Perilous Balance*, Opalka Gallery, Sage College, Albany, NY. Collaborates with Ellen Sinopoli Dance Company for performance in gallery.

Meets Chet and Karen Opalka become friends and major patrons.

*Tempered By Memory* dedicated on Sept. 11th to great public fanfare in High Rock Park, Saratoga Springs, NY.

**2013**

Group exhibitions; *Sculpture at Nohra Haime*, Nohra Haime Gallery, NYC; *Summer '13*, C. Grimaldis Gallery, Baltimore, MD; *Chesterwood Contemporary Sculpture*, Chesterwood Garden, Stockbridge, MA; *Art Hamptons 2013*, C. Fine Arts, Bridgehampton, NY.

**2014**

Group exhibitions; *Summer '14*, C. Grimaldis Gallery, Baltimore, MD; *Response*, James Gallery, Pittsburgh, PA.

Meets Ellen-Deane Cummins, becomes good friend and collector.



Van Alstine installing *Working the Sails*, 1990 for permanent display garden Albany Institute of History and Art, 2015. PHOTO: Chet Opalka.



Van Alstine with longtime friend Dean Brumaghim after installing *Link II*, 1991, Purdue University, 2017.



Aluminum "drop tank", used in *Chalice VI*, 2018 and *Sisyphian Circle* (tank top), 2018.



*John Van Alstine Sculpture: 1971-2018*, hardcover catalog.



Ramersdorfer, Eden and Chloe Van Alstine, Cliffs of Moher, Ireland, May 2016. PHOTO: John Van Alstine.

**2015**

Solo exhibit; *Stone|Steel|Paper*, Erik Laffer Gallery, Schuylerville, NY.

Albany Institute of History and Art acquires *Working the Sails*, 1990, installs in garden for permanent exhibition.

Awarded fiscal sponsorship for seed money from New York Foundation of the Arts (NYFA) for *American Vistas – the Sculpture of John Van Alstine*, monograph book and retrospective exhibition project.

Meets George McCarron, Boston collector, becomes good friend and major patron.

**2016**

Travels to Ireland with Ramersdorfer and daughters Eden and Chloe, impressed with the landscape particularly the Cliffs of Moher, rocky landscape of The Burren and astronomical alignments of Newgrange.

Solo Exhibit; Rolly-Michaux Gallery, Boston.

**2017**

Installs *Link II*, 1991, at Purdue University, West Lafayette, IN, purchased as part of the University's permanent art collection.

Two-person exhibit; *Cartography and Choreography*, Laffer Gallery, Schuylerville, NY, June-July.

Marries sculptor Caroline Ramersdorfer.

**2018**

Installs *Catapulta - Sacandaga River Landscape*, 2016, at Chautauqua Institute, Chautauqua, NY, permanent collection of the Fowler-Kellogg Art Center.

Obtains large aluminum "drop tank", provides material for 2 important works; *Chalice VI*, 2018 and *Sisyphian Circle* (tank top), 2018.

Group Exhibit; *Contemporary Sculpture at Chesterwood: 40 Years*, curated by the Maxwell Davidson Gallery, NYC.

**2019**

Release of *John Van Alstine Sculpture: 1971-2018*, 280 page, hardcover catalog. Essays by Howard Fox, Tom Moran, Tim Kane and John Van Alstine, published by The Artist Book Foundation (TABF), North Adams, MA.

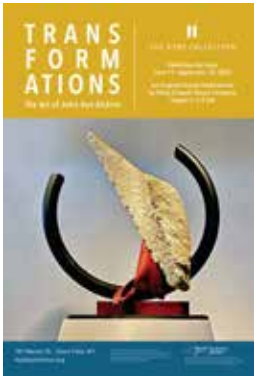




Ellen Sinopoli dancer Laura Teeter with *Buoy*, 1995, Chesterwood solo exhibit, 2021. PHOTO: John Van Alstine.



*Catapulta* 3-19, 2021, at Wuhu Museum Sculpture Garden, Wuhu, China, 2022.



Hyde Collection Exhibition, *Transformations: The Art of John Van Alstine* announcement, 2022. 50-year survey.

2019

Solo Exhibit; *John Van Alstine Sculpture and Drawings*, The Artist Book Foundation Gallery, MASS MoCA, North Adams, MA .

Finishes renovation of Sawmill studio on north end of Wells property for Ramersdorfer.

Installs *Chalice VI*, 2018, at Wilderstein Historic Site, Rhinebeck, NY.

Group Exhibit, *A Sculpture Show*, C. Grimaldis Gallery, Baltimore, MD, May-June.

Historic flood on Sacandaga River Halloween night destroys 2 bronze sculptures, sets up burst of Covid related works.

2020

Feature artist, *Creativity in Quarantine: Adirondack Artists at Work*, The Adirondack Experience Museum, web feature.

Ringling Museum acquires two sculptures and a drawing for their permanent collection. Gift of the Murray and Kay Delaney Bring Collection.

Creates over 100 works in his new Covid Series from 2020 through 2021.

2021

Solo Exhibit; Chesterwood - National Trust For Historic Preservation, *John Van Alstine: Tipping the Balance*, Stockbridge, MA.

Ellen Sinopoli Dance Company performs in conjunction with *John Van Alstine: Tipping the Balance* exhibit at Chesterwood, Stockbridge, MA.

Solo Exhibit; Hyde Collection Museum, *Reflecting on 2020: New Sculpture by John Van Alstine*, Glens Falls, NY, featuring bronze works made during Covid period.

Both Daughters Eden and Chloe Van Alstine get married.

William G. Pomeroy Foundation grants NYS historic road sign to Wells Mill property, for its significant historic and cultural contributions to the community and Adirondack Park.

2022

*Catapulta* 3-19 acquired and permanently installed, Wuhu Sculpture Museum, Wuhu, China.

Work receives the Bronze Medal Award by the international jury.

*Transformations: The Art of John Van Alstine*, 50-year survey exhibition opened June- Sept, Hyde Collection Museum, Glens Falls, NY, in conjunction with The Artist Book Foundation’s 2019 release of *John Van Alstine Sculpture: 1971-2018*, 280 page, hardcover catalog. Exhibit originally scheduled for 2020, postponed because of Covid pandemic.

EDUCATION

1976	Cornell University, Ithaca, NY, M.F.A., Cornell Graduate Fellowship in Sculpture
1974	Kent State University, Kent, Ohio; B.F.A. cum laude, in Sculpture, Ceramics and Glass
1973	Blossom Festival School, Cleveland/Kent, Ohio, full scholarship in sculpture; studied with Richard Stankiewicz and Richard Hunt
1970-72	St. Lawrence University, Canton, New York

SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS

2022	Hyde Collection Museum, <i>Transformations: The Art of John Van Alstine</i> , 50-year survey exhibit, Glens Falls, NY
2021	Chesterwood - National Trust For Historic Preservation, <i>John Van Alstine: Tipping the Balance</i> , Stockbridge, MA
	The Artist Book Foundation, <i>John Van Alstine: Sculpture and Drawings</i> , in conjunction with hardcover book release, MASS MoCA campus, N. Adams, MA
	Hyde Collection Museum, <i>Reflecting on 2020: New Sculpture by John Van Alstine</i> , Glens Falls, NY
2017	Rolly-Michaux Gallery, <i>John Van Alstine</i> , Boston, MA
2015	Laffer Gallery, <i>Stone / Steel / Paper</i> , Schuylerville, NY
2012	Opalka Gallery, Sage College, <i>John Van Alstine: Arrested Motion/Perilous Balance</i> , Albany, NY
2011	John Davis Gallery, <i>John Van Alstine – Small Sculpture</i> , Hudson, NY
2009	John Davis Gallery, <i>John Van Alstine – Sisyphean Holiday</i> , Hudson, NY
2008	John Davis Gallery, <i>John Van Alstine: Slate and Steel – Selections from the Beijing Olympic Series</i> , Hudson, NY
	C. Grimaldis Gallery, <i>Olympic Circles - Works from the Beijing Series</i> , Baltimore, MD
	Gerald Peters Gallery, <i>John Van Alstine: Olympic Circles - Selections from the Beijing Series</i> , Santa Fe, NM
2007	John Davis Gallery, <i>John Van Alstine: Sculpture</i> , Hudson, NY
2006	John Davis Gallery, <i>John Van Alstine: Garden Sculpture</i> , Hudson, NY
2005	Nohra Haime Gallery, <i>John Van Alstine - Slate and Steel</i> , New York, NY
2004	Nohra Haime Gallery, <i>New Sculpture</i> , New York, NY
2002	Buschlen-Mowatt Galleries, <i>John Van Alstine – Sculpture</i> , Palm Desert, CA



2001 Bannister Gallery, *John Van Alstine: Sculpture and Drawing*, Rhode Island College, Providence, RI

2000 Nohra Haime Gallery, *Columns and other New Work*, New York, NY

C. Grimaldis Gallery, *John Van Alstine - New Sculpture*, Baltimore, MD

1999 C. Grimaldis Gallery, *John Van Alstine - New Sculpture*, Baltimore, MD

Hyde Collection Art Museum, *Confluence*, Glens Falls, NY

Wood Street Gallery and Sculpture Garden, *John Van Alstine – Sculpture*, Chicago, IL

1998 Nohra Haime Gallery, *Suspended Animation*, New York, NY

Burke Gallery, *Acknowledging the Figure*, State University of New York, Plattsburgh, NY

1997 C. Grimaldis Gallery, *New Sculpture*, Baltimore, MD

Kendall Campus Art Gallery, *Sculpture and Drawings*, Miami-Dade Com. College, Miami, FL

1996 Nohra Haime Gallery, *Bronze and Granite*, New York, NY

deCordova Museum and Sculpture Garden, *Vessels and Voyages*, Lincoln, MA

1995 C. Grimaldis Gallery, *New Sculpture*, Baltimore, MD

Hopkins Center Gallery, *Sculpture*, Dartmouth College, Hanover, NH

1994 Nohra Haime Gallery, *Granite and Steel*, New York, NY

Paul Creative Arts Center, *Sculpture and Drawings 1988-93*, University Of New Hampshire, Durham, NH

Troyer-Fitzpatrick-Lassman Gallery, *John Van Alstine: Sculpture and Drawings*, Washington, DC

University Art Gallery, *John Van Alstine: New Sculpture and Drawings*, Cleveland State University, Cleveland, OH

1993 Sun Valley Center For The Arts, *John Van Alstine: Sculpture and Drawings*, Sun Valley, ID

1992 C. Grimaldis Gallery, *New Sculpture*, Baltimore, MD

1991 Nohra Haime Gallery, *New Work*, New York, NY

Gerald Peters Gallery, *John Van Alstine*, Santa Fe, NM,

Sonsbeek International Art Center, *John Van Alstine: Sculpture*, Arnhem, The Netherlands

National Academy Of Sciences, *Documents*, Washington, DC,

Morris Museum, *John Van Alstine: New Jersey Artist Series*, Morristown, NJ

1990 Nohra Haime Gallery, *Sculpture and Drawings*, New York, NY

Franz Bader Gallery, *John Van Alstine: New Work/Raw Space*, Washington, DC

1989 Gerald Peters Gallery, Santa Fe, NM

Osuna Gallery, *John Van Alstine: New Sculpture*, Washington, DC

Jersey City Museum, *John Van Alstine*, Jersey City, NJ

C. Grimaldis Gallery, Baltimore, MD

1988 Nohra Haime Gallery, *Passages*, New York, NY

George Ciscle Gallery, *Sculpture and Drawings*, Baltimore, MD

1987 Phillips Collection, *John Van Alstine: Outdoor Sculpture*, Washington, DC

Osuna Gallery, *John Van Alstine: Sculpture*, Washington, DC

Museum of the National Arts Foundation, *John Van Alstine: Sculpture*, Rockefeller Plaza, New York, NY

1986 George Ciscle Gallery, *Sculpture and Drawings*, Baltimore, MD

Brush Gallery, *John Van Alstine: New Sculpture and Drawings*, St. Lawrence University, Canton, NY

1984 Diane Brown Gallery, *John Van Alstine: New Work*, New York, NY

C. Grimaldis Gallery, *John Van Alstine: Sculpture and Drawings*, Baltimore, MD

1983 Osuna Gallery, *John Van Alstine*, Washington, DC

1981 Osuna Gallery, *John Van Alstine: Sculpture*, Washington, DC

Henri Gallery, *Easel Photographs*, Washington, DC,

1980 Art Museum, *John Van Alstine: Sculpture*, University Of Colorado, Boulder, CO

1979 Neill Gallery, *John Van Alstine: Sculpture*, New York, NY

1978 West Broadway Gallery, *Gallery Drawings*, New York, NY

University Of Colorado, *John Van Alstine: New Sculpture*, Ft. Collins, CO

1977 Art Museum, *John Van Alstine: Sculpture*, Northern Arizona University, Flagstaff, AZ

1976 Herbert F. Johnson Museum, *John Van Alstine: Sculpture*, Cornell University, Ithaca, NY



SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

2022	<i>West Palm Beach International Art Fair</i> , C. Fine Arts, New York, NY, March
2021	<i>The 8th “Liu Kaiqu Award” International Sculpture Exhibition</i> , Wuhu Sculpture Museum, Wuhu, China
2018	<i>40th Anniversary Contemporary Sculpture</i> , Chesterwood Gardens, Stockbridge, MA, Jun.-Oct.
2017	<i>Cartography And Choreography</i> , (2 person) Laffer Gallery, Schuylerville, NY, June-July
2015	<i>SOFA (Sculptural Objects Functional Art)</i> , Navy Pier, Chicago, C Fine Arts, New York, NY, Nov.  <i>The Lightness Of Being: Abstracts</i> , Allyn Gallup Gallery, Sarasota, FL
2014	<i>Summer '14</i> , C. Grimaldis Gallery, Baltimore, MD, July-Aug.  <i>Response</i> , James Gallery, Pittsburgh, PA
2013	<i>Sculpture At Nohra Haime</i> , Nohra Haime Gallery, New York, NY, June-August  <i>Summer '13</i> , C. Grimaldis Gallery, Baltimore, MD, July 10-August 17  Chesterwood Contemporary Sculpture, curated by Glenn Harper installed on the grounds of the summer studio and home of Daniel Chester French, Stockbridge, MA, June-Oct.  <i>Art Hamptons Art Fair</i> , C Fine Arts, Bridgehampton, LI, New York, July 11-14, 2013
2011	<i>Confluence Of Opposites – Panta Rei, John Van Alstine – Caroline Ramersdorfer</i> , C. Grimaldis Gallery, Baltimore, MD, March 16-May 6  <i>Houston Fine Arts Fair</i> , C. Grimaldis Gallery, Houston, TX, September
2010	<i>Gallery Artists</i> , Salwa Zeidan Art Gallery, Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates  <i>Abu Dhabi Art Fair 2010</i> , Emirates Palace, United Arab Emirates  <i>Centennial Sculpture Exhibition</i> , Tsinghua University, Beijing, China
2009	<i>John Van Alstine, Valerie Hurd, Carlos Luna, Art in Embassies Exhibition</i> , US Embassy, Santiago, Chile, April, Catalogue
2008	<i>Beijing Olympic Park Exhibition</i> , Beijing, China, Merit Award - competition for construction of large scale public sculpture for the 2008 Olympic Games
2007	<i>Confluence Of Opposites</i> , Lake Placid Center For The Arts, Lake Placid, NY, 2 person exhibit with Caroline Ramersdorfer, July 12-August, 7  <i>Sculpture from Calder to Bolla</i> , Nohra Haime Gallery, New York, NY, April-May  <i>Gallery Artists-Courtyard</i> , John Davis Gallery, Hudson, NY
2006	<i>Project 2006</i> , Pittsburgh Society Of Sculptors - conjunction with the <i>Three Rivers Arts Festival</i> , Pittsburgh, PA  <i>Sculpture: Caro, Isherwood, Ruppert, Van Alstine</i> , C. Grimaldis Gallery, Baltimore, MD, June 8-July 12

2005	<i>Exposition Transfer</i> , Gallery Prisma, Südtiroler Künstlerbund Bolzano, Südtirol, Italy, Oct-Nov  <i>Re-presenting Representation VII</i> , Arnot Museum, Elmira, NY, Sept - Nov.  <i>Gallery Artists</i> , Gerald Peters Gallery, Santa Fe NM
2004	<i>New Additions Outdoors</i> , Grounds For Sculpture, Hamilton, NJ, <i>Spring-Summer</i>  <i>Sculpture In The Park</i> , Rockland Center For The Arts, West Nyack, NY, Oct – April  <i>Summer '04</i> , C. Grimaldis Gallery, Baltimore, MD, July -August
2003	<i>Chuck Olson / John Van Alstine</i> , James Gallery, Pittsburgh, PA  <i>Sculpture Internationale 2003</i> , Cobb Galleria Center, Atlanta, GA, October
2002	<i>From Nature</i> , AVC Contemporary Art Gallery, New York, NY, May 6 -June 7  <i>From Stone to Foam</i> , Nohra Haime Gallery, New York, NY, Feb 19 - April 6  <i>Gallery Artists</i> , Buschlen-Mowatt Gallery, Palm Desert, CA
2001	<i>Earthline / Landscape</i> , curated by Brooke Barrie, curator /director Grounds for Sculpture and Meg Leipzig, The Gallery of South Orange, South Orange, NJ  <i>Spring Invitational Exhibition</i> , Curated by Brooke Barrie, Grounds For Sculpture, Hamilton, NJ
2000	<i>International Sculpture Center - Collection LII</i> , ISC 2000 conference, June Robert McClain & Co. Gallery, Houston, TX  <i>Birth</i> , “N” Street Fine Arts Gallery, 57 N Street, NW, Washington, DC
1999	<i>Into Balance</i> , Outdoor sculpture exhibition, curated by Sarah Tanguy Washington, DC, June-Aug  <i>History And Highlights: The Art Gallery's Collection</i> , University Art Museum, University of New Hampshire, Durham, NH  <i>Indoor/Outdoor Sculpture</i> , Nohra Haime Gallery, New York, NY, June-July  <i>Portals</i> , Outdoor public sculpture exhibition, curated by Sarah Tanguy, Washington, DC  <i>Pierwalk '99, International Outdoor Sculpture Exhibition</i> , Chicago Navy Pier, Chicago, IL, May- Oct  <i>Equilibrium Of The Senses</i> , Nohra Haime Gallery, New York, NY, Jan-Feb  <i>Pierwalk '99: Maquette Exhibition</i> , International Sculpture Exhibition, Vedanta Gallery, Chicago, IL, Jan - Feb  <i>10 by 10</i> , Addision / Ripley Gallery, Washington, DC, Jan - Feb  <i>Small Sculpture</i> , C. Grimaldis Gallery, Baltimore, MD, Jan - Feb



1998	<i>New Stone And Steel Sculpture</i> , Annmarie Gardens, Solomons, MD
	<i>Summer '98: Elaine DeKooning, Hartigan, Kendrick, Ruckriem, Ruppert, Serra, Van Alstine</i> , C. Grimaldis Gallery, Baltimore, MD
	<i>Pierwalk '98; International Outdoor Sculpture Exhibition</i> , Chicago Navy Pier, Chicago, IL, May-October
	<i>Maquette Exhibition - Pier Walk '98</i> , Wood Street Gallery, Chicago, IL, January - March
1997	<i>The Hirshhorn Collects: Recent Acquisitions 1992-1996</i> , Hirshhorn Museum, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC
	<i>Drawings</i> , FIAC - International Contemporary Art Fair, Nohra Haime Gallery, Paris, France, October
	<i>From the Ground UP</i> , Socrates Sculpture Park, New York, NY, May - Sept
	<i>Pier Walk '97: International Outdoor Sculpture Exhibition</i> , Chicago Navy Pier, Chicago, IL, May-Oct
	<i>Tools as Art II: Exploring Metaphor The Hechinger Collection</i> , Curated by Sarah Tanguy, National Building Museum, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC, Apr-Sept
1996	<i>Works on Paper</i> , Nohra Haime Gallery, New York, NY, Jan
	<i>Inaugural Exhibition-Sculpture Terrace</i> , Plattsburgh Museum, State University of New York, Plattsburgh, NY, October
	<i>Gallery Artists</i> , FIAC - International Contemporary Art Fair, Nohra Haime Gallery, Paris, France
	<i>C3 - Beasley, Henry, Hunt, Jimenez, Moroles, Scholder, Surls, Van Alstine, Whitney, I. Witkin</i> , Cerrillos Cultural Center, Cerrillos, NM , July-August
1995	<i>Summer '96: Part I The Sculptors: Isherwood, Kendrick, Ruckriem, Ruppert, Van Alstine, C.</i> Grimaldis Gallery, Baltimore, MD, June
	<i>The Creative Process: Drawings by Sculptors</i> , New Jersey Center For The Visual Arts, Summit, NJ, Sept
	<i>Metamorphosis: Contemporary Sculpture at Tudor Place</i> , International Sculpture Center, Washington, DC, Summer/Fall
	<i>Recent Acquisitions</i> , Spring/Summer, Phillips Collection, Washington, DC,
1994	<i>SEMAPHORE: Placing the Mark</i> , curated by Bill Bace, Art Initiatives Gallery, New York, NY,
	<i>2nd Fujisankei Biennale</i> , Hakone OpenAir Museum, Ninotaira, Japan

1993	<i>Contemporary Sculpture</i> , Nohra Haime Gallery, New York, NY, September
1992	<i>Sculptor's Drawings: Anthony Caro, Joel Fisher, Jene Highstein, David Nash, Joel Shapiro, John Van Alstine</i> , C. Grimaldis Gallery, Baltimore, MD, March
	<i>Art Collection Of The National Federal Reserve Board - Five Years of Accessions</i> , Federal Reserve Board, Washington, DC, Jun - Aug
	<i>Vari, Mutal, Van Alstine</i> , Nohra Haime Gallery, New York, NY, March
1991	<i>10th Anniversary Exhibit</i> , Nohra Haime Gallery, New York, NY
	<i>Caro, Kendrick, Ruppert, Van Alstine</i> , C. Grimaldis Gallery, Baltimore, MD, Jul - Aug
	<i>Sculptors on Paper</i> , Congress Square Gallery, Portland, ME, March
	<i>Object/Context: A National Invitational</i> , Indiana University Museum, Indiana University of Pennsylvania, Indiana, PA, April
1990	<i>Ruppert/Van Alstine, two-person show</i> , C. Grimaldis Gallery, Baltimore, MD, May
	<i>Selections</i> , Nohra Haime Gallery, New York, NY, May
	<i>Washington Artists: Those Who Left - Those Who Stayed</i> , Franz Bader Gallery, Washington, DC
	<i>Sculpture of the Americas into the 90's</i> , Museum Of Modern Art Of Latin America, Organization of American States, Washington, DC
	<i>Voyages of the Modern Imagination: The Boat in 20th Century Art</i> , Farnsworth Museum, Rockland, ME
1989	<i>The Boat Show</i> , organized by the Renwick Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC, Portland Museum Of Art, Portland, ME
	<i>Salon de Mars -Art Fair</i> , Nohra Haime Gallery, New York, NY, Paris
	<i>Selections</i> , Nohra Haime Gallery, New York, NY
	<i>Sculpture Invitational: John Van Alstine and David Maxim</i> , Indiana University Museum, Indiana University of Pennsylvania, Indiana, PA
1988	<i>Blues and Other Summer Delights</i> , Nohra Haime Gallery, New York, NY
	<i>About Seascape</i> , Frick Gallery, Belfast, ME
	<i>Small Sculpture</i> , Nohra Haime Gallery, New York, NY
1987	New Jersey Arts Council - Artists Fellowship Exhibition, Morris Museum, Morristown, NJ
	<i>Watercolors Plus</i> , Nohra Haime Gallery, New York, NY
	<i>Inaugural Exhibition – Fuller Building</i> , Nohra Haime Gallery, New York, NY
	<i>Los Gringos</i> , Sybil Larney Gallery, Chicago, IL



1985	<i>New Jersey Artists Biennial</i> , Newark Museum, Newark, NJ <i>Drawings By Sculptors</i> , Diane Brown Gallery, New York, NY, June-July <i>Discoveries and Disclosures</i> , George Ciscle Gallery, Baltimore, MD
1984	<i>Timely Objects, Inaugural Exhibition</i> , Diane Brown Gallery, New York, NY
1983	<i>International Arts Council Exhibit</i> , Sarah Lawrence College, Bronxville, NY <i>Works in Public Sites, Mayor's Advisory Council on the Arts</i> , Baltimore Sculpture, Baltimore, MD <i>National Invitational</i> , ColbySawyer College Gallery, New London, NH <i>Flatworks Non 3D works by Sculptors</i> , Washington Project For The Arts, Washington, DC
1982	<i>10 Washington Sculptors</i> , curated by Howard N. Fox, International Sculpture Conference, San Francisco, CA,
1982	<i>Grantees Exhibition</i> , DC Arts Commission Gallery, Washington, DC, OctNov <i>Gallery Stable Sculpture</i> , Osuna Gallery, Washington, DC
1981	<i>Color Photography Five New Views</i> , Marlborough Gallery, New York, NY
1980	<i>Recent Acquisitions</i> , Hirshhorn Museum, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC
1979	<i>Directions '79</i> , curated by Howard N. Fox, Hirshhorn Museum, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC
1979-80	<i>First Western States Biennial Tour</i> : Denver Art Museum, Denver, CO; San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco, CA; Seattle Art Museum, Seattle, WA; National Museum Of American Art, Washington, DC
1978	<i>Cornell Then/Sculpture Now</i> , Herbert F. Johnson Museum, Cornell University, Ithaca, NY
1977	<i>Cornell Then/Sculpture Now</i> , Max Hutchinson – Sculpture Now Gallery, New York, NY





SELECTED PUBLIC COLLECTIONS

Albany Institute of History & Art, Albany, NY

Baltimore Museum of Art, Baltimore, MD

Bioethics Institute, Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, MD

Blanton Museum of Art, University Of Texas, Austin, TX

City Of Beijing, China, 2008 Olympic Park Exhibition Collection, Beijing

Carnegie Institute of Art, Pittsburgh, PA

Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, DC

Chautauqua Institute, Fowler-Kellogg Art Center, Chautauqua, NY

Dayton Art Institute, Dayton, OH

Dallas Museum of Art, Dallas, TX

Delaware Museum of Art, Wilmington, DE

Denver Art Museum, Denver, CO, Gift Of List Foundation, New York, NY

Mr. & Mrs. Robert Levi Foundation, Baltimore, MD

Grounds For Sculpture, Hamilton, NJ

Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC

Katzen Arts Center, American University Museum, Washington, DC

The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, Houston, TX

The Hyde Collection Museum, Glens Falls, NY

Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art, Cornell University, Ithaca, NY

National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC

Federal Reserve Board, Washington, DC

Newark Museum of Art, Newark, NJ

Museum of Modern Art, Gulbenkian Foundation, Lisbon, Portugal

Phoenix Art Museum, Phoenix, AZ

Ringling Museum Of Art, Sarasota, FL

The Adirondack Museum, Blue Mountain Lake, NY

The Phillips Collection, Washington, DC

Tsinghua University Museum, Beijing, China

U.S. State Department, Art In Embassies: Bolivian Embassy and Chilean Embassy, Washington, DC;

Jamaican Embassy, Kingston, Jamaica; Nepal Embassy, Kathmandu

SELECTED CORPORATE COLLECTIONS

Artery Organization, Bethesda, MD

Buchanan Partners, Washington, DC

Carmeuse Corporation, Pittsburgh, PA

Deltec Corporation, Washington, DC

Gulf Co., Aspen, CO

Harris Trust & Savings Bank, Chicago, IL

Hechinger Company, *Tools As Art: The Hechinger Collection*, Washington, DC

Luck Stone Corporation, Richmond, VA

MCI Corporation, East Coast Headquarters, Arlington VA

Mountain Bell, Denver, CO

Norwest Bank, Billings, MT

Peat Marwick Inc., Montvale, NJ

Progressive Insurance Corporation, Cleveland, Ohio

Prudential Life Insurance, Newark, NJ

Rouse Company, Baltimore, MD

Schnader Harrison Segal & Lewis, Wash, DC

Trammell Crow Co, Washington, DC

Wilmer Cutler & Pickering, Tyson, VA

LARGE SCALE INSTALLATIONS

The Phoenix Art Museum, museum entrance, Phoenix, AZ, 1997-2006

State University Of New York, Plattsburgh, NY, 2000-2015

deCordova Museum and Sculpture Garden, Lincoln, MA, 1997-2003

Hirshhorn Museum Sculpture Garden, permanent collection, lower garden, 1982-96

Socrates Sculpture Park, New York, NY, 1997-98



Phillips Collection, Washington, DC, large scale sculpture at museum entrance, 1995-97

American Institute Of Architects Headquarters, Washington, DC, 1983

LARGE SCALE OUTDOOR SCULPTURAL COMMISSIONS

2022	Wuhu Museum and Sculpture Garden, Wuhu, China
2011	Tsinghua University, <i>Passage</i> , Beijing, China, Large scale sculpture for University campus to be built in Beijing in conjunction with University Centennial Celebration
2011	City of Saratoga Springs, NY, <i>Tempered by Memory</i> , 9/11 Memorial Sculpture, 35'h outdoor sculpture using World Trade Center steel remnants
2010	Michigan State University, <i>Funambulist</i> , 30' public sculpture for campus – Federal Percent for Arts project
2008	City of Beijing, China, <i>Rings of Unity/Circles of Inclusion</i> , large scale outdoor sculpture commissioned by the Olympic Park Art Committee for 2008 games
2008	Indianapolis Airport, Indianapolis, IN, <i>Cardinalis</i> , 35' high outdoor sculpture at New Terminal entrance
2006	State University Of Indiana, <i>Via Solaris</i> , 16th bronze/granite Solstice calendar, Terre Haute, IN
2004	NJ Transit Authority, <i>2nd Street Sunwork</i> , Commissioned with funds made possible by the Federal Transit Administration. Project administered by NJ Council on the Arts, Light Rail Station, Hoboken, NJ
2002	Kettering, OH, <i>9/11 Memorial</i> , Built in conjunction with the Kettering International Stone Sculpture Symposium, 2002
2002	Dulles Trade Center, <i>Updraft</i> , for Buchanan Partners Inc. Washington, DC
2002	Reed Memorial Park, <i>Reed Memorial</i> , Harleysville, PA, 11'h granite and bronze Monument with Solstice calendar
1994	Jersey City State College, <i>Reconsidering Sisyphus</i> , funded by NJ State Council on the Arts.
1993	Artery Plaza Headquarters, <i>Artery Sunwork</i> , Bethesda, MD, for the Artery Organization Inc., 18'h bronze and granite, Solstice calendar
1989	Institute For Defense Analyzes, <i>SCR Sunwork</i> , Super Computing Research Center, Washington, DC

1988	Democracy Plaza, <i>East River Totem</i> , Washington, DC, for the Artery Organization Inc.
1986	Austin College, <i>Solstice Calendar</i> , Sherman, TX Funded in part by the Texas Council on the Arts and the National Endowment for the Arts
1983	Luck Stone Corporation, <i>Big Go-Round</i> , Richmond, VA
1982	City Of Billings, <i>Trough</i> , large scale public sculpture, Funded by American Linen Co. Burlington Northern Railroad, Ravenhust Corp., First Northwestern National Bank, Billings, MT

UNIVERSITY AFFILIATIONS

University of Maryland, College Park, MD, Assistant Professor of Art, 1980-86

University of Wyoming, Laramie, WY, Assistant Professor of Art, 1976-80

Cornell University, Ithaca, NY, instructor, summer 1976

SELECTED GRANTS / FELLOWSHIPS / AWARDS / MEDIA COVERAGE

2022	Bronze Prize, “Liu Kaiqu Award” for <i>Transformation – Creation; 8th International Sculpture Exhibition</i> , Wuhu Sculpture Park, Wuhu, China
	North Country Public Radio, NPR, <i>Fifty years of fusing found stone and metal in Wells</i> , NY, Interview with Todd Moe, June, 23
2021	North Country Public Radio, NPR, <i>Creating Art During Covid</i> , Interview with Todd Moe, July, 12
2020	The Adirondack Experience Museum, <i>Creativity in Quarantine: Adirondack Artists at Work</i> , museum web feature
2015	New York Foundation On The Arts, <i>Fiscal Sponsorship</i> ; for <i>American Vistas – the Sculpture of John Van Alstine</i> , monograph book and retrospective exhibition project
2014	PBS TV, <i>Aha! A house for Arts, John Van Alstine/Caroline Ramersdorfer</i> , documentary, aired November 5, 2014
2008	Olympic Park Art Committee, Beijing, China, <i>Merit Award</i> , competition for construction of large scale public sculpture built and installed at the Olympic Park for the 2008 Olympic Games
2007	HGTV, High Noon Entertainment, <i>reZONED: Episode 505, a Sculptor’s Lumber Mill</i> , broadcasted nationally



2005	Gottlieb Foundation, New York, <i>Individual Artist Grant</i>
	Mountain Lakes PBS-TV, <i>documentary broadcast; on sculptor John Van Alstine and his Wells</i> , NY studio and sculpture garden
2002	Pollock-Krasner Foundation, New York, <i>Individual Artist Grant</i>
1996	Casting Institute, Art Department, SUNY Buffalo (Amherst campus), NY, <i>Resident Fellowship</i>
1994	New York State Artists, Empire State Artists Alliance, Albany, NY, <i>Individual Artist Development Grant</i>
1988	New Jersey Council on the Arts, Trenton, NJ, <i>Individual Artist Fellowship</i>
1986	National Endowment For The Arts, <i>Washington, DC, Individual Artist Fellowship in Sculpture</i>
1985	Yaddo Artist Colony, <i>Artist in Residence Fellowship</i> , Saratoga Springs, New York, July/August
1984	New Jersey Council on the Arts, Trenton, NJ, <i>Individual Artists Fellowship</i>
1983	University of Maryland, College Park, MD, <i>Creative and Performing Arts Award</i>
1981	District Of Columbia Commission on the Arts, Washington, DC, <i>Individual Artist Fellowship</i>
	University of Maryland, College Park, MD, <i>Creative and Performing Arts Award</i>
1980	Louis C. Tiffany Foundation, New York, <i>Individual Artist Fellowship</i>
	Wyoming Council on the Arts, Cheyenne, WY, <i>Individual Artist Fellowship - photography</i>
1979	University of Wyoming, Laramie, <i>Grants in Aid</i> , work and study Pietrasanta, Italy
1978	American Academy in Rome, <i>Rome Prize Fellowship</i> , Finalist
	University Of Wyoming, Laramie, <i>Faculty Development Grant</i> – toured standing stone sites in England/Scotland
1974-75	Cornell University Ithaca, NY, <i>Graduate Fellowship</i> , sculpture MFA
1973	Blossom Festival School Of Art, Kent-Cleveland, Ohio, <i>Full Scholarship in Sculpture</i>

SELECTED VISITING ARTIST PUBLIC LECTURES

2022	Hyde Collection, <i>Conversation with Artist John Van Alstine &amp; Curator Tom Moran</i> , June 25
2017	Landmark College, Keene, NH, March
2015	Lougheed Festival Of The Arts, State University of New York, Potsdam, April _ In conjunction with visiting artist invitation.
2014	Adirondack Museum, Blue Mountain Lake, NY, <i>Locally Grown - Global Reach: The Contemporary Sculpture of John Van Alstine</i> , Monday night lecture series
	Buck Moon Arts Festival - State University of NY- FMCC, Johnstown, NY Keynote speaker
2012	Opalka Gallery, Sage College, in conjunction with solo exhibit: <i>John Van Alstine: Arrested Motion/Perilous Balance</i> , Albany, NY
2011	Texas Sculpture Symposium, University of Texas at Tyler. Keynote speaker
2010	Abu Dhabi International Sculpture Symposium, United Arab Emirates: public lecture at Zayed University, March
2008	City Of Beijing, China, public art symposium in conjunction with large scale outdoor sculpture commissioned by the Olympic Park Art Committee for 2008 games.
2006	Pittsburgh Society Of Sculptors, in conjunction with the <i>Three Rivers Arts Festival</i>
	State University Of Indiana, College of Arts and Sciences, Terre Haute, IN
2002	Dayton Center For The Visual Arts, Dayton, OH
	Wright State University, Dayton, OH
2001	Rhode Island College, in conjunction with solo exhibit, Providence, RI
2000	Corcoran Gallery Of Art, Washington, DC “Public Art at its Best” panel
1999	Hyde Collection Museum Of Art, in conjunction with solo exhibit, Glens Falls, NY
	University Of New Hampshire, Durham, in conjunction with solo exhibit



1997	State University of New York at Plattsburgh, Art Department - Visual Artist Series
	Kendall Campus Art Gallery, Miami-Dade Community College, Art Department, Miami, FL
	deCordova MUSEUM and Sculpture Garden, Lincoln, Mass. in conjunction with solo exhibit, <i>Vessels and Voyages</i> , June
1996	State University Of New York At Buffalo, Art Department/Casting Institute
1994	University Of New Hampshire, Durham, NH
	Cleveland State University, Cleveland, OH
	Jersey City State College, Jersey City, NJ, funded by New Jersey State Council on the Arts
1991	North Carolina Center for The Advancement of Teaching, Cullowhee, NC
	Sonsbeek International Art Center, Arnhem, the Netherlands, Sept.-Nov.
1990	Anderson Ranch, Aspen/Snowmass, CO
1986	Austin College, Sherman, TX, funded in part by the Texas Council on the Arts and The National Endowment for the Arts
	St. Lawrence University, Robert F. Brush Art Gallery Canton, New York
1985	Yaddo Artist's Retreat, in conjunction with Yaddo Residency Fellowship, Saratoga Springs, New York
1982	Yellowstone Arts Center, Billings, MT in conjunction with outdoor public sculpture installation
1980	University of Colorado, Boulder, in conjunction with solo exhibit
1978	University of Colorado, Ft. Collins, in conjunction with solo exhibit
1977	University of Northern Arizona, Flagstaff, in conjunction with solo exhibit

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Amann, Gloria. “John Van Alstine,” *Cover Magazine*, New York, September 1990, p. 16, illustrated.

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Bjornland, Karen. “Olympic Ring of Unity,” *The Daily Gazette*, Schenectady, NY, June 29, 2008, illustrated.

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Braman, Lisa, “John Van Alstine: Internationally Known Sculptor Breathes Life Into Stone and Steel,” *Adirondack Life Magazine*, Jay, NY, September October 2014, pp. 48–49, illustrated.

Brohel, Edward R. “Plattsburgh State Art Museum Sculpture Park” SUNY Plattsburgh, NY, An exhibition catalogue 2000, p.20, illustrated

Burchard, Hank, “Lessons of the Sun, Sand,” *Washington Post*, Washington, DC, Weekend Magazine, January 18, 1991

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\_\_\_\_\_. “Summer Shows Talent Pool Deep,” *Baltimore Sun*, Baltimore, MD, July 6, 1998, Illustrated.

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Edstrom, Daniela. “From Modern Movements of Light’s Poetry,” *The New Hampshire Magazine*, Nashua, NH, October 28, 1994, illustrated.

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Gariff, David. “John Van Alstine Sculpture and Drawings 1988-1993 – Between a Rock and a Hard Spot,” Art Gallery, Cleveland State Univ., OH, Cleveland State University Press, April 1-29, 1994, An exhibition catalogue, illustrated.

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“John Van Alstine: New Sculpture,” Nohra Haime Gallery, New York, September 8 – October 11, 2004, An exhibition catalogue, illustrated.

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Wells Garden, October 2022, from left to right:  
*Sisyphean Circle (tank top)*, 2018, *Tether (Boy's Toys)*,  
1995, *Pique a Terre VIII*, 1999. PHOTO: John Van Alstine

### Acknowledgements

My first sculpture was completed in 1971 — over 50 years ago. It has been a long journey and there are many people who have helped and inspired me along the way. This book project alone has spanned seven years and there are a number of people I would like to thank. First and foremost Tim Kane who has been with it since the beginning logging in hundreds of hours doing interviews, research and writing. He knows my “story” better than anyone, and I thank him sincerely.

Of course my family, including my parents Richard and Audrey Van Alstine who, when I announced after my first semester at college that I was declaring art as my major, despite their better judgment stood by and supported me through every step of my career, including major help in purchasing, restoring and maintaining our historic Old Adirondack Lumber mill property in Wells, NY, that has been home and studio for 35 years. My wife and partner, sculptor Caroline Ramersdorfer, has shared her professional insights and given steadfast support to this and all my projects. My daughters Eden and Chloe Van Alstine and their mother Holly Van Alstine have spent many years in and around my studios and given me great inspiration. Jennifer Foss Van Alstine who, at my most impressionable age, was instrumental in opening the door to the arts.

I would also like to thank Caroline Welsh, director emerita of the Adirondack Museum, who has provided countless hours of consultation, proposal writing, and planning. She has been an inspiration and a wonderful role model. Paul Hobart, whose advice and keen eye was most helpful in proofreading editing our text. Irene Cole for this stunning book design and Charlie Van Hall of Metro Metals, who generously provided much of the “found steel”, a core element in my work. Bernie Dunn, a loyal friend and assistant who over the years has been involved in moving my work as well as spearheading the construction of my most cherished “stone sculpture”, our extraordinary fireplace.

Finally, I am blessed to have a number of dedicated friends that, without their help, my career would have been very different. I sincerely thank Chet and Karen Opalka, for their many years of support and dear friendship. Don and Kathy Lougheed, Murray Bring and Kay Delaney, Marilyn Burns and Jeffrey Sellon, Ellen-Deane Cummins, Les and Suzanne Carter, James Gold and Dean and Merry Brumaghim; all have been big supporters over the years and especially generous. I would particularly like to thank George McCarron, whose numerous contributions and purchases of many of my works have provided major financial impetus for many of my projects.



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First Edition

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Published in the United State by Clovercroft Publishing, Franklin, TN

Distributed in the United States and its territories and possessions, and Canada by Ingram Publishing Services

Author: Tim Kane

Design: Irene Cole

Editor and Proofreader: Paul Hobart

Indexers: Ilene and Tim Kane

Printed in the US by Jostens Printing

ISBN 978-1-954437-81-4

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Kane, Tim; Van Alstine, John

Title: *American Vistas: The Life and Art of John Van Alstine* / by Tim Kane; contributions by John Van Alstine

Description: First Edition [2022]