

sculpture

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Eclectic Autonomy

September 18, 2020 by Jonathan Goodman



John Van Alstine: Sculpture 1971-2018, foreword and essay by Howard Fox, contributions by Tom Moran, Tim Kane, and John Van Alstine ([The Artist Book Foundation](#), \$95.)

This monograph, heavy and beautiful as a coffee table book, is much more than that. It is a tribute to John Van Alstine's long career, spanning decades of work in which his sculptures have interpreted urban and pastoral influences, with a nod to the massive undertakings



of Land artists such as [Robert Smithson](#) and [Michael Heizer](#). Van Alstine's other influences include the ubiquity of stone in the West—he spent time teaching at the University of Laramie in Wyoming—as well as the detritus of the marine industry on the East Coast. His assemblages are amalgams of different materials, some massive in size and ambition. His joining of granite to steel, for example, results in works that reiterate the primacy of nature, even as they quote manmade industrial processes. The book's many images do an excellent job of illustrating Van Alstine's prodigious output, private as well as public efforts, three-dimensional works, and drawings. As a compendium of Van Alstine's sensibility, the volume works marvelously well. The photographs, without people, emphasize the eclectic nature of his work in regard to materials and themes.

Books like this rely primarily on their images for success, but this one also includes some very good writing. In a brief, but lively foreword, Howard N. Fox, former curator at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, introduces the important issues involved in Van Alstine's work; his longer essay, "Tipping the Balance," begins with biographical information but quickly moves on to materials, formal concerns, and philosophical considerations. This last is particularly relevant because Van Alstine is very much a sculptor of concepts; his abstractions address the idea of the land as much as the land itself. Tom Moran, chief curator at Grounds For Sculpture, offers a summary of the artist's career, placing him within the continuum of steel abstraction, with forebears such as González and Picasso. This makes sense; Van Alstine does belong to that tradition, yet the interesting thing about his work is its eclectic autonomy—it is hard to pin him down as a sculptor, formally or thematically. His work is his own. The last essay (other than Van Alstine's own on his drawings) is by journalist, independent curator, and art critic Tom Kane. "Reconfiguring the Figure" emphasizes the figurative aspect in Van Alstine's work and his ability to merge figuration and abstraction in original ways, incorporating wide-ranging influences—from Modernism and Mayan notions of time to the history of industry and science. Van Alstine's own contribution, on his drawings, examines the close connections between this body of work and his sculptures.

A book like this raises larger questions about issues in sculpture today. How does Van Alstine's unusually eclectic use of materials reflect current practices? Can the melding of figuration with abstraction do justice to both ways of working? Van Alstine's long career evinces a structural and conceptual autonomy unusual for an artist today. His assemblages represent a way of thinking that begins early in the previous century but continues into the present, when the connections between forms involve larger leaps between ideas and things. We are living in a time of confusion in art, dominated by theory and politics. We do not find these things in Van Alstine's sculpture, which is essentially sensuous, driven by materials and a great affection for the land. In some ways, then, his work can be seen as traditional—but that is its strength. As this beautifully composed volume demonstrates, Van Alstine is an artist of integrity and intelligence. By addressing the basic elements of sculpture—its reliance on volume, on materials of merit such as steel and stone, and its ability to refract larger issues such as the landscape and the awareness of mortality—he helps us move beyond complaint into the recognition of beauty, as fragile as it may currently be, beginning with the real world in order to transcend it.

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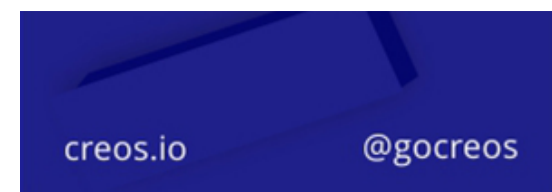


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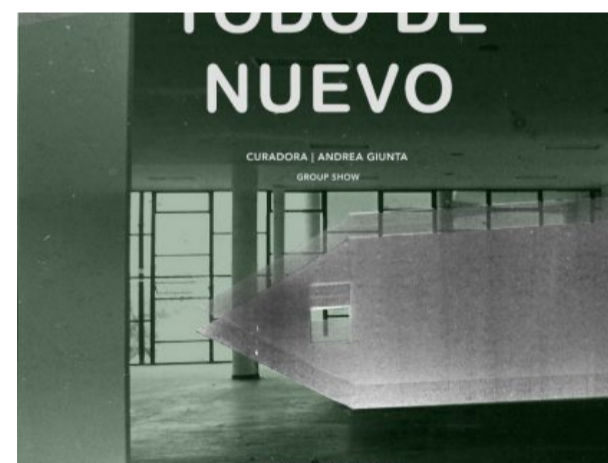
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