





BY ANASTASIA STANMEYER

# TIPPING THE BALANCE

JOHN VAN ALSTINE'S SCULPTURES ARE GROUNDED AT CHESTERWOOD

**THE DRIVE** takes nearly three hours from Stockbridge, where the leading American monumental sculptor of the early twentieth century once resided, to the tiny town of Wells, New York, where a sculptor of this century whose works are of similar physical scale, lives on the banks of the Sacandaga River.

For four decades, Chesterwood has hosted outdoor exhibitions, breathing creative life back into this sprawling home where Daniel Chester French once resided. John Van Alstine's *Sisyphian Circle XXV* was among the sculptures in the 2013 Contemporary Art Exhibition. The Adirondacks-based sculptor returns with 11 pieces placed throughout Chesterwood's wooded and sprawling landscape, as well as seven indoor pieces. Collectively, they are this year's *Tipping the Balance* solo exhibition that opens July 10.

The striking pieces created by Van Alstine are like self-portraits as well as commentary on society's challenges. The abstract sculptures of stone and forged or found steel reflect a tension between the natural and manmade environment. Themes come not only from Greek and Roman mythology, but also celestial navigation and the human figure in Western art. He explores the forces of

**PERFORMING ARTS** The Ellen Sinopoli Dance Company will present two performances on July 10 at Chesterwood, staged around John Van Alstine's sculptures.

THE SCULPTOR John Van Alstine inside his gallery/studio in Wells, New York. Opposite page, Alstine's *Charon's Steel Styx Passage*, on the grounds at Chesterwood.





gravity, tension, and erosion on objects, the synergy of man-made tools and the angularity and vitality of urban architecture.

*Sisyphus* is a theme that Van Alstine returns to again and again, and this exhibition is no exception. He describes the theme: “The formal arrangements of the stone and steel elements suggest the act of prying or pushing a stone, a struggle paralleling that of the mythological Sisyphus who was cast to a life of perpetual labor pushing a boulder to the top of a mountain only to have it roll back down. In many ways my Sisyphus 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. French existentialist Albert Camus suggests in his essay ‘The Myth of Sisyphus’ that the struggle or journey reveals itself as what is 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.”

Van Alstine’s sculpture park complex, once a 19th-century wood products mill, is located in New York’s Hamilton County—the least densely populated county east of the Mississippi. I traveled there just days before he disassembled his sculptures by crane and other heavy equipment, flat-bedded and caravanned them to Chesterwood. Surprisingly, their abstract nature was in balance with the nature around them. It was obvious that the Adirondack landscape is referenced in many of the works—the rounded mountains of stone, flowing rivers of steel intertwined, in a struggle or in a balance. Gravity is challenged in many of the pieces.

We walk the expansive grounds and step into his indoor studio and workspace, where welding tools stand by

PHOTO OPPOSITE: ANASTASIA STANNMEYER; ABOVE: JOHN VAN ALSTINE

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and pieces of metal are waiting for their application. Further in, the air becomes cooler and a series of rooms emerge where his smaller works are on display. Another one of his *Sisyphian Circle* sculptures, much smaller in size and sitting on a shelf, bears the inscription, "The Arc Of Covid Is Long—But It Bends Toward Science," a nod to the famous quote by Martin Luther King, "Let us realize the arc of the moral universe is long but it bends toward justice."

Van Alstine has been creating nonstop this past year. His usual 30 to 40 pieces per year has increased by twofold. "It's my response to the times that we live in," he says. "This year, the basket is bigger—society, the environment, the pandemic."

Van Alstine grew up in Johnston, New York, 40 miles from where he now lives. He attended St. Lawrence in 1970-2, received a BFA from Kent State in 1974, and an MFA from Cornell in 1976. "The program at Cornell wasn't about training teachers, it was about training artists," says Van Alstine, who put himself through school working in production at Good Earth Pottery in Kennebunkport, Maine.

At age 23, he was hired at the University of Wyoming to teach and to continue his work and exhibit his art. He spent four years there in Laramie, where he settled into his medium of stone and sculpture. He then took on a teaching job at the University of Maryland in 1980 and moved to Washington, D.C. He thrived in this big city with a small art community. His work is on permanent exhibition at the Smithsonian's National Museum of American Art and the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden. (The recently released monogram *John Van Alstine: Sculpture 1971–2018* by The Artist Book Foundation is a tribute to his decades of work. Howard Fox, curator at the Hirshhorn at the time, wrote one of the essays in this beautiful book.)

Van Alstine wanted more; he needed to go to where his work would be taken seriously. In 1982, Van Alstine bought a warehouse in Jersey City, New Jersey, to be close to New York City but continued to teach and commute to University of Maryland. A series of major exhibitions and commissions prompt-

ed several leave of absences. The university department chair said that if Van Alstine was going to be a teacher, he needed to teach. He decided to be a full-time artist.

Van Alstine lived in Jersey City from 1982 to 1992. When he was invited to spend the summer at Yaddo, the artists community in Saratoga Springs, New York, he was brought back to his youth in the Adirondacks. He found himself driving around, looking for a summer studio, and came across a decrepit piece of property in Wells with six “for sale” signs displayed by the roadside, by six different realtors. Van Alstine borrowed \$25,000 from his dad and put another \$25,000 in himself to buy the nine-acre abandoned property in 1987. Then they got to work.

“The buildings and the landscape and the river were a goldmine,” says Van Alstine. He goes swimming, river kayaking, and fly fishing. “It was a retreat from the urban environment,” he adds. What began as a summer studio evolved into his full-time home that also includes the studio for the marble and granite work of his wife Caroline Ramersdorfer.

By the time this story is read, the monumental endeavor of moving sculptures from the Adirondacks to the Berkshires is complete. And Van Alstine is back in his studio to continue exploring the effects of movement and gravity on objects, as the world opens up and his works finally come into view to a larger public in dual exhibitions.

—*Tipping the Balance: John Van Alstine*, July 10-October 24, at Chesterwood in Stockbridge. A free preview reception and talk with Van Alstine and curator Caroline M. Welsh will be at 5 p.m., July 9. Albany-based Ellen Sinopoli Dance Company will present two performances inspired by, and staged around, the sculptures, at 2 and 4 p.m. on July 10. [chesterwood.org](http://chesterwood.org)

—The Hyde Collection in Glens Falls, New York, will hold two shows featuring Alstine’s work: *Reflecting on 2020: New Sculpture by John Van Alstine*, June 12-October 31, and *Transformations: The Art of John Van Alstine*, June 11-September 11. [hydecollection.org](http://hydecollection.org) ■

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