

AMERICAN VISTAS

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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.



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.

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."

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.

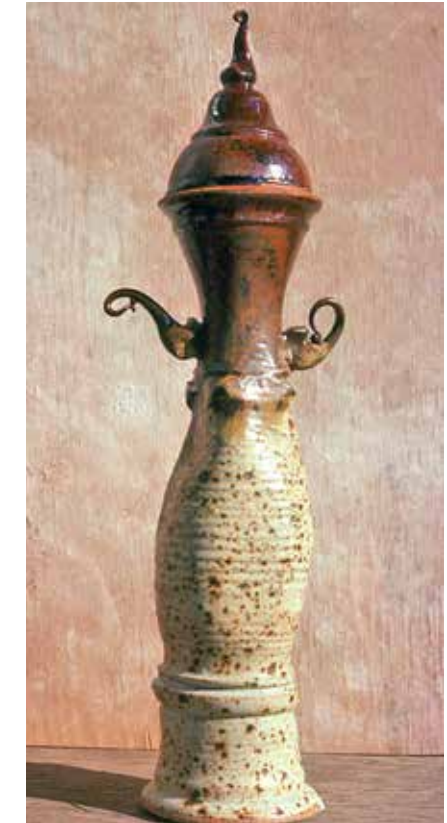
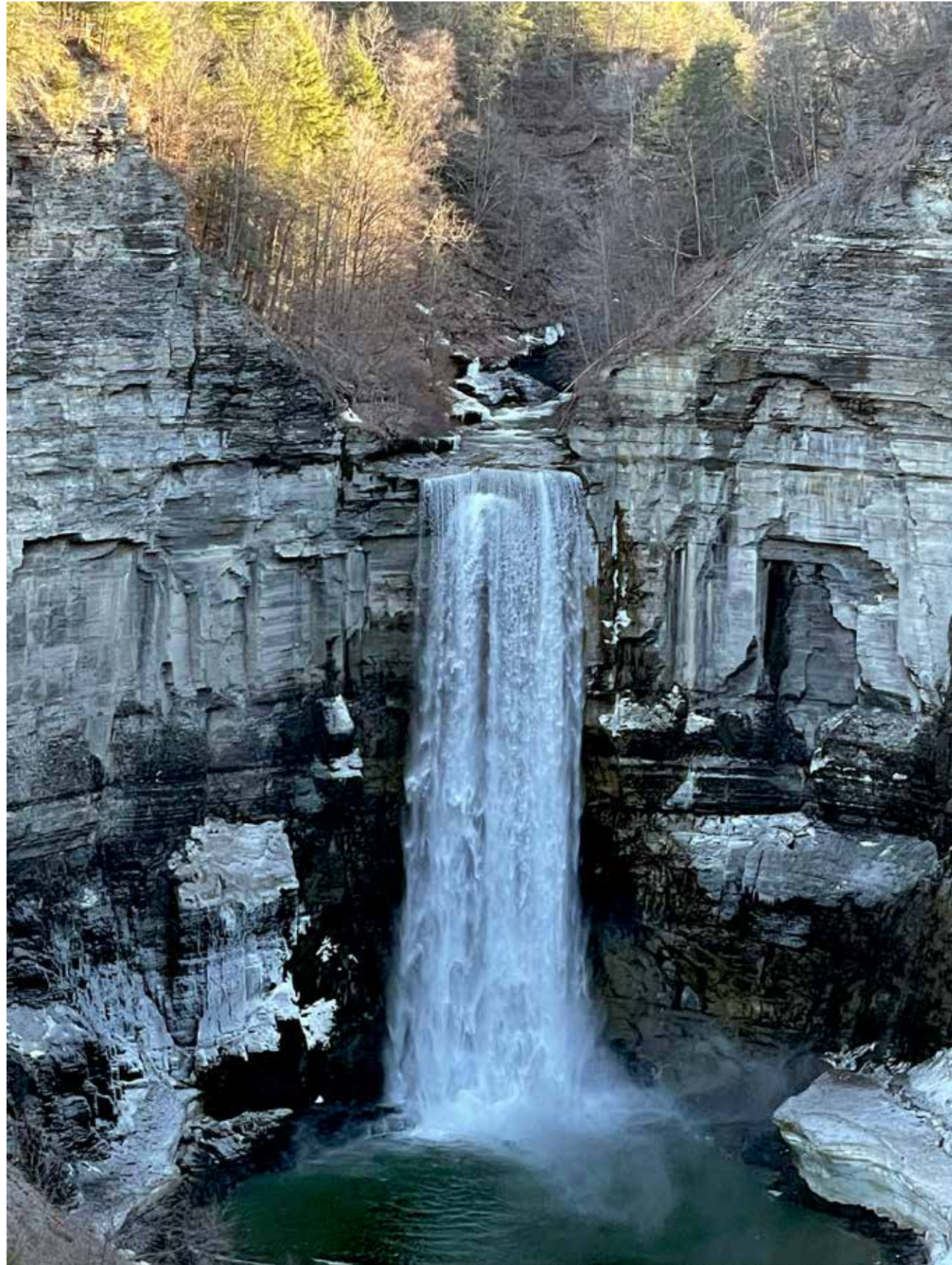


FIG. 15. *Tall Stoneware Covered Urn*, 1976, stoneware, 18 x 8 x 6 in. (46 x 20 x 15 cm). Private collection.

"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.



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

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

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.