



JOHN VAN ALSTINE

JOHN VAN ALSTINE

RECENT SCULPTURE

May 2–June 9, 1990

NOHRA HAIME GALLERY

41 EAST 57TH STREET

NEW YORK, N.Y. 10022 (212) 888-3550

CATALOGUE

- *1. ARA, 1989
bronze and granite
78 x 29 x 38 in.
198 x 73.7 x 96.5 cm.
- *2. HAMILTON GO-ROUND, 1988-89
granite and steel
86 x 86 x 42 in.
218.3 x 218.3 x 106.7 cm.
- *3. CARINA (KEEL), 1989
granite and steel
82 x 32 x 16 in.
208.2 x 81.2 x 40.6 cm.
- 4. SYMPLEGADES II, 1988-90
granite and bronze
86 x 60 x 36 in.
218.3 x 152.4 x 91.4 cm.
- 5. ODALISQUE, 1989
granite and steel
81 x 98 x 60 in.
205.8 x 248.8 x 152.4 cm.
- 6. BRONZE ROUNDER II, 1989
granite and bronze
33 x 35 x 23 in.
83.8 x 88.8 x 58.4 cm.
- *7. SIDEWINDER, 1989
granite and steel
48 x 75 x 32 in.
122 x 190.5 x 81.3 cm.
- *8. UNTITLED, 1989
bronze and granite
67 x 19 x 9 in.
170.2 x 48.2 x 23 cm.
- *9. ROCKSLIDE IV, 1990
bronze and granite
69 x 44 x 35 in.
175.2 x 11.8 x 88.8 cm.

*Works with an asterisk will be exhibited at the gallery















It seems that for John Van Alstine the medium of sculpture is a challenging field of aesthetic adventure, one where in a very real sense creative invention is king.

Since the mid-1970s, Van Alstine has succeeded in pioneering a bold personal course of development through some of the most demanding areas of abstract sculpture. His efforts have been guided, it appears, by a deep and abiding interest in fundamentals, in those basic values and core qualities intrinsic to art and life. If anything can be said to be the driving force behind this interest it is the constructive impulse, that desire to build and need to assemble forms and structures which fires his sensibility.

Aspects of Van Alstine's elemental approach to sculpture were already evident in some of the first pieces he did. It was perhaps more than fortuitous happenstance that Van Alstine's introduction to sculpture as an undergraduate and graduate student took place under the aegis, so-to-speak, of the radical questioning of conventional ideas and attitudes toward the medium that was the philosophical imprimatur of the Minimalist and Post-Minimalist artists who, as the teachers of Van Alstine's generation, largely held sway in art departments across America during the 1970s.

The Post-Minimalist insistence on seeing sculpture in what might be called situational contexts was, for instance, in close sympathy with Van Alstine's native curiosity about the behaviour of materials. The emphasis on process, also dear to the Post-Minimalist agenda, was useful in terms of giving to his own perceptions and observations a discipline and also direction.

How well the Post-Minimalist climate for investigation suited Van Alstine's outlook can be gleaned from the remarkable body of sculpture he produced through the 1970s, in which he first introduced what has become for him a favorite combination of materials: that of granite and steel. His exploration of the space-defining potentials of this particular combination, which led him to examine the various supportive roles the actual weight and gravity of the materials used, can be commanded to play in supporting the structures they are part of. This can be considered a masterful demonstration of problem-solving in contemporary sculpture.

Ara, *Odalisque*, *Hamilton Go Round*, *Carina (Keel)*, *Sidewinder*, and other recent works, form a group containing some of the richest statements Van Alstine has made about the dynamically expressive character of sculpture to date. They have all benefited from the artist's rock-solid grounding in formal issues of balance and placement. At the same time the recent works represent the broadening of a direction of inquiry that, at the outset, was mainly oriented to the presentation of objective phenomena, and has gone on to encompass more subjective and also distinctively speculative territories. Through the 1980s Van Alstine's pieces have continued to grow in poetic significance.

And this, in turn, has only added to the store of pleasures they offer.

As for what sorts of pleasures can be yours just for the looking, for that is casting an open and appraising eye at the pieces that are featured in this exhibition, depends totally on the thrust, speaking in physical as well as literal and emotive terms of each unique structure. While a common vocabulary of forms is used consisting of parts made of granite and metal utilizing either found objects in steel or cast in bronze, the idea of connections is a shared theme. What is immediately striking about these sculptures is their individuality.

Though it might be correct to describe works such as *Ara*, *Odalisque* and *Carina (Keel)* as standing sculptures, this hardly does justice to the engaging and very distinctive way in which each occupies space and defines its place.

For example, *Ara* seems not so much to stand as to be striking a pose, and a confrontational one at that. The combination of a triangular shaped granite bottom leaning at a slight angle for support on a portion of bronze tubing on one side and a top consisting of an anvil cast in bronze makes for a composition that comes with built-in questions of the type capable of triggering a fascinating array of associations in the viewer. Starting with how did Van Alstine get the anvil to balance on the pointed tip of the granite and why is the anvil there, the answers open up the many levels and layers of meaning this decidedly enigmatic piece touches on. Thoughts of vessels brought to mind by the upright form focus attention on the tensions gripping the planes and surfaces and suddenly these take on animated attributes and ideas about myth and magic, symbolic objects and beings charged with special powers quickly follows.

With *Odalisque*, as the title serves to indicate, figural connotations abound embodied as it were in the expanding curves of granite. Here the swelling contours of the upright stone imbue this mass with a quality of fullness and sensuous overtones to it. *Carina (Keel)* is another work emanating strength of presence. The torsions enveloping this construction wrap the sculpture in a delicious aura of mystery. The suggestion of movement coursing through the surfaces of this sculpture is so vivid, it evokes notions of travel. Such a reading is, of course, in tune with the title and subtitle which refer to a constellation used to guide sailors on their way and an integral part of a boat. The portion of steel plate connecting the top and bottom of the sculpture came from the insides of a ship. It shows how the origins of the found industrial steel elements Van Alstine uses can count in terms of sparking and helping to concretize ideas.

Since 1983 Van Alstine has been living in Jersey City which once was an active center for manufacturing and repairing of ships on the New York harbor. Circumstances have put the surplus materials remaining of Jersey City's and for

that matter America's own industrial past within ready reach for him. Van Alstine has responded actively to this opportunity as the veritable treasure trove of steel artifacts lining the shelves and floors of his warehouse-like studio attests to.

His interest in the forceful character that industrial steel forms, by virtue of the function they perform, must assume can be found in the direct manner in which these elements are deployed in *Hamilton Go Round*. A section of industrial pipe cleaned and varnished serves as the bridge or heart linking together the other parts of the sculpture. In *Rockslide IV* the found metal ring is cast in bronze. What casting does is make it possible for Van Alstine to keep the metal part of an object he likes to reuse again. As a material, bronze lends an art historical legacy that delves deep into sculptural traditions.

These traditions are evoked in contemplating such a work as *Bronze Rounder II*. Sculptures such as *Bronze Rounder II*, *Rockslide IV*, *Sidewinder* and *Symplegades* are examples that can also be cited as impressive demonstrations of Van Alstine's wide-ranging vision. These works are informed by his experience of the land, especially the vast spaces and monumental formations he encountered in the American West, in states like Colorado, Wyoming and Utah. To put this another way, there is an immediacy about them which is distinctively American, part of the get up and go spirit of the people and land. There is also another side to them that is of equal importance in the totality of the experience each can provide. This side is universal and very much about the essence of nature, feelings and the life of form. And it, finally, is the source of the quality of urgency that makes these sculptures so absorbing.

Ronny Cohen