

Checklist

Redhorn, 1990

PASTEL & MIXED MEDIA, 29 1/2 x 41 INS.

Link II, 1991

GRANITE & STEEL, 74 x 48 x 30 INS.

Implement XIII, 1992

PINK GRANITE & STEEL, 17 x 12 x 3 1/2 INS.

Untitled (vessel/gold), 1992

PASTEL & MIXED MEDIA, 30 x 22 INS.

Cudgel (blue), 1992

PASTEL & CHARCOAL, 30 x 22 INS.

Implement XIII, 1993

PASTEL & MIXED MEDIA, 41 x 29 INS.

Tiller, 1994

GRANITE & BRONZE, 96 x 93 x 64 INS.

Longhandle (Echo I), 1995

BRONZE, 24 x 41 x 8 INS.

Symplegades III (Clashing Rocks), 1996

GRANITE & STEEL, 71 x 65 x 40 INS.

Midriff, 1997

BRONZE & PINK GRANITE, 144 x 60 x 24 INS.

Konos, 1997

PASTEL & MIXED MEDIA, 41 x 29 INS.

Pique VI, 1998

PASTEL & MIXED MEDIA, 29 x 41 INS.

Sentinel (Tool for Alberto), 1998

GRANITE & STEEL, 13 1/2 x 15 x 4 INS.

Chalice IV, 1998

ALUMINUM, BRONZE & GRANITE, 74 x 30 x 24 INS.

Implement XXXVI (Proboscis), 1998

BRONZE & GRANITE, 52 x 49 x 14 INS.

Juggler V, 1998

BRONZE & GRANITE, 46 x 22 x 8 INS.



sculpture & drawings by **JOHN VAN ALSTINE**

April 11 through January 17, 1999

CHARLES R. WOOD GALLERY
THE HYDE COLLECTION ART MUSEUM
GLENS FALLS, NEW YORK



THE HYDE COLLECTION ART MUSEUM

161 Warren Street | Glens Falls, NY 12801
(518) 792-1761 | FAX (518) 792-9197

Confluence

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GLENS FALLS, NEW YORK

COVER IMAGES:

TOP LEFT: *Implement XXXVI (Proboscis)*, 1998, BRONZE & GRANITE

LOWER RIGHT: *Pique VI*, 1998, PASTEL & MIXED



Midriff, 1997, BRONZE & PINK GRANITE

From first glance, John Van Alstine's work appears rife with conceptual and physical contradiction(s). What happened to gravity? How can that *not* come crashing to the ground? Where did that come from? Yet, the confluence of these elements creates objects of singular grace and poise. They are neither static nor merely monolithic. Rather, Van Alstine's work is highly accessible, engaging, and full of complexity.

Why? Because each work provides a situational nexus that is at once purely associative and bluntly material. The viewer is invited to ruminate upon the individual history and physicality of each object; to account for the engineering that holds them together; and to investigate the experience ultimately presented by the sum of its parts.

In November 1998, I took the opportunity to discuss these perceptions with the artist himself. The following interview resulted.

Randall Suffolk

DEPUTY DIRECTOR, THE HYDE COLLECTION ART MUSEUM



LEFT: *Juggler V*, 1998, BRONZE & GRANITE
TOP: *Konos*, 1997, PASTEL & MIXED MEDIA



There is an implied temporal element in your sculpture that encourages a certain anticipation of movement or change. Does this reflect any influence by the other “temporal” arts such as music or dance?

I find sculpture and dance, because of their three-dimensional existence, to be very much related. So yes, my work is most certainly informed by the temporal aspects of dance. In many of my pieces I see myself as a choreographer – attempting to breathe life and movement into an array of heavy, inanimate objects.

This idea is perhaps most clearly demonstrated in the *Pique a Terre* series which is directly inspired by classical ballet. Interpreted roughly, the *pique a terre* is a position where the dancer’s pointed toe (*pique*) of one foot touches lightly on the ground (*terre*) while the other foot is firmly planted and the arm makes a sweeping connecting gesture. If one examines my work in this series, the parallels are quickly evident. This connection to ballet projects a sense of graceful movement on these ordinarily immovable objects, making them *extra* ordinary and compelling.

Somewhat related to this is the act of juggling which, like dance and music, possesses a temporal element. This act evokes the playful circus jester and can be seen in works like *Juggler V* (1998) and *Boys’ Toys II* (1996). On one level these works are conceived as self-portraits; they

reflect the physical act of their creation as I quite literally become a “juggler” or “a boy at play,” and balance many heavy elements – such as anvils, large chunks of stone, pieces of bronze, etc. – in the air. The finished works convey a whirling, teetering and playful choreography which reminds us that we are all *jugglers*, on our own stage, keeping the various aspects of our lives – family, career, finances, friends, etc. – up, floating and vital.

What does your work suggest about the artist’s role in the creative process?

I view the artist’s role as being much different than a laborer or craftsperson and more akin to a lens – taking a wealth of information and crystallizing it. In some ways this approach undermines the “work ethic” aspect of fine art making – that being, the longer it takes or the more physical effort involved, the better it will be. In that sense my work reinforces the Duchampian notion of the artistic creative process. My sculpture is really a direct descendant of the “ready-made” first put forward by Duchamp.

In terms of the specifics relating to the ready-made, I see my role as one that plucks individual objects, with their specific history and associations, and combines them with other “plucked” objects to create new **things**. These new entities present us with fresh and innovative opportunities to relate and think about familiar objects in a different manner. In other words, making the common powerfully uncommon.

However, I feel my work is unique and distinguished from other work created in this tradition in part by my use of stone. This conventional material is most often employed using a subtractive process; one starts with a block and proceeds to remove all that is not wanted. I approach this material untraditionally. In my work stone is a *found* assemblage element – essentially unaltered from the state it was in when removed from the quarry. The rough edges, torn surfaces, exposed geological information, sparkling crystalline structure, drilling channels and other marks relating to its extraction, represent important information that is then combined with the information generated by other objects in the work. All of this, once amalgamated, hopefully creates something new and interesting.

To what extent have your physical surroundings impacted your work and/or your choice of materials?

The fact that I work with found objects – including the way I approach stone (see above) – has amplified the effect which location has had on my sculpture. In the late 1970s, when I lived and worked in Wyoming, my work incorporated the sedimentary stone that was abundant and readily available there. In addition, the wide-open western landscape, devoid of most vegetation, clearly exposed the underlying geological formations and inspired works that focused on *layering* and *stacking*. These works echoed in both a physical and conceptual way the geology of the area. When I moved back East in the 1980s, I was drawn to the area’s native granite for both conceptual and practical reasons. For the 10 years I lived and worked in Jersey

City, NJ (a very urban area located on the west bank of the Hudson River and New York Harbor) nautical images would find their way into my work. Pieces such as *Link II* (1991) and *Atlas (Highroller)* (1995), which incorporate marine objects like anchors, chains, cleats, buoys, and sea mines, resulted.

Currently, I live and work in a small village in the Adirondacks. I now find that facets of the hunting/taxidermy culture have seeped into my consciousness and have ultimately influenced a certain portion of my work. Cast bronze horns, antlers and other animal parts, as well as other local iconography such as sleds, boats and oars, play important roles in works like *Slippery Slope* (1995), *Boys’ Toys II* (1996), *Almathea II* (1998) and *Actaeon* (1998).



Link II, 1991, GRANITE & STEEL

The play of internal constructive tension and the external seeming negation of gravity seems to simultaneously embrace and ignore the laws of physics. Is this dynamic a pre-requisite in each work's conceptual evolution?

Yes, although it is not something that I consciously consider at great lengths, it is the direction I naturally move toward when developing a sculpture. One way which this tension manifests itself, is through the use of my central material – stone. It is *the* classic/basic/oldest sculptural material. Many artists shy away from it because it is not viewed as “contemporary” – it is not flashy – in addition to the logistics involved in its use. The raw fact that it is so damn heavy, however, is precisely the one important characteristic that attracts me to it. So, I try to turn this perceived negative into a positive.

I think there are several ways I accomplish this. The core of this idea was developed 20 years ago in my early stone and steel works. Then, I literally used the weight of the stone as the energy force that held the pieces together. In this series, which I called the *Nature of Stone* series (1976-80), I created assemblages of rough cut stone and linear steel rods. The rods were designed to cradle and interlock the stone in such a way that a static energy event was created. The linear pieces of steel were in effect tracing the energy fields that were generated between the elements. There were no welds holding the assemblages together. Instead, they were kinetic sculptures held in arrested motion. It was the *gravitational energy* generated by the weight of the stone itself that *glued* them together. The subject matter of these works was not about what they might look like... an insect or bird, etc. Rather, they were *assemblages about assembly*. They were sculptures consisting of multiple elements with an absolute focus on how these elements were put and held together. In other words, they were made whole by the intrinsic characteristics of their parts.

I worked on this series for a number of years. However, because of its very specific and narrow focus, I found that I had backed myself into a conceptual corner. Works that followed still employed the idea of turning the tables on the weight aspect, but in a looser, more open way. The constructions I build today have a wealth of different elements but still play with the tensions created by gravity. I find that

Symplegades III (Clashing Rocks), 1996, GRANITE & STEEL



if the piece is designed correctly, an important visual irony can be created such that the heavier an element is, the lighter it will appear. This happens in works like *Link II* (1991) and *Symplegades III* (1996). In the newer pieces, the metal elements as seen in *Atlas-Highroller* (1995) or *Chalice IV* (1998) also generate this phenomenon.



Chalice IV, 1998, ALUMINUM, BRONZE & GRANITE

Would you elaborate on the importance of allegory in your creative process?

Allegory plays an important role in most of my work. This was not always the case. In fact, in much of my earlier work, like the *Nature of Stone* series, I tried very hard to avoid it. I wanted the work to be entirely self-referential. However, I soon realized that this not only seemed unnatural, but produced work that had a very limited audience. I have come to realize that when a work operates on successive levels, the richer it becomes.

For me, the use of allegory with found objects works well because each object represents a rich history as well as a set of associations. When these objects, further associative elements, and additional objects are combined, it allows me the chance to weave this information into a rich fabric of new associations and connections. By focusing on and elevating things – monumental and common – into symbols and stories, we imbue them with power, meaning, and universality.

For example, *Link II* (1991) directly reflects one of the central themes in my work – that being the harmonious marriage, or “linking,” of the natural and the prefabricated. In this work, two large pieces of rough granite are literally *linked* by a large piece of chain. This section of chain is however more than an ordinary link. It is what some call a *pelican clip* because of its unique shape and function. It is designed to connect diverse pieces of chain and so in a sense it is a “super” link. Considering this, its usage in this sculpture therefore underscores the act of unifying very different materials and elements.

In *Tiller* (1994) the arrangement of the bronze and granite elements simultaneously take the shape of an agricultural implement (one used to *till* the earth) and the steering device of a ship. As tools and implements they are extensions of our humanity. They are also symbols of our goals and achievements.

The idea of *tiller* as a navigational instrument can also be understood on a more universal level. The notion of being on a boat or ship is often used in art and literature as a metaphor for one’s passage through life. In this context, the tiller takes on great significance as something that is vital for navigating this journey; it is the rudder, keeping us on track and assisting in life’s decisions. The ability to make these choices is the very thing that distinguishes us from the rest of the animal kingdom.



Longhandle (Echo I), 1995, BRONZE

and drawn out creation of one sculpture, I am attracted to drawing precisely because it is very immediate and tactile. I feel a great sense of accomplishment and gratification after developing and completing several drawings in one work session.

So my approach to drawing is very much like working with clay; a material I no longer use but enjoyed precisely because of its immediacy and response to touch. I often equate my drawing with the process of clay modeling – adding material by building up layers of pastel or charcoal, and removing or excavating through the layers by vigorous erasures. Like a clay sculpture, my drawings are “shaped” rather than “drawn” in the traditional sense.

Drawing also affords me an important opportunity to experiment and be expressive with color, which is something not usually obtainable given the limited palette which gray granite and steel provide. Pastel has opened me to the power of color and is one reason I now often use bronze, with its wider range of patina options, in my sculpture.

Do you believe that your sculpture strives to make material some commentary on the human presence in the natural world?

Occasionally, but this is not a major focus of my work. However, because of the found object/free association/assemblage method in which I work, I am never sure where the process will take me. Sometimes it leads to works that indeed comment on the human presence in the natural world. A piece that comes to mind is *Atlas-Highroller* (1995). This work incorporates the classic mythological character to address the impact that humankind has had and is having on the environment.

One might view the work as a figure shouldering a globe, which in this sculpture is a bronze cast of an actual U.S. Navy sea mine. The addition of a prominent “fuse” further accentuates the explosive nature of the mine. When coupled with the second part of the title – *Highroller* – it all suggests the indeterminacy of high-stakes gambling and therefore potential planetary disaster.

The “tool” is an iconic motif in your work. Can you explain the importance of this?

The “tool” is most certainly an iconic motif in much of my sculpture. As found in the work of many artists, such as David Smith and Jim Dine, the tool or implement plays a very important role. My recent work is indeed close in spirit and informed by these artists; especially Smith’s *Agricola* series (1951-52) which is composed, in part, of farm machinery and tools.

Works such as *Longhandle (Echo I)* (1995) or *Implement XXXVI (Proboscis)* (1998) are created in such a way that the overall arrangement of the elements suggests a tool (having what might be perceived as a handle and stone “head” or “blade”). Other works like *Juggler V* (1998) or *Sentinel (Tool for Alberto)* (1998) employ actual tools (here an anvil, rake, blade, calipers) as found objects within the assemblage.

The anvil is of particular interest and is often incorporated into my works. I am attracted to its direct association with metal work and its physical resemblance to an altar (“ara” is Latin for altar and used in several titles). For me, the anvil is the place where ideas are both conceptually and physically forged. It is the spot where the spirit of the work is born and released. I view it as the sculptor’s artistic altar. In these works, as in all my pieces incorporating this motif, tools are presented as my artistic allies; simultaneously helping me reach my aspirations and providing symbols of my accomplishments.

Would you refer to your work as being more figurative or abstract? Is one aspect more important to you than the other?

Although very few of my works are considered traditionally figurative, I currently believe my work addresses figuration and abstraction in equal parts.

I am a product of the typical 1970s university art program where Minimalism and cool abstraction were the focus. The work of Serra, Smithson, Morris, di Suvero, and the later work of David Smith shaped my early thinking on sculpture. The figure was not part of this path and for many years I denied its existence when it seemed to appear in my work.

I have now come to realize that there are different ways in which to conceptualize figuration. The scale of the human body and its relationship to sculpture in general, is inexorably linked to the idea of the figurative.

Our physical scale is critical to how we relate and understand all things – architecture, landscape, furniture, domestic objects, and certainly sculpture. *Chalice IV* (1998), which is 74 inches high and in this exhibition, is a good example. In this piece a section of aeronautical fuselage is transformed into an upward reaching “cup of life.” It is precisely the fact that it is larger than life, wildly exaggerated in terms of any human function, that recasts it into a dynamic, aspiring spiritual vessel. It is our relationship to it vis-a-vis our own bodies, which imbues it with power.

Other works like *Longhandle (Echo I)* (1995) and *Implement XXXVI (Proboscis)* (1998), which are presented as tools or implements, operate in much the same fashion. Just as architecture and furniture consider human scale, these works, whether you see them as axes, adzes or weapons, are understood via their relationship to the figure and our projection of their possible function.

So, although my work is not traditionally figurative, it certainly is dependent upon and informed by *human scale*. This particular approach and use of the figure is indeed an important element, and should be considered equal to the abstraction found in my work.



Redhorn, 1990, PASTEL & MIXED MEDIA

What is the relationship between your sculptures and drawings?

Conceptually, the drawings relate to the sculpture in several ways. Some like *Redhorn* (1990), *Cudgel (blue)* (1992), and *Untitled (vessel/gold)* (1992) are created without reference to any specific three-dimensional concept. They are instead developed through free association and often result in ideas that may or may not be physically “build-able.” However, certain passages or motifs in these works frequently lead to further exploration and may provide the germ for the realization of an actual sculpture. Other drawings are used for problem solving while a sculpture is underway. Still others, like *Konos* (1997) or *Implement XIII* (1992) are created after the fact, as two-dimensional interpretations of a finished sculpture.

I feel that physically, drawing fills needs not satisfied by working with stone and metal. They are materials that dictate a process that is slow and removed from the hand: stone is worked with a chisel, metal with a torch or machine tool. In contrast to the typically long

John Van Alstine

Born: 1952

EDUCATION

Cornell University, Ithaca, New York; MFA 1976
Kent State University, Kent, Ohio; BFA, 1974
Blossom Festival School, Cleveland-Kent, Ohio, 1973
St. Lawrence University, Canton, New York; attended 1970-72

SELECTED PUBLIC COLLECTIONS

Baltimore Museum of Art, Baltimore, MD
Carnegie Institute of Art, Pittsburgh, PA
Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.
Dallas Museum of Art, Dallas, TX
Delaware Museum of Art, Wilmington, DE
Denver Art Museum, Gift of List Foundation, NYC
Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, D.C.
Herbert F. Johnson Museum, Cornell University, Ithaca, NY
National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.
National Reserve Board, Washington, D.C.
Newark Museum of Art, Newark, NY
Museum of Modern Art, Gulbenkian Foundation, Lisbon, Portugal
Phoenix Art Museum, Phoenix, AZ
The Phillips Collection, Washington, D.C.

SELECTED AWARDS, GRANTS

1996 Resident Fellowship, Casting Institute, Art Dept. State University of NY at Buffalo
1994 Development Grant – New York State Artists, Empire State Artists Alliance
1988 Individual Artist Fellowship, New Jersey State Council on the Arts
1986 Individual Artist Fellowship, National Endowment for the Arts, Sculpture
1985 Yaddo Fellowship, Saratoga Springs, NY
1984 Individual Artists Fellowship, New Jersey Council on the Arts
1981 Individual Artist Fellowship, DC Commission on the Arts
1980 Louis C. Tiffany Foundation Individual Artist Fellowship
1978 Rome Prize Fellowship, sculpture finalist
1974-5 Cornell Graduate Fellowship in Sculpture

SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS

The Hyde Collection Art Museum, Glens Falls, New York, 1998
Nohra Haime Gallery, New York City, 1998, 1996, 1994, 1991, 1990, 1989, 1988
State University of New York, Plattsburgh, Art Museum,
“Acknowledging the Figure,” 1998
DeCordova Museum, Lincoln, Mass., “Vessels and Voyages,” 1996-7
Grimaldis Gallery, Baltimore, 1997, 1995, 1992, 1984
Kendall Campus Art Gallery, Miami-Dade Com. College, Miami, FL,
October, 1997
Dartmouth College, Hanover, NH, Studio Art Exhibition Program, 1995
Troyer Fitzpatrick Lassman Gallery, Washington, D.C., 1994
Art Gallery, University of New Hampshire, Durham, NH, 1994
Art Gallery, Cleveland State University, Cleveland, April, 1994
Sun Valley Center for the Arts, Sun Valley, Idaho, February, 1993
Sonsbeek International Art Center, Arnhem, The Netherlands,
September - November, 1991
National Academy of Sciences, Washington, D.C., “Documents”
(drawings and related documents produced in conjunction with
large scale site-specific solstice projects), January - March, 1991
Morris Museum, Morristown, NJ, “New Jersey Artist Series,” January/March, 1991
Gerald Peters Gallery, Santa Fe, NM, 1991, 1989
The Phillips Collection, Washington, D.C., April - June, 1987
Osuna Gallery, Washington, D.C. 1989, 1985, 1983, 1981
Diane Brown Gallery, New York, NY, 1984

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

1998 Pierwalk 98, International outdoor sculpture exhibition, Chicago Navy Pier,
May - October
Wood Street Gallery, “Maquette Exhibition-Pier Walk '98,” Chicago,
January - March
1997 Hirshhorn Museum, “The Hirshhorn Collects: Recent Acquisitions 1993-96,”
Washington, D.C., June - September
FIAC, “Drawings,” Nohra Haime Gallery, Paris, France, October
Socrates Sculpture Park, “From the Ground UP” NYC, May - September
Chicago Navy Pier, “Pier Walk '97,” Chicago, May - October
National Building Museum, Smithsonian Institution,
“Tool as Art II, Exploring Metaphor – The Hechinger Collection,”
Curated by Sarah Tanguy, Washington, D.C., April - September
Plattsburg Museum, State University of New York,
“Inaugural Exhibition – Sculpture Terrace,” October
1996 FIAC 1996 Paris, Nohra Haime Gallery, Paris, October
1995 Phillips Collection, “Recent Acquisitions,” Washington, D.C., Spring/Summer