

HYDE JVA BRONZE 2020 works: Checklist and label drafts

Title: *Reflecting on 2020: New Sculpture by John Van Alstine*

Intro Panel text:

For nearly fifty years John Van Alstine's restless inquisitiveness has generated a monumental body of work that explores elemental questions in art and life. His abstract sculptures forged out of steel and stone are a complex synergy between natural forces and man-made materials. Van Alstine transforms his artistic vocabulary of stone, found industrial artifacts and steel through intellectualized filters. The artist draws on ancient mythology, celestial navigation, tools, the human figure, urban forms and industrial shards to give meanings to his visions. Van Alstine's sculpture is also informed by 20th century art and ideas gleaned from abstraction, constructivism, Eastern art and philosophy, assemblage and aspects of cubism and collage. Motion, balance and inertia vie with the eternal forces of gravity, tension and erosion; intimated associations and symbolism animate the finished constructs.

Faced with the pandemic shutdown and sheltering in place in March 2020, John Van Alstine embarked on a new small scale "self-distancing" / Covid series in bronze. His purpose was to revisit some of the predominant themes in his creative oeuvre. He re-focused his exploration of the series devoted to the *Myth of Sisyphus*, *Pyxis Awry*, *Juggler*, *Portals and Passages*, and others to bring meaning and an artist's voice to this very unusual and politically charged period. Since March 2020 the artist used his time of retreat to reflect and isolate from the rest of the world. He worked uninterrupted and without distraction to create over 60 bronze and stone sculptures, an unprecedented output according to the artist.

I think of many artists in the past that were able to use dangerous and uncertain times and the isolation often imposed as a catalyst to spur on their creativity: Shakespeare during the black plague, Gustav Klimt and Egon Schiele during the 1918 Spanish Flu pandemic, many others who were faced with Nazism or the great depression, or even the McCarthy era in the 1950's. I believe in their own way, my new works are an important and personal record that reflects this unusual time we are all facing; not only a time of pandemic but one of the most uncertain political situations in recent American history.

Born in upstate New York in 1952, John Van Alstine grew up in the southern Adirondacks. After attending St. Lawrence University, Kent State University (BFA 1974) and Cornell University (MFA 1976) he joined the faculty at the University of Wyoming, Laramie and later the University of Maryland, College Park to teach drawing and sculpture. In 1986 he left teaching and moved to the New York City area to pursue studio work full time. In 1987 he purchased a 19th century industrial complex on the banks of the Sacandaga River in the small hamlet of Wells, New York and returned to the Adirondacks where he now lives and works in the restored historic lumberyard which he transformed into his studio, gallery, sculpture park and residence.

Van Alstine is an American original whose art is known nationally and internationally. Van Alstine's works have been featured in hundreds of solo and group exhibitions and are in the permanent collections of the Carnegie Museum of Art, the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, the Smithsonian's National Museum of American Art, the Phillips Collection, the Albany Institute of History

and Art, the Johnson Museum of Art at Cornell University, Grounds for Sculpture to name but a few. His works are found from Beijing, China to public and private collections across America and around the world; they are published in *John Van Alstine Sculpture* (2018) among many other books and catalogues.

Unit 1

Header: Sisyphean Myth interpreted through COVID

Panel Text:

*The **Sisyphean Myth** that I have turned to frequently to comment on the creative process, seems particularly germane in a different way in relation to our current Covid situation particularly when viewed through the lens of French existentialist Albert Camus. As the world struggles with the Covid pandemic and political regimes that deny science, we are all confronted with the symbolic task of pushing our stone upward, a seemingly unending task as we deal with the new realities that have been thrown in our path. I am reminded of Camus' words in his essay **Myth of Sisyphus**, "we must imagine Sisyphus happy"; or maybe even more poignantly in **The Plague**, "the only way to fight the plague is with decency".*

*These new 2020 Sisyphean works employ a similar formal vocabulary – circles, stones, arcs, incline planes- but the focus is shifted to confront, understand and give an artist's voice to our current situation. In several of these works, both through the subtitles and text embedded directly in the bronze, I pay homage to Camus as well as the famous line credited to Martin Luther King "Let us realize the arc of the moral universe is long but it bends toward justice" with my "**The arc of Covid is long - but bends toward science.**"*

Objects



SISYPHEAN CIRCLE-COVID IV: The Long Arc of Covid Bends Toward the Truth, 4-2020 Riverstone/bronze , 9.5"h x 29"w x 6"d (24 x 73 x 15cm)



WE MUST IMAGINE SISYPHUS HAPPY, 4-2020,Bronze and riverstone , 6"h x 27"w x 4"d (15 x 8 x 10 cm)



SISYPHEAN CIRCLE-COVID VI: The Arc Of Covid Is Long - But It Bends Toward Science, 5-2020, Riverstone/bronze,9.5"h x 20"w x 8"d (24 x 50 x 20cm)

Unit 2

Header: The Human Figure interpreted through COVID

Panel Text:

*Many of my works such as **Juggler 5-20**, **Fleche (diagonally down)** and **Lunge (cornu)** take inspiration from the movement of the human body. **Juggler 5-20** is in some ways a self-portrait suggesting how I work in the studio - literally juggling individual elements of each sculpture until that are in the perfect position and then are frozen in time and space by the act of welding.*

Juggling can also be seen more universally in that we are all jugglers of a kind, something that in 2020 more than ever painfully confronts us as we struggle to keep our responsibilities and activities such as family, work, play etc., all up, balanced and hopefully in control.

*The **anvil** which appears in a number of my works not only represents the quintessential heavy object presenting the greatest challenges to “juggle,” but is also a symbol of the act of “assembly” on which forging object, material and ideas together is central to the meaning of all my work.*

Objects



JUGGLER 5-20, 5/2020' Bronze and riverstone, 25"h x 19"w x 9"d (63 x 48 x 23cm)



Fleche (diagonally down), 8/2020 Bronze, stainless steel, granite 34"h x 38"w x 8"d (86 x 96 x 20cm)

***Fleche (diagonally down)** takes its title from the old French word meaning arrow or to fly. In architecture **fleche** refers to a slender spire above the intersection of the nave and transepts of a church. In the sport of fencing it is defined as **a running attack with arm extended**.*



LUNGE (cornu) 11/2020 ,Slate / bronze 17.5"h x 26"w x 5.5"d (44 x 66 x 14cm)

Lunge (cornu) – (cornu Latin for **horn** - think cornucopia) also refers to human movement and like **Fleche 5-20**, were created at a time in 2020 of a rapidly spreading novel virus; both convey a sense of fighting or pushing back.



also: in the sport of Fencing : defined as a running attack with arm extended

Unit 3

Header: Hope and Despair in Time of COVID

Panel Text:

*For me, like a lot of people, 2020 presented a whipsaw of emotions, from utter disgust and despair to genuine hope and celebration. "**HUDSON BREACH 2020**" and "**NOT**" are two works that reflect these feelings.*

Objects:



Hudson Breach, 12/2020 Slate / bronze, 25.5"h x 26"w x 9"d (65 x 66 x 23cm)

The rare occurrence of a massive humpback whale spotted several times in December 2020 in the Hudson River near lower and midtown Manhattan was a symbol of hope for me - perhaps signaling a change from the disastrous events of 2020. The whale was caught on camera in front of the Statue of Liberty and other New York landmarks as it paid a visit to the city's harbor and was the inspiration for this piece.



A humpback whale surfaces near the Statue of Liberty in this photo taken from a boat on New York Harbor. (Source: Bjoern Kils via Reuters)



NOT, 10/2020, Bronze, 7"h x 11"w x 6"d (18 x 28 x 15cm)

NOT, is simple straightforward, sarcastic statement created in late October 2020 when we all hoped that the political powers would have provided leadership that would have the pandemic reasonably under control and we would be "OK" ... we were **not**.

Unit: 4

Header: Ancient Mythology interpreted through COVID

Panel Text:

*For years I have found in mythology a framework helpful to expressing my ideas and have turned to it again this past year. In **CHARON - navigating 2020** the dark notion of a death is inescapably front and center. The lower bronze element of the sculpture is designed to be simultaneously seen as both the water and the vessel, implying humankind's oneness with nature and how we are all moved by the currents of time and affected by events like pandemics that occasionally arise.*

*In "**CERYNEIAN LANDSCAPE 2020**" a prominent element in the sculpture is a cast metal **antler** (the best I could do was bronze not gold...) making the connection to Hercules' third of twelve "labors". Viewed in the context of 2020 this is an oblique way of suggesting that the task of defeating Covid 19 will be a Herculean effort and that in August of 2020 when this piece was created, the world had perhaps only reached the third of twelve levels in its battle to rid the pandemic. In hindsight (no pun intended) it certainly seems to be the case.*



CHARON - navigating 2020, 8/2020, Bronze, 12.5"h x 19"w x 7"w (32 x 48 x 18 cm)

In Greek and Roman mythology, **Charon** or **Kharon** is the ferryman of Hades, often depicted with a long pole, who carries souls of the newly deceased across the river Styx that divided the worlds of the living and the dead. A coin to pay Charon for passage was sometimes placed in or on the mouth of the dead person. Some narratives say that those who could not pay the fee or those whose bodies were left unburied, were doomed to wander the river shores for one hundred years until they were allowed to cross the river.



Attic [red-figure lekythos](#) attributed to the Tymbos painter showing Charon welcoming a soul into his boat, c. 500-450 BC buried, had to wander the shores for one hundred years, until they were allowed to cross the river.



CERYNEIAN LANDSCAPE 2020, 8/2020, Bronze and riverstone, 10"h x 18"w x 8"d

In the Greek mythology '**Labors of Heracles**,' King Eurystheus' third task for Heracles was to capture the **Ceryneian Hind**, often referred to as the 'golden Hind' because of its golden antlers. The **Ceryneian Hind** was an enormous female deer that was believed to have lived in the region of Keryneia. Based on various Greek tales, it was considered sacred and was associated with the hunt goddess Artemis. A careful review of the Ceryneian Hind reveals that although the mythical creature was female, it had antlers that were male-like molded from gold while its hooves were bronze. According to the Greek mythology, the creature had the ability to outdo a flying arrow.



Roman sarcophagus depicting Labors of Hercules - defeat of Erymanthian Boar, Hind of Ceryneia and Birds of Stymphalus 240-250 CE Palazzo Altemps, Rome, Italy

Unit 5

Header: The Vessel - Navigating COVID and 2020

Panel Text:

*Over the course of my career I have frequently incorporated the **vessel** or boat form in my work. I am attracted to it both because of its beautiful functional shape and its strong symbolic and metaphoric associations. In the many **Pyxis Awry** works (21 and counting) created this past year, I have revisited one of my longest running series presenting it through the lens of 2020.*

***Pyxis** is a small and faint constellation in the southern sky. Its name is Latin for a **mariner's compass**. Pyxis is completely visible in latitudes south of 53 degrees north from January through March. **Awry** has two meanings: in a turned or twisted position or direction as in askew; off the correct or expected course as in amiss.*

*The works in this series feature a “**vessel**” form - historically understood in art and literature as a symbol for the self, a group of people, humankind, often in passage or transition. If the vessel's compass is awry it will likely end up adrift, untethered, off course...on the rocks. My intent with this series is to raise questions/search for answers relative to personal or group decisions and courses of action to shed light on the resulting consequences, whether they are personal, political, or environmental.*

*In the closely related **Portals and Passages Series**, originally begun in 1987, the vessel and the act of navigating also play prominent roles. Openings or portals are featured suggesting entrance or passages into spaces and places, both real and figurative. In the **Portal and Passages 2020** series a vessel form, again historically understood as a metaphoric “container or carrier” of an individual, a group, or even society in its entirety, is typically careening through a portal or circular opening. In the context of the year 2020 it suggests a “passage” from a dark and politically stymied place into a new decade and a brighter more hopeful future.*

Objects



Pyxis Awry - America 2020, 8/2020, Bronze, 11"h x 22"w x 12"d (28 x 56 x 30cm)



PORTALS and PASSAGES 2020 II, 10/202, Bronze, 8.5"h x 13"w x 7"d (21 x 33 x 18 cm)



PORTALS and PASSAGES 2020 V, 11/2020, Bronze 7.5"h x 23"w

x 7"d (19 x 58 x 18 cm)

Pyxis Awry - America 2020 comments on my sincere feeling that America in 2020 was seriously adrift.



Pyxis Awry (theta), 11/2020, Bronze, 4"h x 19"w x 8"d

(10 x 48 x 20cm) In "**Pyxis Awry (theta)**", the Greek letter **Θ** is conspicuously displayed and the message is more ominous. In ancient times, **Tau** was used as a symbol for life or resurrection, whereas the eighth letter of the Greek alphabet, **theta**, was considered the symbol of death. Theta, which is prominently cut into the base of this piece, suggests a further dark outcome.



death in a mosaic - A *retiarius* attacks his downed opponent, a *secutor*, with a dagger in this scene from a mosaic from the Villa Borghese c. AD 320 Unknown author. This image is from Wikimedia Commons [File:Retiarius vs secutor from Borghese mosaic.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Retiarius_vs_secutor_from_Borghese_mosaic.jpg) - Wikipedia



Pyxis Awry 2021 (river jam break), 1/2021, Bronze, 6.5"h x 21"w x 13"d (16 x 53 x 33 cm)

*As an avid kayaker living and working in a historic lumber mill on a river where not too many years ago log drives (and log jams) were common, I am keenly aware of and influenced by its history. On January 17, 2021 when **Pyxis Awry 2021 (river jam break)** was completed I was sensing a bit of hope and optimism on the horizon in the aftermath of the January 6th insurrection at the US Capitol and in anticipation of a new president and a vaccine to help overcome COVID19. Like others in the **Pyxis Awry series** this piece comments on a country adrift, but through its river metaphor subtitle "**river jam break**", suggests my positive feeling about the release of the much pent-up energy we witnessed in the recent tumult, and more importantly, the resulting renewed determination of reform, moving us "down river" towards something better.*



Log jam upper Hudson River near Glens Falls N., some of these logged floated down the Sacandaga River past our property c.1890s



Pyxis Awry 2021 (tilting plinth/shifting sands), 1/2021, Bronze, 12"h x 24"w x 12"d (30 x 61x 30 cm)

*Completed on January 19, 2021, the inauguration eve of Biden presidency, this piece like others in the **Pyxis Awry series** comments on a country adrift. But it also has a hopeful side conveyed through its subtitle and unsettling arrangement of formal elements. The off-kilter, diagonal sliding plinth and cascading vessel suggest upheaval is underway; the gears of democracy are turning - the very ground we stand on is moving - we are on the verge of a tectonic political shift.*



Pyxis Awry 2021 (Wedge-First Rapid) 2/202, Bronze , 10"h x 16"w x 9"d (26 x 41 x 23cm)

Pyxis Awry 2021 (wedge-first rapid) was created during the second Trump impeachment trial in mid-February 2021. I was deeply troubled by the inaction of the United State Senate and this sculpture, like other works in the Pyxis Awry series, reflects my consternation. The cascading, out of control vessel is a metaphor for persons or groups of people who have lost the bearings of their inner compass and as a result are adrift and in danger.

The two-part subtitle differentiates this piece from others in the series. **Wedge** is a straightforward reference to the largest physical element in the sculpture - an actual bronze cast of a wooden **felling wedge**, complete with its chainsaw marks - which I had cut from a tree to insure it would fall in the proper direction. It also and more figuratively conveys my deep concern that the impeachment ruling will further wedge our divided country apart.



Entering the First Rapid, Winslow

Homer, 1897

The second part of the subtitle - **first rapid** - is a nod to the 1897 Winslow Homer watercolor **Entering the First Rapid** portraying two paddlers moments before they enter the turbulent and dangerous water ahead. As an avid Homer fan and kayaker, the image resonated as a perfect metaphor for this pivotal and perilous moment in our history, now and in the future.