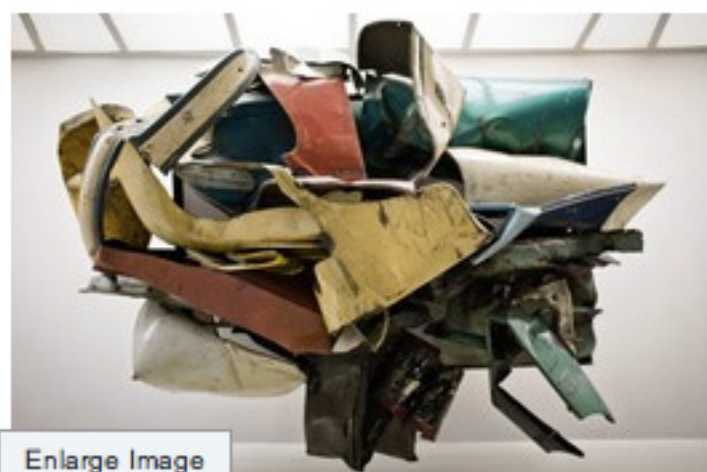


# A Life in Nuts and Bolts

*At the Guggenheim, a Retrospective Becomes an Epitaph*

By KIMBERLY CHOU

"Choices," the John Chamberlain retrospective opening Friday at the Guggenheim, feels especially timely given the artist's death in December at age 84—sometimes too timely for the exhibition's organizers. All of the planning and programs for "Choices" had been set in place prior to Chamberlain's passing, said curator Susan Davidson, who began the process two years ago. But to what degree will museumgoers want to read the retrospective, which runs through May 13, as a kind of memorial or tribute to the late sculptor?



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Ramsay de Give for The Wall Street Journal

At right, his 1962 sculpture 'Dolores James.'

"I can't get away from that—it's a blessing and a curse," Ms. Davidson said of the timing. "It will certainly pique people's interest and will bring them out in a way to say goodbye. At the same time I don't want people to think that it was done because he was dying. I've wanted to do this for 10 years."

The Guggenheim, like most major art institutions, conceives its exhibitions and programs with several months, if not

years, of lead time. Ms. Davidson was in close communication with the artist at his Shelter Island, N.Y., studio in preparation for "Choices." But Chamberlain himself was only involved to a point in deciding what pieces would be included in the show.

"We were totally in cahoots," she said. "He was always very clear with me from the beginning: He had done his job already in making the work, and now it was my responsibility to make the choices."

The career-spanning exhibit showcases nearly 100 objects, including but going far beyond Chamberlain's venerated sculptures of steel and crushed cars. The exhibition—arranged chronologically up the Guggenheim's ramps, from the artist's early 1950s explorations to work made as recently as 2011—includes lesser-seen works of foam, Plexiglas, aluminum, collages and one drawing.

Chou, Kimberly. "A Life in Nuts and Bolts." *Wall Street Journal*. February 23, 2012.



Getty Images

The late John Chamberlain, pictured in 1996

"Choices" marks the second retrospective of Chamberlain's work at the Guggenheim (the first was in 1971). But Amy Sillman, a painter who will lead a tour of the exhibition as part of the museum's "Eye to Eye" artist-talk program, is unsure of the public's understanding of the artist.

"I think people think they know about John Chamberlain, but what they know is a cliché," said Ms. Sillman, referring to the notion that the sculptor worked exclusively with colorful bumpers, tailfins and other junk-yard refugees. "His actual production is restless and contradictory and diverse, but people just think John Chamberlain equals crushed cars. People don't know how often he changed his media. He made those couches [cut-up foam pieces he called 'barges'], he made minimalist drawings and paintings—he did so much."

Ms. Sillman also pointed to Chamberlain's "dramatic, flamboyant, painterly" use of color—rare for a sculptor.

"If you're interested in really intense color, most sculptors don't mess it up with their hands, the way you can in a painting with a brush or a rag," she said. "But he actually works with color as if it were a material, as if it were a substance. It's color in your hands."

Technically, Chamberlain had not made his sculptures with his own hands for some time, given the nature of the materials, and, more recently, his ill health. In the studio, he was aided by a team of assistants who adhered to his very specific dictates.

"He would sit in the center like a king, or the bandleader, in a red rubber-covered chair and order everyone around, shouting at the top of his lungs," said Kara Vander Weg, the artist's representative at Gagosian Gallery, who visited Chamberlain in preparation for his Gagosian shows last year. "One got a sense in the studio of his extraordinary sense of color and space. He saw things that no one else could see. They would move something three and a half inches, not three inches, and he would say, 'It's so obvious, you can see it doesn't sit there!'"

In much the same way, at what is now a posthumous retrospective, the artist doesn't need to be present for his presence to be felt.

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