

# BloombergBusinessweek

## News From Bloomberg



John Chamberlain in his studio on Shelter Island, New York. He passed away in December of 2011. Photographer: Robert McKeever/Gagosian Gallery via Bloomberg

### Car Parts, Washer, Wheelbarrow Made Into Sexy Venus

You can hold a few of the works in your hand, while others weigh tons. One includes an entire 1956 Studebaker.

Most of John Chamberlain's sculptures in the current Guggenheim Museum retrospective consist of mangled junkyard metal objects, welded together in explosive bursts of line and color.

Tarmy, James. "Car Parts, Washer, Wheelbarrow Made Into Sexy Venus", *Bloomberg Businessweek*, March 22, 2012

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Senior curator Susan Davidson worked with the artist to put the show together until Chamberlain's death in December at 84.

Wearing a gray dress, dark pony-hair heels and a black cardigan, Davidson walked me through the exhibition, stopping in front of some of her favorites -- "Fantail," "Miss Lucy Pink," "Dolores James" -- to describe what makes the colored hunks of metal so compelling.

Tarmy: Does this show redefine Chamberlain?

Davidson: The primary misconception about his work is that it's about automobile crashes. With this exhibit I want to show him as a collagist, because that's really what his art is about.

Tarmy: So he had a clear idea of what he wanted his sculpture to look like before he assembled it?

Davidson: I was in the studio with him while he was working. He would take what I saw as junk, and then put something together that would just blow you away.

### ***Junk and Chance***

Tarmy: The act of crushing metal leaves so much to chance.

Davidson: There's no doubt that chance plays a great part in it. He comes from that 1950s moment with Cage and Cunningham, where chance and probability very much affect the work.

But I think that even within that element of chance there was still something calculated. These are abstract art works, true, but one can't help but see anthropomorphic relationships.

Tarmy: How about this one?

Davidson: "Fantail," which is owned by Jasper Johns, is made up of a washing machine, a wheelbarrow and car parts, but you can so clearly see a resemblance to the Venus of Samothrace.

It's fascinatingly beautiful.

Tarmy: Do you consider his work violent?

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## ***Female Elements***

Davidson: No, but I do think his work is strong. His sculptures have a surety and a masculinity to them, but I also think they have a real feminine side to them.

It comes out in subtle ways: the titles he gives are quite feminine and the color choices can be quite feminine.

Tarmy: "Miss Lucy Pink," for example?

Davidson: That was one of the works that was essential for me to have in this show. It's a very iconic Chamberlain, and it's kind of modest in its scale, which I think is important.

You see the artist's hand, and it was made at a point where his sculptures hadn't fully become three-dimensional. John talked about how her "butt" is hanging out -- it's not really a round piece.

Tarmy: He made some of these pieces over 50 years ago. Did you have to restore any before the show?

Davidson: In general they're in remarkably strong shape. We all age though, human beings and artworks included. His sculptures do have the occasional tendency to rust.

And sometimes when the welds break, the works slump a little bit, so conserving his pieces is like getting chiropractic elements back in alignment.

## ***Gallery Switch***

Tarmy: Shortly before he died, Chamberlain switched galleries from Pace to Gagosian. Did that affect your ability to get pieces for the show?

Davidson: Not at all. Pace continued to offer their archive. They had been very committed to his career for a long time.

But I do think that the switch was very good for John. He kept wanting them to show his new work, and for whatever reason, they didn't like it. And so he got frustrated, and did what any artist would do: He went somewhere else.

Tarmy: With Chamberlain's death, has the exhibition taken on a different meaning?

Davidson: I really hope not. We were organizing it long before John got sick, and the exhibit has stayed exactly the same as if he were still running up and down the ramps yelling at me.

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“John Chamberlain: Choices” runs through May 13 at the Guggenheim Museum, 1071 Fifth Ave. Information: +1-212-423-3500; <http://www.guggenheim.org>.

(James Tarmy writes for Muse, the arts and culture section of Bloomberg News. The opinions expressed are his own.)

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