

GalleristNY

His and Hers: John Chamberlain and Francesca Woodman at the Guggenheim



Visitors to curator Susan Davidson's exhibition of John Chamberlain's abstract sculptures made from crushed car parts look like people vetting goods at an auto show. Hands on hips, they inspect the gleaming, chromium-plated, painted or stainless steel works that Chamberlain constructed over a period of 60 years, until his death in

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December at age 84. They peer around shiny fenders, and gaze down at the muscular masses of metal that line the Guggenheim's rotunda.

Meanwhile, in the annex gallery off the fourth level of the rotunda, visitors to Corey Keller's exhibition of Francesca Woodman's photographs are lost in the kind of contemplation called for by tiny photographic self-portraits. In one image, Woodman seems to cut herself under the right breast, and inky blood trickles down her torso; in another, she stages herself as a naked corpse bitten by a viper. Woodman killed herself in 1981, at age 22, and the specter of her imminent suicide looms; the dimly lit dual galleries of small, black and white photographs have a funereal feel.

One artist worked mainly in the stereotypically masculine medium of abstract steel; the other left the record of her short life primarily in the trope of often-blurry black and white photographic self-portraiture. The two shows are a study in contrasts.

Chamberlain is known as the sculptor of AbEx gestures. The surprise of this posthumous retrospective is his early collage work: squares of fiberboard from 1960-61 piled with materials like tin, lace and scraps of colored paper. He borrowed the palette of these objects from painting—orange, flesh pink, greens and blues—and the works' omnivorous use of found material channels the early 20th-century collage artist Kurt Schwitters. These were the two strains in Chamberlain's training: the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, where he was seduced by Van Gogh and de Kooning's paintings, and Black Mountain College in 1955, where he picked up a taste for neo-dada provocation (and his habit of generating titles by shuffling index cards). When he debuted these odd hybrids in New York in the '60s, Minimalist sculptor Donald Judd called Chamberlain's works "specific objects," colorful three-dimensional works that were neither painting nor sculpture.

Chamberlain's monochromes are preferable to his motley works, the freestanding to the wall-mounted, and those where the metal components are obvious to those in which the parts are transformed into compact ripples of color. *Toasted Hitlers From E.J.* (1977) is a good instance of what Chamberlain called his "articulate wadding" of crushed automobile metal. You can make out which found car parts he employs: fenders, doors, hoods. He transformed them through dripping, spraying, sandblasting, crushing and galvanization, bringing together pop's interest in consumer objects and the active verbs of process art. *Kiss #12* (1979), a crumpled steel canister painted barn-red, pink and yellow, is simple and smart.

The most interesting Chamberlains are his B-sides. Two of his experimental slashed and bound polyurethane foam "instant" sculptures, aged to the color of Gouda, show him working out problems of form. Chamberlain had studied hairdressing and makeup on the GI bill, and several square panels from the 1960s featuring hologramlike metal-flaked paint capture the gleam and sparkle at the decorative heart of his work. *Couch* (2007), an interactive divanlike foam structure with parachute cover, is a crowd-pleaser, but the strange, mineral-coated synthetic polymer resin works *Luna Luna Luna (in memory of*

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Elaine Chamberlain) (1970) and *Hano*(1970), both invaginated translucent plastic planes, suggest a quiet fascination with the futuristic spectacle of new materials.

Less successful are recent colored-aluminum sculptures *Rosetuxedo Two* (1986/2007) and the enormous *Sphinxgrin Two* (2010). Hershey Kiss-wrapperlike twisted aluminum foil behemoths, these originated as palm-size maquettes and failed to survive the scale shift. Sculptures post-1990, with some pattern in the paint job, irritate, perhaps because, as the Modernist critic Clement Greenberg once insisted, painted pattern on sculpture really is pure kitsch. (Greenberg, it's worth pointing out, has here, in the main, lost to Chamberlain on this point.) Overall, Chamberlain's project has depth and resonance, and this is surprising for work so ostensibly brute.

The compact, dense exhibition of Francesca Woodman's work gives us the most complete sense yet of the brief career of the 20th-century's most influential art student. Hung across two rooms, the selection includes dozens of the small, square black and white photographs she executed for class assignments between 1975 and '78, mixed with several later works including artist books, videos and large diazotypes (a late 19th-century technique by which film positives are projected onto photosensitive paper), reflecting both her interest in new media and nostalgia for older photographic processes.

The exhibition begins with Woodman's naked torso, the bulb of an air release cable in her hand, head and legs truncated by the camera. *Untitled NY* (1980) is pure Woodman—inventive and vulnerable self-portraiture in which there is an implicitly feminist confrontation between her teenage body and the camera's mechanical eye. This precocious, well-read daughter of two artists from Colorado posed in imitation of the Surrealist women from the artworks she loved, and also borrowed from Surrealist photographic strategies, performing, in her work, the parts of both Man Ray and Meret Oppenheim.

Woodman made most of the photographs on display at the Guggenheim while she was an undergraduate at the Rhode Island School of Design (RISD) in the late 1970s; these are essentially class exercises. She exceeded the academic assignments teaching space and depth of field with her inventive long-exposure works like the *Space2* series. Still, to the extent that her overarching leitmotifs include young women wearing Victorian dresses in abandoned houses, blurry nude self-portraits, and the regular use of museum vitrines, mirrors, taxidermied animals and Cala lilies, the show is a compendium of art school clichés.

In *Untitled NY* (1980), Woodman, in a slip dress and holding a bouquet of foxglove, channels 19th-century photographer Julia Margaret Cameron's soft enchantment. Not only was Woodman, like Cameron, a canny amateur—such figures are central to the history of photography—but her work echoed her chosen medium's intermittent affiliation with fine art, rather than engage with her own era's postminimalist rigor. To the extent that she is often (first by feminist art historians, and now in this show's catalogue) retroactively situated in an academic discourse that includes Eva Hesse and Richard

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Serra, she has been misshelved. Woodman was a precocious and inventive visual diarist, the Anaïs Nin of photography. Her work is bold and intelligent, even when it borders on fashion photography or stylish erotica, as in a photograph of herself nude in tall white stockings burying her nose in an upturned lily, or in her frequent Deborah Turbeville references. It speaks to our own anxiety about photography as an art medium that it is as hard for us to acknowledge Woodman's limitations as it is for us to forget or discount her. She is perhaps most moving to viewers who are themselves in their teens or early 20s, who might admire her bravery without becoming apologists for her lack of engagement with the broader conversations taking place in art of her time.

Cindy Sherman began her iconic series of Film Stills (1977-80) at around the time Woodman commenced her own short and ill-fated stay in New York. The two women were contemporaries, often employing the same props and strategies: the air release cable, costumes, the "this is not a self-portrait" self-portrait, the naked body bound in tape or cable. Yet in relation to Ms. Sherman's magisterial retrospective at MoMA, Woodman's swan song is largely enchanting for its introversion, and its slightness.

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