

JOHN CHAMBERLAIN 1927-2011

BY DAVID EBONY

ONE OF THE FOREMOST sculptors of his generation, John Chamberlain died in New York on Dec. 20 after a long illness. His death at age 84 occurred two months before the opening of a major retrospective of his work at the Guggenheim Museum in New York. With his 6-foot-4 frame and boisterous personality, Chamberlain was a formidable and sometimes provocative figure on the U.S. art scene for more than five decades. Perhaps the last of the fabled Cedar Tavern rabble-rousers of the 1950s, he, along with Mark di Suvero, was early on regarded as the quintessential Abstract Expressionist sculptor. While throughout his career he explored numerous mediums, including photography and film as well as painting and printmaking, he is best known for his imposing welded-metal assemblages of crushed auto parts. Contemporaries such as César and Jason Seley also used recycled car parts in their works, but Chamberlain transformed the unlikely material into bold and fluid compositions of reflected light and color, full of movement and with an underlying current of vibrant sensuality. His work was seen by some critics as a wry commentary on car culture and the waning of America's Industrial Age, a point of view Chamberlain routinely dismissed.

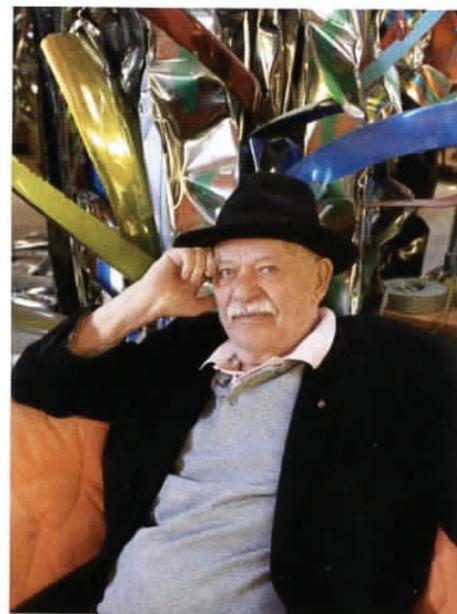
Born in Rochester, Ind., the artist was raised in Chicago by his maternal grandmother. In 1943 he joined the navy and toured the Pacific and the Mediterranean. After World War II, he married (the first of four marriages) and settled in Chicago, where he studied hairdressing and makeup under the G.I. Bill before entering the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. In interviews, Chamberlain often cited his time at North Carolina's Black Mountain College in 1955-56 as the turning point in his career. The college's unorthodox program encouraged experimentation and attracted some of the most progressive thinkers of the day. Chamberlain gravitated to poets Robert Creeley, Charles Olson and Robert Duncan rather than to other artists, but the most profound influence on his work was David Smith's welded-metal abstractions.

Chamberlain moved to New York in 1956 and, while establishing himself in the art world, soon became a Cedar Tavern fixture, drinking with Ab-Ex honchos, as he observed their comments and characters. Over the years, he acknowledged a direct relationship to de Kooning's color in his work; Franz Kline inspired the young artist to aim for a sense of raw power in his sculpture.

Chamberlain produced his first piece made of auto-body parts in 1957 while staying at his friend Larry Rivers's house in Southampton, N.Y. His work attracted considerable attention when it was included in "Art of Assemblage," a landmark group show at MoMA in 1961. He had several exhibitions with Martha Jackson before moving in 1962 to Leo Castelli, his primary dealer for the following two decades.

For Chamberlain, like many of his contemporaries, the 1960s was a period of intense experimentation. Working in Los Angeles for a year, he churned out a wide range of pieces, from urethane foam sculptures to olfactory installations. In Larry Bell's L.A. studio he created a group of vacuum coated Plexiglas sculptures. In the late 1960s, he embarked on a series of films, directing and producing works such as *Wedding Night*, *Wide Point* and *The Secret Life of Hernando Cortez* (all 1969), starring Warhol superstars Taylor Mead and Ultra Violet. These endeavors often met with controversy and were banned on at least one occasion.

The Guggenheim Museum mounted a survey of Chamberlain's work in 1971, when he was 44. Subsequently, he refocused on his found-metal sculptures, continuously refining his technique. His relatively spare early forms, which were allied with Minimalism, gave way in the 1970s and '80s to increasingly colorful and baroque constructions. With wacky titles and more than a hint of figuration, they often look like 3-D paintings. He typically directed studio assistants to spray-paint abstract patterns on already luminous strips of car metal.



John Chamberlain, March 2011.

He then selected pieces for his sculptures from piles of the material, almost as a painter chooses pigments from a palette.

During the '80s, having established a vast studio in Sarasota, Fla., he appeared in a number of prestigious exhibitions, including Documenta 7 in Kassel (1982). In 1987, he joined Pace Gallery, which represented the artist until 2006; subsequently he moved to Gagosian. He was honored with several museum surveys and a permanent display at Dia: Beacon. Ultimately, Chamberlain held more than 100 solo exhibitions around the world.

In recent years, he relocated to Shelter Island, N.Y., and remained as prolific as ever, even as his health declined. In New York last year, he showed sculptures at Gagosian and Pace, plus large photo works at Steven Kasher. "John Chamberlain: Choices," the upcoming Guggenheim survey [Feb. 24-May 14], contains nearly 100 pieces. Organized by museum curator Susan Davidson, the show focuses almost entirely on sculpture. Davidson, who describes Chamberlain as a big-hearted man with a gruff exterior, told *A.i.A.* that the artist was enthusiastic about the show. After meeting with him last October, she said he appeared to be strong and in good spirits. He made only two requests regarding the event: that she include an outdoor sculpture near the museum entrance and try to arrange for a TV interview with Charlie Rose. Otherwise, he gave her free rein in selecting pieces for the exhibition. "I've done the work, now you can make your choices," he told her, alluding to the show's title. ○

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