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# John Chamberlain, Who Wrested Rough Magic From Scrap Metal, Dies at 84

By **RANDY KENNEDY**

John Chamberlain, who almost singlehandedly gave automotive metal a place in the history of sculpture, smashing and twisting together a poetic fusion of Abstract Expressionism and Pop from fenders, fins, bumpers and hoods, died on Wednesday in Manhattan. He was 84.

His wife, Prudence Fairweather, announced his death but declined to give a cause. He had spent his last years mostly in Shelter Island, N.Y.

In a restless career of almost half a century, Mr. Chamberlain worked with a broad range of materials, some as pliant as foam rubber and as ephemeral as brown paper bags. But he returned again and again to the more substantial stuff of the scrap yard, explaining the attraction as one of practicality. "I saw all this material just lying around against buildings, and it was in color," he said, "so I felt I was ahead on two counts."

But auto bodies also provided him with a material that could bear more than its weight in art-historical significance: as a chaotic riff on Duchamp's readymades, as a renegade form of truth-in-materials Minimalism, as a bridge between the raw expressiveness of the New York School painters and the assembly-line deadpan of Warhol.

Critics often saw his crumpled Cadillacs and Oldsmobiles as dark commentaries on the costs of American freedom, but Mr. Chamberlain rejected such metaphorical readings. He turned to making sculpture from other things partly because he grew so tired of the automotive associations.

"It seems no one can get free of the car-crash syndrome," he told the curator Julie Sylvester in 1986. "For 25 years I've been using colored metal to make sculpture, and all they can think of is, 'What the hell car did that come from?'"

Years later, he said: "I think of my art materials not as junk but as garbage. Manure, actually; it goes from being the waste material of one being to the life-source of another."

Mr. Chamberlain devoted his life to challenging traditional notions of sculpture and to eroding

the boundaries between sculpture and painting. He was among a wave of late-modernist sculptors who put color on an almost equal footing with form, and he had an uncanny ability, as the curator Klaus Kertess wrote, “to make roundness into color and color into roundness.”

Donald Judd, who enshrined many of Mr. Chamberlain’s pieces at the art complex he built in Marfa, Tex., observed that Mr. Chamberlain’s colors in his early years were quintessentially American, “the hard, sweet, pastel enamels, frequently roses and ceruleans, of Detroit’s imitation elegance for the poor.”

Mr. Chamberlain felt that even the word “sculpture” was limiting in describing art that, while functioning in three dimensions, could be made from almost anything.

“A sculpture is something that if it falls on your foot, it will break it,” he said. (Well into his career, some people still had a tough time seeing his sculptures as works of art; in 1973, two 300-pound metal pieces were mistaken for junk and carted away as they sat outside a gallery warehouse in Chicago.)

Mr. Chamberlain’s early influences included few sculptors. He gravitated to poets and to the Abstract Expressionist painters he met at the Cedar Tavern in Greenwich Village after moving to New York from Chicago in 1956, chiefly to Franz Kline and Willem de Kooning.

“Kline gave me the structure,” he once said. “De Kooning gave me the color.”

They also helped fuel a love of drink that contributed to his reputation as an art-world hellion, especially during the heyday of Max’s Kansas City, the Cedar’s successor as New York’s art-world clubhouse. At six-foot-four, with a broad, toothy smile full of mischief and menace, he looked, and sometimes acted, like a character from a Sam Peckinpah movie. In 1964, the year he represented the United States at the [Venice Biennale](#), he was arrested in the Village after a drunken street fight with a police officer. Mr. Chamberlain’s lawyer defended his client by saying the fight was the fault of the officer, who had repeatedly and “needlessly struck Mr. Chamberlain on the head with a nightstick.”

John Angus Chamberlain was born on April 16, 1927, in Rochester, Ind., the son of a fifth-generation saloonkeeper. He was raised above a meat market until he was 4, when his parents divorced. His mother, a sometime waitress, took him to Chicago, where he was left in the care of his maternal grandmother, Edna Brown Waller, whom he described as a strong, voluble presence in his life.

In his teens, he grew to love classical music but decided he didn’t have enough talent to pursue a music career. Mostly to stay out of trouble, he joined the Navy at 16 in 1943, lying about his age, and served in the Pacific and Mediterranean before returning to Chicago to study hairdressing on

the G.I. Bill — an occupation he saw partly as a good way to meet women. Between shifts as a hair and makeup instructor at a modeling school, he tried to teach himself to draw but grew frustrated and enrolled in private art classes. He later entered the School of the Art Institute of Chicago but lasted only a year and a half because of quarrels with instructors he accused of being narrow-minded.

Through a friend, Mr. Chamberlain found Black Mountain College in North Carolina, which he attended in 1955 and 1956. It introduced him to like-minded artists, most of them poets including Robert Creeley, Charles Olson and Robert Duncan. Shortly after leaving the school he met and married Elaine Grulkowski, his second wife, and the couple had three sons. Two, Angus and Duncan, survive him, as does his fourth wife, Ms. Fairweather, and her daughters, Alexandra Fairweather and Phoebe Fairweather. Elaine Chamberlain died in 1973, and a son, Jesse, died in 1999. Two other marriages ended in divorce.

Early on, Mr. Chamberlain was drawn to the totemic welded constructions that David Smith made from old tools and machine parts. But in 1957, he had an epiphany while staying with the painter Larry Rivers in Southampton, N.Y. Using two fenders he pulled from a 1929 Ford rusting on Mr. Rivers's property, he made a sculpture by running over the pieces repeatedly with a truck to bend them the way he wanted, then he fitted them together almost like puzzle pieces.

The sculpture, "Shortstop," opened his eyes to the potential of pre-painted junk metal. And work like it, heavily indebted to his Abstract Expressionist mentors, attracted admirers like the influential collector Allan Stone, who described the young Mr. Chamberlain as "a gruff, hairy" character, "more like a north woodsman than a sculptor." Many critics saw his early work as an affront. One, writing in *The New York Times* in 1959, described a Chamberlain work as "a construction from the wreckage of a motor car."

Even admirers like the critic Peter Schjeldahl seemed unsettled by the apparent randomness of Mr. Chamberlain's crushing machines. "As with a sunset or a snowstorm, you don't know whether there's an operating intelligence behind it all or not," he wrote in 1969, "so you learn to accept the manifestations for themselves." He added: "The mangle is the message."

Mr. Chamberlain was rarely happy working for long in one place. Besides New York, he lived in New Mexico, California, Connecticut and Sarasota, Fla., where he kept a houseboat and a yacht in addition to two sprawling studios. He continued to work and sail after settling in Shelter Island (while living part-time in Manhattan). At 74, he took up the saxophone. He also made headlines in 2011 by leaving his longtime gallery, Pace, for the larger empire of the Gagosian Gallery.

His pieces — with punning, portmanteau titles like "Awesomemeatloaf," "Schizoverbia" and "Anything Goethe" — were not usually intended to be figural. But, depending on the vantage

point, they could evoke dancing or hobbled human forms, trees, flowers, boats and birds. A 1982 sculpture called “The Lineup (Dedicated to the Sarasota Police Dept.)” looked like a row of reprobates hauled in for public indecency.

In the late 1960s he switched from car parts to unpainted galvanized steel, then made pieces from resin-coated crushed paper bags. He also began using blocks of foam rubber that, when tied with cords, resulted in forms strikingly like his car-metal pieces, underscoring the seeming softness of such rigid pieces. In 1968, Mr. Chamberlain took a detour into filmmaking, the most notable result of which was the cult hit “The Secret Life of Hernando Cortez,” filmed in Mexico with Warhol regulars Taylor Mead and Ultra Violet in various states of intoxication and undress.

In 1970, the year he was given a retrospective at the Solomon R. Guggenheim museum, he began working with heat-shaped Plexiglas and aluminum foil. But he returned to car bodies in 1974. (The Guggenheim is planning a new retrospective, to open in February.)

Mr. Chamberlain’s work is in the collections of dozens of museums, including the Guggenheim, the Museum of Modern Art and Dia:Beacon in Beacon, N.Y.; this year an older piece sold at auction for \$4.7 million, a record for his work.

Mr. Chamberlain spoke of his work with reluctance and often humility, deriding the over-intellectualizing tendencies of his questioners. “Everyone always wanted to know what it meant, you know: ‘What does it mean, jellybean?’ ” he told Julie Sylvester, adding: “Even if I knew, I could only know what I thought it meant.”

But he trusted his instincts and seemed to follow them to please himself more than anyone else. “When a sculpture is nearly done, you can put things on and you take them off and it doesn’t make any difference,” he said. “Stopping is the key; you have to know when to stop. If I feel so glad that a sculpture is here, and I don’t care who did it, then I figure it’s a good piece.”