

John Chamberlain at the Guggenheim



John Chamberlain, *White Thumb Four*, 1978. Photo: Grace-Yvette Gemmell

“I’m more interested in seeing what the material tells me than in imposing my will on it,” John Chamberlain once remarked. The artist’s characteristic appropriation and manipulation of specific fragments into form, however, points to the role that active selection also played in his process. The discarded automobile parts, aluminum, Plexiglas, and foam that Chamberlain took as his raw materials were never treated merely as found objects. On another occasion he owned that “one day something—some one thing—pops out at you, and you pick it up, and you take it over, and you put it somewhere else, and it fits... You can do the same thing with words or with metal.”

A new retrospective of the artist’s work at the Guggenheim entitled *Choices* reflects Chamberlain’s virtuosities of color and form, as well as his interest in a deliberate process of selection that respects the inherent qualities of a given material. The exhibition, which showcases roughly one hundred works, examines significant shifts in medium, technique and scale over the course of the artist’s sixty-year career. Moving chronologically upwards through the Guggenheim’s rotunda, Chamberlain’s earliest monochromatic iron sculptures give way to experiments in paper, fabric, foam, and

Gemmell, Grace-Yvette. “John Chamberlain at the Guggenheim”, *Artlog*, Feb 27, 2012

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Plexiglas. The show culminates in large-scale foil confections with compounded names like *SPHINXGRIN* and *Rosetuxedo*, which have never before been shown in the United States. Heinrich Wölfflin's designation of Baroque art as "movement imported into mass" comes to mind when viewing these later works, though many of the artist's earlier works might be seen as drawing on a similar idea.

In keeping with his commitment to chance and randomness, many of the works are accompanied by enigmatic, made-up titles that have a life of their own. *HAWKFLIESAGAIN*, *Lord Suckfist*, *Sugar Tit*, *Divine Ricochet*, *Glossalia Adagio*, and *PEAUDESOIEMUSIC* are a few of the makeshift titles appearing in this show. Chamberlain's love of puns and spectacles of language, as well as his penchant for accentuating the undefinable bleeds over into these self-coined monikers that essentially signify nothing, while still referencing a broad spectrum of elements from popular and commercial culture and poetry, biographical allusions and common sayings. Many of the works met their titles through Chamberlain's peculiar act of shuffling index cards with single words written on them to strike absurd combinations.

The relationship between works and titles aside, Chamberlain's process of compounding words into random associations compliments his method of bending and twisting unconventional materials into nonrepresentational sculptures. The retrospective likens the artist's process of "articulate wadding" to Renaissance drapery studies, though Chamberlain himself described his method as resembling "the handling of toilet paper" and the result to "twisted bed sheets after a night of raucous sex." The Guggenheim's retrospective considers these complementary contradictions head-on, reminding us that abstraction as such entails a collage approach that merges, or at least awkwardly juxtaposes, the deliberate with the coincidental.



John Chamberlain, *Rosetuxedo Two*, 1986/2009. Photo: Grace-Yvette Gemmell.

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John Chamberlain, *Hano*, 1970. Photo: Grace-Yvette Gemmell.



Installation view, *John Chamberlain: Choices*. Photo: Grace-Yvette Gemmell.

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John Chamberlain, *SPHINXGRIN TWO*, 2010. Photo: Grace-Yvette Gemmell.



John Chamberlain, *Lord Suckfist*, 1989. Photo: Grace-Yvette Gemmell.

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John Chamberlain, *Women's Voices*, 2005. Photo: Grace-Yvette Gemmell.

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