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At Guggenheim-Dia John Chamberlain Memorial, Friends Recall Sailing, Wrestling, Studio Visits

Dia cofounder Heiner Friedrich lobbies for permanent Chamberlain gallery in the city: 'This is certainly a great wish for all of us'

By Andrew Russeth 4/19 5:38pm



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John Chamberlain. (Courtesy Robert McKeever/Gagosian Gallery)

"Finding out that he wanted his show in my building was very special information for me—it brings tears to my eyes," Frank Gehry said in a video played in the Guggenheim's basement theater last night. He was talking about John Chamberlain, whose retrospective is on view in the museum above. It will travel to Mr. Gehry's Bilbao branch next year. The architect welled up as he spoke. "I knew he liked me and stuff, but that's a big, mother compliment for me, so thank you, John."

The memorial was organized by the Guggenheim and the Dia Art Foundation to pay tribute to Chamberlain, the hard-charging sculptor of shredded and contorted automobile metal who died in December at the age of 84. The crowd included the directors of the

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Guggenheim and Dia, Richard Armstrong and Philippe Vergne, Chamberlain's last dealer, Larry Gagosian, as well as artist Frank Stella, dealer Tony Shafrazi, patron Christophe de Menil and members of his family.

Like many of his friends and supporters who took turns speaking, Mr. Gehry offered stories of the artist's irreverent and combative side to balance the evening's more sentimental moments. He recalled the time that he and Michael Asher spotted John Chamberlain in a full suit as they cruised to the Pacific Ocean to "brave the gods" sailing. The sculptor asked to join them. "He got soaking wet in his bloody suit and he loved it," Mr. Gehry said, marveling at the memory of that day. "I've never seen anyone take to the ocean in that way." The artist began sailing regularly after that. "I'd heard he'd become a damn good sailor," he said.

The director James Signorelli, who first met Chamberlain at Max's Kansas City, also had a sailing story. Decades ago, the two of them were out in Gardiners Bay on the north end of Long Island. "John wasn't paying attention at all," he said gruffly. "His eyes were everywhere except where they should be, from my point of view." So Mr. Signorelli asked him to explain what exactly what he was doing.

Chamberlain pointed off into the distance, "Do you see that?" ("There was nothing out there," Mr. Signorelli told the Guggenheim crowd.) "Do you see that?" Chamberlain asked again, almost growling this time in Mr. Signorelli's telling.

"You mean, the horizon?" his friend responded, incredulously.

"Well, the thing is, you never want to go to far above or below that line."

"I had smoke coming out of my ears," his friend recalled. "An hour later, we're heading into the East Hampton harbor, and John is again all over the place, and he runs this \$35,000 classic yacht aground only a hundred feet from the entrance."

The painter James Rosenquist met the artist even earlier, back in 1956, at a party in Westchester with Romare Bearden and the actor George Reeves, who played Superman on TV. "I went on to become friends later in New York with Romie and John," he explained. "I didn't become friends with Superman because he shot himself."

One day he walked into Dillon's Bar, where Chamberlain, Jasper Johns and John Cage were playing shuffleboard. "Chamberlain grabbed me and put a headlock on my neck," Mr. Rosenquist said, recalling proudly that—in fine condition—he broke the headlock and sent Chamberlain crashing down on a neighboring table. He then proceeded to beat him in an arm-wrestling match.

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“John’s amazing dichotomy is this fantastic rambunctiousness contrasted with his artistic ability to produce such delicate and colorful sculptures out of ruptured chunks of metal from automobile crashes,” Mr. Rosenquist said.

“He could be gruff, but there was always affection,” said the Whitney’s chief curator, Donna De Salvo, who remembered the pinball machines in his Sarasota, Fla., studio, and his “mean spaghetti bolognese.” She fondly recalled a night spent sleeping on one of his foam couch sculptures down there.

Writer and editor Betsy Baker remembered watching Chamberlain carve one of those foam sculptures with an electric carving knife before a gallery show in Chicago. “They were white as snow,” she said, adding that “the couches and foam sculptures were obviously perishable, as was much discussed at the time, and it seems now quite miraculous that a lot of them have survived.” (There’s a recent one, dated 2007, on view right now at the top of the museum’s rotunda.) “It’s a terrible blow of fate that John didn’t live to see this current exhibition,” she added.

The most winningly—fittingly—abstract tributes were offered by Bill Charlap, who played two short piano pieces—alternately somber and vaguely jazzy—and Heiner Friedrich, the art dealer turned Dia cofounder. “Meeting the sculptures of John, nothing needs to be said about them, nothing needs to be discussed,” he said quietly, with his faint German accent. “They open their eyes to you if you face them, and say, address and manifest inspiration through your presence with their presence. Nothing will pass. It is now and eternity, which are identical.”

Mr. Friedrich admitted that he wished the installation on view above would stay permanently. “This is certainly a great wish for all of us here to manifest a space in New York with sculptures by John present—and permanently present—and this is something we will all work on,” he said.

“I can see you already marching,” he told the audience, “and I’m very excited for this. Yes.”

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