

John Chamberlain at the Guggenheim

Crushed, delicately

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VISITORS to New York's Guggenheim Museum who are unfamiliar with John Chamberlain's sculpture will be left with a strong first impression: "C'ESTZESTY", (pictured below) a soaring hunk of a piece at nearly 20 feet tall, seemingly stands guard at the museum's entrance. To those who know, it is recognisably Chamberlain, with its familiar lines of torqued, welded metal, brutally folded into a sculpture assured of its own visual strength. The work is a fitting introduction to "Choices", the artist's newly installed retrospective. It captures Chamberlain at his very best, but because it was made only last year, it is also something of a coda to the artist's 60-year career, which ended with his death last December at the age of 84.

Chamberlain's place in the history of art is a peculiar one. Because he rose to prominence in post-war America, his work tended to be categorised as either Abstract Expressionist or Minimalist. Yet while the artist courted both tendencies, his work never truly fit either movement, as the exhibition's curators point out in the accompanying catalogue. He was too young to have been a part of the first "heroic" generation of Abstract Expressionism, and his work was too playful to claim the objectivity of geometric Minimalism. Chamberlain instead deftly navigated his own path, developing and maintaining a unique aesthetic. While many of his contemporaries were exploring the possibility of a more physically open sculpture, Chamberlain stuck with his heavier visual vocabulary.

"HAWKFLIESAGAIN" (pictured above), for example, epitomises the artist's fascination with a sculpture's density. Crushed automotive parts, tightly woven together, exude a kind of graceful mass. But it is not only with metal that Chamberlain explores the state of impenetrability: his foam sculptures (which deserve more appreciation and critical regard) also flirt with weight, even if that weight is an illusion.

The Economist. "Crushed, Delicately." March 14, 2012.

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A career survey will inevitably feature some weak spots. At times, Chamberlain simply toyed too much with his sculptures. As the exhibition's title implies, his most successful works are those which were seemingly chosen, instead of tampered with, almost as if they created themselves. "Ultima Thule", a galvanised steel sculpture, appears effortless in its simple grace. Some other pieces, however, seem overworked. His paintings, in particular, feature wild clashing colours, and one gets the sense that Chamberlain didn't know when to stop.

But these rare moments do not detract from the overall quality of Chamberlain's sculpture, or this thorough exhibition, which is a wonderful opportunity to reflect on this singular artist's path. At its absolute best, his work is elegant without being soft, graceful without being simply ornamental. This is a delicate balance, where taking away or adding anything would tip the scales, but one that Chamberlain's strongest sculptures achieve.



Courtesy Gagosian Gallery

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