# Test-Driving John Chamberlain's Sculptures at the Guggenheim

PHOTO: ROBERT MCKEEVER, COURTESY GAGOSIAN GALLERY

John Chamberlain in his studio, 2011.

This allusion may seem reductive given Mr. Chamberlain's exalted place in art history, and may not be the appropriate tribute to his memory (he passed away in December). In fact, throughout his career, Chamberlain spent a good deal of energy inveighing against just such an interpretation of his great material insight—even though the most iconic of his works is made from discarded automotive body panels. Chamberlain claimed that his use of vibrantly painted scrap

Berk, Brett. "Test-Driving John Chamberlain's Sculptures at the Guggenheim", *Vanity Fair*, February 27, 2012

metal was not meant to invoke the automobile it came from but was rather an advantageous use of a powerful and plentiful medium, one emblematic of a cycle of decay and rebirth. But this is, at its core, a car column. And since a connection to cars is what originally brought us to Chamberlain's work—as it did with Lee Friedlander's and Chris Burden's (and as we hope it will for you)—we viewed this exquisite show mostly through our love of the sculptural elements of automotive design. (Sorry, John!) Duly, we had two overarching thoughts.

PHOTO: DAVID HEALD/SOLOMON R. GUGGENHEIM MUSEUM, NEW YORK

*Dolores James,* 1962.

First, Chamberlain's re-purposing technique originally appeared in the early 60s, which seems notable to us as that's just when American automotive design entered its swoopy, midcentury apotheosis. It's easy to view the surfeit of metal on domestic vehicles from that time—cars like the 1959 Cadillac or 1960 Imperial, with their towering tail fins, Dagmar bumpers, drooping eyebrows, and ponderous fender skirts—solely as an effort to demonstrate post-war Yankee surplus. But there was a delicacy in this era's stampings, as well—a formal beauty and experimentation seen in the intricate and intersecting creases on the rear ends of vehicles like the 1959 Chevy Impala or the 1961 Plymouth Fury, designs that echoed the painterly lines of Franz Kline. Regardless of whether or not Chamberlain intended it as such, his best work reads at least in part as an artistic comment on this, as if he were flaying the vehicular excess—cutting away at these overwrought slabs and reassembling the metal to showcase the litheness inherent in the material.

Second, in viewing Chamberlain's work *now,* we see a kind of prescience vis-à-vis modern automotive design. Contemporary, interface-based products like iPads and flat-screen TVs are getting sleeker and more minimal; the object can be reduced solely to its most functional form because the user's joy and engagement is derived from the infinite capabilities of what is displayed. But as long as cars remain non-virtual, they need to suggest a similar complexity

Berk, Brett. "Test-Driving John Chamberlain's Sculptures at the Guggenheim", *Vanity Fair*, February 27, 2012

to stay relevant. Ian Callum, the vaunted head of design for Jaguar, once told us that the secret of a good car design—one that looked powerful, purposeful, and capable even at rest—was to maintain tension. "The second you complete the line—connect it from one end of the car to another—you lose that tension. You drain it of suspense." Chamberlain knew this innately, and the allure of his metal work is derived in no small part from the precept—from the way it achieves lovely balance that is at once purely kinetic and purely aesthetic.

Still, you may have your own non-automotive responses—and you can wander up and down the Guggenheim's rotunda anytime between now and May 13 and find out.

Berk, Brett. "Test-Driving John Chamberlain's Sculptures at the Guggenheim",
*Vanity Fair*, February 27, 2012