

# John Chamberlain obituary

American artist best known for his vibrant sculptures made from mangled cars

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**Michael McNay**

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John Chamberlain in his studio on Shelter Island, New York, in May last year. Photograph: Librado Romero/The New York Times

Crashing into his studio one night in 1962, more than a little drunk, John Chamberlain glared at a piece of compressed car body that constituted one of his potential sculptural masterpieces. It hung on a wall, recalcitrantly failing to conform to his expectations. Chamberlain picked up a sledgehammer and hurled it at the sculpture. The hammer smashed through the metal and buried itself so deeply that only three inches of the shaft protruded. "All the pieces went chink, chink, chink," Chamberlain said afterwards. The masterpiece was completed, Chamberlain christened it Dolores James and now it is part of the Guggenheim Museum collection on Fifth Avenue, New York.

The story seems like a bravura piece of Hemingwayesque invention sustaining the myth of all-American postwar art as an enterprise created by brawn, inspiration, and the lucky roll of the dice, turning up in favour of the artist who reshaped the American dream with crushed Cadillacs. Could it have been a figment of the sculptor's publicity-seeking imagination? Unlikely.



John Chamberlain's

sculpture entitled *S*, metal, 1959, in the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden. Chamberlain, who has died aged 84, was a big man, a big drinker, and possessed of a big bad temper – plain ornery, his fellow Americans would say of him. Although the utterances he handed down about the nature of art, particularly his own art, were not exactly Olympian, they were founded in the intellectual and creative stimulation he experienced at the US version of Mt Olympus, Black Mountain College, in North Carolina, in 1955-56, where the resident gods were poets such as Robert Creeley, Charles Olson and Robert Duncan.

The poets felt a close rapport, as Creeley put it, with the painters Jackson Pollock, Robert Motherwell, Philip Guston (and, by extension, the budding sculptor Chamberlain). Creeley described the kind of poetry he wrote and the kind of paintings Pollock made as "like going into a spin in a car ... you're not thinking 'I must bring the car back on the road', you are bringing the car back on the road or else you're over the cliff".

Chamberlain was born in Rochester, Indiana, but was brought up in Chicago by his maternal grandmother after his parents divorced. At the age of 16, he lied about his age to escape into the US navy, and served in the Mediterranean and the Pacific. On demob in 1946, aided by the GI bill of rights, he began learning to be a hairdresser. It pulled the chicks, he said. Maybe not enough, because he soon left and began to attend art classes.

In 1951, he studied at the Art Institute of Chicago, but left after quarrelling with his teachers. There was a hiatus before the key experience of Black Mountain. Then, while he was staying with the painter Larry Rivers in Southampton, New York, he removed the bumpers from a discarded and rusting Ford on the property, drove a truck over them, and twisted them into two shapes that he could bend together as one.

The works that followed looked spectacular, a three-dimensional take on abstract expressionism, though Chamberlain's first inspiration was the consummate abstract sculpture of David Smith, from whose example he developed the skill to bend and weld inchoate material into beautifully balanced and weighted sculptures.

The minimalist Donald Judd described Chamberlain's colour palette (mostly industrially sprayed automobile finishes) as "the hard, sweet, pastel enamels, frequently roses and ceruleans, of Detroit's imitation elegance for the poor". Chamberlain confined himself to defining sculpture as something that, "if it falls on your foot, it breaks it".

He worked with less dangerous paper, and foam rubber, too, and branched out into

print-making, photography and film-making, and sculpture in plexiglass. He moved around between Connecticut, California, New Mexico and Florida, where he acquired a yacht and a houseboat, and went back to New York. He showed at the Venice Biennale in 1964 and at Documenta, in Kassel, Germany, in 1982, and his solo shows ran into three figures. The Guggenheim Museum gave him a retrospective in 1971 and plan one for this year. In 1986 he had another at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles.

Institutions all over America showered him with medals and awards.

Chamberlain was married four times, and twice divorced. He is survived by his fourth wife, Prudence; and two sons, Angus and Duncan, from his second marriage, to Elaine, who died in 1973. Another son, Jesse, died in 1999.

- John Chamberlain, sculptor, born 16 April 1927; died 21 December 2011

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