

John Chamberlain, sculptor who used crushed-up cars, dies

Hard drinker who became famous in the early 1960s for using rusting parts of wrecked Cadillacs and Oldsmobiles



John Chamberlain's *Onecaratstud* during the Frieze art fair at Regent's Park, London, in October 2010. Photograph: Ian Gavan/Getty Images

John Chamberlain, the artist who introduced crushed-up cars into art galleries, has died in New York aged 84.

He became famous in the early 1960s for his sculptures made from the rusting parts of wrecked Cadillacs and Oldsmobiles. Some critics compared the sculptures' folds and bleached-out colours to the work of Chamberlain's mentors Franz Kline and Willem de Kooning.

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Almost inevitably, in 1973 two sculptures were mistaken for scrap metal and towed away from outside a gallery warehouse in Chicago.

Chamberlain discovered that scrap metal could be used as a material for sculpture in 1957. His first work was called Shortstop and was made out of two fenders repeatedly run over by a truck.

"It was like, God, I finally found an art supply, and it was so cheap it just made you laugh," he later said. "I think of my art materials not as junk but as garbage. Manure, actually: it goes from being the waste material of one being to the life-source of another."

Brought up in Chicago, Chamberlain moved to New York in the 1950s and developed a hard-drinking reputation in the bohemian Greenwich Village.

He was once arrested after brawling with a policeman, and later joked to a journalist: "I once had a drink with Billie Holiday, and I smoked a joint with Louis Armstrong. Those are my real claims to fame."

Chamberlain bridged the worlds of pop art, minimalism and abstract expressionism. Some critics were perturbed by the apparent randomness of his work, with one, Peter Schjeldahl, concluding that "the mangle is the message".

By the late 60s, Chamberlain had become frustrated with the way he was so closely associated with car parts. He started making sculptures out of urethane foam, some of which took the form of sofas, one version of which was put into production in Italy.

He experimented with large-format photography and in 1968 made a cult film, *The Secret Life of Hernando Cortez*, which starred Andy Warhol acolytes Taylor

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Mead and Ultra Violet and boasted, according to the All Movie Guide, "gymnastic sexual liaisons in a variety of places, including trees".

His work was less popular in Europe, where the mythology of the car has less resonance – though he rejected interpretations of his work as examining American consumerism or desire for freedom.

Nevertheless, it clearly prefigures the work of later artists who made art out of parts of cars, from the French artist César to Richard Prince. A retrospective of Chamberlain's work, which the artist helped put together, will show at the Guggenheim museum in New York in February, also the venue of his first retrospective in 1971. The gallery said it was saddened by the news of his death.

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