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John Chamberlain (1927-2011)

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Stalwart sculptor John Chamberlain died yesterday, age 84. He's best known for crumpled sculptures made from car metal that was crushed, twisted, bent and manipulated like balls of paper or compressed into slender, towering totems. A formidable personality on the New York art scene for decades, Chamberlain once said that he got his color from de Kooning and his structure from Franz Kline, both of whom he befriended after moving to New York in 1956. In addition to Abstract Expressionism, he was more often associated with Minimalism for his sometimes spare forms and monochromic pieces, and with Pop art for his use of bright colors and his engagement with car culture.



[VIEW SLIDESHOW](#) ; Chamberlain's final installation at the Pace Gallery, 2011.;



Chamberlain was fairly consistent in his choice of materials over the years, but occasionally experimented with alternatives like urethane foam and Plexiglas. His work varied in form, scale and method of manipulation, from tied up foam and paper bags to crushed oil barrels. Some of his works appear to be wrought from very few elements while others are a dense conglomeration of multiple pieces.

Chamberlain's upcoming Guggenheim retrospective, now a memorial exhibition, was announced earlier this month by the museum, where the artist held his first museum solo in 1971. It will be his first U.S. museum survey since 1986. Organized by Guggenheim senior curator Susan Davidson, it will contain 95 works spanning his 60-year career. Titled "John Chamberlain: Choices," the show takes place Feb. 24 to May 13, and then travels to the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao, March–

September 2013.

Born in 1927 in Rochester, Ind., Chamberlain attended the Art Institute of Chicago (1951–52) but bristled at what he considered conservative teachers. He then went to the groundbreaking Black Mountain College (1955–56), where he met Elaine Grulkowski, the first of five wives. Early on he was inspired by the welded steel works by David Smith. Chamberlain first showed at Martha Jackson Gallery in 1956, and later at Leo Castelli. Since 1987, he had been a solid member of the Pace Gallery stable but abruptly moved to Gagolian early this year.

Around the same time, Chamberlain was also in the news because of the resolution of a [five-year-long legal battle with former Warhol assistant Gerard Malanga](#).

Despite his frail health in recent years, Chamberlain continued to be prolific, [directing the production of his work from an armchair in his vast studio on Shelter Island](#), at the eastern end of Long Island. He even launched a new series of photo-based works, or "Pictures," as he called them, which were shown earlier this fall at Steven Kasher Gallery in Chelsea. As with his sculptures, the images are compressed, elongated and otherwise altered, then juxtaposed in brilliant color combinations on 8-foot-tall canvases-like flattened versions of his sculptures with

figurative elements thrown in.

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