

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

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whitehot | June 2011, John Chamberlain @ Gagosian Gallery



*John Chamberlain, HAWKFLIESAGAIN, 2010
Painted and chrome-plated steel, 270 x 311 x 221 cm
Artwork Copyright John Chamberlain
Courtesy of the artis and Gagosian Gallery, photo by Mike Bruce*

John Chamberlain: New Sculpture
Gagosian Gallery, Britannia Street
6-24 Britannia Street
London WC1X 9JD
20th May through 18th June

When John Chamberlain made his first assemblage from automobile parts, *Short-stop*, in 1957 he was using discarded and forgotten fragments from the American car dream. During World War II, American automobile manufacturers stopped making cars and converted their assembly lines and factories over to war production. But when the boys returned from war, automobile manufacturing resumed. The good old American heroes married their gals, got a good job in the city, bought a house in the newly sprawling suburbs and bought a shiny new Cadillac. Owning a car in the 1950s wasn't simply a status symbol, it was the ultimate by-product of the American dream. That Chamberlain's assemblage *Short-stop* is composed of two fenders from a 1929 Ford he found rusting in Larry Rivers's backyard welded together highlights a sensitivity to industry, decay, detritus and excess, all by-products of a practice based on aesthetic exploration and chance encounters.

Since the 1950s, sculptures made from bent and crushed automobile parts have become Chamberlain's signature, although he has worked with brown paper bags, foam rubber, wood, iron, Mylar, colored glass, mirrors, Plexiglas, tin, aluminum foil and paper and cloth towels to make assemblages, as well as experimenting with photography, film and painting. Chamberlain insists that the individual pieces that make up his assemblages are divorced from their material past – he is interested in their aesthetic quality, their colour, structure and shape, not their historic indexical meaning. Although working with mangled, cut and twisted pieces of automobiles, Chamberlain claims that his work is not about car crashes or even the automobiles themselves, but rather detritus. He is interested in found materials, in amassing discarded parts and then finding chance encounters between the pieces, a process he describes simply as finding a 'fit'. Rather than predetermining the structure for his sculptures, Chamberlain lets the shapes and colours of the fragments dictate the composition. For Chamberlain, the pictorial effect outweighs the spatial and sculpture impact of his work. While made from an assemblage of parts, Chamberlain's works are not so much collage, where a mixture of pieces are added to a pre-existing structure, but a new form, born from the way in which the disparate parts balance and hold.

Chamberlain's new work currently on display at Gagosian, Britannia Street, London, reveals a subtlety and sophistication from the late career of an artist who has found confidence and poise from his continual investigation of assemblage and found materials. Far from repeating old motifs, these new sculptures, constructed from 1950s automobiles, are deft variations on the artist's signature melody. While Chamberlain's early work made use of the vibrant colours from the automobile scrapes, here the palette is subdued, limited to shades of tan, grey, black, white, silver and gold. Attention is drawn to the different finishes applied to the metal, from the matte paint to shiny chrome, creating a sense of visual tactility, a tangible play for the eyes that finds rhythmic variation in the physical construction and presence of the individual sculptures.



*John Chamberlain, WETSTARESCORT, 2011
Painted and chrome-plated steel, 351.8 x 216.5 x 190.5 cm
Courtesy of the artist and Gagosian Gallery, Photo by Mike Bruce*

Standing over six or seven feet high, each of Chamberlain's works have a stout, solid presence within the two galleries at Britannia Street. While static, the pieces invite the viewer to move around them, to follow the patterns of the pieces joining together and trace the ripples and twists of each individual piece of metal. In works such as *WETSTARESCORT* (2011), the slight changes in colour and shape of the pieces cause a shifting appreciation of the sculpture as a whole to a fascination with the individual metal fragments – the missing flecks of paint on a bent panel, the play of light of a thin, twisted golden band and the elegant curves of still intact silver wing-mirrors.

Chamberlain's interest in assemblage extends from the physical sculptures to their titles, which are cobbled together form a collection of gathered phrases, showing the artist's interest in a crossover of disciplines, between art and language, form and poetry. While a title such as *HAWKFLIESAGAIN* (2010) hardly describes the pieces, it adds a playful spirit to the work which gently leans to one side, reminiscent of a stuffed scarecrow in a field, or a bird leaning forward to take flight.

Made from the discarded fragments of metal gathered from automobile graveyards, Chamberlain's ready-made materials are the surplus remains of an American commodity fetish. However, far from a comment on consumerism or even the rise and fall of the American automobile industry, Chamberlain's new sculptures, made from 1950s automobiles, embrace the aesthetic potential provided by the fraktura of metal fragments, their material qualities and texture – qualities which, poignantly, would have been on the minds of the original designers of these automobiles. Chamberlain's work continues to be intriguing because appreciating each piece invites a multi-sensory reaction, both visual and physical. He shows the potential of sculpture to be more than a solid, stoic form; they are works formed like a piece of jazz improvisation, the separate pieces meeting like notes in the air, striking harmonics, and chords – atonal or harmonious – but ultimately coming together into a pleasing whole.

--Anne Blood completed her BA at the Courtauld in 2007. Last year she completed an MA in early 20th century Russian art with Professor John Milner. She is currently the Editorial Assistant at The Burlington Magazine.