

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

The New York Times

A Crusher of Cars, a Molder of Metal



The sculptor John Chamberlain in his studio at Shelter Island, N.Y.

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Published: May 8, 2011

SHELTER ISLAND, N.Y. — When a visitor pulled up outside an elegant shingled house here on a recent morning, three intact cars with familiar names — a Mitsubishi, a Land Rover, a Ford — were parked in the driveway. Next to them, wheel-less and sitting atop shipping pallets, were two sinuous, towering conglomerations of paint-encrusted steel that had clearly once been cars but that had been crushed, twisted, crumpled and squeezed into another realm of existence, somewhere between oblivion and timelessness.

The names of these vehicular things, according to paper tags dangling from them, were ones Detroit would never have thought up: “Peaudesoiemusic” and for the other, “Wetstarsescort,” which sounded like the title of either a bebop album or a soft-core porn movie.

No tags were needed to identify the man responsible for these creations. Anyone with a passing familiarity with postwar American art would have been able to identify them across a football field as the work of John Chamberlain, who has almost singlehandedly given automotive metal a place in the history of sculpture.

Now 84 and in bad health for years, he no longer cuts the outside, profane, hard-drinking and wildly industrious figure he once did in the art world. But he recently made big news when he left his gallery of more than 20 years, Pace, to join the larger, flashier empire of Gagosian, where a show of new pieces — including the two in the driveway, awaiting a truck — opened on Thursday on West 24th Street in Chelsea; another is to open on May 20 at one of Gagosian’s London outposts.

Mr. Chamberlain has never much liked granting audiences to people with notebooks or tape recorders. (Even when the Smithsonian Institution got him to sit down in 1991, the record noted: “Chamberlain was reluctant to be interviewed.”) But he extended an invitation for a reporter to visit, perhaps to demonstrate, as he prepares to step onto a larger stage, that he is still very much involved in the making of his pieces.

That morning, past 9,000 hangarlike square feet littered with scraps of fenders, car hoods rolled like tortillas and enough finished sculpture to fill a museum, Mr. Chamberlain was found sitting in a wicker chair in the living quarters of his studio, with his back to a big picture window. Next to him were his fourth wife, Prudence Fairweather, 60, and a combination walker and rolling chair, which he uses to get around. He was told that it was nice to meet him.

He extended a hand and looked up from beneath the brim of his black fedora. "I wouldn't be so sure about that if I were you," he said.

Today would not be a workday, he declared, if that was what anybody was expecting: "I work one day on, one day off now. I worked yesterday." But in the middle of his studio space sits a strange battered-looking chair made out of piles of rubber bands. "And that's where they park me," he said, when he is making work. Sitting there he oversees a team of fabricators from Belgium who, at his direction, take up pieces of metal, sometimes put them in a big blue crushing machine, and weld or simply fit them together like puzzle pieces, rotating the sculpture as it comes together so he can see it.

His lungs are bad, and he can't take much welding smoke, so he often wears a mask. Not long ago both the rubber-band chair and Mr. Chamberlain briefly caught fire when welding sparks shot the wrong way. "It freaked all of us out, naturally," Ms. Fairweather said. "But for him it was just another day at the office, I guess."

Born in Rochester, Ind., the son of a tavern keeper but raised mostly by his grandmother after his parents divorced, Mr. Chamberlain made his first sculptural works out of welded iron, in thrall to the Abstract Expressionist sculptor David Smith. But in the late 1950s he discovered that automotive detritus was both plentiful and already covered in wonderfully weathered paint that looked as if Willem de Kooning himself had put it there. "It was like, God, I finally found an art supply, and it was so cheap it just made you laugh," he said.

Within a decade of becoming famous as the crushed-car sculptor, he grew weary of both the heavy metaphorical baggage usually hung on his pieces — that they represented the wreckage of Manifest Destiny or of the American dream itself — and the endless automotive questions. "What the hell — do you talk to a painter about what kind of paint he's using?" he bellowed, sounding both menacing and comical, like Warren Oates doing a Walter Brennan impression. "It's boring."

He worked for many years on pieces made from other things, some as pliant as foam rubber, paper and foil. (He speaks of his obsession with the idea of "articulate wadding.") But he has never completely abandoned his signature car parts. And a few years ago, when he and his wife came across an auction of the holdings of an unusual vintage car museum in Switzerland, they bought dozens of pristine 1940s and '50s Cadillacs, Fords and Chevys. Mr. Chamberlain wasted no time, as he said with a gleam in his eye, taking them right to a shop and "yanking the motors out of them, and the transmissions and the brakes and the suspensions, the glass, all the wheels, the upholstery, the —"

"Everything Chamberlain hates," Ms. Fairweather interjected, using her husband's last name, as she always does.

He cut her off, leaning forward and glaring: "Because it's not useful to me!"

Wrestling with his own compromised corporeal material, he said, is a much more uncertain business. "I'm going through one of those multi-month illnesses that either you get through or you die," he reported, matter-of-factly. "But I think I'm going to get through this one. Doing the work here is very helpful. If you stop working, that's all she wrote."

It would certainly be nice if he could smoke again. Or drink more, he said. ("I once had a drink with Billie Holiday, and I smoked a joint with Louis Armstrong. Those are my real claims to fame. Write that down.") But he is on oxygen and doesn't care for the mild clientele at Shelter Island bars. He sighed, stared at his visitor, grimaced, then grinned broadly, flashing his teeth.

"I could complain," he said. "But I gave up complaining years ago. It never seems to do any good."