

GAGOSIAN GALLERY



John Chamberlain at Gagosian Gallery

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John Chamberlain shows that bulldozing car fenders can be surprisingly beautiful, as Jess Jones-Berney discovers at his latest exhibition.



When I first see John Chamberlain's *New Sculpture* exhibition at the Gagosian Gallery, I can't help thinking of that scene when Superman turns bad in the third film, instantly appearing more stubbled and beating Clark about the head with a car fender. Only because it's the surrounding debris from this scrap yard that would get John Chamberlain hot under the collar, I imagine.

For the best part of fifty years the American sculptor has made a name for himself by getting physical with automobile parts; beating, bending and hammering everything from bumpers to bonnets into submission. But despite his brutal methods, Chamberlain's concertinaed cars are in fact a thing of unconventional beauty, dotted about the white gallery space in varying sizes of obscurity.

My immediate thought is how does he do this? Then again, part of me would rather go on imagining some giant playing accordion with a car for a couple of hours. It all began when the artistic vandal took a shine to a 1929 Ford in Larry Rivers' Southampton yard. He ripped off the two fenders and bulldozed over them with a car to create the desired impressions, finally welding them together. And voila! His signature car-trashing aesthetic was born, remaining relatively distinct bar Dirk Skreber's recent mangling of a red Mitsubishi and black Hyundai.

But what sets Chamberlain's process apart is its Abstract Expressionist-inspired roots. Not too surprising considering his local was New York's Cedar Tavern in the '60s, frequented by the likes of Rothko, Pollock, Goldberg and de Kooning. And standing here I can see Kline's trademark black block brushworks embedded within three-dimensional cream; while the exuberant spontaneity of each piece calls to mind the compressed frenzy of colours innate to de Kooning's canvases. It's like each sculpture is ready to burst with compressed energy, like Mentos in Diet Coke.

There's also an unexpected lyricism here, and every angle offers a totally different perspective. Take one of the smallest works; a cream and silver compression of metal that appears lanky and malnourished compared to the others. Part of a mangled door hangs bent like the droopy head of a decrepit alien, yet from another angle it could well be the remains of a butchered organ. But the malleability of the work's material and meaning is something Chamberlain welcomes: "Every time I turn around I see more openings for the material to do something else."

And it's exactly his ability to see potential in the the crappy remains of a car that is so impressive, how Chamberlain is able to literally take one man's trash and create colossal conglomerations that are surprisingly beautiful treasures.

New Sculptures is on at Gagosian Gallery until 8th July 2011.