

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

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Beyond the Junkyard

'John Chamberlain: Choices' at Guggenheim Museum
By Karen Rosenberg



Sara Krulwich/The New York Times

John Chamberlain: Choices, at the Guggenheim, includes “Hillbilly Galoot” (1960).

The postwar sculptor John Chamberlain, who died in December, manipulated crushed car parts into abstract clusters that are both gorgeous and terrifying. As installed on the Guggenheim Museum’s curved ramps for the retrospective exhibition “John Chamberlain: Choices,” they look, inevitably, like mangled wrecks on a speedway.



Sara Krulwich/The New York Times

John Chamberlain's “Sphinxgrin Two” (2010), at the Guggenheim.

Yet the show goes to great lengths to extricate Mr. Chamberlain from what he called “the car-crash syndrome.” It includes work made from foam, aluminum foil, paper and plexiglass, and emphasizes the collage process behind the metal sculptures rather than the material that went into them.

The Guggenheim’s exhibition is the first full-dress Chamberlain survey in this country since 1986. Arriving as it does a mere two months after Mr. Chamberlain’s death, it will, for better or worse, exert a stronger-than-usual influence on his legacy.

Crucially, it defines him as an artist of intent rather than incident. As the artist Charles Ray writes in the show’s catalog, “In a sense, there are no dents in a Chamberlain — when we look for the spot welds, we find the beauty of deliberate decisions.”

The show’s subtitle, “Choices,” reinforces this sense of control. It refers to a quotation from Mr. Chamberlain: “Some seem to think that I work with found pieces, but I don’t. They’re chosen, you see.”

But the retrospective also confirms many things we already know, or suspect, about Mr. Chamberlain: That he was an ace colorist, who used the scrap yard as his palette. That he made deforming big chunks of automobiles look as easy as crushing a soda can or scrunching up a piece of paper. That the suggestion of sudden violence, whether car generated or not, gives his art much of its power.

And this too: that Mr. Chamberlain’s late sculptures, with their interlaced ribbons and densely packed rosettes of chromium-plated steel, are overworked to the point of fussiness.

Happily, the 100-piece, mostly chronological installation affords plenty of space to the dynamic, danger-laced works of the 1960s and ’70s. Here especially the curator Susan Davidson deftly navigates Mr. Chamberlain’s many contradictions. He was a trained hairdresser who got into drunken street fights, an East Coaster whose work seemed steeped in California car culture, a large-scale sculptor who periodically turned out twee tabletop constructions.

The first few ramps make clear why Mr. Chamberlain’s sculpture was hailed, almost from its inception, as a three-dimensional answer to Abstract Expressionist painting. But alongside early homages to peers like David Smith and de Kooning are collages, made from scraps of fabric and paper roughly stapled to painted fiberboard, that look back several decades to the German Dadaist Kurt Schwitters.

The red-and-silver “Hillbilly Galoot” (1960) ushers in a group of works that somehow qualify as Pop art, even though they are made of damaged goods. (It’s telling that Warhol bought a sculpture from Mr. Chamberlain’s 1962 show at Castelli and displayed it in the Factory.)

It may be difficult to imagine now, but in their time Mr. Chamberlain’s early sculptures were seen as a flagrant violation of the formalist idea that color was for painting only. As Donald Judd wrote in 1960, “Colored sculpture has been discussed and hesitantly attempted for some time, but not with such implications.”

Mr. Chamberlain’s monochromatic works, however, can be just as powerful. Scuffs and scrapes give the creamy surface of “Velvet White” (1962) — which Klaus Kertess once compared to a “battered but determined bride” — much of its personality.

Works like “Velvet White” leapfrog past Pop, to Minimal and Process art. But critics tended to sensationalize them, fixating on their intimations of death and disaster. By the late 1960s the car had become a kind of albatross for Mr. Chamberlain. He found relief in, of all places, Los Angeles. In seven years of bicoastal living, custom-car culture and the associated “Finish Fetish” movement fed a period of wild experimentation with materials other than metal.

This part of the show is a revelation. Here are doughy garlic-knots of industrial foam bound by ropes, slick hot-rod paintings of lacquer on Formica, delicate blossoms of resin-coated paper, and molten-looking folds of iridescent plexiglass.



Sara Krulwich/The New York Times
“Hatband” (1960), on view at the John Chamberlain retrospective at the Guggenheim.

When Mr. Chamberlain came back to metal, around 1974, he made some changes. He typically focused each sculpture on a specific car part: just fenders, for instance, or bumpers. He started to do more to the surfaces of these components, spraying or splashing paint on them. And his compositions became increasingly convoluted, even baroque, as in the wriggling wall relief “White Thumb Four” (1978).

They got bigger too, as Mr. Chamberlain took advantage of spacious new studios in Sarasota, Fla., and on Shelter Island. The torqued pillars of “The Devil and the Deep Blue Sea” (1983) make up a nine-foot colonnade; the more recent “C’estzesty” (2011) rises to 19 feet and has been installed outside the museum.

In his catalog essay Mr. Ray elegantly summarizes the problem many viewers have with Chamberlain’s late works. “The early work had topology rather than surface, compression rather than form,” he writes; the later sculptures “had shifted from being made of cars to being made from cars.” I’d agree, adding that by limiting himself to pieces of similar size and proportion Mr. Chamberlain was, in effect, painting with just one kind of brush stroke.

Another issue, I suspect, is that the darkness of the early works gives way to unchecked exuberance. Works from the early 1990s, in particular, bring to mind wedding cakes, clusters of cheese straws and bags of discarded wrapping paper.

But there are signs of a very late return to form; the torpedolike “Peaudesoiemusic” (2011) has skinny fenders that wrap around wider curls of metal and a palette that’s limited to blue, yellow and green. Here Mr. Chamberlain fits together not just parts of a car but also incongruous fragments of art history: Bernini, Rodin, Matisse. And to paraphrase the artist, these pieces are not found, but chosen.