

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

HYPERALLERGIC

Mangled Cars and Sleek Architecture

Michael Busch



John Chamberlain, "Dhuha Ditty" (1983) (all photos taken by the author for Hyperallergic)

At first blush, the *Chamberlain/Prouvé* show at Gagosian's Chelsea gallery appears to hinge solely on obvious contrasts. Jean Prouvé's architectural works are sleek and perfectly ordered. John Chamberlain's crushed-up car parts celebrate messy lines and jagged edges. Where the French designer privileges environments free from clutter, the American packs in as much action as space allows. If Chamberlain is intent on establishing the dramatic gesture, Prouvé's concern resides chiefly with function.

The apparent differences mask a common inspiration. Both Chamberlain and Prouvé were committed to uncovering the hidden potential of basic materials to take on new and unexpected forms through simple processes of manipulation. On this point, Prouvé could have been speaking on behalf of both artists when he remarked, "It seemed to me that sheet steel offered unlimited possibilities: cut up, then bent, rolled, and welded, it let you create all the profiles you needed for specific purposes, from straight lines to angles and curves." Yet the final products of the artists' work couldn't be more different.

Dominating the gallery's large showroom stands "Ferembal Demountable House": a squat structure originally designed to function as office space for an industrial manufacturer in Nancy, France. From the outside, the structure looks like a wooden trailer park home; inside, it takes on the feel of a cozy cabin in the forest. Scattered throughout the house are five of Chamberlain's smaller pieces, serving as stand-ins for the people who might otherwise have inhabited the space during work hours.

The choice to situate Chamberlain's work in Prouvé's tiny house serves both artists well. The sculptures invest Prouvé's structure with a sense of depth and comfortable design that would otherwise be lacking were it empty. At the same time, the subdued interior of Prouvé's house utterly transforms Chamberlain's work. Seen in the clinical fluorescence of a gallery, the muscularity and flamboyance of his sculptures scream out for attention. Inside "Ferembal Demountable House," Chamberlain's work takes on a decidedly more intimate flavor. Here, the subtleties and rich interplay of color in the sculptures slowly reveal themselves to the viewer.

"Ferembal" and the other house on show, "Temporary School of Villejuif," testify to Prouvé's preoccupation with mobile architecture. Beginning in the 1950s, the designer embarked on a series of commissions that aimed to craft lightweight buildings that could be rapidly assembled, taken down, or moved — structures that represented an ultimate model for temporary housing. This preoccupation with movement and flexibility couldn't be more at odds with the heavy, compressed presence of Chamberlain's sculptures.

To the extent that mobility factors into Chamberlain's work, it exists to be disabled entirely. Chamberlain may have been looking to tease abstract expressionist forms from conventional automotive design, but the effect runs much deeper. Hunks of recognizable metal, which once combined to move powerfully across distances long and short, get twisted beyond repair in Chamberlain's hands. Despite their bright colors and shiny edges, there is simply no getting around the fact that he presents his audiences with densely mangled car parts — evidence, often, that more than a machine's simple utility has been erased.

There's subversive politics at work in Chamberlain's art, as well. On the face of it, Chamberlain was quite literally smashing the iconic heart of American industrial power when he began crumpling up cars in the 1950s. But his work also directly challenges the narratives of freedom and convenience that defined the golden age of US automotive manufacturing — precisely those qualities Prouvé was chasing in his own designs, no matter how pared down. The fruits of those efforts take shape nicely in the latter's "Temporary School of Villejuif," a striking red steel structure with large glass windows, wooden floors, and a cantilevered ceiling. The schoolhouse was intended for a suburban Paris neighborhood, but stood ready to be packed-up and transported anywhere.

It's not a perfect show, to be sure. In one gallery, for example, Prouvé's elegant steel supports line up against the far wall like sentries guarding tiny models of the designer's various architectural schemes which are displayed across the middle of the room. Given the size and force of everything else on view (including Chamberlain's playful "Dearie Oso Enseau," flanking the models to one side), Prouvé's miniatures feel out of place.

Yet overall, Gagosian's *Chamberlain/Prouvé* succeeds by productively filtering each artist's work through that of the other. Chamberlain's restless ostentation pairs nicely with Prouvé's understated elegance; neither threatens to overtake the other. Indeed, one is left with both a more textured appreciation for both men's ideas, as well as the nagging suspicion that there's a deeper discussion to be had in their dialogue of difference.

Chamberlain/Prouvé continues at Gagosian Gallery (555 West 24th Street, Chelsea, Manhattan) through April 4.