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GAGOSIAN GALLERY

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Perfect Fit

by Lynne Cooke and Larry Bell

John Chamberlain, *CA-D'ORO*, 1964, painted steel, 34 x 37 x 32".

SOMETIMES SPIKY AND ANGULAR, sometimes almost molten in their suppleness, the junked-car sculptures of JOHN CHAMBERLAIN are among the most iconic artworks of the postwar period. Yet automobiles were not the only vehicles of Chamberlain's career-long exploration of color and volume, surface and structure: The artist, who died on December 21, 2011, at the age of eighty-four, wrested the same remarkable pliability from paper, Plexiglas, and foam as from steel plates and shards. As the survey "John Chamberlain: Choices," curated by Susan Davidson and recently opened at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York, demonstrates, Chamberlain deployed all of these materials with an exuberance, acuity, and openness to sculpture's social valences that was to influence generations of artists. Here, curator LYNNE COOKE and artist LARRY BELL pay tribute to Chamberlain and his extraordinarily elastic oeuvre.

LYNNE COOKE

LATE LAST DECEMBER, halfway through the Museum of Modern Art's de Kooning retrospective, John Chamberlain's sculpture irresistibly sprang to mind—as if the Dutchman's extraordinary mid-'50s abstractions (*Interchanged*, 1955; *Gotham News*, 1955; *The Time of the Fire*, 1956) had conjured their three-dimensional counterparts made from the remnants of crushed automobiles. Perhaps no other artist took on de Kooning's legacy more convincingly and more fluently than Chamberlain. Composed from the hoods and bumpers, fenders and fins, of junked car bodies, Chamberlain's vividly hued abstractions are also based on a late-Cubist infrastructure and are similarly replete with a dynamic, gritty, urban ethos. Uncannily, the sculptor's later work moved in tandem with that of his mentor. Thus from the '80s, his work too often featured curling, convoluted, fluttering, ribbonlike forms. Sometimes in polished chrome, more often in shades of white, cream, and black, and occasionally in primary reds and blues, these crimped, attenuated metal strips seem to cascade even as they are deftly bundled into place. Unlike most traditional sculptors, Chamberlain instinctively thought in terms of volume rather than of mass and weight. Circumnavigating one of his freestanding sculptures, its profiles unfold to reveal glimpses of a hollow core molded by the arcing, overlapping, and intersection of colored planes. It sits easily and lightly on the ground, for Chamberlain sought what his friend the poet Robert Creeley nicely described as "the adjectival characterization of 'fluff' or 'glare.'"[1] Whereas David Smith, the Abstract Expressionist sculptor of record, employed welding to cantilever massive steel elements into space in defiance of gravity, Chamberlain seemed to fit his forms together casually and yet with a

For Chamberlain, recourse to welding served merely to secure what already held itself in place of its own accord.

Below: **John Chamberlain, *Phantom Snatch*, 1991**, painted and chromium-plated steel, stainless steel, 80⅝ x 85⅝ x 38".

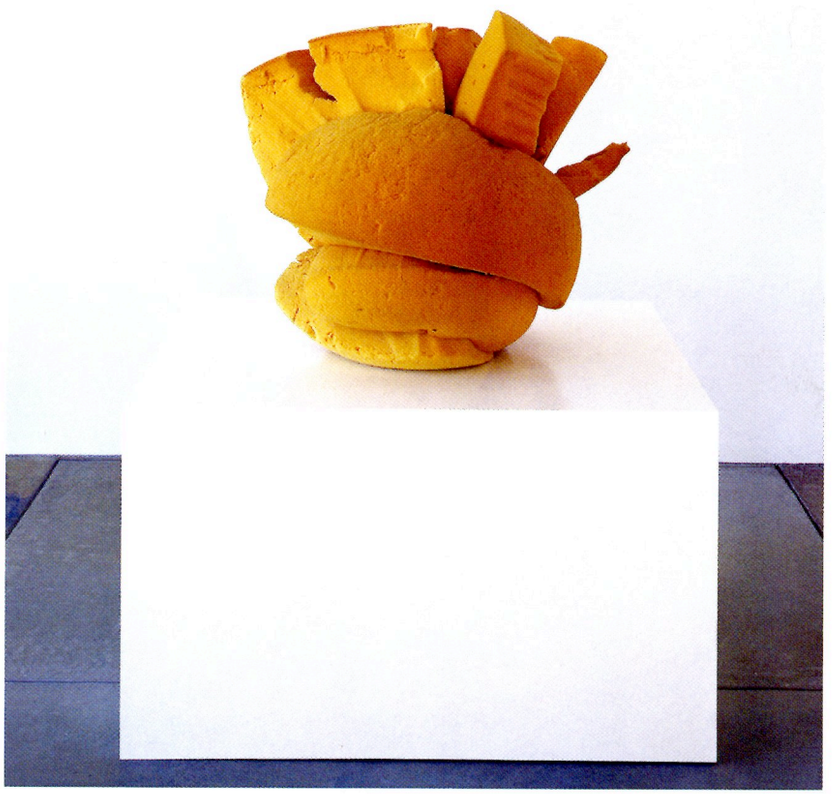
Right: **John Chamberlain, *Crowded Hearts*, 1987**, painted and chromium-plated steel, 114 x 65 x 41".

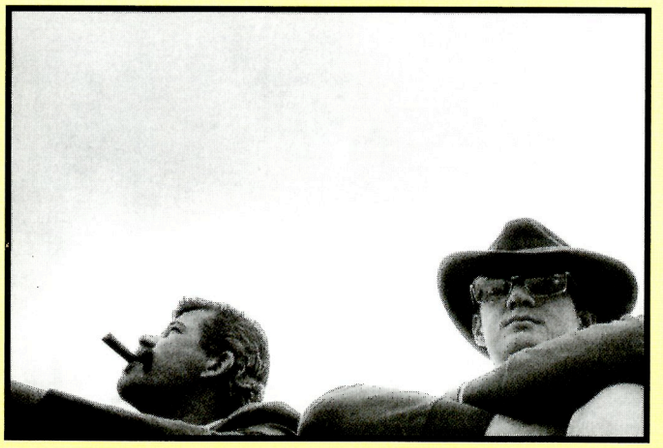
certain inevitability. For him, recourse to welding served merely to secure what already held itself in place of its own accord. And color, not drawing (Smith's preferred mode for defining forms in space), preoccupied Chamberlain, who has been acclaimed as one of the great colorists of the past century. "The hard, sweet, pastel enamels, frequently roses and ceruleans, of Detroit's imitation elegance for the poor" are the hallmark of a distinctive palette, which "is as particular, complex and structural as any good painter's," noted Donald Judd in a much-quoted review from 1962.[2]

Though stylistically Chamberlain's work is heir to gestural Abstract Expressionism, its moods are fundamentally different. Rejecting his predecessors' angst and dark interiority, he opted for emotional detachment. Yet while his work may be identified with that of his peers (Warhol, Judd, and Oldenburg) to the degree that its affects derive from its surfaces, in most other respects it stands apart. At no time was this more evident than in the later '60s, when, fed up with reductive critiques that related his sculptures to car crashes and thence to the violence supposedly endemic to contemporary American culture, Chamberlain took a seven-year sabbatical from his signature medium. Turning to a range of novel materials—aluminum, urethane foam, Plexiglas, and paper bags—he wadded, lassoed, melted, and balled them into freestanding objects.[3] Unfortunately, given its inherent fragility, most of that work no longer survives. Among its highlights was a series of medium-size urethane sculptures made by squeezing and tightly tying blocks of foam at midsection, so that their ends and edges curl and twist with voluptuous abandon. Sensual and erotic like Oldenburg's related soft sculptures, they forgo Oldenburg's melancholia in favor of irrepressible ebullience.

Known as barges, the monumental couches that Chamberlain began producing

John Chamberlain, *Untitled*, 1966, urethane foam, cord, 29 x 32½ x 26¾".





John Chamberlain and Larry Bell at the motorcycle races, Bridgehampton, NY, 1966. Photo: Barbara Brown.

LARRY BELL

MY FIRST MEETING WITH JOHN WAS IN 1962. I was at the Ferus Gallery when Walter Hopps introduced John to a few artists who were hanging around the gallery. I was sitting behind the desk, and Walter introduced him to me; he came over, and when I put my hand out to shake his, he grabbed me by the shirt and gave me a big mouth kiss with his tongue down my throat.

He was with Neil Williams, and they were looking for a studio to make some work for a show he wanted to do here in LA. I helped him find a place on Marine Street near my place. At that time, Venice and Ocean Park were called Desolation Row. It was Appalachia-by-the-Sea and it suited all of us just fine. Cheap spaces were abundant and good fun was the order of the day.

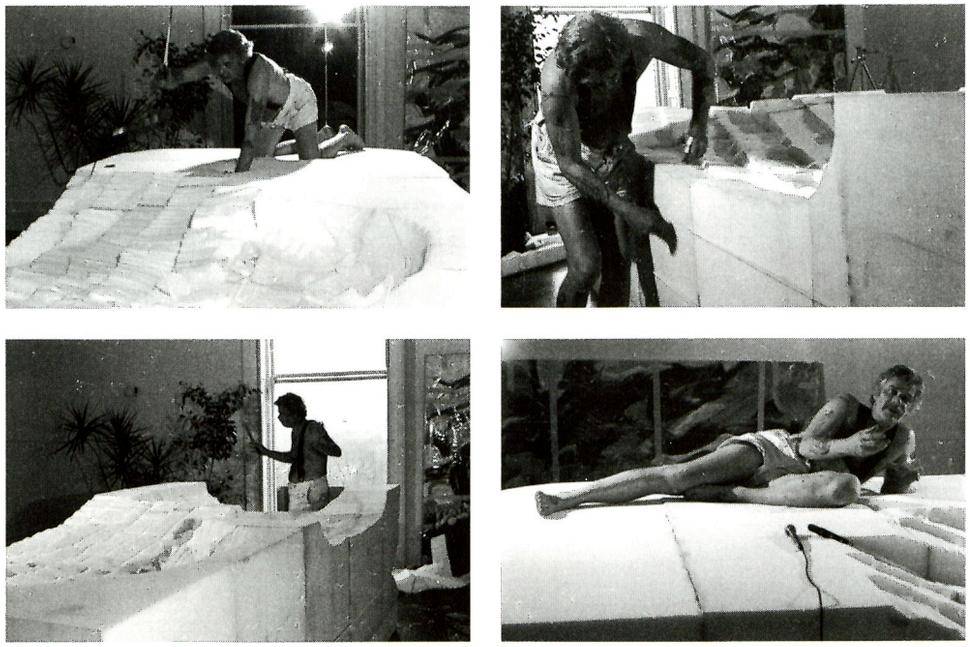
John went to work on his sculptures, and Neil set up a wall to do some painting. I had never met anyone like either of those two bozos. I was twenty-two. When I went to New York for my first show at the Pace Gallery in '65, both Neil and John were my guides and protectors in the big city. Most of the people I came to know were through them.

Over the years, John proved himself to be one of the most human creatures I have ever met. His ability to be improvisational with his materials astounded me; I had a totally different concept of studio activities.

At the end of the '60s, John came back to LA and stayed with me while I applied color to some acrylic boxes that he had melted down into sculptures. I kept telling him we had to make considerations for the proper handling of the acrylic before we coated it, but John would have none of it. His act depended on total spontaneity. So each of the works has plenty of John's fingerprints on the surface and under the coatings. Conservators should find it easy to ensure these works are John's, as they are printed everywhere with his hands.

Around then, John also did an edition of resin works based on a twisted paper bag. This coincided with a breakup with his love at the time, a gal named Muffy who was a chef somewhere. He was devastated and walked the beach for days, drunk, with snot running out his nose. I have some pictures of him during that episode, in a rumpled thrift-store dark suit and flip-flops.

When he came into the studio, the first thing he would do was remove his clothes, everything except a tank top, and stand around my place like a



John Chamberlain during the shooting of Anton Perich's *John Chamberlain: The Hersey Couch*, New York, 1976. Photos: Anton Perich.

during this period are among his most important and influential works. They originate in what has been portrayed as a gesture of serendipitous ad hoc–ism, of a kind that dominates the official narrative of his artistic evolution: In need of furniture for his empty apartment, Chamberlain cut the cords binding one of his many unsold foam pieces and then set to with a large knife, transforming it into an impromptu sofa. The barges are imbued with his signature wit, as underscored by the laconic title, "F-----g Couches," that he gave to the 1972 show at New York's Lo Giudice Gallery at which they had their commercial debut.[4] When covered with sheets or, better, with a silky parachute, they invite a polymorphous sociality fully in keeping with the bohemian spirit of the late '60s. A twenty-four-minute video shot by Anton Perich in 1976 shows the genesis of one such piece. Stripped to his shorts and egged on by a pair of nubile assistants, the raffish forty-something vigorously attacks a block of raw urethane that almost fills the living room of an apartment (in the storied Dakota, no less). This vignette ends with the trio installing themselves in situ. As the artist reclines languidly on his back, one of his companions leans forward to inhale a line of white powder.

Chamberlain himself took up filmmaking around this time. The highlight of what proved a somewhat inconclusive foray is *The Secret Life of Hernando Cortez*, 1968, a fifty-eight-minute feature that stars Warhol staples Taylor Mead and Ultra Violet. Reducing narrative to a series of sexual encounters, the lushly hued movie quickly gained cult status. As with most of Chamberlain's work, "emotion and sexuality and drive" lie at the heart of its aesthetic: Intelligence had to be left out, the artist contended, "because I really don't exercise too much of that."[5] Nonetheless, an almost infallible visual intelligence underpins his work—as Judd, his most perceptive and committed early champion, convincingly argued—and is at its most acute in the best of his metal and foam sculptures. *Fit* was Chamberlain's preferred term for describing the way he composed. As both a verb and an adjective, it could be a tactic and a quality (unquestionable, inevitable, organic). In recent years, scholars have parsed this notion in a variety of ways. Thomas Crow, for example, likens fit, which he sees as intuitive, to the dynamics found in self-organizing

When covered with sheets or, better, with a silky parachute, Chamberlain's foam couches invite a polymorphous sociality fully in keeping with the bohemian spirit of the late '60s.

Right: **John Chamberlain, *Guggenheim Barge* (detail), 1971,** urethane foam, cord, video installation. Installation view, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York.

Below: **John Chamberlain, *The Secret Life of Hernando Cortez*, 1968,** still from a color film in 16 mm, 58 minutes.

John Chamberlain, *Lady*, 1962, painted and chromium-plated steel, 47 x 42 x 39".

systems both natural and man-made,[6] while Dave Hickey, who defines it as "the problem of formulating complex design problems," proposes that it is "only recognizable in its defect": It makes itself apparent only when it doesn't fully succeed.[7]

Ample evidence of Chamberlain's vaunted visual intelligence was memorably on view several years ago at the Chinati Foundation in Marfa. During the '80s, in what was then a sleepy rural town in west Texas, Judd had converted a cavernous warehouse into a space dedicated to the display of Chamberlain's work. After stripping the building down to its industrial skeleton and inserting large windows and doors on all four sides to flood the interior with daylight, Judd installed some twenty-two of Chamberlain's finest metal sculptures. To enhance the kind of slow, close scrutiny he deemed appropriate to any engagement with a work of art, Judd then placed a large barge near the entrance. Here, visitors could hang out and watch *The Secret Life of Hernando Cortez* on the two monitors that flanked the couch. In 2005, the Chinati Foundation hosted a temporary exhibition of most of the extant foam sculptures in one of the former military barracks that Judd had also commandeered for the display of artworks. This rare opportunity to view the frail foam pieces in conjunction with what remains an unsurpassed presentation of metal works proved unforgettable. The question of whether a full-scale retrospective better serves this most protean and profligate of sculptors is tested by the survey "John Chamberlain: Choices," currently on view at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York City. Spanning almost six decades of work, this timely exhibition encompasses painting and photography as well as some eighty sculptures in a range of materials. As of this writing, I have yet to see it. But I wonder if it is not, paradoxically, in situations like that unforgettable occasion in Marfa in 2005—with its fine-grained and apposite conjunction of metal and foam sculptures in what were singular, even ideal circumstances—that his enduring contribuition will be best remembered. □

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For notes, see page 300.

tour guide. His schlong was quite prominent. I would have guests come over, and John would just stand there looking at us. I would introduce him and he would nod his head but say nothing; his schlong said it all. He had a rooster and a pig tattoo, one on each foot.

In 1971, the great Sylmar earthquake shook Venice Beach. John was asleep on a waterbed in the room next to my studio when he heard a lot of glass breaking. He thought I was just over there breaking up works. When he stepped out of his waterbed, he stepped onto a floor that was rolling just like the waterbed and experienced his first earthquake.

We were all together in New York at the studio of Janet Webb the evening Tony Shafrazi graffitied *Guernica* at MoMA. Neil was furious with Tony, he wanted to wring his neck, but John thought it was an interesting thing for someone to do and was quite philosophical about the event. Everyone else was freaked.

Neil and John were about as close as any bozos got in those days. I counted on their input for what was going on. Another associate was Mickey Ruskin, who owned Max's Kansas City on Park Avenue South and Seventeenth Street. We hung out there almost every night. I was living in New Mexico by that time and when I would come into the city, which was frequently, I would go to Max's and find out what was happening in town. I recall one evening when I arrived and Mickey told me that John and Neil were at their usual table with two other bozos: William Burroughs and de Kooning. All were drunk beyond belief. Neil threw me into the booth and proceeded to pour cognac down my throat until I had caught up with them. I am still hungover from that night.

The anecdotes are endless, and I could go on forever recounting them, but it makes me tired to reminisce like that. At John's brief memorial at Saint Patrick's Cathedral in January, I saw a few of the old pals that I met through those guys all those years ago.

I consider myself blessed to have known John. He came out to Taos to visit me about two years before he passed, but the thin air troubled him, and it was hard for him to move very fast. We have all lost an iconic pal, someone who knew that improvisation, spontaneity, and intuition were at once paramount in the studio and not an issue; you just did it! His work was his teacher, as it is for all of us. □

LARRY BELL IS AN ARTIST BASED IN TAOS, NM.

John Chamberlain, *Penthouse #50*, 1969, watercolor and resin on paper, 5 x 6½ x 4½".