John Chamberlain's sculptures epitomize the creative act: to take raw, everyday material and transform the common into the uncommon.

Working with crushed automobile parts, Chamberlain consolidates disparate fragments of fenders, hoods, and bumpers into wall reliefs and free-standing pieces that possess both a monolithic presence and painterly verve. The crumpled and ragged-edged sculptures convey a euphoric sense of spontaneity and lyricism that contrasts with the base industrial materials from which they are made.

Like many artists of his generation, such as Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns, Chamberlain received minimal formal art training. Encouraged by a friend to try welding, he began to make sculpture in 1954 in Chicago, inspired by David Smith's "Agricola" series. Chamberlain's linear welded pieces made from discarded farming tools. But after moving to New York in 1956, Chamberlain changed his direction, finding new possibilities in abstract expressionism. Maturing as an artist in the fifties in Manhattan, he responded to the spontaneous, gestural power of paintings by artists such as Willem de Kooning and Franz Kline. Chamberlain began to translate this forceful vigor into his three-dimensional work beginning in 1957 with "Shortstop", made from flattened parts of an old 1929 Ford. Gradually, he developed a more dramatic sense of mass and volume in which the car fragments seem to twist and writhe in space, just as an abstract expressionist brainstorm races and cuts across the canvas surface. Like the abstract expressionists, Chamberlain also sees the creative process as being open-ended: the sculptures are never preconceived but result from unpremeditated actions.

To retain this sense of open-endedness, Chamberlain employs a collage-like technique in which the automobile fragments are pieced together by intuition and chance. Seeking what he frequently refers to as "fit," Chamberlain sometimes cuts or reshapes the pieces and then spontaneously combines them, the final work remaining an unknown. Some, such as "Medina" series in 1964, possess the elegant, elongated contrapposto of a Greek statue. Others, such as the wall relief "Sudden Enclosures", 1965, are bulky and dense, taking the viewer's eye on an alluring trip over a convoluted topography of textures and colors.

Because Chamberlain works with crushed automobile parts, many observers have read violent symbolism into these sculptures. But this is far from the artist's intent. He chooses to work with these materials for one simple and pragmatic reason: they are essentially free. Three of four times a year, he scavenges junkyards for scrap metal, selecting rubbish that in his studio will become his art supplies. But Chamberlain also sees the ravaged sheets of steel as possessing an inherent softness, and part of his ongoing exploration has focused on this quality of malleability. Between 1967 and 1974, for example, Chamberlain completed several series of sculptures made of urethane foam, galvanized steel, and heavy gauge aluminum foil which were based on the common movement of the hand in wadding tissue paper or sponges, or crumpling empty cigarette packs. Folded, dented, and crushed, the sculptures are visual records of change and metamorphosis.

Since the early seventies, applied color has become an integral component of the work. Prior to this, the colors of the sculptures were the result of the deteriorated condition of the auto parts: a rusted red car hood, a marred and dented white fender. Now Chamberlain takes the liberty of painting the fragments. Paint is splattered, dripped, or sprayed on in a graffiti-like manner to each part before it is incorporated into the larger whole. The vivid colors and patterns—ranging from pearlstein lavendars to garish hues of red—add a visual tension to the ragged contours and surfaces of his sculptures.

For the last three decades, crushed automobile parts have become Chamberlain's signature medium. In spite of this apparent consistency, Chamberlain's overriding preoccupation is to tap into the unknown, to discover an uncommon place of knowledge. "I prefer to think about how art occurs by approaching an idea with an interest that then disappears into what's emerging next, something unknown," he has explained. "What I don't know is what I'm after."

Chamberlain was born in Rochester, Indiana, in 1927, and raised in Chicago. After serving in the Navy between 1943 and 1945, he studied at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago in 1951-52, and then at Black Mountain College, North Carolina, during the 1955-56 academic year before moving to New York in 1956. Between 1963 and 1977, Chamberlain lived and worked in a variety of locales across the country. In 1966, and again in 1977, he received a Guggenheim Fellowship. The artist currently lives in Sarasota, Florida, where he moved in 1980. He is represented by Pace Gallery, New York, and Margo Leavin Gallery, Los Angeles.

Karen Tsujimoto

Works in MATRIX:

All works are painted and chromium plated steel.


Selected one-person exhibitions since 1985:

- Galerie Fred Jahn, Munich, John Chamberlain: Oils, '86 (traveled, catalogue);
- The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles (retrospective), '86 (catalogue);
- Fabian Carlsson Gallery, London, '87;
- Xavier Fourcade, Inc., New York, '87;
- Galerie Tanit, Munich, '87;
- The Menil Collection, Houston, Sculpture: John Chamberlain 1970s and 1980s, '87 (catalogue).

Selected group exhibitions since 1985:

- Chicago Sculpture International, Mile-4, '85 (catalogue);
- Museum of Art, Fort Lauderdale, Florida, American Renaissance: Painting and Sculpture since 1940, '86;
- Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, 70s into 80s: Printmaking Now, '86 (catalogue);
- Xavier Fourcade, Inc., New York, Drawings, '87;
- Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, 1987 Biennial Exhibition, '87 (catalogue);
- Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo.


Selected bibliography since 1985 (see also catalogues under exhibitions):


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