

John Chamberlain: A Progression of Formal Techniques

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John Chamberlain made a name for himself by adeptly transferring the style of Abstract Expressionism from the two dimensional plane of painting to the physical space of the metal sculpture media. Chamberlain's technique progressed through the expression of the abstract form via automobile body work with mixed media pieces, eventually learning a way of approaching and constructing form in a method completely his own. He describes the arrangement of automobile parts into sculptures as having a "fit"; one piece of metal has a satisfying "fit" with another while together creating a sculpture. Dave Hickey describes "fit" in his essay "John Chamberlain: Steel Couture" as "a term we apply to works of art that embody a sense of *intentionality* – a long-term, precognitive assurance that the work is 'on purpose,' even when that purpose remains obscure."¹

After joining the United States Navy at the age of 16, Chamberlain briefly attended the Chicago Art Institute before leaving to attend the Black Mountain College: a hotspot of artistic exploration and learning from the 30's until its closing in 1957. His work started in abstract forms of steel, an exploratory process pursued in different themes throughout his career. His goals and technique eventually led him to pioneer the use of automobile parts both because of their availability and low cost; he is highly recognized today through this form of art.

¹ Dave Hickey, "John Chamberlain: Steel Couture," *John Chamberlain: Choices*, eds. Katherine Atkins, Kara Mason, Jennifer Knox White, Helena Winston, New York: Guggenheim Museum Publications, 2012, 39.

His use of automobile parts began in the late 1950s and continued until 1966, after which he began to explore different media for the following seven years. This period in his career is referred to as his "Lab Years." In this time span, with a few exceptions, Chamberlain went fully into an exploration of alternative media and materials. Among these alternatives were foam, Plexiglas, metal flake paintings, galvanized steel, and paper.

The return to the use of automobile parts after his years of visual investigation proved to be a successful and permanent move that propelled his artistic career until his death in 2011. His new pieces gained unprecedented recognition unequalled in any other part of his history as an artist. The transformation of Chamberlain's style from his first pieces to producing his most iconic works is a direct result of Chamberlain's lab years.

Chamberlain's first piece involving automobile parts was titled *Shortstop*; the pieces came from a friend's old car, from which Chamberlain took two bumpers and some supporting steel.² From this he created a free standing sculpture bereft of recognizable or comparable form. The piece inaugurated his iconic style. The sculpture also set the aesthetic followed in many of his pieces of a seemingly ever changing form, unable to be likened to a familiar object. With this beginning of unfamiliarity, a problem arose from the perspective of future art historians. Due to his aesthetic of constantly changing form, how should one categorize or describe his pieces? This creates an atmosphere that allows only for visual analyses without comparison to similar known objects, artists or even styles.³ (Hickey 31) (Kohn 45).

² Diane Waldman and John Chamberlain, *John Chamberlain: A Retrospective Exhibition*, New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 1971, 7.

³ Hickey, "John Chamberlain: Steel Couture," 31. Adrian Kohn, "Understanding Unlikeness," *John Chamberlain: Choices*, eds. Katherine Atkins, Kara Mason, Jennifer Knox White, Helena Winston, New York: Guggenheim Museum Publications, 2012, 45.

The materials in *Shortstop* include painted chromium-plated steel and iron along with large planes of steel, which have been bent, dented, and pieced together. When these sections are combined, they become spatially related to each other via the artist's choices of "fit"; the steel spaces combine to unbalance and precariously stand erect from the floor. The textured steel seems rigid from the placement of its materials while simultaneously flowing from section to section. The texturing of the planar steel creates focal points throughout the piece, forcing the eye to jump from highlight to highlight, counterbalancing the activity of form diagonally and vertically.

Round and thin elements of steel begin from the bottom of *Shortstop*, resisting the natural expectation of the amalgamation of planar forms to fall away from their only contact point with the ground plane. Their delicacy is excited by the physical volume of space occupied by the form they are attempting to hold from the ground. The contrast of thickness between these long, snaking pieces and that of the planar form creates a tension and a sense of ever-impending movement, waiting for the planar volume to crush its smaller supporting attachments and give in to gravity's pull. In defiance, the lengths of relatively thin metal explore the larger form, investigating their own shape in spatial relation to the planes as well as highlighting and caging-in the top end of the piece.

Mr. Moto is a later piece constructed by Chamberlain in 1963. The well-known sculpture is comprised of automobile parts, specifically siding and structural elements. Materially, it is a composition of painted and chromium-plated steel which shows his progression in terms of form and color in his early years of the medium. The piece, like *Shortstop*, is a freestanding

occupation of three-dimensional space. It refuses comparison or likeness to familiar objects while its form maintains a steady movement of the viewer's eye through highlighting a multitude of focal points or, rather, abstaining from a structurally determined point of focus.

The aesthetic forms of metal correspond to their color throughout. The glossy purple coated forms transition from the ground plane into the similarly smooth, but slightly dented and interrupted components painted in gold. As the form rises from the ground, its consistent fluidity is temporarily interrupted by an angular and sharp-edged component that draws in the eye. The extreme rigidity and lack of reflected light surface contrasts the reflectivity of the brighter, more photo-influential colored elements. The piece finishes with a combination of the three aesthetics culminating in the form of the painted red metal. It borrows its fluid surface from the purple form while highlighting dents and imperfections, and creating a photo sensory experience through its glossy finish. Finally, the top-most form borrows the aesthetic value of sharp and unnerving edges from the lower black forms as well as its apparent use of hardware which draws yet another self-referential similarity in the piece.

After a series of sculptures in his early career built from automobile steel, Chamberlain moved his focus toward alternative media: "I want to do a sculpture that looks like I did it but is not the same material. I proceeded to do seven years of research in materials to pick my kind of sculpture."⁴ For seven years beginning in 1966, Chamberlain experimented with layers of metal flake paint, the compression and molding characteristics of foam, crushed galvanized steel, and partially melted synthetic polymer resin structures. He mentioned the reasoning behind his exploration of alternative media in his interview with Hans Ulrich Obrist, an art

⁴ Hans-Ulrich Obrist and John Chamberlain, *John Chamberlain*, Köln: Walther König, 2006, 20.

historian known for his series of personal one-on-one interviews with artists, in which he said: “There comes a point when you either get very tired or you become too aware and you want a change, or to get going on something else.”⁵ That was the simplicity behind his investigative years of material research. The notion that he became “tired” of a media and too aware of its characteristics, forms and how it shapes an environment was the driving factor behind his self-titled lab years; it could be said that Chamberlain hit a wall in his awareness of potential for metal forms and had to seek out answers in different media.

His experimentation with lacquer and metal flake painting actually began in 1965, slightly before his self-declared investigation into other media. The paintings consisted of multiple layers of lacquer and metal flake on Formica to create a thick, three dimensional surface consisting purely of paint, a traditionally two dimensional medium. Donald Judd, a contemporary of Chamberlain, explains their aesthetic in a transcription of a conversation between himself, Elizabeth Baker, John Chamberlain, and Diane Waldman: “They’re not involved in geometry but in their surface – the arbitrariness of them gets them out of all that composition.”⁶ Earlier in the interview, Chamberlain explains their aesthetic: “And then in that superstructure of a set of squares, there is an idea about them being deep at some level with the color build-up. There was the idea that they would change color as the light changed.”⁷ The lacquer pieces revolved around surface reflections and light refractions, highlighting certain color aesthetics via the photic influences of their surroundings.

⁵ Ibid., 19.

⁶ Diane Waldman, *John Chamberlain: A Retrospective Exhibition*, 19.

⁷ Ibid.

Chamberlain's explorations also led him to the medium of foam. In foam, he found a way to create sculpture without the limiting factor of an extreme force required to mold and shape an object, as with steel. Instead, Chamberlain used a technique of binding foam pieces with lengths of cords, twisting them around the foam and pulling them tight to arrange the foam in forms which generated completely new curves before unseen in his work. The contrasting gradual curvatures of the foam material with the fault-line like canyon created by the cord's contact point with the foam brought out interesting and revealing fluidities that were only attempted in previous works with metal. Susan Davidson, in a piece written for Chamberlain's most recent Guggenheim exhibition *Choices* said of the foam pieces: "There is something to the squeezed form and the tightness of the rope that binds the works while defining their shape, coupled with the almost absurdly disposable material itself, that strikes viewers as both nifty and radical."⁸ This material exploration not only provided information for future sculptures but also turned into a freestanding body of work as it progressed with age to deteriorate and take on new life in its surface aesthetic.

Chamberlain continued his research into alternative media with sculptures made from galvanized steel. Chamberlain had a sort of gimmick at the Cedar Bar, an artist hangout in New York, where he would crush a cigarette pack and its new form would be imbued with an aura of interest and information. Adrian Kohn wrote a piece for Chamberlain's *Choices* about visualizing the abstract and exploring new media, stating: "Well, by acknowledging the physical reality of conventional abstractions and any other information usually 'discarded as

⁸ Susan Davidson, "A Sea of Foam, an Ocean of Metal," *John Chamberlain: Choices*, eds. Katherine Atkins, Kara Mason, Jennifer Knox White, Helena Winston, New York: Guggenheim Museum Publications, 2012, 25.

useless,' we may discover something that we did not know."⁹ This theory relates the crushing of the cigarette pack to Chamberlain's exploration into galvanized steel via enlarged, dimensionally accurate, representations of a cigarette box. These boxes were then crushed and formed into completely new forms with a sense of 'fit' in the way that the steel folded itself together and held itself tightly in a space like his piece *Ultima Thule*.

Along with his exploration into alternative media that expressed and expanded upon Chamberlain's idea of 'fit', he also worked with paper products. Specifically, Chamberlain had a fascination with paper bags and how the material could be twisted, shaped and manipulated with such ease yet still provide entirely new insight on form, weight, and permanence. The exploration into paper began with a bag which he evolved into twisted forms, colored and solidified with resin. In the same way that the galvanized steel structures were crushed in on themselves to fold lines and make wrinkles meet newly created planes and intriguing lines, the paper was folded, spun and creased in order to explore a radial and rotational experience of 'fit.'

Chamberlain's exploration into gloss and reflectivity in its relationship to curvature originated from his experimentation with Plexiglas covered in a mineral deposit. For these pieces, Chamberlain created boxes of Plexiglas, put them in an oven to heat and interrupted their melting process part way through, eventually annealing them through a slow reduction of heat. Once the form was complete, a vacuum tube was used to adhere a mineral compound and create a texture for the form which uniquely responded to light on the surface. One of these pieces, *Hano*, creates completely different planes of reflectivity and color depending on the

⁹ Kohn, "Understanding Unlikeness," 51.

approach angle of the viewer; the piece is activated from its front, the view point displaying the light's interactivity with the curved and reflective mineral finish, but completely deactivated as the viewer explores its 360 degree field of view.

These explorations and processes revealed new possibilities to Chamberlain in the involvement of light, the direction of surface, and the activation of form in an object occupying a three dimensional space. Upon his return to automobile steel, in a conversation with Klaus Kertess, Chamberlain stated, "By the time I got through the seven years I was really glad to be back to this metal business."¹⁰ He approached his return to automobile steel with a relaxed and appreciative outlook. As his body of work in automobile steel grew, his pieces could be defined in a clearer context. Not that they could be compared to a context of other artists' objects, but rather a context of his early, experimental years in automobile parts.

Upon Chamberlain's return to his iconic medium, he displayed a familiar style of sculpture with a new set of aesthetic tools obtained through his experience outside automobile steel. One of his newer pieces, *Women's Voices*, constructed in 2005, exemplifies his learning in contrast to his sculpture style pre-lab years. The aesthetics of the piece change significantly at the bottom half from one side to the other, eventually joining a common wave on the top half. The reflective and curved surface, as viewed from the front, shows similar characteristics to his lab years' experiments in foam and polymer coated synthetic resin. The gradual curve convex surfaces seem to disappear into the rest of the piece, drawing from characteristics of foam exploration. The reflective qualities, specifically the completely chromed surfaces of these curved metal forms, summon images of the interaction of light with Chamberlain's mineral

¹⁰ Davidson, "A Sea of Foam, an Ocean of Metal," 25.

coatings on his polymer resin forms. The photic effects on the forms in *Women's Voices* emulates the highlighted ridges of *Hano* as well as the effect of light rebounded between curves and individual forms.

Women's Voices takes a different form when viewed from the back of the piece. Without the reflective curving forms horizontally bisecting the piece, its waved lengths of metal leave the eye only an imagined line to focus and bounce on either side of. Where the curved surfaces in the front of the piece end, there exists a line around to the back of the piece where the waved forms switch from curving upwards away from the center to downwards toward the floor. This effect creates a disorientation in direction for the viewer. This dictates a "front" and "back" distinction of the work. The wave forms that capture and direct the eye of the viewer upward to its explosive upper half hold attention through their contrasting thick white coloring and chipping, black borders.

The overall appearance of the piece expands on Chamberlain's earlier works *Mr. Moto* and, more so, *Shortstop*. The sculpture resembles these through varying multiple textural and formal qualities. The obvious differentiation between *Shortstop* and *Women's Voices* is the change from geometric structures to the organic wave forms. Although the timespan between the two automobile steel pieces is about the longest in Chamberlain's career, the comparisons of form, the difference in color use, and the attention to photic effects exemplify the changes in technique from before and after his lab years.

A look at the contrasting characteristics between *Women's Voices* and *Mr. Moto* reveals more information about the technical changes in Chamberlain's automotive sculptures before and after his lab years. The formal characteristics of *Mr. Moto*, specifically the top half of red

slow curves, emulate the gradual reflective elements in *Women's Voices*. However, they do not hide their edges the same way as the reflective pieces in Chamberlain's work with foam. The thematic grouped curves of golden and purple forms in *Mr. Moto*, contrasted with its own geometric black form, carries similarities to the way the reflective surfaces of *Women's Voices* contrast with the jagged yet wavy extensions in the piece. However, the contrasting forms in each respective piece are more developed and deliberate in *Women's Voices*, while the same look in *Mr. Moto* seems almost shoved into place as an element of "fit."

Chamberlain's career in sculpture evolved through stages of initial discovery and experimentation, culminating in a refined style that collectively incorporated his aesthetic process. Chamberlain began his exploration into metal work with *Shortstop* and ended with pieces like *Women's Voices*, sculptures that exemplified his dedication to searching out new aesthetic principles and techniques. As Chamberlain said, "I was working in exotic materials that have just arrived in the last fifty years. I did not let the material transcend my madness, but let my madness work around the exoticism of the material, the medium."¹¹

¹¹ Julie Sylvester, *John Chamberlain: A Catalogue Raisonne of the Sculpture*, New York: Hudson Hills Press, 1986, 22.