

GUGGENHEIM

NEWS RELEASE

Guggenheim Presents Major Retrospective of John Chamberlain

Exhibition Explores Six Decades of Production by the Late American Master

Exhibition: *John Chamberlain: Choices*
Venue: Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 1071 Fifth Avenue, New York
Location: Rotunda Floor, Rotunda Levels 2–6, High Gallery
Dates: February 24–May 13, 2012
Media Preview: Thursday, February 23, 10 am–1 pm

(NEW YORK, NY – January 17, 2012) -- From February 24 to May 13, 2012, the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum presents *John Chamberlain: Choices*, a comprehensive examination of the work of the late John Chamberlain and the first U.S retrospective since 1986. Comprising approximately one hundred works, *John Chamberlain: Choices* examines the artist's development over a sixty-year career, exploring the shifts in scale, materials, and techniques informed by the assemblage process that was central to his working method. The exhibition presents works from Chamberlain's earliest monochromatic iron sculptures and experiments in foam, Plexiglas, and paper, to his final large-scale foil pieces, which have never been shown in the United States. Chamberlain was first celebrated at the Guggenheim in a 1971 retrospective.

John Chamberlain: Choices is organized by Susan Davidson, Senior Curator, Collections and Exhibitions, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum. Following its New York presentation, *John Chamberlain: Choices* will travel to the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao, where it will be on view from March through September 2013.

This exhibition is supported by the Henry Luce Foundation and the Terra Foundation for American Art.

The Leadership Committee for *John Chamberlain: Choices*, chaired by Larry Gagosian, is gratefully acknowledged.

“One day something—some one thing—pops out at you, and you pick it up, and you take it over, and

you put it somewhere else, and it *fits*. It's just the right thing at the right moment. You can do the same thing with words or with metal," Chamberlain has stated. Fit and choice were the guiding principles for Chamberlain's work. His respect for the material's inherent properties informs the multiplicity of his forms, the simplicity of his process, and the work's complex underpinnings. The title of the Guggenheim's exhibition pays tribute to the artist's process of active selection, or choosing, that was fundamental to his practice.

Born in Rochester, Indiana, Chamberlain (1927–2011) briefly studied painting at the Art Institute of Chicago (1951–52), and at the avant-garde Black Mountain College (1955–56), near Asheville, North Carolina, where he credited his time with teachers including poets Robert Creeley, Robert Duncan, and Charles Olson among the greatest influences on his work. He rose to prominence in the late 1950s with energetic, vibrant sculptures hewn from disused car parts, achieving a three-dimensional form of Abstract Expressionism that astounded critics and captured the imagination of fellow artists. An inveterate rebel, Chamberlain also violated the formalist prohibition deriding the use of color in sculpture. He chose to adapt uncommon, recycled materials in his work such as the slick, industrial palette of defunct auto bodies.

Chamberlain moved to New York in 1956, where he developed his particular method of assemblage, first using small found metal parts that quickly became larger welded versions of bent and twisted steel. Although he was originally influenced by the compilation methods of David Smith (who also relied on welding found metal parts), Chamberlain's work soon showed a preference for voluminous and spatial masses. His astonishing, balanced sculptures stressed the deep volumes and eccentric folds that he managed to achieve by squeezing or compressing the metal and then welding the disparate elements into highly developed, collage-like compositions.

Equally conversant in a variety of materials, Chamberlain had not solely restricted his medium to automobile parts. In the mid-1960s, using an enamel automobile finish he produced highly glossed, small-format square pictures. For a seven-year period beginning in 1965, he ventured into writing and directing 16 mm films, and, fueled by his interest in science, he began investigations into unusual materials such as urethane foam, aluminum foil, paper bags, and mineral-coated Plexiglas. Later, printmaking and photography (using a wide-angle camera attached at hip level) entered his artistic repertoire.

In addition to Abstract Expressionism, throughout his career, Chamberlain had been associated with both Minimalism and Pop. His works composed of "crushed automobile parts" in bright colors resonated with America's fascination with consumer car culture, accordingly aligning him with the contemporary work of many Pop artists whose focus was on the object. On the other hand, for Donald Judd and his compatriots, Chamberlain's sculptures embodied the neutral, redundant, and expressively structured tenants of Minimalism that sought to remove objectivity, inexpressiveness, and the referential. The attempts to place Chamberlain in such various, conflicting categories acknowledge the artist's elusiveness and singularity. His tireless pursuit of discovery, his curiosity, and his intuitive process distinguished him as one of the most important American sculptors of our time.

Since returning in the mid-1970s to metal as his primary material, Chamberlain limited himself to

specific parts of the automobile (fenders, bumpers, or the chassis, for example). He added color to—or in some techniques, subtracted color from—the found car parts by dripping, spraying, and patterning on top of existing hues to often-wild effect. This liberation and deep exploration of color reference Vincent van Gogh and Henri Matisse, two artists whose color sense he greatly admired. Beginning in the late 1980s, Chamberlain used the discarded tops of custom vans, cutting them into long ribbons that he left unfurled, crumpled into undulating bands, or rolled into dense rosettes. The scale of his work increased dramatically at this time, aided in part by a significantly larger studio space in Sarasota, Florida, in 1980, and ultimately on Shelter Island, at the far end of Long Island, where he worked until the last days before his death in December 2011.

Over the last three decades, Chamberlain worked in varying ways within his basic artistic equation, but as his work matured, he moved toward more aggressive manipulations of form and color and away from crashed-car renown. Perhaps not intentionally, the deep folds of Chamberlain’s sculptures resemble Renaissance drapery studies that imply the underlying presence of a figure, or conversely, a void. His works throughout the 1990s and first years of the twenty-first century became increasingly volumetric, if not baroque, in their massing of form and vibrant color choice. However, in the last five years, the artist embarked on the production of a new body of work that demonstrates a decided return to earlier concerns. Among the largest works he ever made, these confidently monumental bonfires of metal, with their stacks of mostly horizontal and vertical crushed and rolled metal, were drawn from a supply of 1940s and 1950s automobiles. The works’ elegant refinements and exponentially complex renderings exemplify his long-held artistic philosophy, “it’s all in the fit.”

Exhibition Installation

The exhibition encompasses John Chamberlain’s full range of sculptural production and is organized chronologically, spiraling up the Frank Lloyd Wright–designed rotunda. Relief sculptures and assemblages installed on the walls and on the ramps create opportunities to experience the work two-dimensionally as well as in the round. *Doomsday Flotilla* (1982), a seven-part work of painted and chromium-plated steel, is on view in the High Gallery, and *SPHINXGRIN TWO* (1986/2010), an aluminum arc reaching up to 16 feet, is installed on the rotunda floor and marks the first time a work from this series has been shown in the United States. *C’ESTZESTY* (2011), a nearly 20-foot-tall work of painted and chromium-plated steel and stainless steel will be placed along the Fifth Avenue facade of the museum, allowing passersby a view from the street. A foam sculpture carved to resemble and serve as a couch for visitors, which occupied the rotunda floor during the 1971 retrospective, will be re-installed on Rotunda Level 6.

Catalogue

John Chamberlain: Choices is accompanied by a fully illustrated, 248-page catalogue offering a rich and thorough examination of the artist’s work and career. In addition to an introductory essay by exhibition curator Susan Davidson that explores Chamberlain’s early career and underlying scientific approach to his art, the book features an historic overview of Chamberlain’s work by art critic and author Dave Hickey. An essay by art historian Adrian Kohn reviews the scholarly literature produced thus far on Chamberlain’s work and examines the ways in which language is used to describe the artist’s works. In a reflective piece about abstract sculpture, Conceptual artist Charles Ray considers Chamberlain’s influence on younger artists, and Donna De Salvo, Whitney Museum of American Art chief curator and

deputy director for programs, considers the artist's photography in relation to sculpture. Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum assistant curator Helen Hsu contributes the first in-depth chronology produced for the artist, including a complete exhibition history, and independent scholar Don Quaintance offers a lexicon providing background and context for Chamberlain's witty and imaginative titles. The catalogue is available in hardcover (\$65) and softcover (\$45) editions at the Guggenheim Store or online at guggenheimstore.org, and is distributed to the trade by Artbook | D.A.P and Thames & Hudson.

Education and Public Programs

A range of public programs is presented in conjunction with *John Chamberlain: Choices*. Details will be posted on guggenheim.org/publicprograms. Highlights include:

John Chamberlain: A Conversation

Tues, Mar 13, 6:30 pm

Susan Davidson, Senior Curator, Collections and Exhibitions, engages in conversation with Dave Hickey, University of New Mexico, and Donna De Salvo, Whitney Museum of American Art, about the inventive career of this important American sculptor. Reception follows. \$10, \$7 members, free for students with RSVP. For tickets visit guggenheim.org/publicprograms, or call the Box Office at 212 423 3587.

Eye to Eye: Artist-Led Tours

Private gallery tours of *John Chamberlain: Choices* led by contemporary artists. Receptions follow.

DeWitt Godfrey, Mon, April 16, 6:30 pm

Huma Bhabha, Mon, April 30, 6:30 pm

Amy Sillman, Tues, May 8, 6:30 pm

Single tour \$20, \$15 members; \$10 students; series of three \$50, \$40 members; \$30 students (limited tickets). For more information, guggenheim.org/publicprograms or call the Box Office at 212 423 3587.

The World of John Chamberlain

Sun and Mon, Apr 22 and 23, 7:30 pm

Presented by Works & Process at the Guggenheim, this program explores the poetic and musical influences on Chamberlain's work, with Susan Davidson, Senior Curator, Collections and Exhibitions. Featuring jazz great Bill Charlap, Morton Feldman's 1962 work "For Franz Kline," and newly commissioned works by composers Drew Baker and Jason Eckardt, this program includes a private viewing of the exhibition prior to the performance. For more information visit worksandprocess.org.

AbEx3D: Abstract Expressionism in Sculpture

Sat, Apr 21, 10 am–4 pm

Taught by artist and conservator Corey D'Augustine, this daylong workshop includes an introductory slide presentation and a gallery tour of *John Chamberlain: Choices*. In the afternoon, participants experiment with three-dimensional materials and studio exercises using assemblage, collage, and sculptural experiments of the 1950s and '60s. No experience required. \$75, \$60 members and students (limited to 10 participants). To register visit guggenheim.org/courses.

Family Tour and Workshop: Building with Color

Sun, Mar 4, 11 am–1:30 pm

Families with children ages 5–12. Families are invited to explore how Chamberlain used color in building his artwork during an interactive gallery tour, and to create their own textured, colorful, mixed-media works in the Guggenheim’s studio. \$30 per family (includes admission and tour for two adults and up to four children), \$20 members, free for family members. Includes materials. Registration required at guggenheim.org/familyprograms.

Family Tour and Workshop: Reduce, Reuse, Recycle!

Sun, Apr 22, 11 am–1:30 pm

Families with children ages 5–12. Chamberlain often used found materials in his art. Participants tour *John Chamberlain: Choices* before making sculptural works using found objects in the Guggenheim’s studio. \$30 per family (includes admission and tour for two adults and up to four children), \$20 members, free for family members. Includes materials. Registration required at guggenheim.org/familyprograms.

About the Henry Luce Foundation

The Henry Luce Foundation was established in 1936 by the late Henry R. Luce, cofounder and editor in chief of Time Inc. The Luce Foundation supports projects in American art, higher education, East Asia, theology, women in science and engineering, and public policy. Through the American Art Program, begun in 1982, the Foundation has distributed over \$140 million to some 250 museums, universities, and service organizations in 47 states, the District of Columbia, and internationally.

About the Terra Foundation for American Art

The Terra Foundation for American Art is dedicated to fostering exploration, understanding, and enjoyment of the visual arts of the United States for national and international audiences. Recognizing the importance of experiencing original works of art, the foundation provides opportunities for interaction and study, beginning with the presentation and growth of its own art collection in Chicago. To further cross-cultural dialogue on American art, the foundation supports and collaborates on innovative exhibitions, research, and educational programs. Implicit in such activities is the belief that art has the potential both to distinguish cultures and to unite them.

About the Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation

Founded in 1937, the Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation is dedicated to promoting the understanding and appreciation of art, primarily of the modern and contemporary periods, through exhibitions, education programs, research initiatives, and publications. Currently the Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation owns and operates the Guggenheim Museum on Fifth Avenue in New York and the Peggy Guggenheim Collection on the Grand Canal in Venice, and provides programming and management for the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao. The Deutsche Guggenheim in Berlin is the result of a collaboration, begun in 1997, between the Guggenheim Foundation and Deutsche Bank. The Guggenheim Abu Dhabi, a museum of modern and contemporary art designed by Frank Gehry on Saadiyat Island, adjacent to the main island of Abu Dhabi city, the capital of the United Arab Emirates, is currently in progress. More information about the foundation can be found at guggenheim.org.

VISITOR INFORMATION

Admission: Adults \$18, students/seniors (65+) \$15, members and children under 12 free. Admission

includes an audio tour of *John Chamberlain: Choices* in English and an audio tour with highlights of the Guggenheim's permanent collection and building available in English, French, German, Italian, and Spanish.

Museum Hours: Sun–Wed, 10 am–5:45 pm; Fri, 10 am–5:45 pm; Sat, 10 am–7:45 pm; closed Thurs. On Saturdays, beginning at 5:45 pm, the museum hosts Pay What You Wish. For general information call 212 423 3500 or visit the museum online at:

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