

# John Chamberlain Choices

## Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum Teacher Resource Unit

### A NOTE TO TEACHERS

For nearly six decades, American artist John Chamberlain (1927–2011) was one of the leading innovators in contemporary art, yet his work defies simple categorization. *John Chamberlain: Choices*, a major retrospective comprising approximately ninety-five works, examines Chamberlain’s development as an artist, exploring the shifts in scale, materials, and techniques that have been central to his working method. The retrospective presents works from the artist’s earliest monochromatic iron sculptures, signature works in steel, experiments in foam, Plexiglas, and paper bags, in addition to his latest large-scale aluminum pieces, which have never before been shown in the United States. The exhibition demonstrates how Chamberlain’s tireless pursuit of discovery, his curiosity, and his intuitive process have affirmed his stature as one of the most important American sculptors of our time.

This Teacher Resource Unit focuses on various aspects of Chamberlain’s work, providing techniques for exploring the visual arts and other areas of the curriculum. This guide is also available on the museum’s website, at [guggenheim.org/artscurriculum](http://guggenheim.org/artscurriculum), with images that can be downloaded or projected for classroom use. The images may be used for education purposes only and are not licensed for commercial applications of any kind. Before bringing your class to the Guggenheim, we invite you to visit the exhibition, read the guide, and decide which aspects of the exhibition are most relevant to your students. For more information, and to schedule a visit for your class, please call 212 423 3637.

For the educator, *John Chamberlain: Choices* provides a perfect opportunity to invite students of all ages to join in on an exciting and meaningful journey into a visually rich and stimulating world.

The exhibition is curated by Susan Davidson.

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*Some seem to think that I work with found pieces, but I don't. They're chosen, you see. The idea is that there has been a lot of magic implied in the choice.<sup>1</sup>*

## < ABOUT THE ARTIST >

Born in Rochester, Indiana, in 1927, John Chamberlain's Midwestern childhood in the 1930s coincided with the nation's growing dependency on the mechanical and technological. Although he left school in the ninth grade, Chamberlain was knowledgeable in many areas including literature, philosophy, and engineering. He learned to fly a plane at the ridiculously youthful age of eleven, and in 1943 he joined the Navy as an underage teenager, experiencing World War II from an aircraft carrier. Although the GI Bill prepared him for a career as a hairdresser—an occupation that might seem unusual for such a macho guy—in 1950, Chamberlain decided to study fine art at the Art Institute of Chicago. At the time, Abstract Expressionism had upset the status quo, and artists such as Willem de Kooning (1904–1997) and Franz Kline (1910–1962)—both of whom Chamberlain would later come to know and admire—gave him license to pursue his passion. Chamberlain studied and taught sculpture at Black Mountain College, near Asheville, North Carolina, where many of his friends who were poets instilled in him a confidence in the intricacies of words and language that would later become central to his creative process.

Chamberlain's career did not begin with a bang. Rather, attention to his work grew slowly, gaining strength over time. Arriving in New York at the end of the 1950s placed Chamberlain at the center of a vibrant art world: "it was a huge electricity . . . that I'd never experienced before."<sup>2</sup>



Chamberlain in his studio, Shelter Island, New York, 2011. Photo: Robert McKeever, courtesy Gagosian Gallery, New York

The energy and experimentation that surrounded him encouraged the artist to begin creating his unique form of collage and, according to Chamberlain, set him on a lifelong journey to explore art as the quest of "finding out what you don't already know."<sup>3</sup> By 1958, he began to include scrap metal from cars in his work, and from 1959 onward he concentrated on sculpture built entirely out of crushed automobile parts welded together. He developed a particular method of assemblage by bending, twisting, and welding larger pieces of colored steel hewn from disused car parts. His astonishingly balanced sculptures underscored their deep volumes and eccentric folds, created by squeezing or compressing the metal and then collaging the disparate elements into complex compositions. He also incorporated color into his work, using the slick, industrial palette of the defunct auto bodies. In doing so, he achieved what was often characterized as a three-dimensional form of Abstract Expressionism that both impressed critics and captured the imagination of his fellow artists.

While he continued to make sculpture from auto parts, Chamberlain also began to experiment with other mediums. From 1963 to 1965, he created geometric paintings with sprayed automobile paint. In 1966, he began a series of sculptures made from rolled, folded, and tied urethane foam. These were followed, in 1970, by sculptures of melted or crushed metal and heat-crumpled Plexiglas.

Over the last three decades Chamberlain worked on many variations of his basic artistic equation, moving toward ever more aggressive manipulations of form and color. He embraced the use of common materials, manipulating them to create bold, expressive and lyrical sculptures. John Chamberlain passed away on December 21, 2011.

*I'm basically a collagist. I put one thing together with another thing. I sort of invented my own art supplies. I saw all this material just lying around against buildings and it was in color, so I felt I was ahead on two counts there.*<sup>4</sup>

## < COLLAGE >

Chamberlain's dynamic compositions of scrap metal and used automobile bodies have often been admired for translating the achievements of Abstract Expressionist painting into three-dimensional form. Like the Abstract Expressionists before him, Chamberlain reveled in the potential of his materials.

Chamberlain once described how he discovered the medium that would captivate his imagination: "I was looking for another material. I was looking for the next way to go. This was in 1957 or 1958. Then, all of a sudden, it occurred to me one day that all this material was just lying all over the place. I saw the material as other people's idea of waste. . . . I took a fender. I didn't want to use it as a fender, so I drove over it a few times to rearrange its shape, which was the beginning of what I now know as *process*."<sup>5</sup>

Chamberlain's approach appeared in the context of late-1950s assemblage, in which the discarded trash of our culture was being reconsidered and used to create fine art. The ordinariness of his materials made a connection with the real world. The early sculptures used anything made of steel that had color on it, such as metal benches, metal signs, sand pails, and lunch boxes. His interest wasn't in the car parts per se, but rather in their color, shape, and availability.<sup>6</sup>

"Fit" was at the core of Chamberlain's method and aesthetic. He has described this meeting between the parts of his works as a kind of handshake, one in which his forms achieve their natural stance as though the material itself had

preordained its composition. Developing each structure of interwoven elements is akin to building a house of cards. As in other early works, the various elements of *Dolores James* (1962) initially stayed in place by virtue of careful balances; later, the work was spot-welded together to ensure its preservation.

While one may recognize the source of his materials or imagine possible connotations embedded in his titles, the sight of what he has done to them often compels you to look at the raw materials differently. His goal, he said, was "not to explain it so that you don't destroy the discovery angle."<sup>7</sup>



*Dolores James*, 1962. Painted and chromium-plated steel, 184.2 × 257.8 × 117.5 cm. Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York 70.1925 © 2012 John Chamberlain/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photo: Kristopher McKay © Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York

# VIEW + DISCUSS

Show: *Dolores James*, 1962

- ▶ Describe this work. What seems familiar to you? What is unfamiliar?
- ▶ Chamberlain describes himself as a “collagist,” an artist who creates compositions made from various materials. In what ways does this work conform to your idea of “collage”? In what ways is it different? What does the word say about Chamberlain’s method of working?
- ▶ For curious viewers, Chamberlain recommended a way to discover more about his work—to dust one of his sculptures: “I sort of advise anybody who takes one of my pieces [to] clean it at least once. . . . And they find out about how the sculpture is constructed.”<sup>8</sup>

Although museum rules prohibit touching the works on view, an approach to drawing, known as “contour drawing” provides a way to “touch” the surfaces with our eyes. Begin by placing your pencil in the upper, right-hand corner of a rectangular sheet of paper, and convince yourself that your pencil is touching the uppermost corner of *Dolores James*. Move your pencil slowly along the edges of the form without lifting it from the paper, creating a continuous outline. Keep your eyes on the artwork—not on the paper. When you have followed all the “ins” and “outs” of the sculpture, pick up your pencil and consider what you have learned in this exploration. How the drawing looks is not as important as what you have discovered by creating it.

## EXPLORATIONS

### FURTHER EXPLORATIONS

- Although some artists refer to working with “found objects,” Chamberlain was always explicit in his use of the word “chosen” over “found” to describe both his materials and art-making process. Chamberlain settled on the metal from discarded cars as a ready source of material for his sculptures because it was cheap and available, but there are many other materials that can be recycled to create art.

Create your own “chosen object” sculpture. Describe your process. What material did you select? Why did that material appeal to you? Did you run into any problems as you progressed? How did you connect the materials? In what ways is your sculpture successful? Are there things that you might change?

- As Don Quaintance has stated, Chamberlain’s “love of language, words, puns, and allusions . . . have provided a fertile outlet for him to create the multilayered and sometimes humorous . . . titles [for] his artworks. The titles arise from his readings and observations, suggestions by acquaintances, and occasionally by a process of shuffling index cards on which single words are written to arrive at nonsensical combinations that strike a visual or verbal association for the artist.”<sup>9</sup>

Try out Chamberlain’s process for yourself. For a week carry around a pack of blank index cards. When you notice a word that appeals to you, write it down on a card. After a week, lay the cards out, face down. Select two or three at time, noticing any new ideas and meanings that arise out of these random combinations.

- The 1960s, when Chamberlain began exhibiting his work, was a time of rapid change. Americans listened to the Beatles and danced the Twist. Hippies talked about peace, love, and flower power. But the 1960s were also a serious moment in time. Across the nation African Americans took a stand for civil rights, students protested against the Vietnam War, and women fought for equality.

Chamberlain stated on numerous occasions that his choice of materials was determined by color, form, and availability, rather than for any social commentary. Critics have nevertheless suggested various associations alluding to the violence of car crashes, and the turmoil that occurred in the United States during the civil rights era and the Vietnam War. Research some of the social and political issues of the 1960s and then develop a set of interview questions to ask someone (maybe a grandparent) about their experience of the 1960s.

*I never thought of sculpture without color. Do you see anything around that has no color? Do you live in a world with no color? It never occurred to me that having color on sculpture was such a big number. I thought it was very obvious.<sup>10</sup>*

## < COLOR >

Color is one of the most important features in Chamberlain's work. One of the attributes that originally attracted him to automobiles was that they came already colored. The color is also a reminder that these materials have undergone a transformation, once serving another purpose; the bright colors, in particular, speak to America's fascination with consumer car culture. Chamberlain used the original color of the found materials, but would also paint them in his own emphatically expressive way by dripping, spraying, pouring, and patterning, often on top of existing hues, to wild effect.

Some would rank Chamberlain as one of the great colorists of twentieth-century American art. However, Chamberlain's use of color was initially shocking to many in the art world, violating the formalist prohibition against the use of color in sculpture. His liberated exploration of color and surface referenced Willem de Kooning, Henri Matisse (1869–1954), and Vincent van Gogh (1853–1890), artists whose sense of color and manipulation of paint he greatly admired.

It may be helpful to remember that before he decided to become an artist, Chamberlain was a hairstylist and makeup artist. Critics have sometimes commented on how his work combines a monumental, aggressive, and masculine sensibility with feminine colors and decoration. Chamberlain occasionally remarked on the kinship between color in his sculpture and cosmetics: "The color on it became flashy like lipstick or eyeshadow or something for a girl. Whatever people put on as colors, they put on so that somebody sees it."<sup>11</sup>

His exuberant use of color is evident in *Lord Suckfist* (1989). As Dave Hickey mentioned: "The work reveals no readily identified fronts, backs, or sides. There are no emphatic beginnings or ends, so with each step you take around a Chamberlain—with each change in your angle of vision—the color distribution shifts radically. . . . The astonishing thing is that this works—all the way round."<sup>12</sup>



*Lord Suckfist*, 1989 (two views). Painted and chromium-plated steel and stainless steel, 212.7 × 144.8 × 142.2 cm. Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen, Museum Brandhorst, Munich © 2012 John Chamberlain/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Courtesy The Pace Gallery, New York

# VIEW + DISCUSS

Show: *Lord Suckfist*, 1989

- ▶ To begin the discussion, show only one image of *Lord Suckfist*. Ask your students to describe the work, and then create a sketch with colored pencils of what the other side of the sculpture might look like. Have your students share their drawings as well as brainstorm a list of their expectations for the reverse side.

After brainstorming, show the second slide. What assumptions are confirmed? What are the surprises?

- ▶ In his use of color Chamberlain has been compared to Willem de Kooning, Henri Matisse, and Vincent van Gogh. Look at works by each of these artists and notice where you see similarities and differences.
- ▶ The title of this work, *Lord Suckfist*, refers to a fictional character in Francois Rabelais's satirical novel *Pantagruel* (1532). Lord Suckfist is the defendant in a lawsuit in which both the plaintiff and defendant plead in person. After hearing the case, the judge declared: "We have not understood one single circumstance of the matter on either side."<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless, both sides leave the court believing that the verdict was in their favor.

Although Chamberlain's titles are sometimes at odds with his sculptures, the title *Lord Suckfist* suggests that we should imagine this sculpture as a person or a character. What might *Lord Suckfist* be like? Imagine if this sculpture were to come to life. What would it do? What might it say?

## FURTHER EXPLORATIONS

- "You can find 1800 variations of white that are listed and there's more, the Pepsi Cola 'white' or the postal service 'white' they are all different whites. It's amazing. So it goes from 'hot white' to 'cold white.'"<sup>14</sup>

If you question Chamberlain's statement, spend some time collecting different whites. In a large envelope or paper bag, spend a month collecting "whites" from magazines, junk mail, newspapers, product wrappings, or whatever else comes your way. At the end of the month lay out the contents. Are there any that are exactly the same? How many whites have you collected?

- Although working with steel requires specialized tools, you can create your own stockpile of material from which you may create sculpture. Begin with cardstock in various colors. Leave some unpainted, but on the others add paint using some of Chamberlain's techniques, including stenciling, patterning, splattering, pouring, and brushing. You may also choose to add aluminum foil or foil papers to the mix of materials. When the paint is dry, use this supply of material to create a sculpture. Use scissors, tape, and a stapler to customize the shapes and join them together. When you are done, give your new creation a title.
- Chamberlain said: "There is no bad color, there's no color decision to reject because everything is colored."<sup>15</sup> Do you agree or disagree with this statement? Explain.

Many people have a favorite color, but fewer have a favorite palette. Experiment with assembling a palette of five or six colors that you feel work harmoniously together. The class can mix these colors from paints or use color samples from a local paint store. Do students have any associations with the palette they chose? Does the selection suggest a particular environment or emotion? Now try this exercise again, choosing a palette of colors that they dislike. Discuss which palette was easier to formulate and why.

- Marketing and advertising executives invent color names designed to entice consumers and make their products more desirable. Although today's car colors are generally muted, color options for a 1970 Dodge included Go Mango, Banana, Panther Pink, Plum Crazy, and Hemi Orange, providing Chamberlain with a rich and varied palette. Cosmetic companies also use evocative names like Fatal Apple and Kissing Pink to entice customers. Mix or select some colors and create inventive names to describe them.

*It just can't be a blob sitting there. It should be doing something.*<sup>16</sup>

## < GESTURE >

Chamberlain described his sculptures as “self-portraits,” but his notion of portraiture had nothing to do with capturing a likeness. For him sculpture was about balances and rhythms. His work always brings you back to the body in relationship with the world: “The definition of sculpture for me is stance and attitude. All sculpture takes a stance. If it dances on one foot, or, even if it dances while sitting down, it has a light-on-its-feet stance.”<sup>17</sup> The fact that his work exudes a sense of humanity is all the more astonishing when considering its origins.

Chamberlain brought a sense of spontaneous gesture to the world of sculpture. His early works allude to gesture or Action painting and have often been related to Willem de Kooning and Franz Kline who used gestural brushstrokes to imply power and motion. Chamberlain was taken with the roughness, muscularity, and energy of this approach, which gave him permission to use smashed car parts that seemed to be in constant motion. But he was not satisfied with Action painting’s two-dimensional form, and instead, translated its flat forms into volumetric sculptures. In the process, Chamberlain transformed Action painting, achieving an original style.<sup>18</sup>

Beginning in the mid-1980s, Chamberlain created a series of small sculptures from aluminum foil. He made these works by rolling the foil into long tubes, which he would then bend, twist, fit, and weave together. These early works provided inspiration for the monumental aluminum sculptures that he created in the last few years of his life.



*SPHINXGRIN TWO*, 1986/2010. Aluminum, 490 × 420 × 370 cm. Private collection © 2012 John Chamberlain/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Courtesy More Gallery, Giswil, Switzerland

It took decades to find a fabrication process that could successfully convey the compositional complexity of his handheld models and allow him to adapt these small compositions into the superhuman size of *SPHINXGRIN TWO* (1986/2010). This dramatic pose is partially made possible through Chamberlain’s canny choice in materials. *SPHINXGRIN TWO* was created from an industrially produced material, which was then crushed to make an animated surface. These compressed tubes were then twisted around each other, knotted into a composition that takes on a personality of its own, resulting in a unique, occupied space. Standing before this sculpture, it is impressive to consider the improbably balanced parts, wondering just how they remain upright.



# VIEW + DISCUSS

Show: *SPHINXGRIN TWO*, 1986/2010

- ▶ As a class, brainstorm a list of words you would use to describe this work.
- ▶ Chamberlain said: “It just can’t be a blob sitting there. It should be doing something.”<sup>19</sup> In your opinion what does this sculpture appear to be doing?
- ▶ If *SPHINXGRIN TWO* were to come to life how would it move? Act out the gesture that this work suggests.
- ▶ What type of music might best suggest this gesture? Try out various musical selections until you find one that seems to fit the style and tempo of the sculpture.

## EXPLORATIONS

### FURTHER EXPLORATIONS

- Chamberlain was able to impart movement and even personality through the gesture of his abstract sculptures. There is an approach to drawing (known as “gesture drawing”) where the goal is to grasp the essential movement or disposition of a person almost immediately. You are not drawing the person, but rather the individual’s action, and in just a few quick lines you may be able to suggest what is happening. Sitting in a park, in the cafeteria of your school, or even in front of the television, you can practice capturing gestures. Then use these gestures as the basis for an experiment, by creating handheld sculptures from aluminum foil, just like Chamberlain did, that also convey a strong gestural quality.
- Chamberlain admired the paintings of Willem de Kooning and Franz Kline. Research the work of these two artists. What attributes does Chamberlain’s work share with them? How is their work different from his?
- The Marshmallow Challenge is a design exercise that encourages teams to experience lessons in collaboration, innovation, and creativity. The task is simple: in 18 minutes, teams must build the tallest free-standing structure out of twenty sticks of spaghetti, one yard of tape, one yard of string, and one marshmallow. The marshmallow needs to be on top. Surprising lessons emerge when you compare each team’s performance. Who tends to do the worst? Why do you believe that is? Who tends to do the best, and why? What improves performance? What changes it? What hampers it? For more information about how to conduct a Marshmallow Challenge in your classroom, visit [marshmallowchallenge.com/TED\\_Talk.html](http://marshmallowchallenge.com/TED_Talk.html).

*I really don't make an attempt at doing something to things that they don't want done to them. The things should tell you by one means or another.*<sup>20</sup>

## < OTHER MATERIALS >

Although he was best known for his sculptures made from recycled metal, over the years Chamberlain has also used brown paper bags, foam rubber, wood, iron, Mylar, colored glass, mirrors, Plexiglas, tin, aluminum foil, and both paper and cloth towels. Chamberlain believed that “common materials are the best materials.”<sup>21</sup>

In 1966, Chamberlain began “to experiment with other kinds of materials, many of which were far more immediate. . . . Instead of crushing metal with machines, he used his hands to compress foam as well as wad paper [and] aluminum. . . . He started with common household sponges, which he cut up and then tied using nylon cord. He could vary the form by the amount of pressure exerted on the cord, which compressed the sponges into soft and sensual shapes. They could be made so quickly that he dubbed them “instant sculptures.”<sup>22</sup>

Chamberlain has “investigated other sensory perceptions, including a never-realized work that has been described as an ‘olfactory-stimulus-response environment.’”<sup>23</sup> In 1969, he was invited to participate in an art and technology program that brought together artists with corporations engaged in developing new technologies. Chamberlain’s idea was to create a participatory work, comprised of more than one hundred packaged odors, which he called *SniFFter*. The odors that he wanted to create included coffee, a newly lit match, dill, and gasoline. He explained: “I’m initially interested in anything I don’t know about. I’m interested



*Mannabend Ra*, 1966. Urethane foam and cord, 69.9 x 132.1 x 121.9 cm. Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York 75.2191 © 2012 John Chamberlain/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photo: Kristopher McKay © Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York

because I need something to lean on. And any material or physical contact, mental contact, whatever has possibilities for lessons.”<sup>24</sup>

In 1969, fascinated with the childhood practice of blowing up paper bags and popping them, Chamberlain became intrigued by the possibility of capturing this act in freeze-frame. Named after his living quarters at the time—a penthouse apartment in Manhattan—the *Penthouse* series appear as delicate and feminine as roses, frozen by the resin that Chamberlain carefully dripped into their creases both to preserve their materiality and to increase their weight and solidity.

Throughout his career, Chamberlain was highly attuned to his materials. In so doing, his work encourages us to see what these materials can become and, ultimately, how we may think more openly about the objects that surround us.<sup>25</sup>

# VIEW + DISCUSS

Show: *Mannabend Ra*, 1966

- ▶ Look carefully at this sculpture. What do you notice? What adjectives would you use to describe it?
- ▶ Why do you think foam rubber might have appealed to Chamberlain as a material to explore?
- ▶ Describe, step-by-step, how you believe *Mannabend Ra* might have been made.
- ▶ Chamberlain started with common household sponges, which he would cut up and then tie together, using nylon cord. He was always looking to learn about the natural properties of new materials. Try some of your own sculptural experiments using either foam rubber or sponges. What did you learn?

Show: *Penthouse #50*, 1969

- ▶ Look carefully at this sculpture. What do you notice? What adjectives would you use to describe it?
- ▶ According to Chamberlain: “The paper bag sculptures developed out of an idea I was trying to do. You know when you blow up a paper bag and you pop it? I was trying to catch the pop.”<sup>26</sup> Blow up a small paper bag and then pop it. Do you think Chamberlain’s sculpture captures the moment? Explain. Develop your own approach to “catching the pop.”

## FURTHER EXPLORATIONS

- In order to form his sculptures Chamberlain used many industrial tools, but the basic actions on materials such as twisting, rolling, crumpling, looping, ripping, and stacking can be experienced using everyday materials like cardboard. In an online video, a Guggenheim teaching artist demonstrates a way to introduce students to these sculptural possibilities, which you may view at [youtube.com/guggenheim#p/30926C6728D9BCC5/1/\\_Zvh3MvojU](https://youtube.com/guggenheim#p/30926C6728D9BCC5/1/_Zvh3MvojU).
- Chamberlain liked to experiment with words as well as materials, frequently through the use of puns. A pun is the usually humorous use of a word that implies two or more of its meanings, or suggests another word that is similar in sound. Some examples from titles of his sculptures include: *Doorful of Syrup* (1988), *Endzoneboogie* (1988), *RADISHRIPPLE* (2009), and *Whirled Peas* (1991).

First, work on figuring out Chamberlain’s puns, then, try creating a few titles of your own. Start by thinking of words or phrases you know that have more than one meaning, finding a word or words that sound similar. When you are done, share the puns that you have written with the class.

- According to Chamberlain: “Every material has a different density, different weight. . . . Every hand squeezes differently. In finding your place in sculpture, you need to find the material that offers you just the right resistance. As it turns out, car metal offers me the correct resistance so that I can make a form—not overform it or underform it. At one time, hair offered me the right resistance. I think I probably learned about resistance when I was cutting hair.”<sup>27</sup>

Chamberlain has created sculpture from many diverse materials, and felt that “common materials are the best materials.”<sup>28</sup> Have students select a common material that could be used as a sculptural material and spend time experimenting with it and exploring its resistance. Create a sculpture and then discuss the experience of creating it.



*Penthouse #50*, 1969. Watercolor and resin on paper, 12.7 x 16.5 x 11.4 cm. Dia Art Foundation © 2012 John Chamberlain/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photo: David Heald © Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York

*I feel that's like the old picket fence or gate you had when you were a child; when you grow up and look at it again, you can't believe the scale. That's how scale becomes known.*<sup>29</sup>

## < SCALE >

Chamberlain has created very small and extremely large sculptures. Over the years, he worked in a variety of scales, but his smaller works were never considered models for his larger sculptures. He considers them all full-blown sculptural works. Although much of his work is roughly human height, among his best works are some that are small or even minute in size. His sense of scale is so successful that size can become unimportant.

Handheld pieces like this untitled sculpture, made in 1961, have been central to his practice since the beginning. In the 1960s, patrons of the famed artists' bar Max's Kansas City in New York, would watch Chamberlain casually



Untitled, 1961. Painted tin-plated steel, 12.7 x 10.2 x 8.9 cm.  
Private collection, courtesy Anthony Meier Fine Arts, San Francisco  
© 2012 John Chamberlain/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

make intricate sculptural compositions out of crushed cigarette packs. During his career he investigated the relationship between the intimate, tactile, and handmade composition as well as works of monumental scale. For Chamberlain, everyday tasks—such as crushing an empty container, wadding paper before throwing it away, or twisting aluminum foil—suggested ways to work with materials and generate new sculpture.<sup>30</sup>

In 1980, aided in part by a significantly larger studio space in Sarasota, Florida, the scale of Chamberlain's work increased dramatically, and in recent years, the artist embarked on the production of a new body of work, producing some of the largest pieces that he ever made. These confident, monumental bonfires of metal, with their stacks of mostly horizontal and vertical crushed and rolled metal, are drawn from a supply of 1940s and 1950s automobiles. *C'ESTZESTY* (2011), one of the works from this series, rises to nearly 20 feet in an unfolding tangle of black, gold, and silver metal.

Whether large-scale or miniature, Chamberlain's works possess a formal equilibrium that ranks him among other sculptors whose masterful manipulation of space and volume appears effortless. As Chamberlain remarked on moving between small and large works, "if the scale is dealt with then the size has nothing to do with it."<sup>31</sup>

# VIEW + DISCUSS

Show: Untitled, 1961

- ▶ Looking at this artwork, what do you notice? What size do you believe this sculpture is? What clues determined your answer?
- ▶ As any sculptor knows, not all compositions or ideas that work in a miniature form can survive a transformation into monumental scale. Do you think this work would be more successful in a different size, or does its current scale seem suitable? Explain.

Show: *C'ESTZESTY*, 2011

- ▶ What can you see in this artwork? How large do you think this sculpture is? What clues determined your answer?
- ▶ How would it feel to encounter this work? Describe what your reaction might be.
- ▶ Chamberlain was more than 80 years old when he created this work. He was no longer able to lift, manipulate, or weld heavy metal pieces, but he was able to direct workers in his methods. To get a better sense of how these sculptures were created, Gagosian Gallery has a video on its website, viewable at [gagosian.com](http://gagosian.com), that shows Chamberlain as he directs the assembly of one of his works.

## FURTHER EXPLORATIONS

- Chamberlain stated: "I've wanted to take pictures of pieces that I've done, I've always wondered if you could make it so that you wouldn't know what size it was. I figured that it was the best way that I could ever define what scale was: when you can't tell the size of it."<sup>32</sup> Experiment with this idea. Create an abstract sculpture from any material, such as wood pieces, clay, cardboard, or Lego.<sup>®</sup> Can you photograph it so that it looks much larger than its actual size? Which photos are the most successful in creating an illusion of a larger scale? Explain how this was accomplished.
- In the quote that introduces this section, Chamberlain describes how your sense of scale can change. Things that you may remember as being very large when you were younger (and smaller) may seem dwarfed in comparison when viewed again from an older (and taller) perspective (Chamberlain was 6' 4"). Have you ever had an experience similar to Chamberlain's? If yes, describe the shift in scale that you experienced.
- The Saint Louis Art Museum has a short video on its website that examines scale in sculpture. To view this video, visit [slam.org/sfysculpture/scale.html](http://slam.org/sfysculpture/scale.html).



*C'ESTZESTY*, 2011. Painted and chromium-plated steel and stainless steel, 604.5 × 170.2 × 170.2 cm. Private collection © 2012 John Chamberlain/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photo: Robert McKeever, courtesy Gagosian Gallery, New York

This resource unit for educators is adapted from essays contained in the exhibition catalogue, Susan Davidson, ed., *John Chamberlain: Choices* (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 2012).

## RESOURCES

### Books

Davidson, Susan, ed. *John Chamberlain: Choices*. Exh. cat. New York: Guggenheim Museum, 2012.

Schwarz, Dieter, ed. *John Chamberlain, Papier Paradisio: Drawings, Collages, Reliefs, Paintings*. Exh. cat. Winterthur, Switzerland: Kunstmuseum Winterthur; Düsseldorf: Richter Verlag, 2005.

Stockebrand, Marianne, ed. *John Chamberlain: The Foam Sculptures*. Exh. cat. Marfa, Tex.: The Chinati Foundation, 2007.

Sylvester, Julie. *John Chamberlain: A Catalogue Raisonné of the Sculpture, 1954–1985*. Exh. cat. New York: Hudson Hills Press in association with the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, 1986.

### For Youth

Greenberg, Jan, and Sandra Jordan. *The Sculptor's Eye: Looking at Contemporary American Art*. New York: Delacorte Press, 1993.

Lindop, Edmund, and Margaret J. Goldstein. *America in the 1960s*. Minneapolis, Minn.: Twenty-First Century Books, 2010.

### Websites

An interview with John Chamberlain conducted by gallerist and contemporary art dealer, Arne Glimcher, can be viewed at [youtube.com/watch?v=AHClgHdFvcY](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AHClgHdFvcY).

The Chinati Foundation  
[chinati.org](http://chinati.org)

Gagosian Gallery  
[gagosian.com](http://gagosian.com)

## NOTES

- 1 Untitled, unpublished transcript of a conversation with John Chamberlain, n.d. [ca. 1964], courtesy of the Allan Stone Collection, unpaginated.
- 2 Paul Tschinkel, *John Chamberlain: Modern Sculpture*, Art/New York 52 (New York: Inner-Tube Video, 1999), transcript, p. 7.
- 3 Julie Sylvester, "Auto/Bio: Conversations with John Chamberlain," in Sylvester, *John Chamberlain: A Catalogue Raisonné of the Sculpture, 1954–1985*, exh. cat. (New York: Hudson Hills Press in association with the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, 1986), pp. 11, 24.
- 4 Annette Grant, "In the Studio: John Chamberlain," *Art + Auction* (New York) 31, no. 11 (July 2008), p. 43.
- 5 Sylvester, "Auto/Bio," p. 15.
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 Bonnie Clearwater, oral history interview with John Chamberlain, Sarasota, Fla., Jan. 29–30, 1991, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C., transcript, p. 38.
- 8 Adrian Kohn, "A Look at John Chamberlain's Lacquer Paintings," in *It's All in the Fit: The Work of John Chamberlain*, symposium hosted by the Chinati Foundation, Marfa, Tex., Apr. 22–23, 2006 (Marfa, Tex.: The Chinati Foundation, 2009), p. 107.
- 9 Don Quaintance, "Rhyme and Reason: A Limited Lexicon," in Susan Davidson, ed., *John Chamberlain: Choices* (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 2012), p. 230.
- 10 Phyllis Tuchman, "An Interview with John Chamberlain," *Artforum* 10, no. 6 (Feb. 1972), p. 39.
- 11 David J. Getsy, "Immoderate Couplings: Transformations and Genders in John Chamberlain's Work," in *It's All in the Fit: The Work of John Chamberlain*, pp. 176–77.
- 12 Dave Hickey, "John Chamberlain: Steel Couture," in *John Chamberlain: Choices*, p. 36.
- 13 Ebenezer Cobham Brewer, *Character Sketches of Romance, Fiction and the Drama: A Revised American Edition of the Readers' Handbook*, ed. Marion Harland, vol. 4 (New York: Selmar Hess, 1892), p. 46.
- 14 Henry Geldzahler, "Interview with John Chamberlain," in *John Chamberlain: Recent Work*, exh. cat. (New York: Pace Gallery, 1992), unpaginated.
- 15 Ann Temkin, *Color Chart: Reinventing Color, 1950 to Today*, exh. cat. (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2008), p. 83.
- 16 David J. Getsy, "John Chamberlain's Pliability: The New Monumental Aluminium Works," *Burlington Magazine* (London) 153, no. 1303 (Nov. 2011), p. 743.
- 17 *Chinati Foundation Newsletter* (Marfa, Tex.) 11 (Oct. 2006), p. 35.
- 18 Irving Sandler, "The Sculpture of John Chamberlain: An Ugly Beauty," in *John Chamberlain: Recent Sculpture*, exh. cat. (New York: PaceWildenstein, 2005), pp. 5–6.
- 19 Getsy, "John Chamberlain's Pliability," p. 743.
- 20 Phyllis Tuchman, "An Interview with John Chamberlain," p. 41.
- 21 Grant, "In the Studio," p. 43.
- 22 Donna De Salvo, "Nerves of Steel: John Chamberlain's Extra-sensory Expressionism," in *John Chamberlain: Choices*, p. 58.
- 23 Ibid., p. 59.
- 24 Maurice Tuchman, ed., *A Report on the Art and Technology Program of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1967–1971* (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1971), p. 71.
- 25 Getsy, "John Chamberlain's Pliability," p. 744.
- 26 Phyllis Tuchman, "An Interview with John Chamberlain," p. 39.
- 27 Getsy, "John Chamberlain's Pliability," p. 740.
- 28 Grant, "In the Studio," p. 43.
- 29 Sylvester, "Auto/Bio," p. 20.
- 30 Getsy, "John Chamberlain's Pliability," p. 740.
- 31 "Excerpts from a Conversation Between Elizabeth C. Baker, John Chamberlain, Don Judd, and Diane Waldman," in Waldman, *John Chamberlain: A Retrospective Exhibition*, exh. cat. (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, 1971), p. 18.
- 32 Phyllis Tuchman, "An Interview with John Chamberlain," p. 39.

## ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONISM

An art movement of the mid-20th-century that was primarily concerned with the spontaneous assertion of the individual through the act of painting. Generally, Abstract Expressionist art is without recognizable images. The Abstract Expressionist movement centered in New York and is also called the New York school.

## ASSEMBLAGE

A work of art composed of materials, objects, or parts originally intended for another purpose.

## COLLAGE

Two-dimensional works made of pasted paper pieces, cloth, or other materials.

## GESTURE

A movement of the body or limbs that expresses or emphasizes an idea or a feeling.