

John Chamberlain  
MATRIX/BERKELEY 114

University Art Museum  
mid January - mid March 1988

Medina Ataxia, 1984



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, 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 brushstroke 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 Ataxia, 1984, possess the elegant, elongated contrapposto of a Greek statue. Others, such as the wall relief Sudden Enclosures, 1986, 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 or 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 malleableness. 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 pearlescent lavenders 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 piece 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 1946, 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.

1. Emperor Hudson, 1964, 28 x 32 x 24". Lent by Judy and Jim Newman, San Francisco.
2. Medina Ataxia, 1984, 121-3/4 x 46-1/2 x 44". Lent by Margo Leavin Gallery, Los Angeles.
3. Feeling Good, Louis, 1985, 35 x 23-1/2 x 21". Lent by Marcia S. Weisman, Los Angeles.
4. Leaning Tower of Youth, 1985, 156 x 48 x 48". Lent by Margo Leavin Gallery, Los Angeles.
5. Sudden Enclosures, 1986, 35 x 28 x 16". Lent by Margo Leavin Gallery, Los Angeles.

Complete biographical and bibliographical information about the artist through 1985 is in John Chamberlain: A Catalogue Raisonné of the Sculpture 1954-1985, published to accompany a 1986 retrospective exhibition organized by The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles.

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); Ecole Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts, Paris, Cinquante ans de dessins américains 1930-1980, '85; 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,

Structure to Resemblance: Work by Eight American Sculptors, '87.

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

Bourdon, David.  
"Artist's Dialogue: John Chamberlain," Architectural Digest, Nov. '85.  
Muehnic, Suzanne. "The Art Galleries: La Cienega Area," Los Angeles Times, July 25, '86.  
Wilson, William.  
"Chamberlain's Tough/Tender Heavy Metal," Los Angeles Times, Calendar, Aug. 10, '86.  
Russell, John. "Art View: His Sculpture Transforms Scrap into Steel Poems," The New York Times, Aug. 17, '86.  
Morgan, Robert C. "The Look," The Village Voice, Aug. 26, '86.  
Yau, John. "Review," Artforum, Nov. '86.  
Adams, Brook. "Review of Exhibitions: John Chamberlain at the Museum of Contemporary Art," Art in America, Dec. '86.  
Raynor, Vivien. "Art: Pure Sculpture by John Chamberlain," The New York Times, May 22, '87.

MATRIX is supported in part by grants from Mrs. Paul L. Wattis, The LEF Foundation, and the Alameda County Art Commission's County Supervisors' Art Support Program.