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JOHN CHAMBERLAIN

Early Years

L&M Arts

45 East 78th Street, Manhattan

Through June 27

Is there any sculpture from the 1960s that still looks as good as John Chamberlain's? This fine show of works dating from 1960 to 1987 prompts the question.

It would seem counterintuitive that Mr. Chamberlain's assemblages of crushed auto-body parts would stand the test of time. Back in the day they surely struck many observers as gimmicky novelties, the stuff of a New Yorker cartoon. ("Honey, I turned the car into modern art!") But Mr. Chamberlain's works of distressed metal now look like classics. Hovering between the raw and the cooked, they are simultaneously compressed junk and elegant compositions of organic abstraction and orgasmic expression. With colors ranging from dirty white to iridescent metal-flake green including shiny chrome and rusty steel, they a strong painterly quality.

That the sculptures more or less subliminally evoke and eroticize real crashed cars makes them all the more gripping.

In the mid-'60s Mr. Chamberlain tried to escape his destiny as the car-body guy. He made works from galvanized steel, foam rubber and old oil barrels. He also created small, square, near-Minimalist enamel-on-metal paintings. But examples of such work in this show are not as compelling as the auto-body works, which he returned to in the late '60s and has continued to produce with great panache. **KEN JOHNSON**