

# MNUCHIN GALLERY

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## PUCK

*The artist best known for assemblages of crushed car parts has never had a market commensurate with his reputation. That may start to change, thanks to some new tactics by his estate.*



It's a remarkable turn of events for John Chamberlain, a distinctive artist whose signature work—assemblages of crushed car parts from the early part of his career—was quickly sanctified by museums. *Photo: Marion Maneker*

The sculptor John Chamberlain is having a moment. Three of his large, brightly colored "foil" sculptures are currently lined up in the middle of the plaza at Rockefeller Center, following last October's display of another work in the series on Avenue Winston Churchill during Art Basel in Paris. Mnuchin Gallery sponsored both exhibitions, with the monumental works priced at \$5 million–\$6 million, and the gallery is negotiating to sell one of the Rockefeller Center works.

Half a block away, Christie's is hosting a private selling exhibition featuring maquettes of the foil works as well as smaller, tabletop versions of Chamberlain's more recognizable crushed-sheet-metal sculptures, including some fabricated from toy trucks, all priced below a million dollars. Meanwhile, Assouline has published a book, *Living With Chamberlain*, that shows off photographs of the artist's work in the collections of prominent dealers (Marc Glimcher, Larry Gagosian, Robert Mnuchin, Karsten Greve, Heiner Friedrich), as well as artists, designers, and collectors (Vera Wang, Helen Marden, Rainer Judd, Michael Ovitz)

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It's a remarkable turn of events for a distinctive artist whose signature work—assemblages of crushed car parts from the early part of his career—was quickly sanctified by museums. But his market never quite kept up. Just before his death at age 83, in December 2011, Gagosian took over representation of the artist. A Guggenheim retrospective followed in 2012 (he had previously had one in 1971). At the time, the art market was gathering momentum. Chamberlain looked to be positioned to move up a rank, with his most recognized work attracting prices commensurate with his museum presence and art historical recognition. In 2011, a classic 1958 work, *Nutcracker*—owned at different times by two of his important former dealers, Martha Jackson and Allan Stone—was offered in an auction of Stone's inventory with a \$1.2 million estimate. It was bid up to a \$4.8 million selling price.

Works from the late 1950s and early 1960s, the period when the sculptor was influenced by high abstract expressionist painters like Franz Kline and Willem de Kooning, were the most prized, and auction prices seemed to be catching up to his reputation. But it also seemed as if the market for Chamberlain's later works had to expand to unleash prices for work from his early heyday. In 2012, shortly after the retrospective, Gagosian displayed some of Chamberlain's large "foil" works on the plaza at the Seagram Building, in a bid to attract new buyers.

But the strategy didn't work. Even though Chamberlain's works had fetched prices in the \$4 million range before and after the *Nutcracker* sale—one work made \$4.6 million in 2008 and another made \$4.6 million in 2013—there was little upward momentum. The artist achieved only a handful of additional sales in the \$1 million–\$2 million range during the same period.

By 2018, when *Nutcracker* sold again at auction, for a bit more than \$5.5 million, the Chamberlain market seemed little changed. The next year, Hauser & Wirth announced that it had taken over representation of the artist's estate, and there was a lot of talk in the industry of an eight-figure guarantee spread over a five-year period. That didn't seem to do the trick, either. And so began the multipronged approach by the artist's estate—run by his widow and stepdaughter—to build interest in his market, a strategy that we are seeing the fruits of this month. In two years we'll be at Chamberlain's centenary; the estate is already making plans.

## Gimme Shelter Island

On a beautiful spring day last week, I drove out to Shelter Island to have lunch with Alexandra Fairweather, the artist's stepdaughter, at the converted stables the estate now uses as an exhibition space. On the ferry ride over, I realized that I had not been on Shelter Island in a long time. Driving up to the former horse farm, I was struck by how little the place had changed (though I did drive by one farm that was a little too picture perfect, with a vintage red tractor and restored Land Rover parked strategically out front; it turned out to be a \$10 million real estate project that was, well, languishing in manicured splendor). Fairweather had grown up on Shelter Island, moved to New York to attend Columbia, and then moved back with her husband and three small children.

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John Chamberlain's studio in Shelter Island, New York. Photo: Marion Maneker

When Chamberlain died in 2011, he left his estate to Fairweather's mother. In 2012, Fairweather's mother bought the horse farm from a friend and neighbor, and renovated the stables and indoor riding ring during the pandemic to house and display Chamberlain's work. They poured and polished a concrete floor and added arched windows that give the vaulted space the feeling of a large ballroom. Fairweather placed her old dining room table in the middle of the new exhibition space so she could host dinner parties surrounded by her stepfather's work. (We briefly played a game where I was asked to identify the oldest work in the massive space—the joke being that Chamberlain had worked with plexiglass in the early 1970s, and the clear, crumpled forms were actually the oldest objects, not some of the later works made from car parts salvaged from an earlier era.)

After lunch, I followed her low-slung black Porsche a short ways to Chamberlain's studio, which sits across the street from her mother's house. Cobbled together from older buildings, the studio is now storage for the estate, and Fairweather led me into another massive space with huge sliding doors where we saw some of her stepfather's more gigantic works. Tucked away on a staircase were a number of the masks he had made, and a few examples of other work, like a crumpled 55-gallon drum.

Walking into the attached house, we saw dinnerware that Chamberlain had crafted by using car parts as the basis for molds; Fairweather told me that her stepfather had run an Italian restaurant on the island for a number of years. She led me through the studio that contained his inkjet printer, and I saw dozens of brightly colored canvases Chamberlain made from photographs of friends and family, all work I would never have imagined came from the artist.

There was even, somewhat incongruously, an indoor pool in its own pavilion adjacent to the studio and former house. Fairweather explained that Chamberlain had made sketches for works he intended to place around the pool, but never completed the project before he died. On display in the kitchen of the studio are some of the foil maquettes that Chamberlain made while conceptualizing that idea, carefully maintaining the impression that the artist had just left in mid-thought.

As managers of the estate, Fairweather and her mother are behind the push to expand interest in Chamberlain's whole body of work, not just the welded and crushed car parts. They're also partnering with Mnuchin gallery to show the mammoth foils, backing that up with domestic works at Christie's, and supporting the whole project with the polished lifestyle book *Living With Chamberlain*. The idyllic farm and studio on Shelter Island is just the most visible step. Behind the scenes, they have created and manage a registry of the artist's work, necessary steps to build Chamberlain's market and extend his legacy.