Artist with wanderlust is driven to sculpt with autos

By Hunter Drohojowska

John Chamberlain is a restless character. While most artists yearn for some stability, this sculptor has relentlessly moved his studio operations around the country, from New York to Los Angeles to Sarasota, Fla., where he now resides.

He calls it "the seven-year itch." As soon as he comes to know intimately every nook and cranny of a studio, he needs to leave. "When I feel that need, it takes me about a day and a half to find my next studio," Chamberlain says with a grin. His next studio will be on Long Island, near the action of the art world but not in the dead heat of it.

Chamberlain's "Gangster of Love" is among the pieces on exhibit at MoCA.

This peripatetic inclination is something of a metaphor for the intuitive way Chamberlain approaches his art — sculptures composed of cast-off and crushed automobile parts. His method is to prowl like a tomcat among the car pieces scattered around his studio, his glance sliding over a bent chrome bumper, appraising a silken red fender, then lingering on a black enameled door that is crumpled like a bit of used lingerie.

"I pick it up because I like the shape, through my intuition or my sex center or whatever," he explains. The artist will fiddle and search until he finds and places the right elements together. Chamberlain smilingly calls that a sexual fit. It irritates him that so many observers relate his work to the violence of the car crash when to him it is obviously about the soft bought in furniture stores." As he roams about the museum with a visitor, he repeatedly says that the interview and the essay in the exhibition catalog should answer all questions. He is not as comfortable with the spoken word as with the emotions that drive the creation of his work. "Expressionism is where I got my first real thrills in art. A lot of those fellows impressed me as doing marvelous paintings and I did my time as an apprentice," he says. His other major influences were poets Charles Olson and Robert Creeley whom he met in 1955 while studying at the famed Black Mountain College in North Carolina — the school that had such an impact on Robert Rauschenberg and John Cage a few years before. At Olson's College three years later. Then he moved to New York. His first show was in 1958 at the Davida Gallery on Fifth Avenue. Nothing sold, but all of his friends from the Cedar Bar were in attendance.

Chamberlain claims his works didn't sell particularly well until 1974 when the DIA Foundation, headed by philanthropist Philippa de Menil, came to his studio to buy 130 pieces of sculpture. Similar support had been offered to his minimalist friend Donald Judd. Looking particularly pleased, Chamberlain says, "I didn't make my career as others did. My profit was always looking at a series of works that gave me a great deal of satisfaction. I never thought Abstract Expressionism had been around long enough for people to get tired of it. I kept doing it. And what I like about it is that every time I go back, it looks different."

"But unprecedented knowledge is not received too well by people," cautioned Chamberlain. "If you want to be a star, you tell people what they already know when they wanted to be reminded of it. I was never a star."

Chamberlain squirms in his seat like a boy in the principal's office. He asks his visitor whether she has 750 words yet. It is time for the restless artist to move on.

John Chamberlain, a 30-year retrospective and first major showing on the West Coast, is on view from July 30 to Oct. 5 at the Museum of Contemporary Art's Temporary Contemporary, 152 N. Central Ave., Little Tokyo. (Call 621-2766 for information.)

James Rajotanen/Herald photographer

John Chamberlain helps with the installation of his art work for an exhibition at MoCA's Temporary Contemporary.

Chamberlain, at 59, is as brawny and muscular as his sculptures of wadded metal, but he is gentle and full of humor with the bevy of assistants trying to install his unwieldy pieces at the Museum of Contemporary Art's Temporary Contemporary. Four of them are struggling to mount hundreds of pounds of his Detroit scrap metal art on the wall when Chamberlain marches over, lifts his tattooed arms and shoves an unruly fender into place. "That's about right," he says approvingly. Though his face is worn, and his hair is snowy white now, his clear blue eyes reveal a pride in his abstract expressionist roots, in having been a regular at the Cedar Bar in New York with friends and role models like Willem de Kooning and Franz Kline.

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Chamberlain's fame lies in being the artist who brought volume and color to abstract sculpture without compromising its modernist principles. Initially, however, he wanted to be a painter. At that time, postwar sculpture was not as advanced in modernist terms as its two-dimensional counterpart. But Chamberlain is a physical personality and following the discoveries of sculptor David Smith, he began welding metal forms together.

The breakthrough, according to Chamberlain, occurred in 1957 while he was visiting artist Larry Rivers in South Hampton. Casting about for some appropriate sculpture material, Chamberlain stripped an old Ford of its front fenders, crushed them a bit and wrapped them in stringy steel. To consummate the piece, he drove over it once or twice and called it "Shortstop." The piece, which is included in the MoCA exhibition, went beyond the linear quality of his earlier, Smith-influenced work, and incorporated spontaneity, destruction and the element of chance. His new sculpture method was tied to the forces behind abstract expressionist painting, inspired as it was by the subconscious, intuitive impulse. Yet, it coolly removed any evidence of the artist's hand.

In Chamberlain's sculpture, the automobile was both medium and tool, neatly fitting assemblage into the prevailing modernist dictum that the subject of art be of its own making.

Chamberlain, himself, is not so interested in the theoretical rhetoric of making art. For him, it is simply "getting rid of a certain kind of madness." He had little formal training in art schools, and once thought art was "something you

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they looked." He cites the example,
"Blond Day."

"It's mandatory for artists to like what they do, to satisfy some parts of their psyche. If not, it's just industrial design," insists Chamberlain. "I feel that what's fine about fine art is that it's unprecedented knowledge. An artist makes what he wants to see, it's part of the job. I like to stay away from ironclad attitudes and that applies to myself and my materials. I feel strongly that one needs relief, that if you are doing a certain kind of art you need to regularly change scale, materials or attitude."

That restless drive for relief drove Chamberlain to work with materials other than scrap metal between 1967 and 1974. He experimented with vacuum-coated plastic — while living in Los Angeles and acquainted with sculptor Larry Bell — as well as with galvanized steel, paper bags and foam rubber. A huge foam rubber coach, called a barge, is included in the exhibition. On either side, TV monitors play a film that he also made during this adventuresome period. "I wanted to make instant sculptures for a while," he explains, wadding a square of foam rubber to demonstrate the instant effect. "Everybody wads things up, as they did when they were kids, like sheets, toilet paper, a cigarette pack. Looking at my work might remind you of your life. Anything I do relates to being a kid."

Chamberlain's restlessness began as a kid growing up in Rochester, Ind. He recalls a poem he once wrote about "getting out of In-die-ana." When he left, he broke a six-generation family tradition of being a saloonkeeper. "I've kept up with saloonism, however," admits Chamberlain. "It's in the best tradition of English or Irish hanging out." Rochester was a lonely town for Chamberlain. His mother took him to Chicago when he was 4 and divorced his father, but Chamberlain went back during the summers. As a young boy, he wanted to be an inventor. He didn't do well in school, though, and in 1943, at the age of 16, he enlisted in the Navy to avoid jail for vagrancy.

After the war, Chamberlain found a job as a hairdresser, and had a flair for such work. If he was shown a photograph of a hairstyle, he could duplicate it. He went on to study with a makeup artist and learned how to make masks. The classes in hairstyling and makeup — paid for by the G.I. Bill — inspired him to start drawing. In 1951, he enrolled at the Art Institute of Chicago. He felt quite at home until he was asked to leave for writing an art history paper on India's ancient columns carved with nude figures.

"It occurred to me later that they thought I was talking about sex. But I was talking about fit, how it all fit together."

Chamberlain's only other formal training came from Black Mountain