

**JOHN CHAMBERLAIN at the Dan Flavin Art Institute, DIA Bridgehampton**  
*Squeezed and Tied: Foam and Paper Sculptures, 1969-70*

By Janet Goleas

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The art of John Chamberlain was acclaimed as early as 1959 when he first began assembling crushed automobile parts into sculptural forms. By 1962 he was exhibiting his work regularly at New York's famed Leo Castelli Gallery. Known for these edgy scrap metal compositions, in 1966 Mr. Chamberlain embarked on a period of experimentation that would lead to a hiatus from metal work that stretched over seven years. A selection of these little known sculptures is currently on exhibit at The Dan Flavin Art Institute located in Bridgehampton. The exhibition, titled John Chamberlain, Squeezed and Tied: Foam and Paper Sculptures, 1969-70 is on view through Oct 14<sup>th</sup>.

He wanted to test his chops. Mr. Chamberlain needed to know if he was destined to be an artist of a single medium or if he was good enough to find his art in other materials. So, he left New York to live briefly on California's Malibu Beach where he scavenged the Pacific shoreline for the type of secondhand leftovers he could recycle into art supplies, albeit unorthodox ones. His explorations led to countless permutations that included foam rubber, paper bags, melted plastic and aluminum foil. This startling level of innovation has resulted in nearly five decades of work that includes filmmaking, photography, painting, environmental art and other media.

Visceral and abstract, in the 1960s his crushed metal forms were interpreted as the sculptural equivalent of Abstract Expressionism, and were often compared to the swashbuckling paint style of Willem de Kooning. The use of candy colored automobile hoods and discarded fenders also had keen associations to Pop art. In a triumph of intuition and artistry, throughout his career Mr. Chamberlain has utilized classic modernist idioms and at the same time managed to turn them on their heads. His assembled automobile scraps articulate not only volume, movement, color and form but pure, unadulterated process. He has cinched and bundled foam rubber, wadded and squeezed paper and foil and, with his Widelux panoramic camera, he has bent the photographic process to create images that are seductive, surreal and elusive. Even his most reductive works are painterly, inhabiting an arena that is neither abstract nor representational. Most significantly, the artist's actions are so truthful and his sculptures so candid that what they depict, in sum, is process itself. And therein resides the true subject matter of these important works.

John Chamberlain grew up in Chicago and after three years in the navy used his G.I. Bill to study hairdressing. It was not until his education credits were nearly used up that the young artist-in-waiting made a sudden detour away from beauty school and wound up at the Art Institute of Chicago. He studied there briefly before moving to North Carolina to attend Black Mountain College. The artist took classes with and befriended the poets Robert Creeley and Charles Olson, whose influences can be clearly linked to Mr. Chamberlain's sense of process, candor and frank physicality. He moved to New York in 1956 where he imbedded himself in the culture of Bohemian artists that lined the booths of the legendary Cedar Bar. Like the previous generation of artists who had defined an emerging post-war American art, boozing and cavorting in between studio hours was *derigueur* for this pioneering art crowd. In 1965, his friend Mickey Ruskin opened the infamous Max's Kansas City where Mr. Chamberlain and his circle were soon fixtures. The avant-garde was good for business and Mr. Ruskin

wanted them seated front and center -- his offer to accept art for a running tab kept them there. The notorious nightclub drew in the jet set -- glamorous celebrities, Rock and Roll stars, Andy Warhol's entourage and an endless stream of onlookers who came to watch.

In 1966, when the restless Mr. Chamberlain decided to test his gifts by invoking a spectacular shift in materials, the results were extreme. During this "Laboratory Period" he took a complete sabbatical from scrap metal. Instead, he wadded, twisted and crushed paper bags, tied and squeezed slabs of urethane foam, melted plastic boxes and crushed and roiled aluminum foil. One of the best sources for material on the artist is the 2006 documentary film made by his wife's teenage daughter, Alexandra Fairweather. The film, titled "John Chamberlain and Miss Lady Pink" follows the artist from his Shelter Island studio to various locations including the Chinati Foundation in Marfa, Texas where his foam rubber sculptures were exhibited in 2005. Speaking there at a symposium on his art the artist remarked, "The results of tying and squeezing the foam were so instant and so complete -- I thought it wouldn't take too long for anyone to get it. I was wrong -- it took forty years," Mr. Chamberlain laughed, commenting on a body of work that has only recently found its audience.

At some point we've all tried to cut seat cushions from that ubiquitous leftover foam in the basement. It's a little like trying to part the seas. If you slice on one side the other side slips away. If you score it, the foam shreds into unruly striations of Polyurethane. Scissors are of little help. In fact, on the internet there are entire blogs devoted to the ongoing riddle of cutting foam rubber. Electric carving knives are a popular solution, and there are myriad professional devices available. Or you can try one of the truly inventive methods: wet it, freeze it and slice it. One thing is certain, the resulting irregular cuts typical of urethane foam create a topography that is abstract, evocative and elastic in its potential meaning.

The film interview went on. "They're very erotic," Mr. Chamberlain said. "When you squeeze it *here*," he continued, moving his index finger from points in the air, "it opens *here*." Indeed, the supple curves of the twelve foam sculptures included here are swollen and sweeping. They swerve around their own exteriors and then dive inside as if seeking an ultimate interior core. The artist splashes them with paint before manipulating the rubber. "I throw color at it first," he said. "I don't put it together and then paint it -- that's the worst thing you could do."

The ground floor gallery at The Dan Flavin Art Institute is dimly lit. Entering the room, ones eyes gradually adjust to the seductions of these fluid sculptures that rest on tall pedestals. Slightly lascivious, they are pinched and wadded, clutched and bound -- so physical they seem to beg to be touched. In fact, it almost feels as if the hand of the artist is here, gripping at the cinched waists of these voluptuous forms.

In a vitrine on the north wall stands a suite of crushed brown paper bags. Each of these 1969 sculptures carry the title "Penthouse", and are variously numbered from 46 to 50. They are modest in size, but maintain a monumentality that defies scale. Slathered with resin and paint, within their simplicity lies both a fierceness and a deep sensuality that exudes the intellect and passion of this remarkable artist.

The Ross School will host "An Evening With John Chamberlain", a benefit featuring the artist as well as Ms. Fairweather's documentary "John Chamberlain and Miss Lucy Pink," 2006. The event, which will include a question & answer session with the artist takes place Friday, August 10th at 7:00pm. The event will launch the new Chamberlain/ Fairweather Family Scholarship Fund at Ross School.

The Dan Flavin Art Institute, part of the Dia Art Foundation, is located on Corwith Avenue in Bridgehampton.

**Janet M. Goleas**