

Press Release

John Chamberlain. The Poetics of Scale

Hauser & Wirth Monaco
10 May – 2 September 2023



This exhibition pairs John Chamberlain's early poetry with his 'Gondolas' and 'Tonks' from the 1980s, years he spent working in a large-scale studio in Florida. These works epitomize the artist's poetic approach to materials and scale. Hauser & Wirth's exhibition will be the first time Chamberlain's poetry will be shown publicly, illuminating a sensitive and little-known aspect of his practice produced at Black Mountain College in the 1950s.

During the 1950s, Chamberlain spent a year at Black Mountain College, where the poet Charles Olson was his teacher and where he experimented with poetry, composing a body of work that would subtly inform his approach to sculptural work. This interlude had a profound impact on the artist—he would later state, 'My teachers were Kline, de Kooning, Charles Olson.' Chamberlain would later become known for the creativity and poetry of his titles, which, like his sculptures, were assembled based on 'fit'. He wrote words on cards, trying different combinations to create beautiful compositions. In the early 1980s, he gifted his poems from Black Mountain College to the curator and author Julie Sylvester, who was in the process of conducting interviews for a catalogue raisonné of Chamberlain's works. He had saved them for nearly 30 years, and she recognized in this a sign of their singular importance for him, and the insights they might afford for his work. The pages reveal his working through the images and themes, as well as his and others' changes and annotations.

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In 1980, Chamberlain had moved to Sarasota, mooring his boat, the Cocola, at a local marina. He established an outdoor studio at the back of a junkyard in Osprey, eventually occupying a large former industrial building painted bright yellow, allowing him to make work larger than ever before. The artist soon began work on a monumental sculpture commission, 'Deliquescence', made from truck parts. Seeing the remaining truck chassis nestled together in his studio, he was reminded of a fleet of Venetian gondolas and probably also inspired by the proximity of the sea, the vessels in the marina and along the coastline. These hefty parts became the basis of the Armada series. In 1984, Chamberlain changed the series title to the Gondolas, naming each after a notable poet—including Charles Olson, his teacher at Black Mountain College.

By the end of 1984, and in direct contrast to the large scale of the 'Gondolas,' the artist accumulated what he called a 'Tonka Toy junkyard' from which he made some of his smallest works. Many of the 'Tonks,' however, share a focus on low, horizontal form with the 'Gondolas.' Seeing these works together demonstrates Chamberlain's ability to work in a variety of scale—simultaneously creating some of his largest and smallest works. The opportunity to see the 'Tonks' and 'Gondolas' in parallel gives a unique insight into Chamberlain's Sarasota era, a key period in the artist's oeuvre.

Organized in close collaboration with the John Chamberlain Estate, the exhibition is curated by Tanya Barson.

About the artist

John Chamberlain (1927 – 2011) has been the subject of numerous solo exhibitions, including two major retrospectives at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York NY in 2012 and 1971; 'John Chamberlain, Squeezed and Tied. Foam and Paper Sculptures 1969–70,' Dan Flavin Art Institute, Dia Center for the Arts, Bridgehampton NY (2007); 'John Chamberlain. Foam Sculptures 1966–1981, Photographs 1989–2004,' Chinati Foundation, Marfa TX (2005); 'John Chamberlain. Current Work and Fond Memories, Sculptures and Photographs 1967–1995,' Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, Netherlands (Traveling Exhibition) (1996); and 'John Chamberlain. Sculpture, 1954–1985,' Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles CA (1986). Chamberlain's sculptures are part of permanent exhibitions at the Chinati Foundation in Marfa TX and at Dia:Beacon in upstate New York. In 1964, Chamberlain represented the

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United States in the American Pavilion at the 32nd International Exhibition of the Venice Biennale. He received many awards during his life, including a Doctor of Fine Arts, honoris causa, from the College for Creative Studies, Detroit (2010); the Distinction in Sculpture Honor from the Sculpture Center, New York (1999); the Gold Medal from The National Arts Club Award, New York (1997); the Lifetime Achievement Award in Contemporary Sculpture by the International Sculpture Center, Washington D.C. (1993); and the Skowhegan Medal for Sculpture, New York NY (1993).

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Caption and courtesy information:

John Chamberlain
Dhuha Ditty
1983
Painted and chromium-plated steel
181.6 x 129.5 x 47 cm / 71 1/2 x 51 x 18 1/2 in
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Photo: Thomas Barratt

John Chamberlain
Gondola Marianne Moore
1982
Painted and chrome-plated steel
94 x 523 x 84 cm / 37 x 205 7/8 x 33 1/8 in
Gondola Hart Crane
1982
Painted and chrome-plated steel
107 x 480 x 95 cm / 42 1/8 x 189 x 37 3/8 in
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