

CHARLES RAY

Soft Future

If I did not have this computer, the floor of my office would look like a John Chamberlain exhibition, scattered with crumpled-up sheets of paper to remind me of the false starts I have made in writing this short essay. Like this imagined office floor, my appreciation of Chamberlain's work has been littered with false starts and misunderstandings. Perhaps my greatest misconception of Chamberlain's sculptures comes from their entanglement with recent American cultural history. Looking at the works today, it is difficult for me to separate them from my first experience of Chamberlain in the 1960s.

In the same way that Andy Warhol changed my understanding of Campbell's soup cans, whose contents filled my childhood lunch bowl and nourished my sense of American privilege, the vision of Chamberlain's crumpled car parts welded into configurations with intellectual associations propelled me across the cultural divide. Looking at Chamberlain's work today, I sometimes wonder if it followed me on that trip.

As a teenager, I heard a friend's father refer to his son's beat-up car as a rolling John Chamberlain. I mention this because the association shows just how the nature of the work could be misunderstood. In a sense, there are no dents in a Chamberlain—when we look for the spot welds, we find the beauty of deliberate decisions.

As a young sculptor, I embraced Donald Judd's take on Chamberlain. Judd pointed to the hollow core around which Chamberlain built his sculptures. Through Judd I saw past the Pop imagery of the smashed car parts; empty space as a material armature caught my attention, and the nature of Chamberlain's expression dissolved and was reborn to fit with my then-present sculptural concern.

Judd the critic illuminated the work of others with the torch of his own artistic vision in a wonderful way. In my mind, Judd did to Chamberlain what he did to Lee Bontecou: he informed the work with his own concern, showing us that Chamberlain and Bontecou have no separate parts and instead emphasizing their American wholeness. Whether he was right or not, my views of Chamberlain shifted and grew with Judd's evolving interpretations.

As Chamberlain continued working, he settled for finding variation in his work's outward form rather than following the road of sculpture itself in new directions. My understanding of his sculptures began to break apart. Is this what happens when you keep working? Was a simple intuitive quality all that was left? I would rather settle for the rolling John Chamberlain. The complexity of the icon and the philosophical conversation of where the work sat dissolved into a perceived decorativeness. At a certain point, Chamberlain began to apply paint to his works, further confusing my understanding of his intentions.

What happened to his art? Another question, where was his art? Color was inherent to the early work. The early work had topology rather than surface, compression rather than form. The sculptures had shifted from being made *of* cars to being made *from* cars. Chamberlain's work today is celebratory in the same way that reality TV celebrates the custom choppers made by the Teutul family. Chamberlain's best work is a force of nature understood through the complexity of popular culture. Now I cannot pass the looking stage. Is this all a projection? A sculptural misunderstanding? Can I just not see the art part?

A few weeks ago I was invited to visit a young sculptor named Aiko Hachisuka. I was familiar with some of her works made with fabric, secondhand clothes, and furniture. She, like Chamberlain, had made a beautiful couch. While Chamberlain had compressed and tied his foam, this artist had covered, caressed, and overlapped hers with secondhand clothing—jeans, blouses, skirts, and shirts—filling the couch's form and overspilling its boundaries. It was a wonderful work with narrative qualities.

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Aiko Hachisuka's studio, Los Angeles, 2011.
Works shown: Hachisuka's *Shino* and
Hard in the Paint (both 2011)



But on this visit I saw she had moved toward abstraction: large vessels made of fabric with no attention to the human form. I was reminded of the great rifts in Peter Voulkos's ceramic works, but Hachisuka's cylinders were made of foam and fabric. Beautifully, she had screen-printed areas of new color onto the components of each work, bringing an unfamiliarity to the form and material. I asked her, "What is this about? How did you come to screen color onto the fabric?" She told me she had seen and thought about Chamberlain applying paint to his already painted car parts. She said that this gave her inspiration and courage to move ahead in a new direction in her own work. At this moment I found the simple core of art in both a young artist and a much older one.