It’s All in the Fit:
The Work of John Chamberlain
A LOOK AT
JOHN CHAMBERLAIN’S
LACQUER PAINTINGS

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COLOR AND LACQUER
The lush yet matter-of-fact colors of junkyard sheet metal intrigued several of the first art critics to write about John Chamberlain’s sculptures. Donald Judd, for one, coined the odd adverb “Rooseveltianly” in characterizing how Chamberlain juxtaposed the hues of automobile scrap in works such as Essex of 1960 (see fig. 1, p.212) and Huzzy of 1961 (fig. 1). Chamberlain’s palette, he remarked, “involves the hard, sweet, pastel enamels, frequently roses and ceruleans, of Detroit’s imitation elegance for the poor—coupled, Rooseveltianly, with reds and blues.” Some associations of Chamberlain’s colors emerge in this sentence. Rose and cerulean suggested to Judd the products of Detroit manufacturing, such as gaudy cars and other durables that FDR’s New Deal policies promised to put within reach of the working class. Red and blue functioned as genuine aristocratic hues, a nod to Roosevelt’s own privileged caste. Unlike figurative language in much contemporaneous art criticism, Judd’s impromptu appeals to an American city and president clarify the visual attributes of Chamberlain’s objects more than distracting from them. Detroit evokes a certain characteristic color range in this 1962 review instead of the labor strikes of the 1930s (or the later race riots one thinks of at its mention today). The reference to Roosevelt concentrates attention not on legislative efforts to rebalance a
stratified Depression-era society but rather on Chamberlain’s complex coupling of red and blue with rose and cerulean. In Essex, for example, red and blue contrast as opposed primaries but have identical saturation and close values; the red and rose are nearer in hue though less alike in saturation and value; and the red and cerulean share little. Judd’s allusions helped him convey how Chamberlain’s incongruous colors jar without counteracting one another, which maximizes the visibility of each.³

Forty years later, Judd’s analysis remains some of the most perceptive writing on Chamberlain’s art. That being said, he and others insisted on an affinity with Willem de Kooning’s paintings, a somewhat curious reading given that Chamberlain himself repeatedly named Franz Kline as a greater influence (figs. 2, 3).⁴ Chamberlain acquiesced to the constructed similarity in the end but tried to limit its scope. He specified that “the comparison of my color to de Kooning’s color has a lot to do with the fact that Detroit puts
a lot of white in the color ... that they mix for putting on cars.” ⁵ Artist Lawrence Weiner commented further in a conversation with Chamberlain: “Color is opaque for a car and for de Kooning as well. ... In order to get a blue, it had to be a blue based on white. It had to have a white or grey base or it wouldn’t cover the metal, and it wouldn’t be opaque; it would be translucent.” ⁶ Weiner’s assessment holds true for the unaltered commercial enamel on metal in Chamberlain’s earliest pieces. Yet in paintings from 1963 to 1965, and in many subsequent sculptures, Chamberlain experimented with a property contrary to standard automobile paint-jobs—not enamel’s opacity but rather lacquer’s translucence.

In *Four Seasons* of 1964, Chamberlain sprayed one hundred layers of orange metal-flake lacquer onto a square-foot sheet of Formica (fig. 4). He wanted to try “arriving at a color through veils.” ⁷ To achieve this innovative kind of hue, Chamberlain minimized the ratio of flake to binder. “I was interested in taking a can full
of clear glaze and dumping a teaspoon of color into it and then painting and painting,” he explained. “It took fifty coats before I got a color.”

A single coat of the lacquer blend in *Four Seasons* would have appeared transparent, but dozens of overlapping coats accumulated like layered veils into a sparkling orange.

As the lacquer piled up, Chamberlain complicated its minute thickness. Midway through the layers of *Four Seasons*, he painted two sets of nine squares, one with a translucent red lacquer and the other with a more opaque violet, before covering the entire surface with additional clear coats. “What I wanted to do with those little squares was have them float in there, have them appear floating,” he observed, “[so] I put down a lot of veils with the squares halfway in, like more veils.”

A cross-section of *Dee Dee Sharp’s* fused layers measures less than one-sixteenth of an inch, but Chamberlain regarded the surface as “deep at some level with the color build-up” (fig. 5). Indeed, the veiled squares,
dark and visible though buried within the translucent yellow, confirm that one is seeing into a thin slab of hardened lacquer. Compared to the depicted or chromatic depth of other postwar paintings, the shallow physical depth of *Four Seasons* and *Dee Dee Sharp* registers as surprisingly different, since real.

Another series of larger lacquer paintings with four-foot sides have similarly intricate surfaces. For the field in *Rock-Ola* of 1964, Chamberlain sprayed a panel of Masonite with several priming layers, then dozens of coats of purple Ditzler metal-flake lacquer, and finally about thirty layers of clear topcoat in order to “bury the flake to make it look suspended” (fig. 6). A green and a gray right-angled stripe cut in from either side. Two angular chromed attachments sit just above the painted surface and reflect it. Chamberlain summarized the diverse optical effects of these five components:

There was the field, there were two painted bars and then two chrome bars that stood up. But if you counted everything going all the way across, you could count up to thirty: thirty different changes, thirty different notations—how the light struck, how the light changed the field or changed the painted bar, then the bar itself and the reflection, and so on.13

Chamberlain’s inventory compounds as one draws nearer. At an inch or two away, the previously uniform purple reveals glinting specks of violet, red, and gold. The green stripe turns out to have a great deal of gold glitter and scattered bits of red. And whereas the purple and green hues derive from multicolored metallic particles in colorless lacquer, the gray stripe consists of far fewer and solely gray flecks in gray binder, tinted purple by the underlying ground but otherwise opaque. All in all, the green and purple have more sparkle than sheen, the gray more sheen than sparkle.
Moving sideways in front of the paintings also brings about variation. The pieces “change color as the light changed [and] as you walk past them,” Chamberlain attested. In an untitled large work from 1964, the ground’s green, gold, and red flakes twinkle erratically since suspended within the lacquer facing every direction (fig. 7). Even so, the surface darkens in unison as one’s viewpoint swings from front to side. Further multiplying the versatility of his paintings, Chamberlain recommended experimenting with their orientation on the wall, turning the support ninety-degrees and hanging it sideways or rotating it forty-five degrees to sit at an angle. “It alters your perception,” he said, “if you need it altered.” Looking anew can mean making discoveries, as Chamberlain realized. “Art,” he declared, “is one of the few things in the world that is never boring. ... You just have to perceive it.”
INTELLECTUAL THINKING AND INTUITIVE THINKING

Intelllect comprises reason, judgment, cogitation. Intuition encompasses instincts, quick impressions, instantaneous cognition. These two methods of knowing remain intertwined and largely indistinguishable when an artist manipulates material and when a viewer perceives it. Nevertheless, Chamberlain proposed a provisional separation and acknowledged the paramount importance of intuition in his artmaking: “I deal with new material as I see fit in terms of my decision making, which has to do primarily with sexual and intuitive thinking. … The intellectual and emotional aspects have little role in my work.”17 But Chamberlain neither celebrated intuition nor dismissed intellect outright. Instead, he implied a subtler distinction between intuitive thinking, where intellect evaluates intuitions against material and visual facts, and intellectual thinking, where intellect comes unmoored from the physical evidence available.

As a student at Black Mountain College in the mid-1950s, Chamberlain practiced an extreme form of intuitive thinking. “I had this collection of words that I liked to look at,” he recounted. “It didn’t matter what they meant, I liked the way they looked […] for instance[,] with a lot of p’s or o’s.”18 “If the word is ‘beauty,’” he ventured, “it can become ‘beautiful.’ Then it can become ‘beauteous,’ can’t it? Or ‘beautification.’ […] The word looks nice to you. Maybe you don’t even care what the word means.”19 Chamberlain’s straightforward explanation downplays his striking inversion of printed text, a mode of communication that usually solicits intellectual thinking to convert letters into ideas. Upon seeing the word “beauty,” for example, most of us comprehend one or more aspects of its dense meaning as opposed to its visual form on the page. We fail to notice a word’s p’s and o’s whereas Chamberlain cultivated his intuitive attraction to the look of these letters. In so doing, he engaged intellect to halt interpretation rather than to start it.
Art critics and historians, on the other hand, may be tempted to instantly interpret unfamiliar art as they would a word, using intellect not to grasp the singular qualities of a painting or sculpture but to assimilate the work with what they have seen before and already know. Some writers read in Chamberlain’s early constructions a narrative concerning car crashes and a trite rebuke of Americans and their automobiles. Responding to pieces such as *Hidden Face* and *Velvet White* of 1962 (figs. 8, 9), one reviewer commented,

[Chamberlain] translates painting into a fantastic collage medium (insulting the car, our hallowed status symbol) that is recalcitrant and must be hammered, ripped, squashed, etc. Each fragment of automobile is made an extreme of human exasperation, torn at and fought all the way, and has its rightness of form as if by accident. Any technique that requires order or discipline would just be the human ego. No, these must be ego-less, uncontrolled, undesigned and different enough to give you a bang—fifty-miles-an-hour around a telephone pole.20

Treating the art as a car became a frequent conceit, validated by some scraps’ obvious automotive origin.21 At first sight, colored sheet metal bent in a hydraulic press just might resemble a wreck.22 Intellect can then either test this impression through closer examination or turn at once to exploring its evocations.

Chamberlain preferred the former choice, intuitive thinking. He noted how upon seeing the sculptures, “people say, ‘Oh, that looks like my old Mustang there.’” His reply: “It doesn’t look like their old Mustang at all.”23 Intuition can be wrong. A sense of seeming similarity or apparent disparity arising from a quick glance may collapse after more thorough consideration of an object’s material and visual properties. Chamberlain tested and corroborated his intuition with intellect, confirming the physical incongruities between his sculptures and wrecked cars.
“None of [the pieces] really look like they’re smashed together,” he pointed out. “What it looks like, to me, is that they were put together.” Here intuitive thinking vets the allusions that over-excite intellectual thinking. Just painted metal put together, Chamberlain insisted, not car parts smashed together. If ignored, this and other differences begin to seem negligible and may escape notice entirely. Chamberlain’s work then starts to look like what it is not—a de Kooning painting, a car accident, an old Mustang—instead of what it is. And so one learns nothing new. “My idea about art was that it was unprecedented knowledge,” Chamberlain submitted. “I make something [and] I really get the feeling that I haven’t seen that before.”

When confronted with an unknown work, Chamberlain’s advice was to “just … perceive it.” This tacit restriction on intellectual thinking unsettles ingrained habits. Preoccupied by what art means, writers may distrust the immediacy of unstructured sensory experience or worry about missing some hidden significance. To hedge, they contrive meaning—ostensibly profound readings that only refashion commonplace knowledge. With Chamberlain’s pieces, intellectual thinking seems especially appealing because the materials themselves are more suggestive than most. Likewise, the rich connotations of Chamberlain’s words may distract from the actual objects. “The assembly is a fit, and the fit is sexual,” he said of the sculptures. “If you look at them carefully, they have a certain erotic tone to them.” Chamberlain was specific—a sexual fit and an erotic tone, qualities of his sculptures and not everything else sex and erotica can evoke. Aroused by such words, art critics and historians often pass up a careful look in favor of overwrought and yet reductive academic exegesis.

Chamberlain warned against this routine. “If a thing is made intuitively, then why look at it intellectually?,” he mused. “You may be missing the point. In order to be intellectual, you want to make up a point which is not really there.”
reasoning can serve other ends. Intellect may affirm art’s perceptual complexity and uniqueness while also considering its underlying premises, in part by attending to intuitive impressions of it. Chamberlain’s description of his large lacquer paintings provides a model of intellect examining and refining intuition of what is really there, instead of retreating to cultural or art-historical clichés. Some general notion of Rock-Ola’s visual intricacy is immediately evident. Chamberlain’s parsing of this cursory impression into “thirty different changes” constitutes discovery of something new. Of course, intellectualizing about intuition enables intuition itself to escape one’s grasp. Asked, “have you developed your sense of intuition, or just your ability to follow and trust it?,” Chamberlain found the question wrongheaded. He answered, “I’ve gotten to the point where I don’t even trust intuition. It just happens.” 30 Unlike Chamberlain, most of us need intellectual resolve to heed intuition when viewing art.

**Judd on Chamberlain**

Donald Judd refuted the separation of intellect and intuition, which he called thought and feeling, respectively. “All thought involves feeling. All feeling is based on experience, which involves thought. [...] It’s all one,” he contended. 31 This account of how one arrives at knowledge resembles the interplay that Chamberlain called intuitive thinking. 32 Exercising intellect and intuition in tandem, Judd studied the physical features of Chamberlain’s art, which guided ensuing inquiry into its wider propositions. Nine writings between 1960 and 1989 demonstrate Judd’s sustained interaction with Chamberlain’s work, including paintings and sculptures in his personal collection and at his nonprofit Chinati Foundation in Marfa, Texas. 33

Judd recognized aspects of Chamberlain’s art that other commentators overlooked, but he always had difficulty finding words
to suit the works. Concepts he primarily felt and intuited became communicable in language only after much intellectual deliberation. In his preface for Chamberlain’s 1989 exhibition catalogue, Judd declared, “I write, but for myself; with some difficulty I’ve worked that [writing] around to where it[’]s mine, as has to happen in [one’s personal encounter with] art, but, ambiguously, since writing remains communication.”34 “There’s a big difference between thinking about someone’s work and thinking about it in a way that others can understand,” he maintained.35 Judd focused his analysis on the unconventional and therefore almost ineffable attributes of Chamberlain’s objects. For instance, he never arrived at the right word to relate how the large lacquer paintings are, as he put it, “not austere,” a phrase at which he immediately wavered, “or whatever that quality is” (fig. 10).36 These pieces struck Judd as “immoderate” and “elegant in the wrong way,” which in his art-critical lexicon counted as high praise, that is to say, the right way.37 Judd redefined common words and improvised new ones to help intellect convey intuition. “It’s necessary to build ways of talking about the work[,] … to isolate and construct verbally communicative ideas,” he explained.38

In order to articulate his experience of Chamberlain’s sculptures, Judd developed the idea of a “three-way polarity” between their “neutral, redundant[,] and expressively structured” aspects.39 He described these three properties and their polarity further:

[First,] a piece may appear neutral, just junk, casually objective, pretty much something as anything is something. [Second,] the sculpture is redundant, voluminous beyond its structure, obscured by other chances and possibilities. There is more metal and space than the structure requires. [Third,] much of that metal becomes simply expressive, through its structure and details and oblique imagery.40
Neutrality, redundancy, expressiveness, and three-way polarity serve as ad hoc art-critical concepts. As with “Rooseveltianly,” these quirky terms address both the appearance and basic principles of the art at hand. Neutral means both made of junk and “casually objective” like junk, instead of composed and contrived like many other artworks. Redundant means voluminous and billowing while also implying that a piece’s final form suggests innumerable alternative “possibilities.” And expressive means expressionistic as well as illusionistic. The sculptures’ nonfigurative “tumescent planes,” “passionate” structure, and “turbulent” metal can also invoke “organic […] imagery.” Only once, and in his first review, Judd compared Chamberlain’s work to an “ordinary wreck” so as to emphasize the scrap metal’s neutrality. In later accounts, he seemed wary of unintended associations diverting discussion from the visible object. Judd improvised terms to characterize Chamberlain’s sculptures, but contrary to
many writers, he then resisted the temptation to let language itself generate the art’s meaning.

Unlike the metal constructions, Judd found no imagery in Chamberlain’s lacquer paintings. He discussed these pieces with more reserved and exact words: “just the paint,” “just plain surface,” “just a case of one thing over another.” He discussed these pieces with more reserved and exact words: “just the paint,” “just plain surface,” “just a case of one thing over another.”\textsuperscript{44} Here, speaking about the paintings in 1971, Judd struggled to restrict language, to avoid abstractions, and to establish material attributes in preparation for contemplating the broader meanings he intuited. In a 1966 catalogue essay, for example, he examined the “neutrality, chance and disorder” of the large lacquer works.\textsuperscript{45} Chamberlain placed Zia’s chromed angles in a simple “arrangement” with more chance and less order, Judd argued, than the “somewhat traditional […] rationalistic structure” of the sculptures’ fitted scraps. The various components of the paintings manifest a curious neutrality, a different sort than the neutrality of crumpled metal. Although Zia’s protruding chromed elements command attention, Judd regarded them as “less important than they are conspicuous” since from some positions they are “diminished considerably in reflecting the surface of the square [and] of the painted angles.” Zia’s metal attachments, red and orangy-brown painted bars, and red field all stay “fairly equal” and “neutral.” In Judd’s opinion, this equitable combination constituted an advance over the hierarchical balancing of “traditional form” in previous painting.\textsuperscript{46}

Intuitive thinking, both thought and feeling together, allowed Judd to comprehend and communicate his conclusions about Chamberlain’s paintings. His inquiry moved from visual facts to wider significance, from reflections off chrome to Zia’s neutrality, chance, and disorder. Yet there he stopped. Judd’s terms retain incidental connotations as all words do, but he limited their scope as best he could to what looking at the work would verify. Intellectual fancy often lures art critics away from
such precision. Take a paragraph on the large lacquer paintings by another artist-writer, Robert Smithson:

Chamberlain’s use of chrome and metal-flake brings to mind the surfaces in *Scorpio Rising*, Kenneth Anger’s many-faceted horoscopic film about constellated motorcyclists. Both Chamberlain and Anger have developed what could be called California surfaces. In a review of the film, Ken Kelman speaks of “… the ultimate reduction of ultimate experience to brilliant chromatic surface; Thanatos in Chrome—artificial death …” in a way that evokes Chamberlain’s giddy reliefs.⁴⁷

Chrome and metal-flake, real material features of *Conrad* and *Zia*, inspired Smithson’s chain of allusions—first motorcycles’ surfaces, next a motorcycle film, then a film review, and finally the film reviewer’s cliché of death by decadence.⁴⁸ Words suggest other words, deceptively insinuating physical parallels where in fact discrepancy predominates. By wandering between associations, Smithson lost sight of, to use Judd’s words (and echo Chamberlain’s), “what is there.”⁴⁹ In his own commentary on Chamberlain’s art, Judd distinguished very similar things rather than equating very different things, which enabled him to make new discoveries instead of generalizing prior knowledge.

**THREE KINDS OF DEPTH**

One of Judd’s observations in particular sets Chamberlain’s lacquer pieces apart from most other paintings. An expanse of stretched canvas or fiberboard tends to appear spatial once painted, as if one can see into it. This strictly visual depth belies the support’s and paint’s actual thinness. For instance, Willem de Kooning’s oil on canvas work of 1960, *Door to the River*, depicts an abstracted and flattened but still seemingly three-dimen-

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sional landscape in perspective (see fig. 2, p.86). In contrast to de Kooning’s representation of space, Josef Albers’s *Homage to the Square: Awakening* of 1963 gives rise to a non-imitative chromatic space between a projecting yellow and a receding gray (fig. 11). Judd argued that Chamberlain’s paintings diverge from both of these examples. *Ray Charles* and *Rock-Ola* have neither perspectival depth nor chromatic depth but rather a third kind, real depth (fig. 12). Their accumulated lacquer looks only as deep as it really is.

Existing art-critical terminology and concepts concealed the disparity between these varieties of space at first. Reviewer Lucy Lippard thought she recognized a familiar technique in *The Rain Drops* of 1965 and the other small lacquer paintings, a “use of close-valued or contrasting colors for recession or projection from the glinting surface” (fig. 13). In a 1971 roundtable on Chamberlain’s work, art critic Elizabeth Baker also remarked on

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Private collection.
“a kind of optical depth” in the paintings. Judd, another participant, disagreed:

If you add a slight layer [of lacquer] here, you’ve got something to see into. But that’s a physical thing, it’s not that you’re creating two or three inches of illusionary space alongside. [...] Like putting a little liquid on the table, you don’t change the surface, it’s just a case of one thing over another and it’s the same surface. ... What you’re looking into is really just the paint—the two or three layers of lacquer, that’s all.

Real depth, Judd affirmed, not illusion. Along with the reports of chromatic and optical space that he disputed, Judd’s counterexample of an illusionary space several inches deep befits Albers’s Homage to the Square series. Chamberlain acknowledged the influence of these pieces, saying, “I like Albers’[s] work ... and I felt that [my paintings] came closest to it without any of
his problems. [...] I didn’t like the dot, dot, dot [stepwise recession]. It took away from being flat.” The color relationships and stepped structure of *Homage to the Square: Awakening* create the illusion of a space beyond its actual surface. Chamberlain’s lacquer appears no deeper than it is and thus looks flatter than Albers’s oils.

Lippard overlooked this and other dissimilarities in her 1965 account of Chamberlain’s paintings. Intellectual thinking guided her use of art-historical abstractions, as when she argued that the large pieces’ “garish simplicity” exemplified the “absorption of pop art principles into the non-objective idiom.” Elsewhere, like Judd, Lippard used connotative language to describe Chamberlain’s palette. The hues of the paintings are those of “restaurant decorators”; their surface calls to mind “*House and Garden*, kitchen-ware, ceramic-ashtray[s].” Whereas Judd’s references to Detroit and Roosevelt led discussion back to color, Lip-
Lippard’s interpretations drifted away from the material and visual facts, licensing subsequent outright errors. Chamberlain’s “use of metal flecks is, finally, just industrial pointillism,” she concluded. On the contrary, tiny metal flakes suspended in the lacquer of *Miracles* have little to do with industry and look quite different from Seurat’s larger oil dabs on top of canvas (figs. 14, 15). Lippard’s own invocations of tawdry diner interiors, magazines, utensils, and ashtrays lured her into mistaking the sheen of metal-flake lacquer for a “false richness.” Although “all that glitters is not gold,” as she put it, lacquer’s luster is just as true to its material nature as gold’s glitter. Loose writing coupled with language’s natural allusiveness can cause an artwork’s physical attributes to resemble anything and everything they are not. Lippard missed a chance to learn what makes Chamberlain’s paintings new, that is to say, everything about them that does not evoke what already exists.

When art criticism addresses what is unknown and unprecedented in a piece, both reader and writer make discoveries. Judd had asserted in his 1964 essay “Specific Objects” that “anything on a [painted] surface has space behind it. Two colors on the same surface almost always lie on different depths. […] It’s possible that not much can be done with both an upright rectangular plane and an absence of [illusionary] space.” In Judd’s own estimation, Chamberlain’s paintings proved him wrong. *Zia* is upright and rectangular but lacks the chromatic space he anticipated. “They’re just plain surface,” Judd said of the large lacquer paintings, “the colors of the painted angles don’t react to the color they’re on in the usual way; they don’t come forward or recede.” Using intellect to scrutinize his intuition of a different kind of spatiality, Judd made an innovative distinction. De Kooning’s painting has several feet of perspectival depth; Albers’s *Homage to the Square: Awakening* has a couple inches of chromatic depth; Chamberlain’s *Zia* has a millimeter of lacquer, real depth, and that is all.
PERCEIVE, DISCOVER, LEARN

Few reviewers besides Judd perceived the uncommon depth of Chamberlain’s lacquer paintings. Often what is actually there appears on its own terms only for an instant, only as an intuition. If intellect embarks on interpretation without evaluating these impressions, an artwork’s unique qualities can begin to pass for those already known and named. Resemblance to other pieces obscures clear disparity. And so Chamberlain’s paintings may look “Minimalist.” Circumstantial evidence bolsters this reading inasmuch as Chamberlain exhibited with Frank Stella; he befriended Judd, Dan Flavin, and Larry Bell; the timing is right; and the pieces themselves are nonobjective and schematic. Curator Julie Sylvester put this question to Chamberlain, asking, “Was there any conscious adherence to, or involvement with, the minimal art of that time?” He reminded her, “As far as a minimal phase, it wasn’t so minimal. Each of the paintings contains about one hundred coats of paint.” Deadpan joke or frank reply, Chamberlain construed “minimal” according to its everyday usage as opposed to its clumsy art-historical definition. Defying the allure for art critics and historians of populating such categories, Chamberlain upheld the incongruities between his art’s physical properties and verbal classifications. A hundred coats of lacquer exceed a minimal amount so Miracles is not a minimal painting.

Prior experience and established words serve as guides when coming upon something unconventional. The term Minimalist enables at least some understanding of Chamberlain’s peculiar paintings. But this intellectual shortcut can thwart discovery. Forcing novel sensations to fit accustomed categories insinuates that nothing exists new enough to warrant new knowledge, a situation that seems unlikely ever to be the case with art or in life. Chamberlain observed that using language to define his pieces can ruin the surprise of personal participation:
I never like to explain my work. I think that if I explain something, [a viewer might say,] “well, okay, that’s it, I don’t have to think anymore.” If I don’t explain anything, you still have your own act of discovery to exercise…. You’re supposed to discover. There is no other place where you can exercise this facility.

Sustained perceptual investigation renders abstract terms inadequate and verbal explanations superfluous. Studying matter directly yields discovery. For curious viewers, Chamberlain recommended a failsafe alternative to relying on words—dust one of his sculptures.

I sort of advise anybody who takes one of my pieces [to] clean it at least once themselves because it’s a form of gaining familiarity and knowing just what it is you’ve got. [...] Whoever does it is fortunate in one sense. They go slowly through everything so it’s like they are actually going in and finding out little places and all of that, and they find out about how the sculpture is constructed.

The examination Chamberlain describes is practical and physical, meticulous yet intuitive. In thinking through the changing look and feel of the metal, one exercises a capacity for discovery that is, unlike language, inseparable from sensory inspection. Chamberlain’s advice suits his paintings as well. Discriminating Rock-Ola’s thirty changes and peering into the real depth of The Rain Drops provide fresh visual experience. As Chamberlain said, one just has to perceive.

Knowledge founded on perception always stays flexible. Imposed intellectual interpretations remain rigid, eliminating discrepancies if sensations vary from that which is expected. When viewing art, as with everyday existence in the world, a willingness to just perceive means learning, again and again, what one did not know before, even though things seem perplexing at first. Chamberlain recognized this potential, claim-
ing that “a work of art can give you a lot [of] things you don’t need…. But you can also savor it and keep it in reserve because tomorrow you may need it.” Discovery begins with an intuitive insight but it takes careful looking and thinking to gauge new information’s similarity, difference, or distinction of degree from current understanding. As intellect admits exceptions, one adjusts trusted generalizations and, in so doing, learns. To learn one must discover and to discover one must perceive.
NOTES


For Chamberlain’s statements of Kline’s importance, see “Art as Invention: Sculptors John Chamberlain and George Segal Discuss Their Work,” 1985 transcript of a 1971 audio recording (North Hollywood, CA: Center for Cassette Studies, Pop Art Profiles Number 5303), The Menil Collection Art Library vertical files, Houston, 6; Phyllis Tuchman, “An Interview with John Chamberlain,” *Artforum*
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CHAMBERLAIN’S LACQUER PAINTINGS
Dee Dee Sharp (1963) and Righteous Bros (1965), one of the two sets of nine squares is often indiscernible.

10 Chamberlain in Esmay and Kohn, interview (note 7); and Chamberlain in Tuchman, “Interview” (note 4), 39. See also Obrist, John Chamberlain (note 4), 121–22.

11 Chamberlain in “Excerpts” (note 7), 19.

12 Chamberlain in Francesca Esmay, notes from a conversation with John Chamberlain, February 25, 2005, Chinati Foundation, Marfa, Texas, unpaginated (fourth page). See also Esmay and Kohn, interview (note 7).

13 Chamberlain in Sylvester, “Auto/Bio” (note 4), 18. Earlier, Chamberlain quipped, “Five units, two angles, 30 changes.” (Elizabeth C. Baker’s account suggests that the “two angles” here may refer to the shadows cast by the chromed attachments. Presumably, those attachments, the two painted angles, and the field constitute the “five units,” as they did in Chamberlain’s later statement.) See Baker, “The Chamberlain Crunch,” Art News 70, no. 10 (February 1972): 60. Chamberlain’s rough formula was that “you take five parts and make interchanges that multiply by six” to get thirty changes. See Chamberlain in Sylvester, “Auto/Bio” (note 4), 18.

14 Chamberlain in “Excerpts” (note 7), 19.

15 Chamberlain in Esmay and Kohn, interview (note 7). Turning a printed reproduction of a large lacquer painting in his hands, Chamberlain asked, “Did you ever hang them this way [turned ninety-degrees]? Have you ever hung them on the corner [turned forty-five degrees]? Hang them like that. I always liked them that way. … It alters your perception—if you need it altered.” For instance, Conrad (1964) appears to be hung parallel to the floor in Lippard, “New York Letter” (note 1), 53, and in Robert Smithson, “Entropy and the New Monuments,” Artforum 4, no. 10 (June 1966): 30, but turned 135 degrees counterclockwise and sitting at an angle in Documenta 7, 2 vols. (Kassel: Paul Dierichs GmbH & Co KG, [1982]), 1:36.

The smaller lacquer paintings, named after rock-and-roll bands, have two possible rotations. Chamberlain said that they should be “hung east to west,” with the two sets of nine squares to the left and right (Steve Cossman, John Chamberlain studio, statements to author, April 18, 2007). Righteous Bros, The Rain Drops (1965), Four Seasons, and Ray Charles (ca. 1964) are turned 180 degrees from Sylvester, “Auto/Bio” (note 4), 18–19, to Schwarz, John Chamberlain (note 4), 48–51. However, Sylvester also switched the paintings’ titles by mistake: Righteous Bros is listed as “Raindrops,” The Rain Drops is listed as “Four Seasons,” Four Seasons is listed as “Ray Charles,” and Ray Charles is listed as “Righteous Brothers.” As far as inconsistency in
the titles themselves—Righteous Bros versus “Righteous Brothers,” The Rain Drops versus “Raindrops”—Schwarz confirmed that the first version in both of these pairs matches Chamberlain’s inscriptions on the back of the paintings (statements to author, April 16, 2007). Finally, note that Righteous Bros and The Rain Drops are twelve-by-twelve-inch squares hung at an angle, making their height and width close to seventeen inches.

17  Chamberlain, 1982 statement (note 16). In a later interview, Chamberlain said, “I always get the feeling that I just run on intuition and use that as a general mediator among emotion and sexuality and drive. (We have to leave out intelligence, because I really don’t exercise too much of that.)” See Chamberlain in Sylvester, “Auto/Bio” (note 4), 24. While Chamberlain minimized the significance of intellect and intelligence in both quotes, he seems to have reconsidered the importance of emotion in his working process.

19  Chamberlain in Sylvester, “Auto/Bio” (note 4), 16 (phrases reordered). Chamberlain offered another example: “‘The Vocabulary of Red,’ ‘The Oyster of Nonsense.’ The words look good and they have a nice feeling together but no one quite knows what the meaning is, which is really what I want.” See Chamberlain in Esmay and Kohn, interview (note 7).
20  E[dgar], “John Chamberlain” (note 1), 15.
21  See, for instance, [udd], “John Chamberlain” (1960), (note 4), 57; Barbara Butler, “Movie Stars and Other Members of the Cast,” Art International 4, nos. 2–3 ([February–March] 1960): 52; Françoise Choay, “Lettre de Paris,” Art International 4, no. 9 (December 1, 1960): 36; and “Chamberlain’s Automobiles,” Metro 2 (May 1961): 90–91. Irving Sandler’s art criticism identified this trend and rejected it. Chamberlain’s “pieces might be witty and mordant monuments commemorating highway crashes, the tragic evidence of man’s inability to cope with the machine. [Yet] the images suggested by industrial wreckage are as unimportant as the geological associations evoked by the marble in classical Greek statues.” See Sandler, “In the Art Galleries” (note 1), 12; and similar discussion in I[rving] H[ershel] S[andler], “John Chamberlain,” Art News 58, no. 9 (January 1960): 18; Irving Hershel Sandler, “Ash Can Revisited, a New York Letter,” Art International 4, no. 8 (October

22 See footage of Chamberlain and an assistant operating his press in “Walking Tour Dia,” video recording, Chinati Foundation archives, Marfa, Texas, at 15:46, 17:40, 50:32.


24 Chamberlain in Creeley, interview (note 4), 19.

25 “It’s just painted sheet metal,” Chamberlain claimed. “No engines, no tires, no wheels, no drive chains.” See Grace Glueck, “Art People,” New York Times (January 5, 1979): C16. Chamberlain also identified his material as “painted metal” in a 1982 statement (note 16) and “colored metal” during an interview in which he expressed frustration at the persistent readings of car wrecks: “The only response I ever got was that I was making automobile crashes and that I used the automobile as some symbolic bullshit about our society. … Everyone kept insisting it was car crashes. … It seems no one can get free of the car-crash syndrome. For twenty-five years I’ve been using colored metal to make sculpture, and all they can think of is, “What the hell car did that come from?” Who gives a shit what car it came from?” See Chamberlain in Sylvester, “Auto/Bio” (note 4), 21. In other interviews, Chamberlain acknowledged the metal’s origin but also his efforts to neutralize this aspect. “The fact that I used car sheet metal and bumpers had a lot to do with people deciding that they were car crashes, which actually they weren’t. […] I try to suppress some of the idea about where this material comes from.” See Chamberlain in Who Gets to Call it Art?, Arthouse/Palm Pictures film, 2005, at 29:48; Chamberlain in Corbino, “Creating Art” (note 23), 16; as well as “Art and Invention” (note 4), 4; and Obrist, John Chamberlain (note 4), 102.
Obrist, John Chamberlain (note 4), 90. See also “Art as Invention” (note 4), 6.

27 Chamberlain, 1982 statement (note 16).

28 Chamberlain in an October 1, 1981, conversation with Michael Auping, as cited in Auping, “John Chamberlain: Reliefs” (note 23), 12; and Chamberlain in Who Gets to Call it Art? (note 25) at 30:04. See also “Excerpts” (note 7), 17–18; Corbino, “Creating Art” (note 23), 16, 21; Chamberlain, 1982 statement (note 16); Sylvester, ”Auto/Bio” (note 4), 24; Clearwater, interview (note 5), 13–14; Creeley, interview (note 4), 22; “John Chamberlain in Conversation with Klaus Kertess” (note 2), 11; and Obrist, John Chamberlain (note 4), 39, 115.

29 Chamberlain in Corbino, “Creating Art” (note 23), 17.

30 Kohn and Chamberlain in Esmay and Kohn, interview (note 7).


32 Judd remarked that philosopher Benedetto Croce “considers intuition cognitive in its own way, which improves the word enormously.” See Judd, “Yale Lecture” (note 31), 150.

Design, 1975), 183. Also, Philip Johnson seems to have composed the introduction to “Young Artists at the Fair and at Lincoln Center” but Judd, uncredited, wrote the brief entries for each artist, as reprinted in Judd, Complete Writings 1959–1975, 130–31.

Judd owned several works by Chamberlain, including the metal sculptures Mr. Press (1961), Hollywood John (1962), Buckshutam (1963), and Calla Look (1980); a small square-foot lacquer painting titled Miracles (1964); Rock-Ola, Toureiro, Zia and three other untitled large lacquer paintings with four-foot sides, all from 1964; an immense urethane foam piece titled Judd’s Couch (1967); and a lacquer on board Morgansplit Painting (1970). From the beginning, Judd envisioned the Chinati Foundation as a means to permanently install a large number of Chamberlain’s pieces. The former Marfa Wool and Mohair Building now houses twenty-three objects made between 1972 and 1982. See [Donald Judd], “A Portrait of the Artist as His Own Man,” House & Garden 157, no. 4 (April 1985): 220; Don Judd, “The Chinati Foundation,” The Chinati Foundation (Marfa, Tex.: The Chinati Foundation, 1987), unpaginated (third page); Julie Sylvester, “Catalogue Raisonné of the Sculpture,” in Sylvester, John Chamberlain (note 4), 63, 68, 74, 175, 219, nos. 83, 117, 151, 644, and appendix no. I; Post-War and Contemporary Art (Morning Session), Wednesday 10 May 2006 (New York: Christie’s, 2006), 66, lot 139; and Craig Rember, Judd Foundation, statements to author, August 25, 2006.

34 Judd, “John Chamberlain” (1989), (note 33), i (supplemented for clarity).

35 Don Judd, “Jackson Pollock,” Arts Magazine 41, no. 6 (April 1967): 32. Along with his writings on Chamberlain, Judd selected several passages from his article “Jackson Pollock” to be reprinted in the 1989 Pace Gallery catalogue (note 33). He did not include this sentence, however.


38 Donald Judd, “Jackson Pollock,” Complete Writings 1959–1975 (note 33), 195; and Judd, “Yale Lecture” (note 31), 149. In the original version of “Jackson Pollock,” the
sentence reads, “it’s not necessary to build ways of talking about the work...” (emphasis added). As printed, this phrase contradicts the previous claim in the text: “Discussion ... should be something of a construction.” In the reprint of this article, there is no “not,” apparently confirming that the word was an error in the original. Compare Judd, “Jackson Pollock” (note 35), 32. See also Don Judd, et al., “Portfolio: 4 Sculptors,” Perspecta 11 (1967): 44 (Complete Writings 1959–1975 [note 33], 196, incorrectly lists the “March/May 1968” issue of Perspecta).


40 This quotation combines two similar passages on Chamberlain’s “three-way polarity.” See Judd, “Local History” (note 33), 31; and Judd, “Chamberlain: Another View” (note 4), 39.

41 Judd wrote that “the parts are not absolute definitions of their space but appear capable of change and of expansion and contraction.” See Judd, “Chamberlain: Another View” (note 4), 39.


45 Judd, “John Chamberlain” (1966), (note 33), 9. In this essay, Judd called the large lacquer paintings “reliefs” because of their attached metal angles, a confusing practice given that Chamberlain made so many sculptural works such as Essex and Huzzy that hang from the wall and seem a better fit for that word. See also Judd, “John Chamberlain” (1989), (note 33), x, xi.

46 This and the preceding quotations are in Judd, “John Chamberlain” [1966], (note 33), 9.


48 Richard Shiff defined the rhetorical phenomenon and art-critical strategy of “metonymic drift” as “the capacity for the meaning of an event or sign to pass readily from what appears to be its initial context or location to another location that is in some sense contiguous or adjacent. There need be no essential connection other than the fact that the two locations are aligned, perhaps only by chance.” See Shiff, “Breath of Modernism (Metonymic Drift),” in Terry Smith, ed., In Visible Touch: Modernism and Masculinity (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1997), 189.

49 Judd, “Jackson Pollock” (note 35), 34. See also Chamberlain in Corbino, “Creating Art” (note 23), 17, as cited above at note 29.


51 Baker in “Excerpts” (note 7), 20. Baker may have been speaking loosely here since in a later article
she agreed with Judd that the lacquer paintings’ depth is material, not optical: “One looks into the surface to see the form [of the small squares]—which nevertheless remains depth-less—a strange effect.” See Baker, “The Chamberlain Crunch” (note 13), 60 (emphasis in original).

52  Judd in “Excerpts” (note 7), 19–20 (phrases reordered).
53  Chamberlain in “Excerpts” (note 7), 20; and Chamberlain in Esmay and Kohn, interview (note 7), (supplemented for clarity). During the interview, Chamberlain moved his straightened hands closer together three times as he said “dot, dot, dot,” in imitation of the concentric bands and square in Albers’s Homage to the Square paintings.
54  Lippard, “New York Letter” (note 1), 53.
55  This and the preceding quotations are in Lippard, “New York Letter” (note 1), 53.
56  Judd, “Specific Objects” (note 33), 76 (phrases reordered and supplemented for clarity). Regarding the date, Judd stated that this article “was published [in 1965] perhaps a year after it was written.” See D[onald] J[udd], “Introduction,” Complete Writings 1959–1975 (note 33), vii.
57  Judd in “Excerpts” (note 7), 19; and Judd, “John Chamberlain” [1966], (note 33), 9. Elsewhere Judd was ambivalent. In late 1966, art critic and curator Barbara Rose asked him, “Do you think there is such a thing as a flat painting?” Judd answered, “No, there isn’t, so far. I think it’s probable that someone will manage to make one … but so far, no one has.” In his 1989 catalogue essay, however, Judd recalled, “I wrote in ’66 that Chamberlain’s paintings and reliefs suggested alternatives to all the dead ideas of what to do with a discrete flat surface. They still do.” See “Is Easel Painting Dead?,” symposium transcript, November 1966, New York (Washington, D.C.: Barbara Rose Papers, Archives of American Art), 30; and Judd, “John Chamberlain” (1989), (note 33), x.
And, around 1985, Judd’s unhappy relationship brought Bell, Chamberlain, and Flavin together with Judd in Marfa, Texas. See Sylvester, “Catalogue Raisonné” (note 33), 117; Sylvester, “Auto/Bio” (note 4), 21; and Larry Bell, statement in *Artforum* 32, no. 10 (Summer 1994): 73, 114.

60 Sylvester and Chamberlain in Sylvester, “Auto/Bio” (note 4), 18. Chamberlain continued, “Art is not minimal only because there is not a great deal of garbage involved in it.”


62 Poet Robert Creeley described the habit of mistaking new experience for previous knowledge when viewing Chamberlain’s sculptures: “Our sense of history looks for conformities of act and effects, and in that respect does us poor service in the arts. ... You will not live long if you look always for what was there, assuming the world to be no more than the time track of your familiarities. ... What things are is, again, more complex, and more distinct than some incidental violence done you.”


63 Chamberlain in Esmay and Kohn, interview (note 7), (supplemented for clarity). See also Clearwater, interview (note 5), 16, 27–28, 38; and Obrist, *John Chamberlain* (note 4), 39, 63.

64 Chamberlain in Esmay and Kohn, interview (note 7), (phrases reordered).

65 Chamberlain in Creeley, interview (note 4), 31–32.