



Art Review: “No Slouch!”: The Spray Lacquer - Metal Flake Paintings of John Chamberlain

March 3, 2013

by Mike Solomon

“John Chamberlain: It Ain’t Cheap” at The Dan Flavin Art Institute, Corwith Avenue, Bridgehampton, NY 11932.

Over a century and a half ago, the Ashcan artist and teacher Robert Henri warned his disciples, that just because Franz Hals had depicted scenes of drunken revelry in which the artist himself had been involved, none of them should be fooled into thinking Hals was an undisciplined sloppy drunkard when it came to making his paintings.

Henri claimed Hals was sharp as a whip in his ability to turn the experience of such festive chaos into such believable and sumptuous scenes of revelry. He also pointed out how much talent and discipline it took to get the pink cheeks on the drunks just right.

The same could be said of the late John Chamberlain: his reputation—both as a party animal and as an Expressionist based sculptor who had taken the gestures of deKooning and found an organic way to morph them into sculpture by crushing car metal—might lead some to think there was little discipline or rational process involved in his work. Not so my friend, not so.

Among so much evidence are the spray lacquer paintings Chamberlain made between 1963 and 1965, five of which are now on view at The Dan Flavin Art Institute in Bridgehampton, NY

Chamberlain was acutely aware of the formalism presented by his closest colleagues, Donald Judd, Frank Stella, Larry Bell and Neil Williams.

Living in Topanga Canyon at the time these works were first conceived and produced, it is highly probable that his use of spray lacquer and metal flake was related to what became known as the “Fetish Finish” movement that was emerging in California about the same time. John McCracken went on to make the most of that particular idea.

However, Chamberlain had been dealing with the finishes of auto paint inherent in his use of bent car metal since 1960, and to disassociate the finish from the shapes and focus on what auto paint treatment was all about was a very rational progression.

It underscores Chamberlain’s analytical ability and foreshadows the various paint application

processes he explored in subsequent years, including his use of sand blasters and camouflage patterns in the 1980s and '90s.

Chamberlain claims to have made about 50 small works in the spray lacquer method. Some, like the ones presented at The Dan Flavin Art Institute, are on 12" square panels and there are larger ones at 17" (Guild Hall owns a nice one too). Apparently there were also a few others made at 48", though I personally have never seen any of those.

The imagery or motif of the smaller works came from Chamberlain's use of a template of nine small squares spaced evenly apart that made a larger square area. This 9-squared motif floats at various locations across the surfaces of the larger square panels.

Chamberlain was fascinated by the application of 100 thin spray coats of lightly pigmented lacquer...how the color only started to emerge after about the first 50 coats were applied. One in particular here, called *Lovin' Spoonful* (most of the tiles have names of music groups), has a double meaning because Chamberlain stated that he added only "a teaspoon of color" to the lacquer, and therefore its slow emergence.

Chamberlain wanted the 9-squared motif to sit neither below nor above the coats of lacquer but rather to float somewhere dimensionally, within the "middle" of the 100 coats. Perhaps only a sculptor would see into the micro-depths of the lacquer layers like this.

Much later, Chamberlain would return to the use of the square template to build the "square donut" mould that made parts for his amazing *"Tower of Klytie"* that can be seen at the Friedrichstrasse Mall in Berlin.

"No slouch!" was one of Chamberlain's favorite sayings, and when it came to making art he certainly wasn't one... *so don't get any funny ideas.*

BASIC FACTS: "John Chamberlain: It Ain't Cheap" opened on Jan. 12 and remains on view until Oct. 20, 2013 at The Dan Flavin Art Institute, Corwith Avenue, one-half block north of Main Street, Bridgehampton, NY 11932. www.diaart.org

The exhibition presents six of the Chamberlain's rarely exhibited metal paintings from 1965 and a sculpture titled *It Ain't Cheap* from the same year. The works are from a series of 12-inch-square paintings that were presented at Leo Castelli Gallery in January 1965 in a solo exhibition titled "Paintings done in auto lacquer and metal flake on formica," according to The Dia Foundation. Chamberlain's work was exhibited previously at The Dan Flavin Art Institute in 2007. John Chamberlain died in 2011. He was 84 years old.

HAMPTONS INSIDER: Mike Solomon first met John Chamberlain in 1976 when Chamberlain bought a car that Solomon was selling. In January 1980, Chamberlain called Solomon to ask for help in establishing a studio in Florida. Chamberlain said that he liked the assemblages Solomon had been making and believed Solomon would "get" his process.

Solomon moved to Florida in late April 1980 and worked for Chamberlain periodically through 1984.

Among other things, Solomon was responsible for procuring and processing the materials for Chamberlain's "Tonk" series—small sculptures made from Tonka Toys.

Solomon describes Chamberlain as "a great and rare artist who was a very close friend and supporter." They remained friends until the end of Chamberlain's life, said Solomon.

© 2013 Hamptons Art Hub LLC. All rights reserved.