

Excerpts: *Black Mountain John Chamberlain: John Chamberlain's Writings at Black Mountain College, 1955* (Princeton University Press, 2020)

Edited by Julie Sylvester

Journal of Black Mountain College Studies

Volume 11: The Practice and Pedagogy of Writing at Black Mountain College (Fall 2020)

Article URL: <http://www.blackmountainstudiesjournal.org/black-mountain-john-chamberlain/>

Published online: October 2020

Published by:

Black Mountain College Museum + Arts Center

Asheville, North Carolina

<https://www.blackmountaincollege.org>

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Introduction for the *Journal of Black Mountain College Studies*

Julie Sylvester

I met John Chamberlain in November of 1977. It was the first exhibition in the expansive new space in Soho, Heiner Friedrich Inc., which quietly and unquestionably became the gold standard for the exhibition for contemporary art. It was also my first job in the art world.

I had known Chamberlain from an art historical viewpoint as the important figure in the sculpture of the Abstract Expressionist era, the pioneer of color in sculpture. This exhibition, however, was surprising. The sculptures were not free standing, in their stance and attitude they resembled polished and shiny musical instruments fixed to the wall. Also surprising was John, a larger than life personality, charming, disarming, witty and warm.

Over the next years, John and I spent a lot of time together, at his studio on Vestry Street, at the Odeon and the Ocean Club, and on his boat in Sarasota. John's importance in history was overlooked or underestimated, I believed, and I set out to do something about it. This became the catalogue raisonné of the sculpture, an unpopular idea at the time, and led to the comprehensive retrospective exhibition at the sprawling Temporary Contemporary at MoCA in Los Angeles. From the onset, I did not want anyone to write about Chamberlain. His language was so robust and delicious that I thought it best to somehow record his words. That was a challenge in itself, but happily resulted in AUTO/BIO, the main text of the book. Everything one needs to know about Chamberlain is there and in his words.

I observed that John's friends were of a variety. More poets and musicians than artists, Robert Creeley was closest as a soul mate. John had great respect for poets, he named his gondolas in the early Eighties after Marianne Moore, Hart Crane, William Carlos

Williams. I never understood the connection fully until one night on the boat when he pulled out a stack of poems on very fragile paper which he had meticulously stored, about one hundred or so, his writings from Black Mountain.

And I think I only realized decades later that the poems were so important to Chamberlain that he gave them to me for safekeeping. Nothing was really so important to Chamberlain, he was haphazard in most things, but the poems were preserved and given curious respect.

A friend reminded me that Andy Warhol had the highest regard for Chamberlain. He considered John the quintessential artist - working with his hands, moving big materials around, forceful, hard drinking, women on his arm, and in command of any social circumstance. This reminded me that Walter de Maria once told me that Chamberlain was the only artist who could go on the Johnny Carson show and hold his own and intelligently represent artists. Big words from big artists.

Chamberlain was a huge personality and anyone who knew him sees him magnified in time. I now see that at the root of it all is the time he spent at Black Mountain where he absorbed everything given to him by poets, where he developed his language, where he decided how to be an artist. It seems a quiet beginning for that big noisy sailor, but Chamberlain was also very elegant, a smooth ballroom dancer, a sweet talker, and in the end, his humble days at Black Mountain determined the delicate grace in his sculpture.

Blond Day

John Chamberlain

From interviews conducted by Julie Sylvester in Sarasota and New York, 1981–1984
Reprinted with permission from *Black Mountain John Chamberlain: John Chamberlain's Writings at Black Mountain College, 1955* (Princeton University Press, 2020)

The only time I ever became interested in anyone or where I became interesting to anyone else was when I went to Black Mountain College. Black Mountain was introduced to me by Gerry van de Wiele, a friend of mine from Chicago. It was a nice place, very country, mountainy, just east of Asheville, North Carolina, Tom Wolfe's old

home. Joel Oppenheimer was there, Stefan Wolpe was there, I took a little music course with him. Charles Olson was there, Robert Duncan was there, Robert Creeley came there for a while, a guy named Wes Huss who was interested in theater....actually Wes liked to sit around and watch everything else go on as though it were theater. Joseph Fiore, Dan Rice and Tom Field were artists there. People had their families, there were about five students and fifteen teachers. It was 1955, kind of the final year of Black Mountain College. The school sort of dribbled down from there. The attitude of the people who went there was that of graduate students, interested in the information and the knowledge that they were acquiring, and having to deal with it on a daily basis. You could start anywhere at any time. You could take everything or you could take nothing. There were work schedules that were funny but never lasted. Black Mountain had its life. It went through a lot of different changes, a lot of different regimes. Its most crowded was when it had ninety students.

At Black Mountain College, everyone was reading books. You had to read about the Old West, you had to read anything D.H. Lawrence wrote, and Ezra Pound and William Carlos Williams, and detective stories by Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler. All of those areas were very popular. I would read and when I'd see a word I liked, I'd isolate it, I'd write it down. So I had this collection of words I liked to look at. It didn't matter what they meant, I liked the way they looked. So I would look at the words, and I would put the words together and I would come up with an image that was unlike anything you would perceive if you didn't do it this way. I remember one line I wrote where I put together two words: blond day. I'd never thought of a day being blond. I still haven't, but I liked the way that the connection went together, and it's a very good example of how I feel I work. I still go around and process stuff in the same way. There is material to be seen around you every day. But one day something, some one thing, pops out at you and you pick it up and you take it over and you put it somewhere else and it fits, and it's just the right thing at the right moment. It's actually doing things in the same way, with words or with metal.

I guess that's part of my definition of art. Art is a particular madness where you are using a means of communication, which means are recognizable to other people, to say

something that they hadn't heard, or hadn't perceived, or had repressed. Curiously, it's only recently that I've noticed that I'm still making sculptures in the way that I made the poems. It's all in the fit. Say you take one word that's on a page. You like this word, this word looks nice to you. Maybe you don't even care what the word means. But you like the word. You can conjugate the word. If the word is beauty, it can become beautiful. Then it can become beauteous, can't it? Or beautification. You can play around with it, add to it, or if you want you can take the word apart. You can play with the letters in the word, that's making anagrams. There's also a way of taking the syllables apart, rearranging the syllables.

What I do is not unlike this. In quite a few of these stories I am telling you, I didn't get their point until years later.

When I went to Black Mountain, I found that there were other people who spoke with tension, trying to find out what they didn't know. Everybody else before them had been happy with what they knew. They weren't curious about what they didn't know. Probably the main description of the occupation of art is to find out what you don't know. By starting someplace that's curious and delving in, in a common way, and coming out with an uncommon satisfaction, an uncommon piece of knowledge, that is very satisfying to your nervous system.

The greatest influence on my work and on my thinking actually came from the poets at Black Mountain College. As far as the poetry I wrote then, I'm certain it was all very personal. There isn't a body of work, so I couldn't include myself as a poet in the poet sense, like Creeley is. See, Creeley, is a real poet. Whether it's on a postcard or the way he phrases sentences, he works with words. He has his own manners and attitudes in that regard. He understands my foam sculpture, but that doesn't make him a sculptor. From having the foam sculpture around, did he understand the wadding technique, or the compression? Not necessarily. But the next time he washed the dishes, when he squeezed the sponge and one end of it popped out of the end of his fist, it looked like the sculpture. It was because of the one that he could see the other. He could get an added perception. It's daily life. That's where I get the idea that everybody makes sculpture every day, whether in the way they wad this up or the way they throw the

towel over the rack or the way they wad up the toilet paper. That's all very personal and very exact, and in some sense very skillful on their part, but it is discarded as not-useful information. But it's not not-useful. These little things, like blowing up the paper bag and hitting it so it pops – say you take it one little step further and you do it in slow motion and you explore what resistance of the air in the bag is, and you make something. That is to me very interesting. If there is a body of work demonstrating all these things that come together, that's useful in art history, as part of the accumulation of how knowledge goes on and on and on in this particular occupation.

The few sculptures that I made at Black Mountain were strongly influenced by David Smith. The first piece of David Smith's that I saw was *Agricola Nine*, it was at the Art Institute of Chicago. I liked it a lot because it wasn't representing something else, or it didn't seem so to me, and it was a very strange looking thing, and I sort of liked it because it was strange and I hadn't seen anything like that before. It was nice to be around. The pieces *Clytie* and *Calliope*, *Clytie* especially, look similar to it. In the development of both of those pieces, I found myself working in that area, I was trying to put the top part of *Clytie* in the other one, but when I put it in the right place, it connected up in three different places, so it told me how to put it together. I think in this particular area, in the way I've gone about this, I've led a charmed life. David Smith was quite good, I felt, but as I got to know him more and more, the pieces got smaller to me, and then I started disagreeing with his attitude about a lot of things, and then I thought he was very flat, but I still liked him a lot, besides, he looked like my father and we were born about sixty miles apart. He came from In Diana also.

The poems written by John Chamberlain at Black Mountain were given to Julie Sylvester by Chamberlain in the early 1980s. A selection was made for the publication Black Mountain John Chamberlain: John Chamberlain's Writings at Black Mountain College, 1955 (Princeton University Press, 2020) and is reproduced in facsimile. Chamberlain's spirit remains in his words, one imagines the sound of his big fingers pounding the typewriter keys.

i am not content
with the way the
poem is written or
the manner that words
fall on the paper.

they are laboured
under a tortured
finger pressing them
out like grapes be-
neath the feet.

the air hangs thick
around the space ~~on~~
ON delicate stilts and
follows the words i
pin to the wall. AND

some words stick fine
in a framed atmosphere
of ~~soft~~ ^{LEAD} gray background
offering the silloutte
not seen with the eyes.

but later, dancing, in
a round room built to
have its walls pined &
pinned the thought dropped
and broke my toe. i

am not content to
sit by and hold my
extremities ? etc.
nor flake the dirt
with an unbroken toe.

i am disarranged

not in form

in the contents of my mind, my mind

~~do not~~

forward to be counted, by the numbers,
with the index finger. (cadium red tipped)

it was never there maybe i

forgot

not where but how to sharpen the

razor on a strop

strap behind the curtains of the fleecians

dull ~~set~~ sharpless
chisel top
flattened out