



**Artists Documentation Program
Video Interview Transcript**

JOHN CHAMBERLAIN

MARCH 27, 2000

Interviewed by:

**Carol Mancusi-Ungaro, Founding Director, Artists Documentation Program,
and Chief Conservator, The Menil Collection;
with Helen Winkler Fosdick, Co-founder, Dia Art Foundation**

Video: Laurie McDonald | Total Run Time: 01:25:51

**Location: The Menil Collection, “John Chamberlain Sculpture: Selections from The Menil
Collection and the Dia Art Foundation,” January 28-April 2, 2000**

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This interview is part of the Artists Documentation Program, a collaboration of the Menil Collection, the Whitney Museum of American Art, and the Center for the Technical Study of Modern Art, Harvard Art Museums.

The Artists Documentation Program has been generously supported by
The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation.

About the Artists Documentation Program

Throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, artists have experimented with an unprecedented range of new materials and technologies. The conceptual concerns underlying much of contemporary art render its conservation more complex than simply arresting physical change. As such, the artist's voice is essential to future conservation and presentation of his or her work.

In 1990, The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation awarded a grant to the Menil Collection for Carol Mancusi-Ungaro, then Chief Conservator, to establish the Artists Documentation Program (ADP). Since that time, the ADP has recorded artists speaking candidly with conservators in front of their works. These engaging and informative interviews capture artists' attitudes toward the aging of their art and those aspects of its preservation that are of paramount importance to them.

The ADP has recorded interviews with such important artists as Frank Stella, Jasper Johns, and Cy Twombly. Originally designed for use by conservators and scholars at the Menil, the ADP has begun to appeal to a broader audience outside the Menil, and the collection has grown to include interviews from two partner institutions: the Whitney Museum of American Art and the Center for the Technical Study of Modern Art, Harvard Art Museums. In 2009, The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation awarded a grant to the Menil Collection to establish the ADP Archive, formalizing the multi-institutional partnership and making ADP interviews more widely available to researchers.

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[Speakers (in order of appearance): Carol Mancusi-Ungaro, Chief Conservator, The Menil Collection; John Chamberlain, Artist; Helen Winkler Fosdick, Co-founder, Dia Art Foundation; Doug Laguarda, Art Preparator.]

[BEGIN RECORDING]

[00:00:58]

CM-U: Today is March 27, 2000.

J. Chamberlain: And it's _____ [name inaudible]'s birthday. Shit.

CM-U: And John Chamberlain is here.

J. Chamberlain: How do you do?

CM-U: Hello.

J. Chamberlain: It is I.

CM-U: And we are looking at his sculptures that we haven't seen here, together, for a number of years.

J. Chamberlain: For some time, yes.

CM-U: For some time.

[00:01:17]

CM-U: So my first question is just questions of how do they – how does things look in general to you?

J. Chamberlain: Well, they look all right.

CM-U: Yeah?

J. Chamberlain: Yeah.

CM-U: This one – this one – *Rooster Starfoot* [1976, The Menil Collection, Houston, gift of Heiner and Fariha Friedrich]...

J. Chamberlain: Yes, I know. I have a picture of it on my foot.

- CM-U: Do you? Where did the title come from?
- J. Chamberlain: The rooster that's on my foot.
- CM-U: (laughs) Okay.
- J. Chamberlain: It has star feet.
- CM-U: Uh-huh. And you like that _____ [phrase inaudible], yeah. Well, my question...
- J. Chamberlain: You know, it's something.
- CM-U: ...my question about it is, it's come in pieces. It may have been one you were talking about, in fact, that was in a few pieces.
- J. Chamberlain: Hmm. No, not that one.
- CM-U: No?
- J. Chamberlain: No, the *Ladies of the Night* or some [The artist is possibly referring to *Two Dark Ladies*, 1979, Collection of Dia Art Foundation, New York] – that one's the one that came in pieces. (laughs) That's funny. Now I don't know where – it got really rusted out. There was – what's – there was also another one, I remember, *Luftschloss* [1979, Collection of Dia Art Foundation, New York]...
- CM-U: Yes.
- J. Chamberlain: ...*Luftschloss*.
- CM-U: Yes.
- J. Chamberlain: Castles in the air.
- CM-U: Yes.
- J. Chamberlain: And, let's see. What about *Tongue Pictures* [1979, Collection of Chinati Foundation, Marfa, TX]?
- CM-U: No.
- J. Chamberlain: You don't have that one?

CM-U: I don't think so. No.

J. Chamberlain: Well, that was out there, too.

CM-U: Oh, well maybe.

J. Chamberlain: But there was a bunch of others, and I can't remember them. I think that one – there's one in that room...

CM-U: Uh-huh.

J. Chamberlain: ...that's sort of low to the floor. It's laid out this way...

CM-U: Yeah.

J. Chamberlain: ...and it has this one – that's *Pigmeat Plays the Blues*, or something [*Pigmeat's Eb Bluesong*, 1979, Collection of Dia Art Foundation, New York].

CM-U: Uh-huh.

J. Chamberlain: Isn't it?

Helen Fosdick: I'll go find out.

CM-U: It could be. I just don't remember the names on that one.

J. Chamberlain: It's the one that's sort of spotted, with pink and black. [The artist is likely referring to *Hurray for Bernie Galvez (3¢ under the Limit)*, 1981, Collection of Dia Art Foundation, New York.]

CM-U: Is that one you think we worked on here?

J. Chamberlain: I don't know, but there was one that it was left at that time.

Uh-huh.

J. Chamberlain: And I can only, like, put them in the time zone.

[00:03:05]

J. Chamberlain: See, now I treat 'em different now.

CM-U: Okay.

J. Chamberlain: See, I load them up with other – I coat them up with a lot of polyurethane.

CM-U: Oh, so you apply that on even the older pieces at this point?

J. Chamberlain: Well...

CM-U: Are you doing that on your new ones?

J. Chamberlain: You're not supposed to do it on the old pieces. This looks – they look pretty good. I mean, that's...

CM-U: Well, what we've done is, we just clean it with Pre-Kleano®. You know how you've been telling us about Pre-Kleano®.

J. Chamberlain: Yeah, there is nothing else to do.

CM-U: Uh-huh.

J. Chamberlain: I've worked in a lot of places where, you know – I mean, I went to Detroit once. And it looked like it still had the leaves in it from when it was in England.

(laughter)

J. Chamberlain: And then, like, you're not supposed to clean these. See. And what it is is that the dust and the dirt just – I went to a guy's place in Beverly Hills, and I did this. And I said, "How come it's never cleaned?" I mean, my hand got turned black. It looked like three years of dust on this thing.

CM-U: Yeah.

J. Chamberlain: I said, "Why don't you clean it?" And then there was three welds broken. I said, "Is this the kind of condition...?" And he said, "Don't touch the art! Don't touch the art!"

(laughter)

J. Chamberlain: No, it wasn't terribly funny. But that overthrew me. That, and a few other facts about this particular fellow. And it turned out, you know, a little while later, the sculpture is – not only is it broken, it's dirty, but you've got it on the wall upside down.

CM-U: Hmm. So did he change it?

J. Chamberlain: Well, I don't know. I mean...

CM-U: You just told him?

J. Chamberlain: The guy, tsshhhk! What can you do? I mean...

CM-U: I know. We have...

J. Chamberlain: There's not – there's a curious thing about L.A. I've had three occasions where the piece is upside down in L.A. Never anywhere else, you know. But only in L.A.

(laughter)

CM-U: That's strange. Something – well, there are a lot of things that are only in L.A. But...

J. Chamberlain: Remember how it used to banned in Boston? You know. I think it's shifted to L.A., you know.

[00:05:13]

CM-U: Well, with *Rooster Starfoot*, when we took it out to assemble it for this installation, we noticed that it looked different in the catalogue raisonné than it has now. And there was a piece on top in the catalogue raisonné, which I can – I'm going to show you – that's not on it now. And I don't know how you feel about that – excuse me.

J. Chamberlain: Well, until you told me, I didn't know.

CM-U: Good. So then it isn't something that...

J. Chamberlain: No, this is good. This doesn't look – the same things do – I don't think...

CM-U: We can get up and walk around and take a look at it.

J. Chamberlain: It's on the other side, isn't it? Wait a minute.

CM-U: Unless it's this, and it's just...

J. Chamberlain: Yeah.

CM-U: Well, that piece is there.

- J. Chamberlain: There is no brown piece up there. So where is – oh, well, it’s – I don’t know how it got put back together, but it’s all right.
- CM-U: See, here’s another photo of it, and it doesn’t – this is the way it is now. From the other side. Come here.
- J. Chamberlain: Hmm.
- CM-U: So I guess my general question is, something like this, which is bent now [sounds like]...
- J. Chamberlain: Well, it appears differently in that...
- CM-U: Yeah.
- J. Chamberlain: ...as soon as you change the photograph.
- CM-U: Yeah. So there’s a weld broken there.
- J. Chamberlain: And probably somewhere else, too.
- CM-U: See, this piece is completely free. That comes right off.
- J. Chamberlain: This?
- CM-U: Yeah. Let’s lift it. Right. It comes right off.
- J. Chamberlain: Hmm. Not good. Okay. Oh, here’s a bunch more. Better send Duncan [John Duncan Chamberlain, son of the artist] over here to weld some of this stuff together.
- CM-U: See, that piece is completely free...
- J. Chamberlain: Okay. This is gonna bust here, too. Ah, leave it. That’s okay.
- CM-U: But what’s – I mean, do you tend to reweld if the piece is...
- J. Chamberlain: Yeah [sounds like]. See, but this is such a bad weld. I probably welded this.
- CM-U: Well, your welds are very small. They are really very good [sounds like].
- J. Chamberlain: But they should come up all the way around. Yeah, this is too loose. Hmm. Nah. It needs a lot of work.

CM-U: So it needs welding, you think? Because it's been put together [sounds like].

J. Chamberlain: Oh, lots of it.

CM-U: Lots of little...

J. Chamberlain: Yeah.

CM-U: And who is doing that for you now?

J. Chamberlain: It's done by a person named Chamberlain.

CM-U: Oh, you're doing it? Well, do you think we can get that Chamberlain guy to come back and do some welding?

J. Chamberlain: Oh, yeah, sure.

[00:08:56]

J. Chamberlain: What's the next one? This is the next one? Yeah. It's loose down there. [Walks around sculpture] Hmm. Hmm. Hmm. Okay.

CM-U: This one is *Slow Dancing to the News* [1981, Collection of Dia Art Foundation, New York].

J. Chamberlain: Yeah. Yeah, I remember. Well, I don't know about this one [*Ultrafull Private*, 1967, Collection of Dia Art Foundation, New York].

CM-U: Yeah, I do want to ask you about this one, though, because we had questions that came up about this, too. On this side here. One of the questions was that I...

J. Chamberlain: How did it get like this?

CM-U: Yeah. What about this? How does this look to you? Is this rusted, or is the color that it was?

J. Chamberlain: Ooh, this is loose. Hmm. Do you have pictures of this?

CM-U: Yes.

J. Chamberlain: I mean, is this how you got it?

CM-U: It came – it was in two pieces when we put it together. Brad, it might be interesting to get Doug, if he were free to come.

Brad Epley: Okay.

CM-U: Okay.

J. Chamberlain: Hmm.

CM-U: Okay.

J. Chamberlain: Hmm. (Walks over to sculpture and adjusts elements).

CM-U: It's fine.

(Mancusi-Ungaro, Fosdick, and Chamberlain look at the catalogue raisonné together.)

J. Chamberlain: Hmm.

CM-U: Here it is.

J. Chamberlain: Hmm.

CM-U: No, that's *Royal* _____ [word inaudible]. That's not it.

J. Chamberlain: It's smaller.

CM-U: Yeah. That's not it. *Ultra Private*. 303.

Helen Fosdick: Three oh what...

CM-U: Here it is.

Helen Fosdick: Yeah, there's the place...

CM-U: There is it. Okay. So what were you thinking about?

J. Chamberlain: Well, it's loose. It should be – really should be...

Helen Fosdick: This is the top [sounds like].

CM-U: This is – this is completely different.

J. Chamberlain: _____ [phrase inaudible].

CM-U: This pattern that's on the galvanized – that's just the way it's manufactured, right? So there isn't any paint, per se, on this piece.

J. Chamberlain: No, it's dipped.

CM-U: It's dipped? And the solvent creates...

J. Chamberlain: Yeah.

CM-U: ...creates that.

J. Chamberlain: Whatever galvanized is. I don't know, actually.

[00:12:14]

CM-U: So I guess what I'm saying is, you just need to look at – because they are different from they are in the photographs. But I guess that's not unusual over time.

J. Chamberlain: Oh, no. As a matter of fact, you could see the distortion, like just in that blue part, if you look in the photographs. (looking at catalogue raisonné) See, there's a distortion that...

CM-U: Yeah.

J. Chamberlain: Hmm.

CM-U: Right there.

J. Chamberlain: Yeah, we see this is distorted here, because this looks like it is going more this way. There it's coming straight out. And this seems to be – see, I mean, if we walk – let's see...

CM-U: Just push me. Yeah.

J. Chamberlain: Just – I'm not sure. There. The picture was taken like from here, right?

CM-U: Right. Look at the blue piece – the light blue piece.

J. Chamberlain: Yeah, it still is distorted, see? _____ [phrase inaudible]

- CM-U: Well, is that the kind of thing, like, in the catalogue, we see that the blue piece is flat. And there it's bent. Is that the kind of thing that we should try to flatten?
- J. Chamberlain: Well, it's difficult, from your point of view, because you are trying to get it back like it was. See, and you can only do that by magic.
- CM-U: Right. Right. So, I mean, what we want to do is get it the way you want it. So...
- J. Chamberlain: Oh, it's okay.
- CM-U: ...so if this...
- J. Chamberlain: It seems to be all right. It's just not together very well.
- CM-U: Uh-huh.
- J. Chamberlain: Can you weld it?
- CM-U: Doug is here. Doug, come meet John Chamberlain.
- J. Chamberlain: Who welds here?
- CM-U: Doug put these things together when they came out. This is Doug Laguarda. John Chamberlain.
- Doug Laguarda: Hiya.
- J. Chamberlain: How do you do?
- CM-U: We're talking about *Rooster Starfoot*, and how many pieces it was in when you went to put it together.
- Doug Laguarda: Right, it was primarily just wrapped. Most of it was just wrapped in foam.
- CM-U: Here, it's back here.
- Doug Laguarda: In foam
- CM-U: The other picture.

Doug Laguarda: And then there was one piece that was loose, that was right on the top of it – that was just set loose in the crate, and it was...

CM-U: This piece, right?

Doug Laguarda: No. No, that...

CM-U: Oh, no, that piece is gone.

Doug Laguarda: ...that piece, no...

J. Chamberlain: Is gone?

Doug Laguarda: Right.

J. Chamberlain: That's okay. There's...

Doug Laguarda: You know, we'd never seen it.

[00:14:29]

J. Chamberlain: Where is this piece?

Doug Laguarda: That's over at a storage...

J. Chamberlain: What kind of condition is that in?

Doug Laguarda: It looks pretty...

CM-U: It's in good – we worked on it. We worked on the *Luftschloss*. Is that how you pronounce that?

J. Chamberlain: *Luftschloss*.

CM-U: *Luftschloss*. We worked on that one, I remember.

J. Chamberlain: *Castles in the Air*.

CM-U: Is that what it is? I remember. That's in good condition. Or stable condition anyway.

[00:15:01]

- CM-U: So, basically what we've been talking about is that the pieces need to be more secure. And that's your feeling...
- J. Chamberlain: Well, I don't think that I can do what I do now.
- CM-U: Right.
- J. Chamberlain: See, so you're asking the wrong person.
- CM-U: So just tell us what you think needs to be done.
- J. Chamberlain: That really needs to be tightened up and cleaned. Might put a little nail polish on the welds. (laughs)
- CM-U: Let's go look at it. Come on – can we turn around and go look at that? Come over here.
- J. Chamberlain: Turn it around. No, we'll scratch the floor.
- CM-U: What? You want to turn the piece around?
- J. Chamberlain: Yeah. I don't know. It'll all fall apart.
- Doug Laguarda: Well, it's – the one piece, this piece that's right on top here...
- J. Chamberlain: I know. She showed me. But you see it's all...
- Doug Laguarda: Well, it's – when it was sent, or when we uncrated it, it was all encased in like a half-inch foam strip, that went all around the top and bottom.
- J. Chamberlain: See, the thing now is that I clean all this off now.
- Doug Laguarda: Um-hum.
- J. Chamberlain: See. And I paint in back of here.
- CM-U: You paint back in there?
- J. Chamberlain: Yeah. I paint this back part.
- Doug Laguarda: Um-hum.
- CM-U: To prevent the rust?

J. Chamberlain: No...

CM-U: Just for looks?

J. Chamberlain: ...it gives it another surface.

CM-U: It's another surface, yeah.

Doug Laguarda: Sure.

J. Chamberlain: So this needs to be really rewelded.

CM-U: Well, maybe this is a piece that we...

J. Chamberlain: I mean, if I sent Duncan in, all he'd do is really reweld all this and – see – nah. No, I don't do this like this anymore.

CM-U: I know you don't. Well, maybe it's the kind of thing that you would send Duncan, and you would just tell him what you thought needed to be done.

J. Chamberlain: Well, no, I...

CM-U: Or you could just send him...

J. Chamberlain: We'd come over.

CM-U: Yeah.

J. Chamberlain: And, well, we could do them all. I think they are all – probably need something.

Doug Laguarda: Yes.

Helen Fosdick: Is _____ [phrase inaudible] on down, decide how they look, and then leave them in that condition till you can come and work...

J. Chamberlain: Well, it's all right. I just don't like it in the condition that they're in. I mean, as far as what you see is all right. Yeah, because at this point – and then it would be only be coming [sounds like], well, there's more, or there's less. So – which sort of cancels itself out.

[00:17:27]

J. Chamberlain: There's one in there called *Fantail* [1961, Collection of National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian Institutions, Washington, D.C.; on loan from Jasper Johns at time of catalogue raisonné, 1986], and that was one where – no, no, it's in the book. That was a piece Jasper [Johns] owned. He gave it to the Smithsonian. But it had a piece of – you know, this cloth; it's not cloth, but – and it's not woven, but it's like paper; and it sort of looks...

CM-U: Like a matted paper?

J. Chamberlain: Yeah, I can't quite put my finger on what it would be. It's like fancy wrapping paper.

Doug Laguarda: Hmm.

J. Chamberlain: But I mean really fancy.

Doug Laguarda: Um-hum.

J. Chamberlain: You know. But anyway, I had this whole thing covered, and it got stolen. Like, in some exhibition, somebody took it. See. So I...

CM-U: The entire piece, you mean?

J. Chamberlain: No, no, just...

Helen Fosdick: The fantail.

CM-U: Just the fantail.

J. Chamberlain: Just this little piece of cloth.

CM-U: Oh.

Helen Fosdick: When did you do it? Do you remember the year?

J. Chamberlain: Sixty-one.

CM-U: Well, I guess at this point what we're thinking is that, you know, we've put them together the best we can, based on your photographs; and so now we just need your intervention.

J. Chamberlain: Okay. Well, it seems to be together.

Doug Laguarda: That one has held up really well.

CM-U: We would never do that to your sculpture, John.

J. Chamberlain: What?

CM-U: We would never do that to your sculpture! (laughs)

[00:18:56]

CM-U: What about the height from the floor? Does that seem...

J. Chamberlain: Oh, that's okay. Yeah, it's all right.

Doug Laguarda: Although it does take some manipulation to get them around and to, you know, work them into the individual pieces because they seem to interlock in places, you know.

J. Chamberlain: Yeah. I think maybe you should make a list of the ones they have the most trouble with.

CM-U: Okay.

J. Chamberlain: And then probably should just make it in one piece. Like something like that...

CM-U: That would be great.

J. Chamberlain: Instead of – yeah, I know, 'cause I put them like that. See, if the floor isn't level, or the back [sounds like] – you know, like you turn to the backboard or something. Just a little bit, you know, and all of a sudden they turn. And this is where you find that the photograph distorts _____ [phrase inaudible].

CM-U: Right. That's what we found, and we – also, you know, I mean, maybe, at the time when they were made, it was hard to transport something that size.

J. Chamberlain: Yes.

CM-U: But it isn't now. You know, we transport things like that.

J. Chamberlain: Well, that. And, plus, things like this, you know, they are always – they are very awkward. This is not really – see, it's a – oh, what the hell is it called?

- CM-U: What?
- J. Chamberlain: Well, it's – what is it called? No, no, no...
- Helen Fosdick: They are hard to handle?
- J. Chamberlain: No, no, it's...
- Helen Fosdick: Hard to transport?
- J. Chamberlain: All the parts are different.
- CM-U: Yeah.
- J. Chamberlain: See. So there's no – there is – nothing really actually fits where one might think it would fit.
- CM-U: Well, I'm sure it does.
- J. Chamberlain: See, it works all right because the orange is enough for there, see.
- CM-U: Um-hum.
- J. Chamberlain: Or, if you go around it, you'll see this is the right amount of orange with the blue.
- CM-U: Um-hum.
- J. Chamberlain: All those things – that's another characteristic. See, it's not just – but I think it should be welded and then we'd figure out something that you could put on the welds so they don't...
- CM-U: To protect them.
- J. Chamberlain: Yeah, so they don't – see, now I do it – now I overdo it. (laughs)
- CM-U: But the other thing is, John, we don't let these be out...
- J. Chamberlain: I keep coating the thing. I say, "Oh, it looks like it could use a couple of more." Yeah, and you're already at...
- Doug Laguarda: (laughs)

- J. Chamberlain: It's already like it's encased.
- Doug Laguarda: Sure, sure. For posterity.
- Helen Fosdick: It works.
- J. Chamberlain: Yeah, it's okay for me, you know. It works. I mean, now. I mean – see, I don't know what you can do now. See, if I screw around with it, it becomes another piece.
- CM-U: I know. That's the...
- Helen Fosdick: And also, if you spray on a lot of stuff, it would be a different color.
- J. Chamberlain: Yeah. Remember that woman in San Francisco, Jane – was it Defoe. DeFeo.
- CM-U: Yeah. Jay DeFeo.
- J. Chamberlain: Jay DeFeo. Remember her?
- CM-U: Yes. Yes.
- J. Chamberlain: Made one painting. She kept painting on the same thing...
- CM-U: *The Rose* [1958-66, Collection of the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; gift of the Estate of Jay DeFeo and purchased with funds from the Contemporary Painting and Sculpture Committee and The Judith Rothschild Foundation].
- J. Chamberlain: *The Rose*. Right.
- CM-U: Yeah. Did you see it in New York?
- J. Chamberlain: Nah, I don't want to look at the goddamn thing. Look... (lifts up sleeve to reveal tattoo on arm)
- CM-U: Is that the... – oh.
- J. Chamberlain: And that's older than her painting.
- CM-U: I'm not going to ask you about that on tape. But anyway...

[00:21:58]

John Chamberlain Interview Transcript, Artists Documentation Program, The Menil Collection, 03/27/2000

Video: adp2000b_chamberlain_001va.mp4 / Interview #: VI2000-020.2000b / TRT: 01:25:51

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Helen Fosdick: Yeah, you should have asked him. You've got to ask him while his – here's *Fantail*. (holds up catalogue raisonné)

J. Chamberlain: Yeah.

Helen Fosdick: What piece is missing?

J. Chamberlain: Oh, I can't tell you. It's in here somewhere. It would be, you know, like this. It was really rich blue, and, you know, like paper that has been...

Doug Laguarda: Was it transparent, or...

J. Chamberlain: Well, it had been dyed.

Doug Laguarda: Uh-huh.

J. Chamberlain: It wasn't a small article, you know. It was...

Doug Laguarda: It was a substantial shape.

J. Chamberlain: There's the piece that is upside down in L.A.

CM-U: What's the name of that piece?

J. Chamberlain: This is *Bijou* [1961, Private collection, New York].

CM-U: *Bijou* is upside down. Installed upside down?

J. Chamberlain: It was installed upside down. See, I went up to it, and I wondered, "Why the hell...?" I mean, see these were all loose; but they were over here. And then this part here was over here. And I remember, "Hmm." And I go, "Jesus Christ, it's dirty." See. And then it turned out – you know, not that it was dirty and broken – but this guy didn't want me to touch it.

(laughter)

J. Chamberlain: But it turned out that – it was only recently that I remember, "Shit, the thing's upside down."

CM-U: You knew it didn't look right. In general, how do the colors seem to you? I mean, on *Rooster Starfoot*. They look great [sounds like].

J. Chamberlain: Oh yeah, they seem to be the same.

CM-U: I know. Have you had pieces where you feel the colors have changed?

J. Chamberlain: Yeah, but they're not pieces – I mean, I put the – I was doing this piece called *Root Balls*, and they've been outdoors in Shelter Island for a while. But they – the colors have faded.

CM-U: From being outside? Yeah.

[00:23:29]

CM-U: Well, that was the other point I was going to make. I mean, these pieces won't go outside. So, I mean, your welds, once they are corrected...

J. Chamberlain: Yeah well, they can – you move them across the street, and then the vibration could break some welds.

CM-U: Yeah.

J. Chamberlain: And there's some I've had – I mean, as bad a welder as I am, I mean, they are still together after fifty years.

CM-U: I think your welds are very characteristic of you. And you can tell.

Helen Fosdick: Is that good or bad?

CM-U: That's good. Because you can tell when someone has done it. No, you can.

J. Chamberlain: This decade, I was in a hurry. And that decade, he was really in a hurry!

(laughter)

Helen Fosdick: So you can recognize John's welds, as opposed to somebody else's, Carol?

CM-U: I can tell when someone has restored a piece. We were looking at one recently. They are different. So that's important. Yes? We think, how they look?

J. Chamberlain: Yeah, but I don't think the weld – that's like saying, "Did you reproduce the thing? And did you use the same rubber cement he used to paste this stuff down?" You know, if you were redoing a collage or something?

CM-U: Right. Right.

J. Chamberlain: That gets to be like making a movie, and making sure that, if everybody is on the monarch's guard of honor, that they got the exact same underwear on.

CM-U: But you can't see that, but you can see this.

J. Chamberlain: No, no, that's what I mean. You can't see it. So it's incredible that...

CM-U: But you can see the welds. I mean, they do have a sense. An impact. We want to ask...

J. Chamberlain: I try to hide them as best I can. But nevertheless. You know, I think this – is this one together?

CM-U: *Nanoweeep* [1969, The Menil Collection, Houston]. This one is owned by the Menil. This is one you made out of a desk, I guess, of some sort.

J. Chamberlain: Hmm.

CM-U: Some of these welds have been reworked.

J. Chamberlain: Hmm. Nothing in there.

CM-U: Are you still looking for something in that drawer?

J. Chamberlain: Okay. Hmm. No, I see – who did this?

CM-U: Yeah, like I said, some of these welds have been redone. That's not one of your welds.

J. Chamberlain: Who would do that? [sounds like] No.

CM-U: Now this was – this was when you – these were colored steel from something other than automobiles? I mean, you used other things?

J. Chamberlain: Yes.

CM-U: Desks. Appliances.

J. Chamberlain: Yeah. Well, the automobile thing is a little overworked, because it's easy.

CM-U: Well, and permanent.

J. Chamberlain: Everything else seems to be...

[00:26:37]

CM-U: The one question I want to ask you in this gallery has to do with the newest piece, the one over there in the corner.

J. Chamberlain: Ooh. I don't know – I don't remember that. Sure that's mine? Hm?

CM-U: I think so. I think...

J. Chamberlain: But you're not certain.

CM-U: I'm positive. Come on. This is the last one we're going to do in this gallery, and then you get to take a break.

J. Chamberlain: Ooh, where are we going to take it?

Helen Fosdick: Yeah, what are we going to do on the break _____ [phrase inaudible]?

J. Chamberlain: What can we – where can we take it to?

CM-U: If you want to. This one is 1990 [*Cone Yak*, 1990, The Menil Collection, Houston].

J. Chamberlain: Ooh. Well, you see – you see the surface?

CM-U: Yeah.

J. Chamberlain: Yeah, that's what...

CM-U: It's so shiny. How is it supposed to be? That was the question.

J. Chamberlain: Probably like that.

CM-U: Like that? Okay. Good.

J. Chamberlain: Oh, you didn't know that?

CM-U: No, we didn't know that. See, here's a photograph we had of it.

J. Chamberlain: Huh.

CM-U: And I don't think it's been published, so it's important for us to know this. Why is this so shiny?

John Chamberlain Interview Transcript, Artists Documentation Program, The Menil Collection, 03/27/2000

Video: adp2000b_chamberlain_001va.mp4 / Interview #: VI2000-020.2000b / TRT: 01:25:51

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- J. Chamberlain: Wait a minute.
- CM-U: It was taken here.
- J. Chamberlain: Mickey's and Robertson.
- Helen Fosdick: Hicky and Robertson [photographers]. That was photographed here. So they might not have known how it went, Carol.
- CM-U: Right. That's why I think it's important that we...
- J. Chamberlain: Well, didn't any pictures come with it? Where did you get it from? Who did you get it from?
- CM-U: I don't know who we bought it from.
- Helen Fosdick: What's it called? Is it in this book?
- CM-U: No. It was after the book.
- J. Chamberlain: Hmm.
- Helen Fosdick: Those people live here in Houston. Those photographers.
- J. Chamberlain: Well, it goes like this.
- CM-U: Do you have it set up the way it is...
- Helen Fosdick: That's right. That's it. Is that it?
- CM-U: Okay. Okay. Now what's different about why – this seems to be coated.
- J. Chamberlain: Oh. Well, the welding is a lot better 'cause Duncan does it. And then we coat it. See all the coatings.
- CM-U: What do you coat it with?
- J. Chamberlain: The same stuff that goes on bowling alley floors.
- CM-U: It's like a clear sealer of some sort. Yeah.
- J. Chamberlain: Yeah.

CM-U: It looks good.

Helen Fosdick: What's the year?

CM-U: 1990.

[00:28:59]

CM-U: This one on the wall.

J. Chamberlain: Hmm. Looks...

CM-U: That's pretty solid. Yeah.

J. Chamberlain: What is that one?

CM-U: That one's called – what is it?

Helen Fosdick: *Prez's Blurb* [1979, Collection of Dia Art Foundation, New York].

J. Chamberlain: Hmm.

CM-U: Let's look at *Daddy-O*. Or *Oh-Daddy*. *Daddy-O-Springs*.

Doug Laguarda: _____ [word inaudible].

CM-U: Right.

J. Chamberlain: Well, as long as it's together.

Doug Laguarda: It's pretty – there's a screw [sounds like], that counter – that holds it inside...

J. Chamberlain: Uh-oh. What...

Doug Laguarda: And this piece, this whole piece up here, from here on over to there, are two separate pieces. And we could never find any welds that corresponded, that may have broken in the past.

J. Chamberlain: Hmm.

Doug Laguarda: So it was a matter of matching...

J. Chamberlain: There wasn't anything in here?

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Doug Laguarda: No.

J. Chamberlain: Okay.

Doug Laguarda: No. No. It was...

J. Chamberlain: Hmm, yeah _____ [phrase inaudible] here. Huh.

Doug Laguarda: See, we put a screw in. Just basically to match` the angle that it was in.

J. Chamberlain: Hmm. Well...

CM-U: We also – we put some screws in. I think we put some in just to secure it up in here.

Doug Laguarda: We put one screw in over there.

CM-U: Would you have a problem with that, if we just kind of – yeah, you don't like that. Well, what shall we do in a case like that, when we...

J. Chamberlain: I'd like to come back with somebody, and we can weld it.

CM-U: Do some welding?

J. Chamberlain: But I don't want anybody welding besides...

CM-U: No.

J. Chamberlain: Huh-uh. Just...

Doug Laguarda: Right.

CM-U: Absolutely.

J. Chamberlain: ...my son, because he knows what to do.

CM-U: Right. Is Duncan your son?

J. Chamberlain: (nods)

CM-U: Uh-huh. And then I...

J. Chamberlain: Nepotism. (laughs)

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CM-U: Well, he knows you. He knows what you want. That works. And then I think at one point they also had to attach it to the wall back there, because they were concerned about it being not – to hold the angle right. So I don't know if that...

J. Chamberlain: Hmm.

CM-U: But if it's a question of coming back and doing some welds, that's what we should do.

J. Chamberlain: Yes, but I'm not – see, I'm not curious enough. You better not let me screw around too much.

CM-U: No, we don't think you should. We think that you should just kind of give us an idea of what needs to be done.

J. Chamberlain: If I start messing around with them...

Helen Fosdick: You don't want to take the time to do that [sounds like]...

J. Chamberlain: No, I can't do that.

Helen Fosdick: Well, that's fine. But, I mean, I think that if there's going to be – anything to be done should decide, if they're loose, they need to be welded or whatever. Sort of get an idea of that.

[00:31:40]

J. Chamberlain: Who is this *Ranier Falls*? Yeah. I don't know. Hmm.

Helen Fosdick: Was this after Rainer Judd [daughter of Donald Judd]?

J. Chamberlain: Yeah. Well, that was before I found a girlfriend who knew how to make up names for me.

(laughter)

CM-U: You once told me you took names from a racing page. Is that right?

J. Chamberlain: Oh, I – we even played Balderdash to get names.

CM-U: Uh-huh. That's a good way, actually.

J. Chamberlain: Well, it would, uh – then there was a problem. For a long time, they had to be triple puns, you know, like *Toasted Hitlers* [from *E.J.*, 1977, Collection of Dia Art Foundation, New York].

CM-U: Uh-huh.

J. Chamberlain: And there's about a three-way there.

CM-U: Uh-huh.

J. Chamberlain: And then there was a couple of more that, they took you this way, but then you maybe have thought it should have gone this way. Those kind of titles are okay. (laughs)

CM-U: What about a piece like this, where it looks like you've painted...

J. Chamberlain: Yeah, when was the last time that somebody go up that – you remember, what's his name – Kasper – not Kasper Koenig, no. What the hell was that guy?

CM-U: Where was he?

J. Chamberlain: Kr, Krick, Krip...

Helen Fosdick: Kurt?

J. Chamberlain: Kirk, Krik, Kruck. Krrr...

(laughter)

J. Chamberlain: Klaus Kertess.

Helen Fosdick: Klaus Kertess. I think he's still around.

J. Chamberlain: Yeah, I know he...

Helen Fosdick: He was just here.

J. Chamberlain: Yeah, every time they give me a medal or something, he's there. So the last time he came, he just read off titles.

(laughter)

Helen Fosdick: They're good. They're good titles.

[00:33:21]

CM-U: I've got another question about this piece, *Rainier*. What about the paint? It looks like it's been painted. That you've painted on it. When did you...

J. Chamberlain: No, I didn't paint that.

CM-U: You didn't paint that?

J. Chamberlain: No. That's...

CM-U: Uh-huh.

J. Chamberlain: No, it was chosen.

CM-U: It was chosen? Okay.

J. Chamberlain: Yes.

CM-U: But you did start painting on some of them.

J. Chamberlain: Oh, we paint them all now.

CM-U: Uh-huh.

J. Chamberlain: We paint the whole thing. But not after it's in.

CM-U: Right. While they are still _____ [phrase inaudible].

J. Chamberlain: No, I use – the sheet metal that comes in now is not, not like this stuff. It's van tops...

CM-U: Yeah?

J. Chamberlain: You know, they chisel off the van top.

CM-U: Yeah.

J. Chamberlain: Then they put a bubble on top of the van or some sort, so people could stand up inside or something. Well, all those van tops are available, for three bucks apiece.

- CM-U: Amazing.
- J. Chamberlain: So I bought a thousand. And then, I ran out. I used them all. I'm on my second thousand.
- CM-U: And then you take – so they are already painted, and then you...
- J. Chamberlain: No. No.
- CM-U: No?
- J. Chamberlain: As a matter of fact, they are, but white, black, maroon, dark blue. That's about it.
- CM-U: Huh. And...
- J. Chamberlain: No, we had to take them apart. I mean, there's stuff in it, you know. We have to – gummy stuff...
- CM-U: You mean, like the padding and the fabric and _____ [word inaudible].
- J. Chamberlain: Well, not that so much. But there was stuff. Anyway, they are cleaned up, and we strip them. So we get eight foot by sixteen-inch strips.
- CM-U: Huh.
- J. Chamberlain: So, and then, every so often – so I just made a painting change. So the guy who works in the booth, he – I made him make some big fives and fours and threes. So he's laid it on. So he gets little parts of a number. Could do it with letters, you know.
- CM-U: Huh.
- J. Chamberlain: But there's not – I mean, there's just so many curves in it. You know, like angles and things. So what we did is – so we got a sort of negative and positive space and a line. And he's painting by brush, not by spray.
- CM-U: Hmm.
- J. Chamberlain: And it's just the one formula of colors, like whatever the guy, or the manufacturer makes, see. Just those colors. And there is no – not too much mixing.

CM-U: Um-hum.

J. Chamberlain: So he just does that. And if he – so if he does a positive, negative, and line – so if he does it on one side, that it's hot, cold, and if the two are light, the line's dark. So that's the formula. So he turns it off and does it in reverse.

CM-U: Hmm.

J. Chamberlain: Or he can do it the same stuff, but he changes the – whichever of the three positions. So he has that to work on, and that goes for a long time. And actually it's proven to be a good move because every now and then, everything gets tiring, you know. So no matter what tube of ink, I mean of paint you open, and how good it always looked, at some point it's going to look like shit.

CM-U: Right.

J. Chamberlain: And you don't want to have nothing to do with it for a while. So you find something else to – how to work around it, or rearrange this. That's what essentially we do. First, there was a time when all the color looked like crap, so I said, "Let's..." – oh, what's it called? "Sand. Sandblast it." Well, I thought if we sandblasted it, we'd just take it off and maybe the steel would shine. But the steel went dull. So I said, "Well, don't take all the paint off." So I had this guy do it, and that's when you saw the sculptures that looked like they had giraffe designs. Yeah.

CM-U: Yes. Yes.

J. Chamberlain: Well, that's what it was. Then it turned out – it was funny – I used to watch this guy going, and if he was in a hurry, the line would be thin. And if he wasn't in a hurry, the line is much thicker.

(laughter)

J. Chamberlain: So then, you know – and all these things are all right, you know, because finally I'm the one that decides to use it or not. See? So it's okay, but...

CM-U: Right.

J. Chamberlain: It's really strange, you know.

[00:37:26]

J. Chamberlain: Gee, that's a nice looking piece.

CM-U: Does that look nice from here?

J. Chamberlain: Yeah.

CM-U: It's beautiful. What about putting them together? Shaping?

J. Chamberlain: It looks like a girl I used to know in Philadelphia.

Helen Fosdick: And what was her name?

J. Chamberlain: God, I forgot.

(laughter)

Helen Fosdick: Mildred. We've gotta talk about her.

J. Chamberlain: Mildred.

(laughter)

CM-U: Mildred?

Helen Fosdick: _____ [phrase inaudible].

J. Chamberlain: I saw Mildred last in _____ [word inaudible] 1975, '76. _____ [word inaudible]

Helen Fosdick: You said '74, and I was gone in '72. So it was '74.

J. Chamberlain: Whenever it was I had the show ["John Chamberlain: Recent Sculptures," Curated by James Harithas, Contemporary Arts Museum Houston, February 14-March 17, 1975] at this Contemporary...

CM-U: Arts Museum.

J. Chamberlain: ...thing, you know. That box that looks like this.

CM-U: Yeah. Yeah. Here.

J. Chamberlain: Yeah.

- CM-U: Yeah. Contemporary Arts Museum.
- J. Chamberlain: Right. Didn't Harithas work there or something?
- CM-U: Yes.
- Helen Fosdick: He did.
- J. Chamberlain: It was about – whatever time that was.
- CM-U: Early seventies.
- Helen Fosdick: But also, could we just ask this question while we're talking about it. Do you know if Marilyn Lubetkin still has John's piece in her yard?
- CM-U: I don't know.
- Helen Fosdick: So who do I call?
- CM-U: Marilyn Lubetkin.
- Helen Fosdick: I'll go get her phone number and I'll find out. Okay?
- CM-U: Yeah.
- J. Chamberlain: Yeah. I'd like to know if it's – see, the last time I saw it, it had sunk in the mud.
- Helen Fosdick: All right. I'll...
- J. Chamberlain: It might be another job, you know.
- CM-U: Yeah. Now, the pieces you were talking about, you know, when you were taking the van metal from the cars, the ones you are working on now, do you then malle – crush them – or shape them?
- J. Chamberlain: Yeah, we make them look just like lasagna. We make it pretty much the same as if it were lasagna.
- CM-U: I see. So you are layering them, is what you are doing?
- J. Chamberlain: Yeah. But it all sort of goes to start fitting together, you know, in some way that, you know – it's like – oh, irregular. That's the word I was trying to think

of before, in terms of the set. See, it's irregular. There's no one thing that's the same as another.

CM-U: Right.

J. Chamberlain: Nothing fits this way.

CM-U: Right.

J. Chamberlain: Nothing is this way. You know, it's very irregular. In all these pieces, you will not find one piece hardly similar to another piece, see?

CM-U: Right.

J. Chamberlain: Even though it's a lot of stuff comes from the same _____ [word inaudible].

CM-U: Well, it's the way – you refer to yourself as a collagist, and that's true.

J. Chamberlain: Yeah.

CM-U: It is.

J. Chamberlain: Well, that part is part of the – well, it's like, talking about that one, I mean, it's not so much whether there was the accumulation on the top, and if one piece left, whether it would damage that accumulation; or as if anybody would really know. But if the stance got bungled so it didn't stand, I'd object to things like that.

CM-U: Okay.

[00:40:12]

J. Chamberlain: Yeah, there's one there. See, there's a giraffed-looking thing – see, that was one on one of his fast days. (laughs)

CM-U: That's *Elixir*, [1983, The Menil Collection, Houston, gift of Heiner and Fariha Friedrich].

J. Chamberlain: Yeah, you like that title?

CM-U: It's great. I love that title. Tell me about that title, yeah.

J. Chamberlain: Do I have to?

CM-U: Yes.

J. Chamberlain: Ah, Jesus!

Doug Laguarda: (laughs)

J. Chamberlain: Well, I don't know. I think that we should come back and do a couple of days of welding.

CM-U: Okay.

J. Chamberlain: But can you weld in here?

CM-U: No, but we can move them out individually. Or what we should do is move into a place where you can weld them.

J. Chamberlain: Well, the thing is that it should be level then.

CM-U: Well, we'll move into a place that's level. We can't weld in here.

J. Chamberlain: Well, how long is this up for?

CM-U: Another week or so.

J. Chamberlain: Oh, and then they go back to...

CM-U: Yeah. So before they go back into storage is when we should – or maybe when they go back into storage, we could find a place there to weld them.

J. Chamberlain: Well, you don't take them over to Richmond Street anymore?

CM-U: No, in fact, we have a permanent installation [Dan Flavin Installation, Richmond Hall, 1998, The Menil Collection] in there now.

J. Chamberlain: Oh, really?

CM-U: Flavin. Dan Flavin. You haven't seen it?

J. Chamberlain: Oh no.

CM-U: His last piece.

J. Chamberlain: Who is that?

CM-U: We'll go down there.

J. Chamberlain: What's his name?

CM-U: You remember him.

J. Chamberlain: Who? (laughs)

CM-U: Rainer's father!

(laughter)

J. Chamberlain: What do they do when they turn the lights off?

CM-U: Then it's a space [sounds like].

J. Chamberlain: Ah, okay. Yeah, ah...

CM-U: Okay. I want to talk about *Gondola*.

J. Chamberlain: Oh, okay. Let's move on.

CM-U: Let's go into the far room.

[00:41:47]

J. Chamberlain: So anyway we started out with this. I have somebody painted a lot of them, most of them, green, but some...

CM-U: The chassis were painted mostly [sounds like] green?

J. Chamberlain: Yeah, the chassis parts. But I have a couple – this was just the first one, and...

CM-U: So this is the first of all the *Gondolas*?

J. Chamberlain: Yeah.

CM-U: Uh-huh.

J. Chamberlain: But I didn't do near as good on it as I wanted to do. But then I didn't know. There was nothing to compare it to.

CM-U: Right.

J. Chamberlain: I mean, if you see the one I have now, and you see a big difference between them, but I'm not one to say.

CM-U: Right. Right.

J. Chamberlain: ...again.

CM-U: Well, would that have been the color of the chassis? The reddish color? Or did that get painted?

J. Chamberlain: That's a straight prime.

CM-U: Okay. So that was...

J. Chamberlain: Now you could – I mean, if that had to be painted, you know, got scratched and junked up and burnt or something – you could repaint that with that particular coat. It's a primer.

CM-U: What about repainting these? I've never thought that we could do that.

J. Chamberlain: You could repaint – if it's that (points). You can't repaint that (points in a different direction).

CM-U: No. So you're saying we can repaint where it's a solid color...

J. Chamberlain: Yes.

CM-U: ...and obviously it was intended to be solid; but where it's broken up, that's part of the work. Yeah.

J. Chamberlain: And that's an ordinary primer coat.

CM-U: Um-hum.

[00:43:03]

CM-U: Now when you come around behind here, though, John, it looks like there is a painted piece that maybe was painted separately, but it looks like sprayed...

- J. Chamberlain: Oh, okay. Then since you said “separately,” I could tell you. They are always painted separately.
- CM-U: Okay. Good. Let’s talk. Tell me.
- J. Chamberlain: Oh, you didn’t know that?
- CM-U: I did know that, but I’d like to hear it again.
- J. Chamberlain: Ahh. Oh, okay. Well, all the parts are painted separately, and then they are used. And that makes a big difference, to me anyway, because there is something somewhat uncharacteristic – to put it together and then start painting it.
- CM-U: Right.
- J. Chamberlain: And also, like when I bend this stuff, and it chips – the paint chips at a certain place – I mean, that’s like eraser marks.
- CM-U: That’s part of it.
- J. Chamberlain: Yeah.
- CM-U: Part of the life of it.
- J. Chamberlain: But everything gets painted “foist.”
- CM-U: Uh-huh. Talk about bending a little bit. Do you do the bending, or you take them to compact – do you take it to places where they crush it?
- J. Chamberlain: I’ve got two compactors.
- CM-U: Compactors. Uh-huh. And then can you control that at all? The amount of compacting?
- J. Chamberlain: Yeah. It’s electric. You press this switch with the thumb, and it’ll either go up or it’ll go down.
- CM-U: I know. But I know that! But I mean, can you stop it, or can you – you just crush it, and then you look at the pieces.
- J. Chamberlain: You can – I mean, just give it a little tap if you want.

CM-U: But when you're making pieces, you are just – you are making all these parts, and then you're lying them out, and then you put them together.

J. Chamberlain: I've had parts around for years.

CM-U: Um-hum.

J. Chamberlain: I remember parts that I – God, they're so old! But in this particular area is very little to be thrown away. You know, even if you cut all of this out, it goes into another pile. And that pile becomes art supplies, too.

CM-U: Right.

J. Chamberlain: Because you – if the pile is large enough, then, "What do I do with this pile?" And that's essentially how I continue.

[00:45:13]

CM-U: Look at that one from here.

J. Chamberlain: From here?

CM-U: Yeah.

J. Chamberlain: I can barely see it.

CM-U: Come on! You know, someone came in. A child came in. I never told you this. When we opened this building, your pieces took over this whole gallery just like it is now, except without the walls. Do you remember? It was just one great big space. We had all the *Gondolas* over there.

J. Chamberlain: Hmm. Oh, you put these walls in?

CM-U: Yeah, we put these walls in. A child came in who was autistic, with her parents, and she was going through the galleries, and she said, "They're butterflies."

J. Chamberlain: Oh, yes.

CM-U: As I was standing there looking at it, that's what came to mind. It's almost weightless in a way.

J. Chamberlain: Well, I remember, it wouldn't go any higher than that.

- CM-U: You tried, huh? Oh, and now, before we leave this gallery, this one [*Softer Sticks*, 1979, Collection of Dia Art Foundation, New York]. What about the paint on this? I mean, that's very unusual.
- J. Chamberlain: Well, it looks all right to me. I'm just trying to figure out if they are put together well, you know. (grabs sculpture and shakes) Hmm. Hmm.
- Doug Laguarda: It's got a lot of flexibility.
- J. Chamberlain: Uh-huh. I don't know if that's good or bad. Well, maybe I'll call Duncan after a while and just talk to him about it.
- CM-U: Okay.
- J. Chamberlain: See – oh, yeah, this is – I can see where it's been welded here by other people. Hmm.
- CM-U: Okay.
- J. Chamberlain: Well, it seems to be okay. It could be just beefed up a little bit.
- CM-U: Uh-huh. Okay. Is there anything else you want to say about the metal, coated metal pieces, before we move on to something else? I mean, I'm accepting all of this, the scratches and everything. I mean, that's just – that's...
- J. Chamberlain: Yeah, that's the way it was.
- CM-U: ...that's the way it was.
- J. Chamberlain: I don't think that there's an awful lot wrong. It just needs more attention. Yeah, well, maybe we could do that. (examines and shakes *Hurray for Bernie Galvez (3¢ under the Limit)*, 1981, Collection of Dia Art Foundation, New York) Hmm. Hmm.
- CM-U: Okay. Let's go in and talk about foam. Sit down and look at the foam pieces.
- J. Chamberlain: What are we going to do tomorrow?
- CM-U: We'll find something to do.
- J. Chamberlain: Oh, okay.

[00:48:50]

John Chamberlain Interview Transcript, Artists Documentation Program, The Menil Collection, 03/27/2000

Video: adp2000b_chamberlain_001va.mp4 / Interview #: VI2000-020.2000b / TRT: 01:25:51

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- CM-U: What is this? What is the makeup of all of that?
- J. Chamberlain: Well, I was – you mean the bottom part?
- CM-U: Yeah.
- J. Chamberlain: Well, that’s just something to put it on.
- CM-U: Yeah, but you made that.
- J. Chamberlain: Yeah.
- CM-U: Yeah. This is called *Mesa* [(piece of the *Rock series*), 1981, Collection of Dia Art Foundation, New York].
- J. Chamberlain: Yeah, I remember. (laughs)
- CM-U: Where did it come in...
- J. Chamberlain: And it actually was supposed to have some paint on it that went around. I don’t know what happened. That must have just, hm...
- CM-U: So now how does this – was this the first, these little ones? I mean, I’ve read about your show...
- J. Chamberlain: No, that’s another set.
- CM-U: That’s another set? Okay. The first ones were very tiny little ones, right?
- J. Chamberlain: Umm, not necessarily. But they’d had no paint – or, no watercolor on them.
- CM-U: Okay.
- J. Chamberlain: See, then this was wrapped, so _____ [word inaudible]... had it kinda like – I don’t know. I can’t remember. The *Penthouse Series*.
- CM-U: That’s right.
- J. Chamberlain: Or something. No, the *Penthouse Series* was paper bags. This is called *Barking at the Dog*, or something.
- CM-U: These are called *Stuffed Dogs*.

J. Chamberlain: *Stuffed Dogs*.

CM-U: *Stuffed Dogs*, 1, 2, 3, 9, so on.

J. Chamberlain: I think the...

CM-U: These are all *Stuffed Dogs*.

J. Chamberlain: Yeah, one – that they have some – a vague amount of color on them. Well, there was a whole bunch of these, but then this [referring to *Mesa*] seems to be the only one that's left.

CM-U: But these are the only ones that you mounted on something else.

J. Chamberlain: And this is a throwaway (touches large foam work).

CM-U: Well, we don't know what that is.

J. Chamberlain: Well, this – well, when this stuff loses – gets dirty, and loses its crispness...

CM-U: Hmm.

J. Chamberlain: See these – it's amazing that you can see – that one is still clean. That's a very – that's a good, really good...

CM-U: That's a beautifully clean one. So is this one. Let's look at this one [*Stuffed Dog 3*, 1970, Collection of Dia Art Foundation, New York].

J. Chamberlain: Yeah, see the marks are still – see is how it was when it was new?

CM-U: Yeah. It was much lighter when it was new.

J. Chamberlain: See, now, if I was with Susan Lemond [sounds like], she's, like, "No, you can't do that. Oh, don't you do that. Oh, don't do that. Oh, don't do that."

[laughter]

CM-U: Okay. Now what about the paint? The paint went on first before you wrapped it all up?

J. Chamberlain: Yeah. But, again, a lot of these, if it goes, it goes.

CM-U: What does that mean?

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J. Chamberlain: Well, that means it goes. See, as long as it stays, you know, like – see, this is very crisp. See how. See this part?

CM-U: The edge is very crisp.

J. Chamberlain: See how the edge is here?

CM-U: Yes.

J. Chamberlain: I mean, it has...

CM-U: It's beautiful.

J. Chamberlain: See, well, it's lost it in this. See how it's lost it?

CM-U: Yes, I do.

J. Chamberlain: Well, now all of these were just as crisp.

CM-U: Uh-huh.

J. Chamberlain: It didn't matter what the size is.

CM-U: And did you use different kinds of foam? Different types? Sizes?

J. Chamberlain: No, about the same.

CM-U: No, it was all the same? And where did you buy this stuff? Did you just have slabs and slabs of it delivered to your place?

J. Chamberlain: (laughs) Yes.

CM-U: And where were you making them? In New York?

J. Chamberlain: In wherever I was at the time.

CM-U: Uh-huh.

J. Chamberlain: (digs through jacket pocket) What happened to Helen?

CM-U: Helen. Helen? Who? Well, anyway, well, talk to me about the colors.

J. Chamberlain: Helen, who?

CM-U: She'll be back. She had to go pick up her son.

J. Chamberlain: Oh, okay.

CM-U: So, originally the color of them all were something like this? A lighter color?

J. Chamberlain: Yeah. But that's what I was showing you. See that's...

CM-U: Yeah. The interior.

J. Chamberlain: That's the color when it first – first of all, it's yellow. It's like this color when they pour it. And they pour – it's liquid. And they pour it on a belt, and it rises up and turns white.

CM-U: Huh.

J. Chamberlain: And then when it's exposed to the light, it goes back to being yellow again.

[00:52:25]

CM-U: Have you seen some – I mean, how does that strike you when it's at that state? Have you seen some that are so aged, in your opinion, that they lose their life?

J. Chamberlain: Oh, I've got them when they're crumbling.

CM-U: And they are still – I mean, they still work for you as sculptures?

J. Chamberlain: No, not particularly, but it was a good idea at the time.

(laughter)

CM-U: Well, what about that one? That one's called *Lop Nor* [1967, Collection of Dia Art Foundation, New York].

J. Chamberlain: Yeah, I know. Yes, and it's also thirty years old, too. Or something like that.

CM-U: Uh-huh. But that's not so long, thirty years.

J. Chamberlain: No, it was made in 1966, I think.

CM-U: Sixty-seven, I think. Maybe '66. But that's not so – I mean, that's not so long.

J. Chamberlain: Well, if you take care of this stuff, it is.

CM-U: Have you ever had them washed or cleaned in any way? No?

J. Chamberlain: Well, let's see...

CM-U: Now this is an interesting one because for some reason – it's *Stuffed Dog 3*, I think; maybe *9*. No, it was *Stuffed Dog 1* [1967, Collection of Dia Art Foundation, New York]. It's glued to the box.

J. Chamberlain: Yeah. (laughs)

CM-U: Did you do that?

J. Chamberlain: No, I don't...

CM-U: You don't know?

J. Chamberlain: No, I don't remember having anything to do with these boxes. That was somebody else's doing.

CM-U: Um-hum.

J. Chamberlain: But see that one held up good.

CM-U: Let's go look at that one. I want to look 'cause that one looks really good.

J. Chamberlain: _____ [phrase inaudible]. This seems to be all right. _____ [phrase inaudible]. I don't know that you can do a whole lot once that they start to deteriorate.

CM-U: Did you just throw color on it, or spray color on them, or soak them, or...

J. Chamberlain: No, no, I don't remember.

CM-U: Oh.

J. Chamberlain: I was drinking that day.

(laughter)

CM-U: You talked about, in some interview with someone, about them being examples of your wadding technique. What do you mean by that?

J. Chamberlain: Oh, yeah, these are wadding in the sense that they are – see, all of this – this is all _____ [phrase inaudible] – it’s all there because of the way the material is and the way it is treated with the cinch.

CM-U: Right.

J. Chamberlain: See, the cinch is in there.

CM-U: So it’s one piece, or two pieces that’s held together with a rope?

J. Chamberlain: Yeah.

CM-U: Yeah.

J. Chamberlain: But you see how white it is in here?

CM-U: Uh-huh. Well, what do you think about the color? I know it’s not as white as it was, but it is certainly still...

J. Chamberlain: Oh. And if you want to, you know, make sure that it would stay together...

CM-U: Uh-huh.

J. Chamberlain: ...you could do – if you just did this (squeezes foam sculpture), but you sprayed it with – you get paper cement in a can – from, 3D?

CM-U: 3M.

J. Chamberlain: 3D! (laughs) Hmm. See, and then you could spray down to here, and just hold it a little bit together till it takes.

CM-U: But that would just discolor it more, wouldn’t it?

J. Chamberlain: Well, no, not down in here. This is the bottom.

CM-U: Um-hum.

J. Chamberlain: And then, you know, you just (squeezes foam sculpture)...

CM-U: Have you done that with some of them?

J. Chamberlain: Yeah.

CM-U: You still own some of these?

J. Chamberlain: Yeah, a couple.

CM-U: Um-hum. Um-hum.

[00:55:47]

CM-U: Well, we were interested in looking at them because even though these are all pretty much from the same period – the *Stuffed Dogs* are 1970, but *Lop Nor* and _____ [word inaudible] and the others are all the sixties. Late sixties. But we were marveling at how different the color of the foam is. And we thought that was in part due to maybe how they were stored? Why do they all – why are the colors all so different?

J. Chamberlain: They've been exposed to light differently.

CM-U: Uh-huh.

J. Chamberlain: And I don't know what these two have been through, see. But they look like art supplies now, at best. Cut the rope.

CM-U: No, you don't really – you still see them as your work, don't you?

J. Chamberlain: Well, not now.

CM-U: No?

J. Chamberlain: A little too unraveled, I'd say.

CM-U: So, not tight enough, in your view? Oh, but look at that. That looks quite tight. What about the ones on paper behind them? I don't understand how they relate exactly to the sculptures.

J. Chamberlain: Oh, I didn't see them! Hmm. Oh, I remember these. Funny. These are my French curve drawings.

CM-U: Um-hum.

J. Chamberlain: Ooh. Yeah, I think this is really too beat [referring to *Lop Nor*] 'cause actually – no, it was that one – I remember, see – yeah, it's pretty tight. Nah. And I don't know how to clean it.

- CM-U: If there were a way to clean it, you would...
- J. Chamberlain: It would be dry cleaning.
- CM-U: Yeah. But that would appeal to you, to try to get rid of some of this discoloration?
- J. Chamberlain: I don't know. You might screw it up more.
- CM-U: So did you make the drawings first? And then are the drawings directly related to the sculpture pieces?
- J. Chamberlain: I just made them at the same time.
- CM-U: Uh-huh. Okay. Well, we've been thinking about how we're going to preserve these sculptures.
- J. Chamberlain: I don't know how you can clean that and clean it all at the same time. See, and then this is – you're not going to get this out. I don't even know what that is.
- CM-U: Let's turn it around so we can look at it in the light. But this is the way it was when you chose the foam.
- J. Chamberlain: See the...
- CM-U: With the holes in it. With these, over here on this side. This.
- J. Chamberlain: Oh, that's the bottom. No that's...
- CM-U: We don't have this in the right position?
- J. Chamberlain: Nah, that's the skin. That's the skin. That's no, no, when they pour it on a belt...
- CM-U: Uh-huh.
- J. Chamberlain: ...this is the bottom. This is the skin. I don't know any other way...
- CM-U: Yeah.
- J. Chamberlain: It's like skin. See, if you get a big piece of foam...

CM-U: Yeah.

J. Chamberlain: ...not something that's, you know, for pillows or mattresses...

CM-U: Yeah.

J. Chamberlain: ...but a really big piece, you'll find that this is – they'll all have this.

CM-U: So this is the down side, and then you cut the piece from there and shape it?

J. Chamberlain: Well, this is part of it, too, here. See. It starts over here.

[01:00:01]

CM-U: Okay. So you feel that this one has really suffered?

J. Chamberlain: Well, uh...

CM-U: Wow, it looks so orange from here. It looks almost painted.

J. Chamberlain: Put it out in the sun for a couple of days. (laughs)

CM-U: Well, we're aware of the fact that what's really – as you are – that what's really affecting this is light. Oxygen. Just being in our environment. And so we are seriously considering – in fact, we're making plans to store these when they are not on exhibition in environments that don't have oxygen in them. _____ [word inaudible]

J. Chamberlain: No, you don't have to put them in a deprivation [sounds like] plant or something.

CM-U: We're making bags...

J. Chamberlain: No. Why don't you just put a black plastic over it?

CM-U: Because plastic – it still is going to disintegrate because of the oxygen that's in it. The plastic will just make it dark to keep out the light, but it is still...

J. Chamberlain: Well, the light is what changes the color.

CM-U: But it's also the oxygen.

J. Chamberlain: Really?

CM-U: Um-hum. So we – Brad [Epley, Menil Assistant Paintings Conservator] has actually been designing bags...

J. Chamberlain: So a black bag with nitrogen in it?

CM-U: Right. Or a clear bag with nitrogen, so we can see it. And then keep it in the dark. How does that strike you?

J. Chamberlain: I don't know if I want to be kept in the dark, though.

(laughter)

J. Chamberlain: Do I have to be kept in the dark?

CM-U: We can do you, too, I suppose.

J. Chamberlain: Thanks a lot.

(laughter)

J. Chamberlain: Yeah, just come in once a month and milk the snake. Yeah. Okay. I don't know if I can tell you any more about these.

CM-U: Okay. Well, that's all right. I think you've answered my – let me see if you've answered the questions I had. I've seen you describe – I've heard you...

J. Chamberlain: Now if I – let's see.

[01:01:53]

J. Chamberlain: I don't know if the guy is still alive that – Sidney Fiedler [CEO, Dura Foam, Inc., Maspeth, NY]. I mean, he was alive a couple of years ago. I used to get all the foam from him.

CM-U: And what city are we talking about?

J. Chamberlain: Well, we're talking about New York.

CM-U: Okay.

J. Chamberlain: He's actually in Brooklyn. In Jamaica.

- CM-U: Um-hum.
- J. Chamberlain: Or something like that. Out by Kennedy. But he was always a kind of funny fellow.
- CM-U: And he's the guy who made – actually produced this stuff?
- J. Chamberlain: No, he orders it from Tennessee, where they pour it.
- CM-U: Oh.
- J. Chamberlain: There's a half a dozen huge corporations that make this.
- CM-U: Um-hum.
- J. Chamberlain: And they make it in three or four different – the cell is bigger or smaller.
- CM-U: Um-hum.
- J. Chamberlain: So it's softer or harder. And if it's really hard, then it's Styrofoam.
- CM-U: And how would you determine what size cell you wanted?
- J. Chamberlain: Oh, I – except for the piece I did for the Guggenheim [*Guggenheim Barge*, 1971, Private Collection]...
- CM-U: Yeah. Tell me. That's one of the – was that one of the couches?
- J. Chamberlain: Yeah. That was the softest one. I had him give me the softest. And it was – so it was 24 feet by 12, I think, and about this high. But I wanted the softest, so once they – somebody, you know, just went in. You know, they really laid down.
- CM-U: To sit.
- J. Chamberlain: So they'd look straight up to the ceiling.
- CM-U: So they'd fall into it.
- J. Chamberlain: Well, it was like a T-square. See, you know, you have to understand that the rotunda in the Guggenheim is difficult. There's only a couple of people who have been able to deal with it without it looking staged.

- CM-U: Right.
- J. Chamberlain: See, and this was one of them. And I always wondered – you know, I always had this feeling of wanting to do something, to see if I could take care of that problem, so to speak. And I went ahead and did it, and didn't think about that. Then I thought about it after I'd done it. "Gee, I guess you did."
- CM-U: Was that...
- J. Chamberlain: It seemed that this was the horizontal on the floor...
- CM-U: Right.
- J. Chamberlain: ...you know. And then, when you're in the thing, and you are boxed in by two TVs that are playing sort of stupid country music...
- CM-U: Um-hum.
- J. Chamberlain: ...and – by artists, by the way. And then – but you go in, and you're so laid out flat that you look to the top. So there's an element of this. So it's sort of like a T-square.
- CM-U: And how big – so it was big enough for many people to be in it at once, I take it.
- J. Chamberlain: Oh, that was part of the idea.
- CM-U: So the minute you sit down, you fell back?
- J. Chamberlain: And the other thing about the couches were that they had no hard parts. There's no hard parts.
- CM-U: All foam.
- J. Chamberlain: It's all foam, yeah.
- CM-U: Have they survived? The couches.
- J. Chamberlain: Yeah. Well, you didn't – okay, you didn't go to – oh, well, Helen can tell you about the floor I had on 22nd Street.
- CM-U: Uh-huh.

J. Chamberlain: There's four new ones, plus the nest. Did she ever tell you about the nest?

CM-U: I don't remember. What was that?

J. Chamberlain: Well, in the nest there are two blocks. See, one block is this high (holds hand in air). See, and then the next block goes on. No, it must be higher than this. Well, maybe it's like that. I get the idea that it's about nine feet up, is the top of it. See, and I made a little place in there, and I put this rack – it was scaffolding.

CM-U: Um-hum.

J. Chamberlain: The scaffolding is the bedside table. So it's a nest.

CM-U: I see.

J. Chamberlain: So you have to climb up...

CM-U: Climb up...

J. Chamberlain: ...to get in, yeah.

CM-U: And then when...

J. Chamberlain: But it appears to be much higher than eight or nine feet. That's what it is.

CM-U: And how long was that installation up?

J. Chamberlain: Well, they just took it down 'cause Dia was going to sell the building.

CM-U: Uh-huh.

J. Chamberlain: But now Dia didn't sell the building, so does it go back in?

[01:05:52]

CM-U: Are you still working in foam?

J. Chamberlain: No. Not unless you really want to put an offer in front of me that's too good to refuse, and I'll do something.

CM-U: And you moved on. Was it because of concern about preservation, or just you were ready to move on?

J. Chamberlain: Well, first of all, it takes up a lot of space. And everybody wants one, but nobody wants to buy one.

CM-U: Oh.

J. Chamberlain: And I tried even to sell one to Plato's Retreat.

CM-U: What's that?

(laughter)

J. Chamberlain: Oh, that was a sort of a half ass legal massage warehouse in Ansonia. You don't remember Plato's Retreat?

CM-U: No, I don't.

J. Chamberlain: Huh? You do.

CM-U: Haha. Right.

(laughter)

J. Chamberlain: Anyway, I tried to sell them. "Oh, no, too much money. Too much money."

CM-U: Let me see what else I wanted to ask you about *Stuffed...*

J. Chamberlain: Okay.

CM-U: ...*Dogs*.

J. Chamberlain: What are we going to do tomorrow?

CM-U: What? Tomorrow...

J. Chamberlain: If we do this today, what do we do tomorrow?

CM-U: Well, tomorrow we're going to talk more about this stuff.

J. Chamberlain: We are?

CM-U: Yeah.

J. Chamberlain: Do we have to come here to do it?

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CM-U: No.

J. Chamberlain: Oh, good. Are we going to be filmed again?

CM-U: No. So anything you want to say for posterity, now is your time. (laughs)
How's that for pressure?

J. Chamberlain: (looks into camera) After you observed it, what remains to be seen?

CM-U: Thanks, John. This was really interesting and helpful.

J. Chamberlain: Art ain't easy, and all this proves it.

[01:07:35]

CM-U: Now you said somewhere – I was going to ask you about this, because I thought it was interesting and typical of you. You said something about these foam pieces make people nervous because they go faster than people do.

J. Chamberlain: Oh, yeah. Well, I mean it's – for instance, I have trouble – for instance, when the *Gondola* – when the flotilla [*Dooms Day Flotilla*, 1982, Collection of Dia Art Foundation, New York]– remember there's seven of them?

CM-U: Yes.

J. Chamberlain: So there was seven of them. And I tried to get – and they were on – they had a floor at Dia for a year [“John Chamberlain: Gondolas (1981-1985) and Dooms Day Flotilla (1982),” Dia:Chelsea, New York, April 5, 1990-March 3, 1991]. I kept saying to them, “Well, what do people think about having to look down?” And nobody ever gave me an answer.

CM-U: Uh-huh. Uh-huh.

J. Chamberlain: And they had to keep looking up. They are used to, you know, you have to look up. You wouldn't think of looking down.

CM-U: Right.

J. Chamberlain: See, so there's an angst in there somewhere. I don't care much about it. But the *Gondolas* did that. So the story was that I left this place in New York because the ceilings were closing in, and it's time to leave, get out of there. Actually I hadn't been there as long as I should have been. But it turned out that, “Okay, I gotta get out of here, da-da-da.” So I left. Went down to – and

got this studio in Florida. You know, this 18,000 square feet. And really high ceiling. I wanted to get down there so I could, you know, have a higher ceiling. So I get down there, and what do I do? Three foot high, you know. I tell you, 'cause it happened. [sounds like] That's terrific, isn't it?

CM-U: That's life.

J. Chamberlain: No, I think it was marvelous. I thought it was interesting, whether people look down or look up.

[01:09:30]

J. Chamberlain: And as far as these (picks up *Stuffed Dog 3*), I mean, listen, I mean, for crying out – I mean, if it takes you more than five minutes to get it, you're not going to get it anyway. So what difference how long it lasts?

CM-U: What difference how long it lasts?

J. Chamberlain: Yeah!

CM-U: Well, we're committed to making them last a long time.

J. Chamberlain: Well, they usually do. Only I don't know what happened to these, but most of them, though, seem, yeah, seem to be all right.

CM-U: Hmm. Well, great.

J. Chamberlain: There just wasn't a lot of them, because – I don't know. I can see – if I get the point, and I can shuffle through it, and it's another form of, you know, what kind of materials you have, what are the art supplies at the moment, that's usually how I go to work.

CM-U: Um-hum.

J. Chamberlain: And so it either is terrific for a while, and then you run out of that particular stock of materials, and it seemed to me it is just – that's when you know how to quit. Or you quit because there's no magic left, or, you know, nothing pops up that you didn't expect, and things like that. See, it's just like, "What did Tiger do today?"

CM-U: I don't know. He was...

J. Chamberlain: See, yesterday he lost the magic. See, he couldn't hold out or nothing. I mean, he was just barely is able to keep up.

CM-U: He will.

J. Chamberlain: Yeah, but, you know, there's days when you lose the magic. Or, when they just don't go together. Or you wreck [sounds like] – you know, if you have a pile of art supplies, and you put things together, and they do _____ [phrase inaudible]. Finally, the art supplies get down to there is very little. So the choice is less and less and less and less and less. So at some moment there, you can't complete this because there is no more choice.

CM-U: But you don't mix media. You stay pretty...

J. Chamberlain: No, no, you can't. It's very difficult to mix media. It's sort of like you made a movie that is black and white with some color. It's very difficult. Not too many people have done it.

CM-U: Um-hum.

J. Chamberlain: Actually, hardly anybody has done it.

CM-U: Um-hum.

J. Chamberlain: I was going to work on a movie once, with Bill [William S.] Burroughs. And it was the life of – no, no, *The Last Words of Dutch Schultz* [1970]. Which it was 26 hours of gibberish, see, but you see, you could make – but the only thing is, a black and white movie. And the only color was red, and the red only showed up when there was blood.

CM-U: Hmm.

J. Chamberlain: Like, there was blood when he was born.

CM-U: Hmm.

J. Chamberlain: And there was blood when he got circumcised. And there was blood every time he shot somebody.

(laughter)

J. Chamberlain: So, I mean, the only color, it was blood, right? So that was a characteristic where those two things could go – an intermediate, you know. An intermedia

of stuff. A little floral design, so to speak. But I find this – it gets kinda – it’s not that you can’t do it. It’s just, I don’t know what you’re doing, you know.

CM-U: Um-hum.

J. Chamberlain: When you’re allowed to do anything, I mean, a lot of times no one knows how to differentiate and how to stabilize what you really are doing. So after you observed it, what remains to be seen?

CM-U: I guess that sums it up.

(laughter)

CM-U: Thank you. Okay.

[01:13:06]

J. Chamberlain: Hey, you got here just in time.

Helen Fosdick: What did I miss?

CM-U: Just in time. We just ended. Did you have something...

Helen Fosdick: What did I miss? I had to go get Aden and take him to _____ [word inaudible].

J. Chamberlain: Well, you can’t miss anything you never had.

Helen Fosdick: Yes, I can.

J. Chamberlain: No, you can’t.

Helen Fosdick: Yes I can.

J. Chamberlain: No, you can’t. Yes, you can. No, you can’t. Yes, you can.

CM-U: Okay.

[Break in video]

Helen Fosdick: What do you think about _____ [phrase inaudible] sealing those?

J. Chamberlain: Huh?

- Helen Fosdick: Sealing those up?
- J. Chamberlain: No. Then they wouldn't be soft.
- CM-U: Well, you don't object to us putting them in bags, do you?
- J. Chamberlain: Oh, no, no. No, no. No, she said sealing them up.
- CM-U: He thought you meant spraying them.
- Helen Fosdick: I know. I meant putting them in those bags.
- J. Chamberlain: I tried all that. You know, I suppose that would have worked, you know, like if I was a real "market it" [sounds like] type. But I thought it was non-art, if you were to, you know, like, make these in bronze or...
- CM-U: It is. It is. I mean, it's our job to preserve them. But why would you deal with it? It doesn't make sense.
- J. Chamberlain: I still think it – you know, if it takes you more than five minutes to get it, it's not going to make any difference anyway. (laughs)
- Helen Fosdick: Do you mind the difference between what this looks like and what that looks like? (points from one work to another)
- J. Chamberlain: No, I think this [*Lop Nor*] is down the hatch.
- Helen Fosdick: Yeah. Well, are the others going to get like that?
- J. Chamberlain: No. This one will be down the hatch. No, not as long as – I think it's been – it's been coated with something.
- CM-U: I don't think so, John, 'cause some of it is soft.
- Helen Fosdick: Okay. No, how do you make – do you make that decision, whether they stay or go or...
- J. Chamberlain: Well, there's not much there. I mean, I don't know how to pull it back, you know. If I untied it, and tied it again, it would be another piece.
- CM-U: And that wouldn't solve the problem of the material anyway.
- J. Chamberlain: No, it's still dirty.

CM-U: And aged. But on the other hand, it has a certain beauty...

Helen Fosdick: You don't want it to be a piece when it looks like that? Are you saying that?

J. Chamberlain: What? Nah. This looks terrible.

Helen Fosdick: So you don't want it to be a piece anymore?

J. Chamberlain: Nah.

[01:15:23]

J. Chamberlain: Should we fix your piece [*Untitled*]?

Helen Fosdick: I know.

J. Chamberlain: *Stuffed Dog*. Is that right, *Stuffed Dog*?

CM-U: These are *Stuffed Dogs* (points toward other works on the table). I don't know what you call Helen's piece.

J. Chamberlain: That was something else, too. I thought that was a...

CM-U: How did you get that piece?

Helen Fosdick: I went and visited John in Sarasota.

J. Chamberlain: What the hell was it? 'Cause I remember that. You owe me 75 cents _____ [phrase inaudible].

Helen Fosdick: What?

J. Chamberlain: You owe me 75 cents in there (opens end of foam sculpture).

Helen Fosdick: Seventy-five. Okay.

J. Chamberlain: We could put another one in here. See? (places work on table) No, that's just about right. This is about the right angle.

Helen Fosdick: I love that piece.

J. Chamberlain: Yeah, it's terrific. You know, it is in a similar condition.

- CM-U: It's just – it's small.
- J. Chamberlain: I don't know how to clean this. I used to – I keep thinking – you know what I keep thinking?
- CM-U: What?
- J. Chamberlain: Do you know what a dry shampoo is?
- Helen Fosdick: No.
- CM-U: Yes. Yes.
- J. Chamberlain: It's just some kind of herbs. It's all different kind of herbs. I don't know what they are. But you massage it in your hair, and you brush the hell out of your hair, and the herbs will, as you brush out, will take along with them the grease or the dirt...
- CM-U: Right.
- J. Chamberlain: ...and they give dry shampoos in hospitals.
- Helen Fosdick: Yeah. They give it to – yeah.
- J. Chamberlain: This is, is that a note? [sounds like]
- CM-U: So you're thinking something dry...
- Helen Fosdick: No, I didn't spin it that way. [sounds like]
- J. Chamberlain: Oh, it was actually instead of cutting it off, I just... [sounds like]
- Helen Fosdick: The only thing that – and I think I – is the tear that I think I did that...
- J. Chamberlain: Oh shit [sounds like].
- Helen Fosdick: ...after you gave it to me.
- J. Chamberlain: Ohh. It's okay.
- Helen Fosdick: But it's okay.
- J. Chamberlain: Yeah. It's all right.

Helen Fosdick: I think it's stayed remarkably well. But I have it in a cabinet.

J. Chamberlain: Cat nip?

Helen Fosdick: Cabinet.

J. Chamberlain: Oh, yeah, right, yeah.

Helen Fosdick: A glass-fronted cabinet.

J. Chamberlain: Huh. I don't know why I can't hear _____ [phrase inaudible]...

CM-U: So do you still crush cigarette packs?

J. Chamberlain: No. No, I don't smoke.

CM-U: Oh, that's hard, yeah.

J. Chamberlain: Not that that means anything. I mean, other people smoke. There would be the packs around, but – no, that was an exercise that – it was interesting in the bar; but it was also interesting in, you know, taking a particular...

[Break in video]

J. Chamberlain: ... _____ [word inaudible] truck, and took it to this place on White Street that had a – I made a deal with him. He let me crumple up these boxes in his compactors. So I took them in, ta-da, ta-da. Di-da-da. Take them out. So the elevator operator is taking them up and down and he's just, "Hey, you know, they looked better going out than when it came in."

(laughter)

J. Chamberlain: See, so that was one of my better compliments that I like, you know. Elevator operator.

CM-U: Art lover, yeah...

J. Chamberlain: No, no.

CM-U: No, it just...

J. Chamberlain: No, it had nothing to do with art. But it was just that it looked better going out than when it came in.

CM-U: Right. It was just like the compliment. That's about as good as it gets.

J. Chamberlain: Nothing more than that, and nothing less. I mean, he didn't make out like it was a big deal or anything. Just, "They looked more interesting going out than when they came in." I thought that was the perfect art response. And, well, that's, you know – like that was one of that _____ [word inaudible] of that other thing that I mentioned earlier to you about the, "Why do people with expertise ask people with no expertise, 'How do you like my expertise?'"

(laughter)

J. Chamberlain: Well, I didn't ask this guy, actually. But what he came through with was right on the money.

CM-U: Right.

Helen Fosdick: And in the clearest, simplest terms.

[01:19:26]

Helen Fosdick: Do we have John's book that his gallery produced?

CM-U: I don't know.

J. Chamberlain: *Conversations with Myself?*

CM-U: No.

J. Chamberlain: No. Little book with a stupid-looking etching of my face?

CM-U: No. Maybe we do. I haven't seen it.

J. Chamberlain: Well, I thought that...

Helen Fosdick: Great.

J. Chamberlain: ...that was fine. "Here, take this copper plate and do something." So I looked, and there was my face.

Helen Fosdick: That's what – see, they wanted a print to go with the book; and so they handed him a copper plate instead of letting him decide what goes in, they handed him the copper plate...

J. Chamberlain: See, the stories were – see, ten, twelve years ago, I did a couple of things. And I don't do this anymore, I mean. I used to go into restaurants and order this big meal, you know; and set it in front, da-da-da-da da-da-da-da. Order the check. Pay. Big tip. Leave. People used to chase me down the street and I wanted to Pfffft! (punches air with fist). No. It's just mine. I can do what I want. I don't do this anymore. But there is one story about doing that.

J. Chamberlain: Then there is another story about a guy who never heard that – and an American, too – who never heard that Yogi Berra had said, "You can observe a lot by just watching."

J. Chamberlain: We went into hysterics about that. And, you know, the story ends with, his wife comes over and says, "And what's going on over here that I'm missing?" You know.

(laughter)

J. Chamberlain: So it's a story like – and then there's the story about a guy who's a diver. He and I had a couple of drunks together. And he was a terrific guy. Scared the shit out of everybody who looked at him. But he was a diver, and he had the bends, and the Holland, the Dutch doctor told him, "Walk to Spain." So when I caught up with him – well, when we met, he was already to Saint Trop – no, what's the – La Napoule. It's outside of Cannes – Canes – Cannes. Cannes. And he got – we had this big argument. We were real drunk, and we had this awful argument, like, he was for vertical, and I was for horizontal. And then after that story. So we had this argument because he wanted to go up and down, and I just wanted to stay on the top. Dealing with the waters [sounds like].

J. Chamberlain: So then that prompted a story, which I always liked, that I put in the book, too. Because there's two – there are two, hipsters leaning on a rail on a steamer in the middle of the Atlantic. Nice beautiful day. Calm and everything like that. And one hipster says to the other, he says, "Hey, man, look at all that water." And the other hipster says, "Yeah, man, and it's only the top."

(laughter)

J. Chamberlain: So it was along that story that he and I had this, uh, of horizontal and – 'cause he was a diver, and I was the sailor.

CM-U: I got it.

J. Chamberlain: So, in any event, he – that was _____ [word inaudible]. So those are the kind of stories that's in this book.

CM-U: And when was the book published?

J. Chamberlain: Six, seven years ago. See, there's only sixteen lines to each page.

CM-U: Oh.

J. Chamberlain: There's only 108 books.

Helen Fosdick: Oh. Better hurry up.

CM-U: We'd better get one.

J. Chamberlain: No, there's plenty. There's plenty of books. I think they sold four.

(laughter)

CM-U: Oh, well. All right. We should have.

Helen Fosdick: The Menil should get one.

CM-U: We should have it. Yeah, the Menil should get one.

J. Chamberlain: But they want six hundred dollars for it. See, that's one of the drawbacks.

CM-U: Well hey...

J. Chamberlain: I don't know. It doesn't seem that art dealers know much about marketing either.

CM-U: Nuh-uh.

Helen Fosdick: The Menil can afford that.

CM-U: I don't see why not.

Helen Fosdick: I don't see why they don't have one already.

J. Chamberlain: Put the...

CM-U: Maybe they're not being promoted.

John Chamberlain Interview Transcript, Artists Documentation Program, The Menil Collection, 03/27/2000

Video: adp2000b_chamberlain_001va.mp4 / Interview #: VI2000-020.2000b / TRT: 01:25:51

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J. Chamberlain: Well, I, see, you know...

CM-U: Maybe we do. We may have one.

J. Chamberlain: ...art doesn't go in this country so good [sounds like]. This country is big on sports and entertainment.

CM-U: Um-hum.

J. Chamberlain: They seem to be able to salve [sounds like] everyone through those two units. Art doesn't work here.

CM-U: Um-hum.

Helen Fosdick: How many pieces does the Menil own?

CM-U: Um, I think we own about five or six.

Helen Fosdick: And so most of the rest are Dia's?

CM-U: All the rest are Dia's. Is that about right? I think that's right.

J. Chamberlain: I have no idea.

CM-U: Yeah.

Helen Fosdick: They are being stored here?

CM-U: Uh-huh.

Helen Fosdick: And everything we have is stored – is out?

CM-U: No. Not in this gallery. Between this show and the last show that you saw, when we opened, I think we've shown just about everything.

J. Chamberlain: So you – so *Two Dark Ladies* are at the other place?

CM-U: Right.

J. Chamberlain: We have to go over to somewhere else.

CM-U: Into the storage. They're in storage, *Two Dark Ladies*.

J. Chamberlain: Okay. I know that was one that I can remember the title. Is *Luftschloss* still in the same condition?

CM-U: Uh-huh. Uh-huh. *Luftschloss* is in good condition 'cause we worked on that one in '87.

J. Chamberlain: Okay. So – and you don't have...

CM-U: We worked on *Elixir* in '87. *Elixir*. And...

Helen Fosdick: Is this – is what's happening is what he want you – are you seeing and doing to it what you want to do? To the work? Right now? You want to see everything, right?

J. Chamberlain: Well, while I'm here, yes.

Helen Fosdick: Yeah.

CM-U: Okay. We'll see what we can do.

[END RECORDING]