

In the (Photo) Studio of John Chamberlain

by Brienne Walsh

09/28/11

With a Widelux panoramic camera in tow almost everywhere he goes, John Chamberlain has spent more than three decades assembling a personal archive of images, capturing places visited, people encountered, intimate moments shared with his family, and his own likeness as he ages. These images have been contained to his studio, and very rarely seen. But in the past two years, Chamberlain has used the photographs—which, using Photoshop he pixilates and distorts (sometimes beyond recognition)—to create large-scale prints on canvas. He then bolts the panels together in multiples of three, forming collaged works that are bursting with color, slickly executed, and self-reverentially autobiographical. "It's almost like a diary, in a funny way," his wife, Prudence Fairweather, told *A.i.A.* "It is a biography of his life."



**TRIXIENOTRUMP, 2011.
COURTESY STEVEN KASHER GALLERY.**

The resulting canvases, nine of which are currently included in "John Chamberlain: Pictures" at Steve Kasher Gallery in New York, look like an unholy marriage between the collages of James Rosenquist and chaotic stills lifted from the videos of Ryan Trecartin. They show a glimpse of Chamberlain's personal narrative in the fragmented language of the Internet, where a person's life story is told using images jigsawed together at random. They are an experimental Facebook profile of "Chamberlain The Person" writ large in the real world, and gone mad with exuberance.

"He was doing the MySpace thing 30 years before MySpace," his assistant of a year, Nico Sherman, told me as he walked me through a room plastered with hundreds of original Widelux prints at Chamberlain's sprawling studio in Shelter Island. As we talked, Sherman pointed out images recycled

into collages—a shot of Chamberlain's head set against a deep blue sky crowded with birds; the door of a boulangerie in Paris, where the artist frequently travels with Fairweather; a self-portrait after he was beaten over the head with a brick and mugged in his own studio. Sherman, with admiration, pointed out that he made sure to take the shot before he called the police.

"People always get nervous when Chamberlain takes out the camera," Fairweather said. "I say, 'don't worry, it will look nothing like you.'" But in most cases, the people in the finished canvases are easy to identify. I immediately recognized Fairweather's face in various pieces—kissing Chamberlain in *Untitled* (2011), or firmly held in the embrace of a young girl in *TINSELTARTAUTEUR* (2010). She is joined by familiar figures like Bill Cunningham, the *New York Times* photographer, whose slender, cartoonish form takes center stage in *BLANCHESNOWMAN* (2011). Other figures in the prints include a menagerie of art world icons—Arne Glimcher and Dennis Oppenheim, to name a few.

A constant in almost every work is the presence of Chamberlain, who gives away his identity in small details, like the tattoo of a bird on the chest of a man wearing a carnival mask in *Untitled* (2011). "He always puts in a symbol of himself," Fairweather explained. "Just in case you missed him, you know he has this tattoo."

The *Pictures*, at their worst, seem like an attempt at experimentation by an artist bored with his modus operandi—in Chamberlain's case, sculptures made out of car parts—who is looking to try his hand at something new fangled and digitally-based [or just "digital."]. But at their best, they are passionate examinations into the inner workings of an artist who senses that he is in the swan song moment of his career. "He stays in the bedroom of his studio," Nico told me, when explaining how Chamberlain, despite his battle with cancer, continues to create. "When he got home from the hospital yesterday, we went right to work."

<http://www.artinamericamagazine.com/news-opinion/news/2011-09-28/john-chamberlain-photos-stein-kasher/>