

MNUCHIN GALLERY

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## John Chamberlain's Dazzling Foil Sculptures Make Their U.S. Debut

Chamberlain's only series fully designed for outdoor display, are now on view at New York's Rockefeller Center.



*The three Chamberlain foil sculptures outside Rockefeller Center. Photo: courtesy Tishman Speyer.*

By Richard Whiddington  
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It's said that friends of artist and sculptor John Chamberlain would wait expectantly for him to finish a pack of cigarettes so as to watch how he'd crimp and contort its hollow shell. Beginning in the late 1960s, Chamberlain applied the same bare-handed attention to other everyday materials, including paper bags, foam, wire, and aluminum foil.

After two decades of crafting the crushed car sculptures for which he became best known, Chamberlain returned to humble aluminum foil in the 1980s, making a group of 29 palm-sized, freestanding sculptures. It was in some ways his ideal material, one both pliant and resistant, whose every crinkle evidenced the hand of the artist. To make the works, he twisted foil into elongated tubes, which were then bent and woven together into beguiling contortions.

Scaling up these sculptures proved tricky, impossible in fact, until 2007, when Chamberlain met Ernest Mourmans, whose Belgium-based workshop manufactured pieces for the likes of Anish Kapoor and Frank Stella. The challenge was to recreate the cheap, dimpled, shiny qualities of aluminum foil within a form that was structurally sound. The solution Mourmans found was to lay compressed aluminum ductwork (the type used in heating, ventilating, and air conditioning systems) over an interior skeleton of firm metal tubes. Chamberlain chose four colors for the works: silver, green, copper, and pink.



*A view of the sculptures by Chamberlain now showing in Rockefeller Center. Photo: courtesy Tishman Speyer.*



*Details inside the John Chamberlain studio on Shelter Island. Photo: Jason Schmidt/Ventura Capital.*

It was the start of a short, but productive relationship. Within four years, Mourmans had realized all of the original sculptures, some reaching up to 16 feet, and Chamberlain was most certainly grateful to see his miniatures realized.

“Art isn’t labor. When it’s labor, it’s better to have someone who is an expert,” Chamberlain told Richard Marshall, the long-time Whitney Museum curator, in an interview. “I make the small sculptures, and Ernest just makes them larger.”

To date, Chamberlain’s Foils have been a largely European affair, they’ve stood in front of the Grand Palais and graced the Inverleith House in Edinburgh. Now, three of these sculptures have temporarily landed in the plaza of Rockefeller Center, that iconic New York space that in recent years has hosted Robert Indiana’s *Love* (1966–99) and Kaws’s towering *Share* (2021). Chamberlain’s so-called “foil” works, all of which are making their first U.S. appearance, are somewhat more enigmatic.

*BALMYWISECRACK* (2011) dips and turns like a ballet dancer, head down, arms swooped back, body contorted. *FIDDLERSFORTUNE* (2010) stands off-kilter, its knot of entwined strands like some gaudy wreath. *RITZFROLIC* (2008) appears as a mutant ring fixed with nail on top. They are, as ever with Chamberlain, very much open for interpretation. His goal, he once said in interview is “not to explain [art] so that you don’t destroy the discovery angle.” Expect to see passersby stopping in the Plaza, bending, craning, pacing—all trying to make sense and shapes out Chamberlain’s works.



John Chamberlain, *FIDDLERSFORTUNE (Pink)* (2010) installed at Rockefeller Center in New York City, 2025. Photo: Craig T Fruchtmann / Getty Images.

They are, in the opinion of Robert Mnuchin, whose gallery is presenting the installation, Chamberlain’s most serious body of work intended for outdoor display. “These sculptures reflect the culmination of Chamberlain’s lifelong exploration of material, color, and abstraction,” Mnuchin said over email. “They evoke unmistakable feelings of joy and celebration.”

The trio’s arrival is part of a mini Chamberlain-centric festival taking place at Rockefeller Center this Spring. Christie’s is exhibiting 11 small-scale works, “Foil and Form,” including several that inspired his supersized foil works, ahead of a sale on April 17. A day earlier, coinciding with what would have been Chamberlain’s 98th birthday, Assouline is releasing *Living with Chamberlain*, a splashy coffee table book complete with conversations with family, friends, gallerists, and collectors.