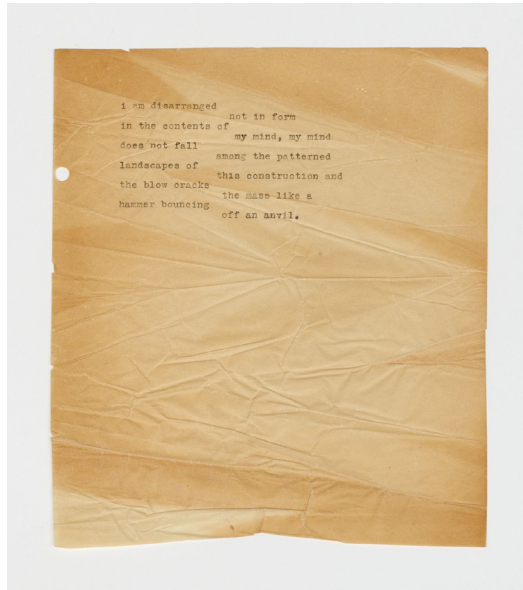


## The Manner That Words Fall on the Paper: A Review of “John Chamberlain: Black Mountain Poems 1955” at Corbett vs. Dempsey

Jennifer Smart | April 5, 2024

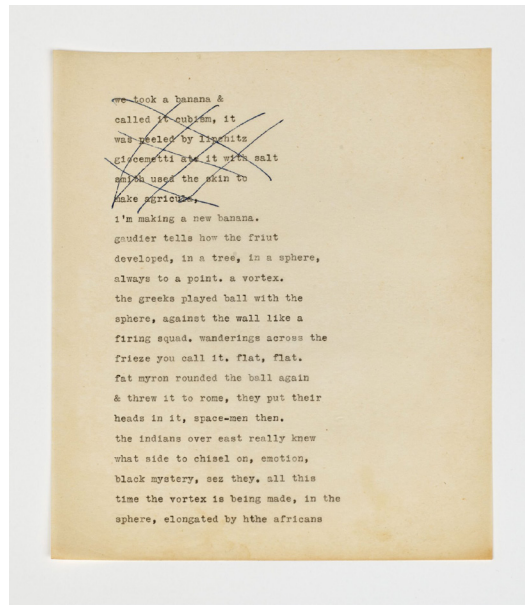


John Chamberlain, Poems written at Black Mountain College, 1954-1955, 71 typewritten manuscript pages on onionskin paper with handwritten notes, dimensions variable.

In the art world, John Chamberlain’s name is synonymous with hulking sculptures fashioned out of the crushed metal from destroyed cars. In part a violent deconstruction of the optimism of the automobile age, and in part an inevitable fetishization of its factory-produced colors and shiny bodies, Chamberlain’s automobile sculptures are central to the story of mid-century American art. Over the course of his lengthy career, however, Chamberlain worked in a variety of media (foam was another favored medium for sculpture), producing films, works on canvas, and—as an intimate show currently on view at Corbett Vs Dempsey reveals—poetry.

“Black Mountain Poems 1955” features twenty-two manuscript pages that Chamberlain composed while residing at Black Mountain College. At Black Mountain, he was surrounded by a multidisciplinary group of artists ranging from the poet Robert Creeley to the composer Stefan Wolpe, but he would tell an interviewer years later that “The greatest influence on my work and on my thinking actually came from the poets at Black Mountain College.”

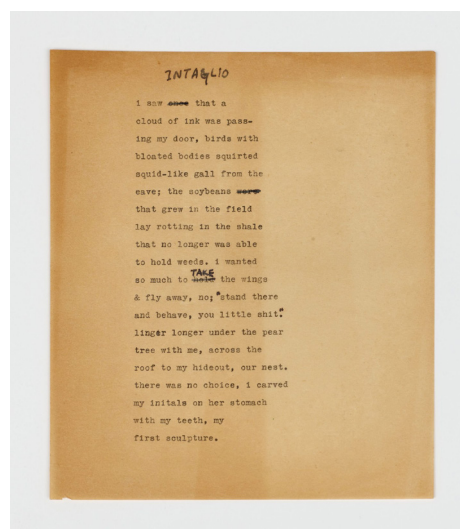
He was fascinated by poetry’s experimental reorganization of something as central to humanity as language. In the poetry on view at Corbett vs Dempsey lines range from the humorous, “the Bauhaus found the bananas upside down & left them”; the impossible, “I saw that a cloud of ink was passing my door”; to the sincere, “I am not content with the way the poem is written.”



John Chamberlain, untitled poem, 1955, typewritten manuscript page on onionskin paper, approx. 8 1/2 x 7 inches.

The sparseness of Chamberlain's poems on the walls of Corbett vs. Dempsey's back room presents a stark contrast to the matte luminousness of Richard Wetzel's colorful paintings installed in the front gallery. The diminutive pages are installed at eye-level around the small space, the blackness of the type and the yellowed paper are the only colors in their otherwise muted surrounds.

Poetry is rarely if ever written with this sort of viewing mode in mind, but gallery audiences are more used to reading than we tend to imagine. Seeing poetry on a wall behind glass, however, invites viewers to attend to the formal qualities of the written word on the page as well. Although not concrete poetry (the organization of text isn't quite that unconventional), Chamberlain's poems all occupy the space of the page in different ways. Many are relatively straight columns but justified far to the right or left. Unconventional breaks between lines are added.



John Chamberlain, untitled poem, 1955, typewritten manuscript page on onionskin paper, approx. 8 1/2 x 7 inches.

The quality of the paper, too, becomes a subject for contemplation, as it reveals its age and history through the yellowed parchment or the wrinkles that have been gently smoothed out in order for the page to lay flat behind the glass.

The editing process is also visible. Chamberlain's pages are full of pencil marks; words are crossed through, and sometimes whole sections are crisscrossed with a giant "X." Words are penciled in to replace other words or added to the ends of the phrases. Titles are added to the tops of pages. This reveals the history of these pages in another way: Chamberlain's poems are the product of a typewriter, the pencil marks conveying a sense of slowness involved with working with the machines as writers were forced to retype entire pages rather than merely delete and insert.

There are multiple ways to engage these works—as an excuse to contemplate formal qualities of the written word or as combinations of words themselves—but one might also recognize the common basis of a seemingly gentle art form like poetry and the heaviness of Chamberlain's later sculptures. Chamberlain uses both mediums to reorganize the parts of taken-for-granted forms and objects in order, as he emphasizes, to communicate something that hasn't "been heard... or perceived."

"John Chamberlain: Black Mountain Poems 1955" is on view at Corbett vs. Dempsey, 2156 West Fulton, through April 27.