Chicago artist John Himmelfarb has been making art for nearly fifty years. His artworks have been exhibited throughout the world and collected by many prominent museums including the Art Institute of Chicago, Museum of Modern Art in New York, and the National Museum of American Art in Washington, DC. During most of his long, successful career, John has created paintings, prints, drawings, and sculptures that have depicted subjects other than trucks. Yet, since 2003, artworks that feature an image of a truck have become his focus.

What he was working on from the late 1960s until 2003 cannot be easily categorized. John has always kept abreast of what other contemporary artists were doing and has regularly found inspiration in the art of others. But his knowledge and inspirations are much more personal than they are about keeping up with trends in the art world. Among the many recurring themes and ideas in or behind John’s work have been industrial and rural landscapes, human relationships, the mystery and beauty of written languages, and literary and musical references.

Taking a step back from that list of themes and ideas we can see that it encompasses a rather thorough list of what any of us might experience during our lives: places, people, and communication. While many artists focus their efforts on exploring a particular style or material or subject, John has focused his efforts on undertaking an expressive analysis of his personal experiences as they occur. Stated more simply, he waits for interesting things to happen; when they do, he digs into them by painting, drawing, printing, and sculpting as a way for him to find out why those things are interesting to him. In the process, he has created an enormous and dynamic body of work that is unified by the energy John puts into his art. Whatever topic or idea that inspires him to create, we as viewers can see clearly that he was excited by the entire process of making the artwork.

The ideas that have inspired John to make art are consistent in important ways. Our physical environment, relationships, and methods of communication define who we are and how we live. In John’s art, these things are presented with intensity and originality. Things that at first glance seem clear and recognizable turn out to represent nothing but visions from John’s imagination. Things that appear to be chaotic and abstract might conceal recognizable objects. This sense that differences can co-exist—the strange and the familiar, order and disorder—can be found throughout his work.

But trucks?

Why now and what took so long? Why would an artist whose work has been exhibited and collected by major art institutions around the world, shift gears into trucks?

Though John’s artworks are often responses to recent experiences, trucks as a subject in his work came about indirectly. The artistic response was not to trucks themselves,
cover

Penelope Awaiting Her Chamberlain, 2013, 1946 Chevrolet farm truck and found objects, 11 feet 5 inches x 25 feet x 8 feet 6 inches courtesy of the artist, photo courtesy William H. Bengtson

1. Temperance, 2006
   graphite on raw cotton canvas, 40 x 138 inches
courtesy of the artist

2. Bend in the Road, 2012
   painted and welded plate steel, 43 x 25 x 75 inches
courtesy of the artist and Modern Arts Midtown, Omaha, NE

3. Drift Ice, 2009
   plasma-cut aluminum plate relief print, 19 x 26 inches
courtesy of the artist and Modern Arts Midtown, Omaha, NE

4. Juggernaut, 2010
   acrylic on canvas, 60 x 72 inches
courtesy of the artist and Luise Ross Gallery, New York, NY
but to a painting by Jean Dubuffet he had seen during a visit to the Art Institute of Chicago in 2003. The impact of the painting was so strong on John that when he first returned to his studio, he let his memory of the Dubuffet painting guide his work. In his retelling:

“I immediately went back to my studio, mixed up some blues and greens (as I recalled them from the Dubuffet), and laid down a patchwork of color swatches of no particular distinction. Over that I began to draw with a liquid black paint, using a thinner brush more suitable for drawing.

“As usual, I had no particular image in mind. I began on the right side with my industrial forms. The result looked like a crane, and I stopped far short of covering the entire plane with this pattern. It wasn’t enough, so I recommenced drawing beneath the boom of the crane. The truck that emerged delighted as much as it surprised me. I felt an immediate visceral connection.”

The “visceral connection” has continued since that moment in 2003. As John indicates in the above quote, the truck came about as an extension of the crane. The crane and other pieces of urban, industrial equipment had begun finding their way into his work he had been creating for his Inland Romance series. This series featured bold, abstracted lines and shapes that were inspired by the roads, buildings, and industrial machinery of Chicago and the Midwest. The shapes of trucks, literally and figuratively, represented a move beyond urban architecture toward something more universally experienced. And by 2005, trucks made regular appearances in his paintings and drawings. The more he worked on them, the more he realized that they were capable of imparting a broader message than one of basic utility.

In 2007 John was invited to participate in a three-month residency at the John Michael Kohler Arts Center Arts/Industry program in Sheboygan, Wisconsin. This prestigious program gave him the chance to create sculptures for the first time in any serious, sustained period. He made a series of truck sculptures in wax and plasticene to create sand molds. These were used to create cast sculptures in iron, brass, and bronze, ranging widely in size.

While the subject of John’s works is trucks, it really represents a very specific kind of truck. Like many people, when he pictures trucks in his mind he goes back to his childhood memories of what a truck looks like. In his case that means work trucks that date from the late 1940s and early 1950s. John’s trucks are the tough, powerful vehicles that were in action as the country emerged from the Second World War and began a period of unprecedented growth. The type of truck that inspires him was designed for strength rather than beauty, a no-frills machine for doing a vital job.

This kind of honest dedication to its unsung purpose has often led John to assign titles to the artworks that reflect the
value and dignity of the trucks. *Dedication, Hero, Honor, Loyalty*, and other similar titles tell us that we are looking at more than representations of trucks. We are looking at character. John has stated that the artworks in this series “are not about trucks but about us, our histories, skills and coping mechanisms, ambitions, and character.”

John's interest in the truck's sense of character and history led him to his next big step. In 2008 he acquired a 1949 International Harvester KB-1 truck. Then, he crammed a host of steel barrels, tools, pipes, and other things, and covered

5. *Honor*, 2011  
   welded plate steel, 32 x 60 x 34 inches  
   courtesy of the artist and Modern Arts Midtown, Omaha, NE

   cast brass, 14.75 x 30.5 x 69 inches  
   courtesy of the artist and Luise Ross Gallery, New York, NY

   acrylic on canvas, 38 x 54 inches  
   courtesy of the artist and Modern Arts Midtown, Omaha, NE

   acrylic on canvas, 38 x 60 inches  
   courtesy of the artist and Thomas McCormick Gallery, Chicago, IL

   acrylic on canvas, 47 x 59 inches  
   courtesy of the artist and Modern Arts Midtown, Omaha, NE
all of the steel of the truck and its additions in bright red paint. John titled the painted sculpture *Conversion*, and he has since created additional drivable sculptures using work trucks from that time period, including *Galatea, Remains, KB-3*, and the work on display at the Sioux City Art Center, *Penelope Awaiting Her Chamberlain*.

*Penelope Awaiting Her Chamberlain* began life as a 1946 Chevrolet farm truck. After many welded additions to her cargo area and roof, she emerged as a drivable sculpture in 2013. “Penelope” in Greek mythology refers to wife of Odysseus, who remains faithful to her husband while he is away for twenty years fighting in the Trojan War. In John’s sculpture, rather than awaiting Odysseus, *Penelope* awaits *Chamberlain*, referring to artist John Chamberlain (1927-2011). Chamberlain, who also grew up in Chicago, was best known for transforming old car parts into modernist sculptures.

Like the opposites contained within John’s earlier artworks, *Penelope* is familiar and strange, functional and artistic, industrial and whimsical and unexpectedly beautiful. It is John’s ability to give us something unexpected from something so common. The truck shifts from its purely industrial function to become a merging of forms and colors that have been determined both by its original manufacturing design and by John’s artistic design. In doing this, John celebrates our century-old appreciation of American trucks, as well as the equally long artistic tradition of converting factory-made materials into artworks.

   2-color screen print (ed. 24), 21.75 x 29.75 inches
   courtesy of the artist and StewardandStewart.com, Bloomfield Hills, MI

   2-color screen print (ed. 24), 21.75 x 29.75 inches
   courtesy of the artist and StewardandStewart.com, Bloomfield Hills, MI

   acrylic on canvas, 38 x 60 inches
   courtesy of the artist and Modern Arts Midtown, Omaha, NE

back cover
*Crisis Management*, 2008
acrylic on canvas, 48 x 48 inches
courtesy of the artist and Modern Arts Midtown, Omaha, NE
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