


Robert Chamberlin at Marcia Wood Gallery in Atlanta

 burnaway.org/robert-chamberlin-collapse/

December 5, 2018





Robert Chamberlin, *Collapse 18 (pink)*, 2018; raw porcelain, 11 by 8 by 10 in; all photos courtesy of Marcia Wood Gallery

Decorative. That which is without function. The ornamental, the additional, even the superfluous.

“Decorative,” we say, referring to molding which adorns but does not support the walls of the house; the trill which embellishes but does not substantially alter the melody; the visually-pleasing but uneaten garnish.

Decorations, ornamentations, and embellishments may serve no functional role, but they are not truly without purpose. Their function may be aesthetic, spiritual, or, as is most often the case, ideological. As expressions of personal or collective values, decorations may ultimately appear more important than the objects upon which they rest: a building, a tool, or a piece of furniture may become a mere backdrop, a host for a wealth of decoration.

Atlanta-based artist [Robert Chamberlin](#) has created a collection of ceramic vessels through which he experiments with the potency and pitfalls of the decorative. The vases in “Collapse,” his current exhibition at [Marcia Wood Gallery](#), are adorned with excessive ornamentation, some to the point of their effacement or destruction.



Robert Chamberlin, *B&W Raw 003*, 2018; raw porcelain, 13 by 9 by 9 in.

The rotund shape of each vase is simple enough, but this simplicity only increases the prominence of their decorative elements. Billowing, flower-like porcelain trims several vases, appearing to bloom from the material beneath, while small, icing-like dots pearl on the tops, bases, and sides. Though the decorations, like the vases themselves, are all solid, made of raw porcelain, everything appears soft, creamy, *edible*. (According to the artist, the icing-like mounds and trim were piped with the tools of a cake decorator.) Beneath these features, on the body of some vases, dots of color form floral patterns resembling Chantilly or Valenciennes-style lace or the needlepoint embroidery found on mid-19th century upholstery.

These hues—baby blue, pastel pink, dried lavender—are similar to those of the Sèvres porcelain found in abundance at Versailles. In this decadent context, where Marie Antoinette played at being a peasant and Louis XVI hunted for sport while genuine peasants starved, the colors took on symbolic associations with prolonged naiveté and self-imposed ignorance.

“The most immediate impression of the bourgeois interior of the mid-century is overcrowding and concealment, a mass of objects, more often than not disguised by drapes, cushions, cloths and wallpapers, and always, whatever their nature, elaborated. No picture without a gilded, a fretted, a chased, even a velvet-covered frame, no seat without upholstery or cover, no piece of textile without tassel, no piece of wood without some touch of the lathe, no surface without some cloth or object on it.”

Eric Hobsbawm, the British historian of industrial capitalism, could easily have been speaking about the Baroque interior of Versailles, where all is gilded, trimmed, and festooned. Chamberlin likewise manages to evoke these two groups known for their decorative decadence—both French Royalty during the Baroque period and the mid-19th century bourgeoisie— through his insistent ornamentation.

Most importantly, he conjures up the periods during which these groups were destroyed or transformed: the French Revolution of 1789 and the worldwide economic “Depression of 1873–79,” respectively, which partially resulted from—if only symbolically—previous material excesses. Some of Chamberlin’s vases are so weighed down with decoration that they splinter or, as the show’s title suggests, collapse. While their original shape remains identifiable and their lavishness legible, there is a destitute, even lifeless, quality to them. One vase is reduced to shards. Another has slumped over on its side. A third’s body has fallen in, giving it the appearance of a punctured balloon (or lung), frozen in the act of deflating. Their own lavishness has destroyed them.

In a text accompanying the exhibition, Chamberlin claims, “We can look to history to see the connections between opulence and the demise of dynasties,” indicating an acute awareness, on his part, of the socio-political resonances of his ceramics. It does not seem that Chamberlin is merely trying to point to the past for its own sake. The wall text continues: “As history tends to repeat itself I am left to wonder how much *we can take* before *our own* eventual collapse.”

The historical, opulence-induced collapses suggested by his vases seem intended to bring to mind the excesses and material indulgences of our own era. But in relying primarily on visual motifs from the past, Chamberlin does not point to what our particular present excesses might be. Further complicating Chamberlin’s works is their emphasis on self-destruction. The vases collapse *by themselves*, by *their own* ornament. This focuses our attention on those who generate(d) and use(d) opulence, rather than the *external* actors who resist(ed), destroy(ed), or transform(ed) it. It also suggests inevitability, as if change or dissolution is *bound* to happen, when excesses can actually signal the entrenchment of economic and political power, rather than its downfall. Will the powerful transform, reform, or destroy themselves? Or will others make them do so?

This open-endedness allows the viewer a great deal of freedom in drawing analogies between the past and the present, and in imagining a future. However, if political efficacy is Chamberlin’s end goal (and it’s not clear that it is), it’s worth stating: While open-endedness and ambiguity are common, even welcome qualities in visual art, they don’t lend themselves a coherent political program.


That said, I hardly think that “Collapse” encourages complacency. One leaves the show invigorated, alert, and with an eye turned towards the past. In a cultural moment that demands constant engagement with the present, Chamberlin’s historically-minded work rings with vitality and encourages much-needed contemplation.

“Collapse” will run at Marcia Wood Gallery through December 29. An artist’s talk is scheduled for Friday, December 8 at 7 pm, with a holiday party to follow.

Notes:

1. Hobsbawm, E. J. *Age of Capital*. (New York 1996), pp. 231.





Robert Chamberlin, *Collapse 24*, 2018; raw porcelain and mason
stain, 8 by 14 by 12 in.