

# Go for Baroque: Opulence and Excess in Contemporary Art



Baroque is one of those words whose meaning changes slightly depending on context and perspective—it could refer to a specific or general time period or a style of art, architecture, music, or other creative endeavor. Possibly derived from a Portuguese word for a misshapen pearl, it has a history that has been described as “long, complex, and controversial.”

This complexity adds to the drama associated with things described as baroque—historically that included works considered excessive, full of bravado and theatricality. While the historical emphasis on baroque in art involved spectacle on an elaborate scale, a contemporary baroque—such as what is suggested with this exhibition—could be identified by its response to excess and lavishness, the decorative or the ornamental, and the theatrical. These artists may or may not be interested in creating the grandiose. Using a wide range of media, including ceramic, titanium, paper, acrylic, found jewelry and metals, Mylar™, zippers, silver, paint, polymer, dollar bills, and household plastic wrap, they explore luxury, excess, consumption, artificiality, illusion, fantasy, beauty, and the grotesque.

(above)  
**Silversärk**  
Headpiece by Deborah Olson  
*Sol Invictus*, 2015  
Synthetic taffeta, lace, and silk faille  
Bust: 35 inches  
Waist: 25.5 inches  
Courtesy of Stephanie Schultz  
Photo: Ryan Blomquist

(below)  
**Petra Zimmerman**  
*Untitled (Bracelet)*, 2012  
Antique handbag clasp, polymethyl methacrylate, coral beads, amethyst beads, gold leaf, and silver  
6.5 x 5 x 2 inches  
Courtesy of Ornamantum Gallery, Hudson, NY  
Photo: Petra Zimmerman

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This exhibition combines work from RAM’s ever-growing permanent collection with works on loan. RAM collection artists include: **Ralph Bacerra, Bennett Bean, Rain Harris, Laurie Hogin, Nina Levy, and Marci Zelmanoff.** Artists whose works are borrowed include: **Doug Bucci, Tyanna Buie, Kate Cusack, Sienna DeGovia, Misty Gamble, Tamara Grüner, Hanna Hedman, Anya Kivarkis, Kate Kretz, Jose Marín, Märta Mattsson, Jennifer Merchant, Jaydan Moore, Deborah Olson, Soohye Park, Jessica Putnam Phillips, Ruth Reese, Lyndsay**



Rice, Anna Rikkinen, Melanie Sherman, Silversärk, Leigh Suggs, Linda Threadgill, Lauren Vanessa Tickle, Amelia Toelke, Heather White van Stolk, and Petra Zimmermann.

Like any period, style, or movement, there are multiple historical illustrations of what can be described as “baroque.” Often repeated examples of art include **Gian Lorenzo Bernini’s** (1598-1680) life-sized sculptural relief *The Ecstasy of Saint Theresa* for the Cornaro chapel in Saint Maria della Vittoria—with its dramatic posturing and sense of emotion—and the intense paintings of **Peter Paul Rubens** (1577-1640), **Caravaggio** (1571-1610), **Diego Velazquez** (1559-1660), and **Artemisia Gentileschi** (1593-1653). Much of the work of these artists has been characterized as “sensational” because of compositional qualities, such as sharp light and dark contrasts, and an overall sense of drama.

In architecture, decorative arts, and fashion, a sense of the theatrical and grandiose (to some, absurd or unrestrained) parallels the emotion perceived in the paintings and sculpture.

Depending on the context and the inclination of the person offering a description, calling something baroque could be positive—elaborate or sensational—or negative—excessive or too complex.

Artists that address the baroque in a contemporary context play off of a definition of the aesthetic that now incorporates hundreds of years of interpretations and a somewhat shifting meaning that is rooted in social and cultural context. For example, a quick visual image perusal of baroque on Google suggests large, grand rooms; elaborate gilding on architecture; ornamental pattern-based wallpaper; some lavishly decorated fashion; and dark or busy paintings. A search on the handmade craft and vintage site Etsy returns irregular pearl necklaces, silhouettes of chandeliers, and seventeenth-century style furniture—in essence, a product-oriented version of what is found on Google. These popular, non-academic sources of things that are associated

with the word baroque incorporate the past and the present. A term that some might consider historical or rarefied, it has a contemporary currency that can be used to address aspects of cultural and social production—economic consumption, social standards, concepts of luxury and largesse, issues of class—and how these things can be translated into metaphorical and aesthetic concerns.

The term baroque could be used as a gathering point—a commonality that aligns artists drawing from many kinds of backgrounds and interests. To be explicit, most of these artists rarely, if ever, use the word baroque to describe their own work. A closer



(above left)  
**Lauren Tickle**  
\$300.00, *Currency Converted*, 2015  
United States currency, silver,  
and monofilament  
9 x 9 x 3 1/2 inches  
Courtesy of the Artist  
and Sienna Patti, Lenox, MA  
Photo: Lauren Tickle

(above right)  
**Kate Cusack**  
*Elizabeth*, 2010  
Zipper, thread, and metal clasp  
11 x 10 x 2 1/2 inches  
Courtesy of the Artist  
Photo: Frank Cusack

(left)  
**Anna Rikkinen**  
*A Dutch Encounter*, 2011  
Lacquered wood and paper yarn  
24 x 20 x 5 inches  
Courtesy of Ornamentum Gallery, Hudson, NY  
Photo: Markus Henttonen

look at a few of those artists featured offers insight into subject matter and how their work relates to current understandings of the term.

Contemporary artists can speak to modern concerns about overconsumption, excess wealth, and the distribution of power and money while also evoking historical items that addressed the same social concerns through a different lens. For example, **Lauren Vanessa Tickle** uses U.S. dollar bills to create adornment that challenges concepts of value and materialism—money becomes something decorative, its own commodity, and a material with a different meaning. **Soohye Park's** jewelry and objects are constructed of conglomerations of numerous found pieces of jewelry that are “disregarded and neglected,” according to Park. By combining mass quantities of objects that were once meaningful (presumably), Park highlights the abundance and availability of certain kinds of materials as well as their tenuous employment as useful commodities. Addressing ideas of value, society, and race simultaneously, **Tyanna Buie** underscores the class distinctions made visible through objects and images. Her piece takes an object (silver serving ware) associated with a privileged, often white European-based class, and challenges assumptions and expectations by disrupting the form and turning it into decorative patterning.

Generally a baroque aesthetic is described as ornamental and lavish—full of color, contrast, pattern, and texture. **Linda Threadgill** investigates ornament in her copper and brass jewelry that combines a rosette motif, bright colors, and layered forms. She states: “The stylization of nature, motifs that are enhanced through repetition, the constraints of symmetry and other design strategies on natural forms, the use of pattern as a way to measure time, as well as ornament’s ability to mask or create illusions are all the focus of my work.” Suggesting that his

aim was only to make work that should be “like an ornament, exquisitely beautiful,”

**Ralph Bacerra** merged Asian and American-studio ceramics to create vessels, teapots, and platters with elaborate patterns and lustre glazes. Playing off her interests in Victorian, Rococo, and Baroque fashion, as well as contemporary Japanese street fashion, self-taught seamstress **Silversärk** constructs wearable garments that merge the historical and the modern.

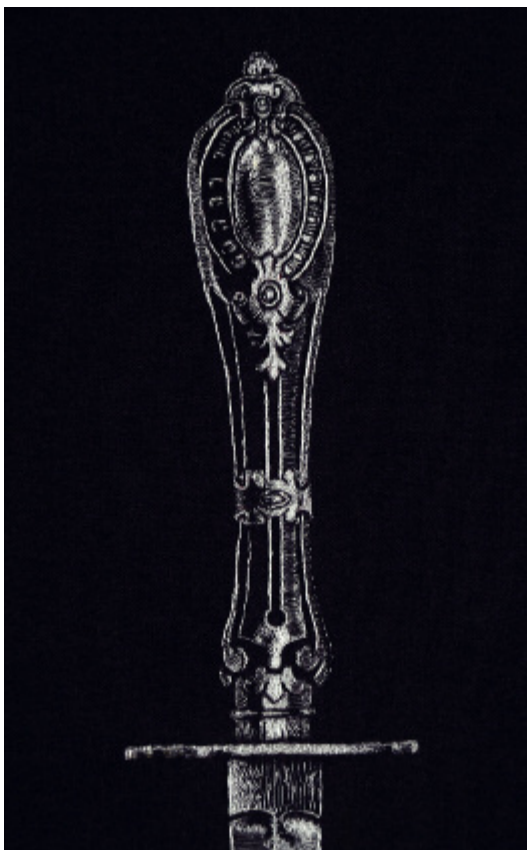
With the historical baroque, the line between the beautiful and the grotesque or absurd was challenged. Understanding that concepts regarding beauty are both socially constructed and personal, contemporary artists also explore these ideas. **Kate Kretz** creates striking stitched works on black velvet. A sweet lamb that has been obsessively French-knotted and a “gothic” dagger are rendered both more magical and slightly more disturbing when the realization that the lamb is being prepared for slaughter and the dagger is made of gray hair from several women. A similar “upset” occurs with the floral jewelry of **Heather White van Stolk**—where the flowers are actually casts of body parts, such as teeth, lips, and belly buttons goes initially undetected.

Suggesting illusion, artifice, and opulence, **Leigh Suggs** and **Amelia Toelke** have created larger-sized pieces that echo the sparkling and reflective surface interiors of many a grand palace. In essence, Suggs has laboriously created a modern equivalent to the multi-sensory experiences and events that were constructed in the Baroque period. Her piece, *Trying to Exit Here*, is a grid of woven Mylar™ and paper strips—begging to be touched, it also reflects everything around it. It is both a textured, rich surface and a foil to everything



(above)  
**Jessica Putnam Phillips**  
*In shā Allah*, 2015  
 Glazed porcelain, mother-of-pearl lustre,  
 and gold lustre  
 14 x 14 x 1 1/2 inches  
 Courtesy of the Artist  
 Photo: Jessica Putnam Phillips

(left)  
**Kate Kretz**  
*Une Femme d'un Certain Âge*, 2014  
 Human hair and velvet  
 33 x 22 inches  
 Collection of James Swope  
 and Scott Robertson  
 Photo: Greg Staley





else in the room. Of her work, Suggs states, “The reflective surfaces and vibrant intense colors are a simultaneous reflection of physical and psychological states, which make my work ocular and auric. I make art that investigates visual manipulations as subdued objects and experiences.”

Drawing on an interest in ornamentation and images in a modern visual landscape, **Amelia Toelke** references opulence, artifice, and architecture. Her two-dimensional relief, *Transom*, is an arrangement of ornately shaped pieces of mirrored acrylic that form a frame around an empty space on the wall. While certainly referencing historical precedents, this piece could also be seen as a questioning of modern consumption—is the image/illusion/frame more valuable than the contents?

**Jennifer Merchant** also plays with concepts of artifice and opulence—the glitz and glimmer

of the gold in her jewelry operates as a sign (of something expensive, something precious, something valuable). Yet, she uses a labor-intensive process of combining printed papers, metal foils, and acrylic sheets to create neckpieces, rings, and bracelets that may look opulent even when the materials themselves are not.

**Kate Cusack, Laurie Hogin, Jaydan Moore, and Petra Zimmermann** directly reference objects and fashion that could be associated with the baroque. Interested in the body and exploring the theatrical, Cusack constructs elaborate neckpieces made



of zippers as well as “Marie-Antoinette” style wigs made of household plastic wrap. The largesse of both types of objects—as well as their material makeup—evokes the fantastical. Hogin combines the context of historical painting with very contemporary meaning—she uses animals to symbolize concepts associated with a free market economy and media-saturated environment. The atypical combinations of species, exaggerated posturing, and often fantastical coloring

or movement lend theatricality to the compositions. Silver-plated tableware—the type of item has been used to represent social standing and heritage in Western cultures—is reconfigured by Moore into a purposefully commemorative item that speaks to metaphor and memory. Using modern materials, found vintage costume jewelry and elements from antiques—such as the frame of a purse—Zimmerman creates unexpected wearable forms that investigate standard notions of beauty and explore value in material as well as social and cultural terms.

**Lena Vigna**  
Curator of Exhibitions



(above left)  
**Laurie Hogin**  
*Peaceable Kingdom*, 1997  
Oil on canvas  
30 1/4 x 40 1/2 inches  
Racine Art Museum, Gift of Gerald and Barbara Weiner  
Photo: Jon Bolton

(above right)  
**Tamara Grüner**  
*Purple Velvet*, 2013  
Found antique metal objects,  
bone, silver, steel, and glass  
5 1/2 x 3 x 3/4 inches  
Courtesy of Mobilia Gallery, Cambridge, MA  
Photo: Alexander Köninger

(left)  
**Linda Threadgill**  
*Rosette Brooch 36-16*, 2016  
Copper, brass, and paint  
4 x 4 x 1 1/2 inches  
Courtesy of the Artist  
Photo: James Threadgill