

Rebecca Manson: "Contemplation and Zen in Rebecca Manson's "Barbecue"

By Emma S. Ahmad

August 3, 2024



Installation view of "Rebecca Manson: Barbecue." Photo: Evie Marie Bishop, courtesy the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth

From a distance, the large, swelling mounds that comprise Rebecca Manson's *Barbecue* might be mistaken for jagged, molten waves, the soft green and yellow hues morphing into deep sunsets of orange and red. But as I inch closer, I realize the masses are actually piles of leaves — over 45,000 individually crafted ceramic leaves, to be precise. This site-specific installation is contained within the Fort Worth Modern's oval-shaped gallery known as the ellipse, with narrow winding pathways allowing visitors to wander amongst the curious foliage.

Much like the title suggests, the scene holds many familiar elements from a backyard barbecue gathering mixed within the leafage: a small charcoal grill with black coals strewn about, a folding lawn chair, chunks of watermelon, chopped tomato and onion, chicken wings (both raw, cooked, and burnt), ribeye steak, hamburger patties and buns, charred shrimp, Kraft cheese squares, scattered matches, a lighter. You can also spot a variety of organic and inorganic debris: giant sunflowers, a loose sock, playing cards, whimsical mushrooms, planks of wood, and a sad-looking crocheted chicken toy. Each item appears to be in the process of being swallowed up, overtaken by the foliage as if it is alive and hungry.

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Detail view of "Rebecca Manson: Barbecue." Photo: Evie Marie Bishop, courtesy the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth

Manson, who graduated from the ceramics department at the Rhode Island School of Design in 2011, has always been fascinated with nature and the lessons it can teach us about navigating the human experience. The colors within the installation indicate the season is autumn, which has historically symbolized a period of change and growth; as the weather shifts from warm to cool, trees shed their leaves and make way for new life.

As I make my way through the designated trails, I note a sweeping slowness within the stillness of the installation. As if moving underwater or within a dream, time flows differently in the immersive space. I find myself stopping to take in every meticulous detail (something I rarely do when I'm actually spending time in nature), searching for more familiar and nostalgic objects within the waves of detritus. Because the ellipse gallery can only hold a few people at a time, my duration in the space feels sacred and intimate.

There is a distinct sense of longing in *Barbecue*; longing for time to freeze, for moments to endure and never come to an end; for a picnic where no one has to go home.

The installation sent me into a meditative state, contemplating the instinctual human reaction to reject change or the passage of time. I recall Buddhist teachings that encourage us to embrace change because the phenomenal world is transitory in nature and nothing is permanent.

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"Every time I see a beautiful autumn leaf, it's like a little moment of grief, but it's this positive moment with grief because leaves fall, that is always going to happen," the artist explains. "That, for me, is this really accessible way to just recognize that change can be hard but, because of that, we can talk about change a little bit more easily."

I like that mindset of embracing grief — the grief that comes with change — instead of resisting or ignoring it. From the Buddhist perspective, life and death are two phases of a continuum: life does not begin at birth or end at death. Within *Barbecue*, there is both the flowering of a larger-than-life daffodil and the decay of a wilting hydrangea. I feel the lingering energy of community and joy, and the remnants of a moment passed — life and death.

I feel compelled to believe that the artistic process of creating a work like this must also be a practice of zen. Manson first has to slow down, be present, and observe, then rely on her memory to aid her in capturing this brief, ephemeral moment. Later, as she individually molds each leaf and object, painting it with glaze and firing it in her gas kiln, each small, tedious detail becomes all the more relevant. This process of memorizing, remembering, and reimagining is Manson's way of processing and accepting everyday griefs.

Rebecca Manson: *Barbecue* is on view at the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth through August 25, 2024.

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