

# TexasMonthly

Rebecca Manson: "50,000 Reasons to Go See 'Barbecue,' a New Artwork at Fort Worth's Modern"

By Daniel Vaughn

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Barbecue. Evie Marie Bishop/Courtesy Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth

From afar, the new exhibition at the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth looks like a collection of colorful leaves piled on the museum's ground floor. But once viewers step into the concrete ellipse at its center, they are quickly immersed in a barbecue universe. **Rebecca Manson**, whose **Barbecue** installation opened last week, estimates she crafted and composed 50,000 individual ceramic pieces (though the official description credits a mere 45,000).

Manson grew up in New York, where she still lives and works. Her father has always been the cook of the household in the summer. "The Weber grill is his stove," Manson told me when we met at the museum. Lamb chops and beef steaks have always been his specialties. "As he gets older, the meat seems to get rawer," she said. Those summer meals were events, and each one ended with a winner, whose name was recorded on a cardboard cutout of a pig. "At the end of dinner every night, whoever was the biggest slob got written down on the pig, and it was usually between me and my dad," Manson said. Like a Texan with a tray of meat market-style barbecue in front of them, Manson was encouraged to eat the grilled meat with her hands. "There's something that feels really good about that primal experience of eating, and that's really a huge part of what the sculpture is about," she explained.

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In the back of the ellipse, a tenuous stack of leaves supports a dumped-over Weber kettle grill, made entirely of clay. Grilled shrimp and charcoal spill forth onto the leaves, while the end of a raw-beef rib bone is captured by the grates. Manson said the scene is meant to elicit a sense of danger. The red, orange, and golden leaves below could ignite at any moment from the fire used for cooking the meat. "It's the blending of man-made and nature, and I think that's kinda what barbecue is about," she said.



Left: Barbecue includes a half-eaten chicken wing resting on a flower. Photograph by Daniel Vaughn

Right: Rebecca Manson in her New York-based workshop. Courtesy of Rebecca Manson

There's also a longing for those family barbecues evident in the composition. The dying leaves signal the onset of fall and the end of summer barbecue season. Every item in the scene is in a state of decay, aside from a few blooming flowers emerging from the leaves, fertilized by the decaying meat beneath. Manson said she included litter like a Goodyear tire, a broken rake, and lighters as a reminder of what will be left when the leaves have fully decomposed.

Dark themes are evident in *Barbecue*, but there's also a playfulness when you look closely. Pickle chips liberated from their jar hang from leaves next to red onion slices and chunks of watermelon. These glossy pieces of barbecue debris are blown glass made by artist Jessica Tsai. Spilled matches and slices of American cheese rest on the leaves. Lamb chops and T-bone steaks are strewn about the scene. The discarded meat would be a literal scavenger's paradise, and if time permitted (museum docents allow only five viewers in the ellipse at one time), the exhibit would be ripe for a scavenger hunt of foreign objects among the leaves. Pieces of chicken so realistic they border on unsettling (also produced by Tsai) are especially meaningful to Manson. She explained that "the chicken is represented on a spectrum from raw to cooked to consumed." Noting that chickens don't really have a place in the natural world, primarily existing to serve as meat and egg producers for farms, she said the meat's presence "represents a blurring of the lines of what is nature and what is man-made."

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Manson said when she conceptualized the piece, she was inspired by an exhibit of comic paintings from the Dutch Golden Age in the seventeenth century. "There is a spirit of recklessness in the paintings," she said, which she tried to capture in *Barbecue*. Guiltless, conspicuous consumption is depicted in the paintings of **Jan Steen**, with flesh and fowl spilling onto the ground while revelers laugh uproariously. "I wanted to interpret that in a contemporary context," she said, "and thought barbecue was the perfect sort of narrative for that." Those Dutch scenes may have reminded Manson of her own family's pig awards.

Work began on *Barbecue* two years ago, after Manson met Clare Milliken at a dinner. Milliken became assistant curator at the Modern shortly thereafter, and she came to Manson with an idea to transform the concrete ellipse that had held Anselm Kiefer's **Book With Wings** sculpture for years. "This was completely from the ground up for this space," Manson said. The museum sent her a template of the ellipse floor plan, which was larger than her warehouse workshop. Its boundaries spilled outdoors. She welded metal frames to support the leaves against walls she could only imagine, then got to making thousands of individual clay pieces.

"Adrenaline is very important," Manson said of the painstaking and repetitive process. She would form three hundred leaves per batch, the number that would fit in the kiln. She lost track of how many batches the project required. "The numbers start spinning in your head," she said. When the monotony became too much, she would switch to crafting elements such as charcoal and meat, which required detailed glazing techniques. "Those things really ended up defining much of the piece," she said. The leaf-making process didn't end until the week everything was packed up to ship to Fort Worth.

"We spent two weeks even further customizing it to fit those walls perfectly," Manson said, praising the dedicated team at the museum that helped with the installation. As a New Yorker, I wondered if she felt intimidated creating a piece called *Barbecue* for a Fort Worth audience. "When I got here for install and I saw the big sign that said 'Barbecue,' I was like, 'I can't believe I did that,'" she said. Now she hopes the audience will understand that her aim is to pay homage to the barbecue process. And I think that's evident, especially in the literal elements of the piece—such as the perfect re-creation of a half-eaten chicken wing perched on a blooming flower. "I'm really still exploring what barbecue means to me, and really getting to learn more and more through this project what barbecue means to different traditions," Manson said.

A gallery exhibit of Manson's previous work was on display in **the Warehouse** in Dallas last year, and one at **Ballroom Marfa** ran through this March, but *Barbecue* is her first museum installation, and the first for Milliken. *Barbecue* will be on display through the summer, until August 25.

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