

Rebecca Manson's Giant Porcelain Butterfly Wings Push the Limits of Ceramics

By Emily Wilson

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Portrait of Rebecca Manson by Lance Brewer. Courtesy of Jessica Silverman.

Blues, greens, violets, and oranges shimmer through Rebecca Manson's 13 massive sculptures of butterfly and moth wings. On view now at the solo exhibition, "Time, You Must Be Laughing," through February 28th at San Francisco's Jessica Silverman, their glowing iridescence encourages viewers to take a step back and zoom in close to see the tiny ceramic pieces that make up the scales on the wings. Most startling of all, considering they are made of porcelain, is that, with a flexible adhesive, the sculptures drape on the wall, mimicking textiles.

"I'm a clay nerd, and I'm obsessed with this sort of spontaneity and the movement in the material," Manson said. "It was a goal for so many years to capture movement and to try and honor the part of the process that is so fluid."

This goal is finally coming to fruition with her growing art world profile. Last month, Jessica Silverman announced representation of Manson. Following group shows at Ballroom Marfa in Texas and the Center for Craft in North Carolina, last summer, she had her first solo museum show, "Barbecue," at the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth in Texas (it later traveled to Arsenal Contemporary in Montreal). For the exhibition, she created more than 40,000 ceramic leaves, along with a barbecue grill, giving the show its name. Like "Time, You Must Be Laughing," it was intricate, monumental, and presented a new vision for the possibilities of clay.

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Left: Rebecca Manson, *Black Swallowtail*, 2025

Right: Rebecca Manson, *Torn Wingtip*, 2025

When Manson was eight years old, she started taking ceramics classes. She loved using the wheel as well as the spirit of cooperation in the class.

"I had a really hard time socially as a kid," she said. "That was a social space I was finally thriving in."

To make the microscopically detailed wings in works like *Black Swallowtail* (2025), Manson first looks at images and makes collages in Photoshop. She then does a sketch, which she digitally prints onto the canvas. She makes hundreds of thousands of small flat pieces of clay, which she and her team call "smushes." She fires and glazes them to use for the scales on the wings. During our interview, she showed me the many boxes of smushes, divided by color, and the carts which contain all the colors for a single wing. Finally, she and her team glue them onto the canvas, which is then displayed on the wall.

She described this work as "a lot of project management" and admitted it can be tedious. But she said it makes her pay attention—the way she hopes viewers do when looking at the wings.

Manson said she had a hard time in school, unwilling to do anything she didn't want to do. But to get to the satisfaction of creating what she envisioned, she will endure any amount of monotony. "I can do superhuman things if I just have some curiosity, some spark," she said. "You have to get through these steps, and it's about finding something playful in that."

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Rebecca Manson, *Shelly*, 2025

Along with clay, Manson has always loved the natural world, growing up in a semi-rural area of the Hudson Valley in New York. In 2023, she did a residency in the Norwegian Arctic Circle, and she said that observing the frozen landscape and seeing its decline had a profound impact on her work.

When Manson saw a photo of the details of butterfly wings on Instagram, she knew that was her next project. She calls butterflies "pollinator warriors," both delicate and resilient, and said they encapsulate several important themes—nature, fragility, movement, beauty, and impermanence. The title of the show, for instance, references a 1975 Joni Mitchell song, "Sweet Bird," about the constancy of change.

Manson's attention to detail doesn't stop with the wings. The exhibition also has a swing set, based on the one she had as a kid, with a glass bikini hanging off it. The swimsuit was made by glass artist Jessica Tsai, who made glass onions, chicken, charcoal, and embers for "Barbecue." With these glass pieces, Manson hoped to create a surprise for the viewer: She compared it to discovering something unexpected on a nature walk. She said this new work with butterflies feels like exactly what she wants to explore about transformation.

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Rebecca Manson, *The Swing*, 2022-2025

"There's this question about what's happening during their metamorphosis. They fully break down and their cells are recreated. It's truly a rebirth," she said. "Change is really hard, and so I'm interested in using beauty as an access point to talk about challenges."



Rebecca Manson, *Oilslick*, 2025

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