

# REBECCA MANSON BARBECUE

May 24–August 25, 2024

Working with clay is a process steeped in change. Clay begins its life as a wet, malleable material and repeatedly transforms, taking on new characteristics during each stage of drying, glazing, and firing. For Rebecca Manson, the life cycles of porcelain coincide with and enrich the cyclical narratives embedded within *Barbecue*, her installation at the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth. Comprised of over 45,000 individually crafted ceramic leaves and a variety of other elements, Manson utilizes the detritus of a summer barbecue in an autumnal scene to explore notions of longing, entropy, and self-discovery. Monumental in scale yet exquisitely detailed, the artist defies viewers' expectations of what clay can do.

Five heaping leaf piles, some standing nearly eight feet tall, are interconnected; a walkable path enables visitors to immerse themselves in this journey. *Barbecue* is site-responsive; Manson deliberately engages with the Modern's oval-shaped gallery known as the ellipse. The installation's enveloping foliage juxtaposes sweeping movement with the stillness of the gallery's smooth concrete walls. Such dualities in *Barbecue* demonstrate the simultaneous existence of opposing realities, including the friction between containment and expression, life and death. The result is a "visceral commonplace," a term Manson uses to describe her combination of recognizable forms with sophisticated and surreal narratives.

Manson finds profound connections in natural places and takes inspiration from her surroundings, often revisiting favorite locations, noticing subtle changes, and contemplating their emotional resonance. Drawing on memories and clay impressions of foliage collected on walks near her studio, she creates thousands of unique ceramic leaves. After their initial shaping, the leaves are refined and enhanced with detail as they air dry. With each layer of glaze, a leaf's uniqueness intensifies. Once fired in the kiln, the leaf transforms yet again; its chemical structure changes, becoming more resilient and vibrant. In a way, the process freezes a fleeting moment in time. In Manson's work such moments of transition are solidified, collected, and amassed to construct large-scale sculptures that are greater than the sum of their parts. While she embraces the physical qualities of ceramics and the conceptual rigor they add to her work, Manson forgoes more traditional forms of pottery, consciously breaking free from the utilitarian confines of the medium. Embracing the polarity of clay, she stretches the material to its most fragile and muscular places.

This unconventional approach embraces the somatic and enables the artist to consider a range of stylistic influences. Through her painterly applications of glazes to each individual ceramic element, Manson makes clear connections with painting in her sculptures. In a manner similar to that of traditional landscape painters, she considers the interplay between color, light, and line, creating depth, perspective, and nuanced textures that evoke the natural world. Consider Manson's *Barbecue* alongside Hudson River School founder Thomas Cole's (1801–1848) oil painting [The Hunter's Return](#), 1845, depicting a family's idyllic homestead nestled in the American wilderness. Both artists depict elements of the

Northeastern countryside; each work utilizes a crescendo composition, negative space in the centerground, and the warm colors emblematic of the region in autumn. Coupled with the sublimity of nature, these compositional elements entice viewers to reflect upon humanity's complicated history of intervening in the American landscape.

Manson's work also recalls land art of the 1960s and 1970s, particularly that of Robert Smithson (1938–1973), best-known for his seminal work *Spiral Jetty*, 1970. Before making art within the landscape, Smithson invented Nonsites, works in which he took elements from nature—primarily rocks—and reconfigured them within a gallery or museum setting. Such works act as a vestige of the actual site, existing in an environment unnatural to the source material. Smithson postulated that Nonsites are three dimensional "logical pictures" of real places;<sup>1</sup> they do not realistically represent what they depict, but rather act as legible abstracted references. According to Smithson, between the Nonsite and the actual site "exists a space of metaphoric significance. It could be that 'travel' in this space is a vast metaphor. Everything between the two sites could become physical metaphorical material devoid of natural meanings and realistic assumptions."<sup>2</sup> Although the Nonsite is physically separated from its place of origin, a transcendental path connects the two, unearthing the unseen when figuratively traversed.

Manson achieves a similar effect: she draws her physical materials and inspiration from the earth and retools them to fit within her visual lexicon. While connected to realism, this process abstracts the naturalism of her iconography to produce a psychological distillation of nature. After her artistic mediation, she relocates her creations to manmade environments. In *Barbecue*, Manson creates both a literal and metaphorical path, inviting viewers on a physical journey through evocative echoes of nature to explore their own interiority.

Like Smithson's Nonsites, Manson transmutes her sourced natural materials beyond the familiar into something conceptually expansive. In the artist's hands, the physical metamorphosis of clay is elevated into an analogy for human experience. Individually, each leaf possesses its own identity; Manson understands their collective power, amassing the leaves to convey humanity's insignificance when facing the magnitude of nature. Throughout *Barbecue*, windswept gestures at pause conjure correlations to the passage of time, reinforcing notions of mortality. In concert with one another, the leaves mutate again, just as their clay has evolved through every stage of the artistic process. These transformations harken to the distinct seasons—both those found in nature and in human lives. The scale

of *Barbecue* creates space for big-picture contemplation: of the natural world and humanity's place within it, of the passage of time and the cycles of life, and of the universal emotions that nature can evoke. Yet the minute details and seemingly infinite variety within this immersive environment also invite consideration of nuance, fleeting moments, and individual perceptions. Manson embraces this comingling of process and concept, and of macro- and micro-viewing, to illuminate the profundity of autumn.

Approaching the ellipse, with its austere concrete walls, *Barbecue* draws viewers in with a macro-view of sweeping leaves. From this vantage point, fantasy takes hold. Upon entry perspectives change, enveloping the visitor and allowing for slow, detailed micro-viewing. While walking along the designated trail between the mounds of leaves, elements of a summer barbecue come into view, contrasting against the autumn scene. Strewn about are realistic ceramic strips of bark, newspaper, broken pallets, matches, a grill, and charred logs. Glass onions, uncooked and cooked chicken, charcoal, and embers—made in collaboration with glass artist Jessica Tsai—emerge into view. These disparate elements are in various states, ranging from raw to scorched. This too elucidates Manson's interest in lifecycles, entropy, and uncertainty. Upon this closer examination, tensions arise between the different seasons depicted in *Barbecue*. Apprehension gnaws at the senses with the creeping realization that even the smallest spark from the grill, matches, or embers can set the dry leaves ablaze—just as a single instance can change a life trajectory, setting off a new cycle. Within the installation, these disparate moments converge to forge a fantastical chaos that illuminates the beautiful and tenuous underpinnings of daily life.

In discussing her work in preparation for this installation, Manson remarked, “through a maximalist approach and dramatic gestural representations of the world outside, I create an overwhelming environment to evoke our smallness in the face of nature and dependency upon it. This hyperbolic fantasy is a call for empathy and prompts us to challenge the unnatural changes we impose upon our climate.”<sup>3</sup> Autumn is inherently a season of transitions. Leaves alchemize from life to death and fall to the earth, transforming the landscape. They wash over the terrain, obscuring what came before and creating new natural sculptural moments. Yet when the wind blows the leaves transform again, illustrating the fleeting beauty of the season. Amidst this continual upheaval there is a human longing for such fleeting moments to remain. For Manson, fall is “a memorial to that longing.”<sup>4</sup> By deriving her visual language from this convergence of sentiment and nature, she grapples with humanity's impact on its surroundings, while exploring the tensions between a desire to immortalize the ephemeral, and the necessity of developing coping mechanisms to process change and allow for growth.

Manson's leaves not only relate to the cyclical nature of a person's life, changing from one season to another, but also to an internal struggle: to either collect or contain one's emotions or to release them. In responding to the installation site, the Modern's ellipse, the artist further

magnifies this tension. The architecture of the gallery acts as a foil against *Barbecue's* abundance, becoming both a literal and conceptual vessel for the installation. The five interlacing leaf piles, flowers, detritus, and grill contend with their confines; there appears to be no beginning and no end to the ceramic elements, many of which climb the cave-like walls. The formal grandeur of the space enhances the interplay between containment and release, nature and manmade structure.

To Manson, such dualities are inherent in the fall chore of raking leaves. While perhaps useful, there is an absurdity in raking leaves which are then stuffed into plastic trash bags to be displaced, whether for convenience or aesthetics. Such an act negates the cyclical beauty and transformative power of ephemerality. In this exhibition, the ellipse stands in for the trash bag, becoming both hindrance and aid to Manson's creation. This engagement between site and artwork suggests the realities of internal turmoil, conflict, resolution, and adaptation.

Within *Barbecue*, Manson intentionally intertwines the impacts and influences of material, process, and concept. Each facet of the installation circles back on itself to facilitate deeper reflection. Just as fall comes every year, change is inevitable.

Clare Milliken  
Assistant Curator

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## ARTIST BIO

Rebecca Manson was born in 1989 in New York, where she currently lives and works. She received her BFA in ceramics from the Rhode Island School of Design in 2011. Her work has been featured in numerous exhibitions across the country, including *Perhaps the Truth* (October 2023–March 2024) at Ballroom Marfa in Marfa, Texas. She has participated in a variety of residencies, including The Arctic Circle Residency, Svalbard, Norway. *Rebecca Manson: Barbecue* (May 24–August 25, 2024) at the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth is the artist's first solo museum exhibition.

### Endnotes

1 Robert Smithson, *A Provisional Theory on Nonsites*, 1968, in *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings* by Jack Flam (University of California Press, 1996); see <https://holtsmithsonfoundation.org/provisional-theory-nonsites>,

2 *Ibid.*

3 Rebecca Manson, in conversation with author, March 26, 2024, via Zoom.

4 Rebecca Manson, in conversation with author, November 17, 2023, Bedford Hills, New York.

Rebecca Manson, *Barbecue*, 2024. Porcelain, glaze, steel, adhesives, and glass. Dimensions variable. Courtesy of the Artist and Josh Lilley Gallery.  
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3200 Darnell Street  
Fort Worth, Texas 76107  
817.738.9215

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