



# Portfolio: Monica Banks & Stories in Porcelain

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by Pat Rogers

Monica Banks's art is unexpected. From afar, her sculptural ceramics can appear as delectable cakes or figures of intrigue. Up close, things can get real, real fast. Don't be surprised to find writhing figures or dead birds atop tasty looking cakes or an array of tiny porcelain plates that feel empty rather than anticipatory of a wonderful meal soon to come.

Oppositional emotions occupying a range of positions along the swinging pendulum of life experiences are a hallmark of Monica Banks's art. She mines the places between comfort, joy and peace in quiet moments with disappointment, grief, revulsion and horror at extreme suffering experienced around the world.

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"Pink Slice" by Monica Banks. Glazed English Porcelain, 5 x 7 1/4 x 7 1/4 inches.  
Courtesy Sara Nightingale Gallery.

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Her art may begin with big moments such as war, earthquakes, terrorist attacks on the societal level or the more intimate ones of motherhood, familial relationships, domestic life and individual transitions, but she doesn't remain a safe distance away. Instead, she plunges close to explore the emotional depths that may be found when key occurrences turn personal.

The work tends to have an element of playfulness and lighthearted irony regardless of the subject matter. This complexity is mirrored in her materials of choice, which are typically both fragile and strong, reflecting the ability of the human spirit to persevere.

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"One Tall Feather" by Monica Banks. Glazed English Porcelain, 8 x 7 1/4 x 7 inches. Courtesy Sara Nightingale Gallery.

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The moments chosen to explore are intuitive, Banks said in a recent interview. So is the shape her sculptures take. Process-oriented, Monica Banks has worked with steel, aluminum, found objects, copper wire and other materials to create art both large and small (think towering public commissions, tiny sculptures, hanging installations and everything in between).

Her public works have been installed in New York City in Times Square, the South Bronx and Greenwich Village. In the New York Metro, installations have been presented at the Rockland Center for the Arts in West Nyack and at the Carriage House of the [Islip Art Museum](#) on Long Island. Her work is held in the permanent collections of the [Parrish Art Museum](#), University Museum for Contemporary Arts at UMASS Amherst (Amherst, MA), Lynchburg College's Daura Gallery (Lynchburg, VA) and others. In the Hamptons, Monica Banks exhibits frequently with [Sara Nightingale Gallery](#).

These days, Banks mostly works in porcelain to create conceptual sculpture in ceramics that mine and reflect the things on her mind. Her most recent series was exhibited in her solo show "[Butterfly Pie](#)" at Sara Nightingale Gallery in Sag Harbor, NY. Some of her art is on view as part of the gallery's group show "Soft Spoken" on view through September 4, 2017.

Banks took a moment from making work to discuss the series with [Pat Rogers](#) of [Hamptons Art Hub](#) and the lynchpin moment that turned the path she anticipated for her art in an unexpected direction.

### **Pat Rogers: What is your inspiration for your art?**

**Monica Banks:** My work is process oriented. I create porcelain objects that reflect how I'm feeling in the moment and then integrate them into cakes, making domestic monuments to the big and small moments in my life. For example, I was very excited about Hillary [Clinton] when I was working on *Promise* in the months leading up to the 2016 election.

The piece started out with delicate abstract shapes covering the sides – I was thinking of shaved chocolate – and they started morphing into petal shapes and then butterflies, a metaphor for the blossoming of the country under an enlightened, progressive president. I planned to fill the top with a swarm of beautiful, diverse butterflies. When the election results came in, I was stunned and I stopped working on the cake. The empty top reflects the emptiness I felt.



"Promise" by Monica Banks, 2017. Glazed English Porcelain, 6 7/8 x 9 x 9 inches.  
Courtesy of the artist.

### **PR: Why sculpture versus another medium?**

**MB:** Sculpture connects me with the physical the world; I like collecting things and transforming them. Making porcelain likenesses of things in the natural world allows me the freedom to associate

aspects of the physical world with my emotional world. For example, I find chicken hands particularly repulsive, so they were the perfect objects to evoke my post-election feelings in *Animal Hands*.



“Animal Hands” by Monica Banks, 2017. Glazed English Porcelain, 14 5/8 x 10 x 10 inches (variable). Courtesy of the artist.

### **PR: How did this series begin?**

**MB:** The pieces in “Butterfly Pie” all relate to my post-election feelings of vertigo. I awoke to a world that seemed to have no values, and started looking for ways to evoke my sense of an ambushed future (*Promise*); revulsion and disgust (*Animal Hands*, *Raised Hand*); and the unity and beauty of people coming together in the resistance (*Women’s March*).



“Raised Hand” by Monica Banks, 2017. Glazed English Porcelain, 15 1/2 x 6 x 6 inches. Courtesy of the artist.



“Women’s March” by Monica Banks, 2017. Glazed English Porcelain, 14 x 8 1/2 x 8 1/4 inches. Courtesy of the artist.

### **PR: How did this body of work impact you as an artist?**

**MB:** The cake and pie forms are no longer platforms for the objects I make in the moment; they are integral to each other. This complexity deepens the meaning of each piece and takes the viewer on a longer journey.

The process of making *Butterfly Pie* taught me a lot. The bottom piecrust and lattice top were made separately. As I experimented with elements to put inside—pebbles, leaves, insects, I felt that the butterflies were the most poignant. They are trapped, but still alive. This can be interpreted as the glass ceiling Hillary spoke of, the hope that women might escape our confinement and flourish, and the fear that these beautiful creatures will perish. There is also the fear that, as pretty as they are, they might be eaten.



“Butterfly Pie” by Monica Banks, 2017. Glazed English Porcelain, 2 1/2 x 10 x 10 inches. Courtesy of the artist.

**PR: Do you have a favorite piece?**

**MB:** I am a brutal editor of my work at every stage. About half of the pieces I start and many of the ones that are completed are never shown. The works in *Butterfly Pie* are all my A Team. Each piece presented its own technical and aesthetic challenges.

The *Two-Tier Cake* mixes many different types of elements – miniature figures, life-size flowers and insects, and decorative dots and spheres—and orchestrating the rhythm of the composition was more difficult than in any other piece. I also had to design the piece so it could be lifted and transported. I did enjoy naming it. When the title is said aloud, it sounds like “Two Tear Cake,” an irony for our time, when far more tears are being shed. Each finished piece taught me more about the medium I was working in, and freed me in my search for solace and meaning.



“Two-Tier Cake” by Monica Banks, 2017. Glazed English Porcelain, 11 x 12 1/2 x 12 1/2 inches. Courtesy of the artist.

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**BASIC FACTS:** Monica Banks is based in East Hampton, NY. Her art has been exhibited nationally including the American Craft Museum in New York, the Heckscher Art Museum and Islip Art Museum on Long Island and the Parrish Art Museum and Southampton Cultural Center in The Hamptons. Banks’s solo show “Butterfly Pie” was exhibited July 22 to August 12, 2017 at Sara Nightingale Gallery in Sag Harbor. It was her second solo show at the Hamptons-based art gallery. Some of her art is currently on view as part of the gallery’s group show “Soft Spoken” on view through September 4, 2017.

To see more of Monica Banks’s art, visit [www.monicabanks.com](http://www.monicabanks.com).

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