



Tricia Zimic takes “monkey business” to artistic heights, telling stories of human vices and virtues in painstakingly crafted porcelain sculpture.

Beautiful Beasts

Tricia Zimic holds a mirror to humanity's flaws and strengths through often-humorous anthropomorphized porcelain animals.

By PATTI ZIELINSKI | Photos by LAURA BILLINGHAM

In a studio painted Tuscan Orange, beside a house in Upper Black Eddy, you might find Tricia Zimic at a mirror, making faces. What does humility look like? Pride? Envy? Lust?

"You can see the humor in my sculptures," the artist says by way of explanation, referencing her recent acclaimed series *Sins and Virtues*, which consists of fourteen white porcelain sculptures of Chacma baboons depicting the Seven Deadly Sins and Seven Virtues.

Zimic began the series in 2016. She selected the Chacma due to their expressive faces, opposable thumbs, and provenance in porcelain: They are the baboons you see in the iconic *Monkey Orchestra* by Johann Joachim Kändler (1706–75), which Zimic encountered while on a 2016 trip to visit the Meissen Porcelain Manufactory and the Dresden Porcelain Collection in Germany, which inspired her series.

It was the trip that changed her life.

Educated at Parsons School of Design, Zimic started as an illustrator for beloved children's stories, such as *Nancy Drew* and *Black Beauty*, and for cult-classic horror movie posters for Troma Entertainment in the 1980s, work that served as a springboard for her evolution

as a fine artist. She started on her path into ceramics in 2000, after taking lessons from her friend, ceramist Marguerite Brennan, followed by workshops in Tuscany and with other artists. "I found ceramics to be my natural medium," she says. "I realized I could do this the rest of my life and be happy."

But it was that trip to Meissen, the European birthplace of porcelain, that solidified her artistic

calling, her imagination afire with the porcelain animals she had seen. After Meissen, she traveled to Pisa, Italy, where she encountered the fresco *The Triumph of Death* (1336–41), by Buonamico Buffalmacco, the early version of the Deadly Sins. The imagery of Kändler's sculpture and Buffalmacco's fresco fused in Zimic's mind, and from that imagery was born her concept for this series depicting sins and virtues—one in which anthropomorphized baboons depicted the human proclivities.

"I love dressing them up," she admits. And dress them up she did. "It is exciting, unusual fashion," Zimic says. "*Pride* is

basically King Henry VIII." *Wrath*, which won the Phillips' Mill Community Association Sculpture Award in 2023, depicts a samurai wielding a sword against a cloud of butterflies.



When Zimic started working in porcelain, she says, "I realized I could do this the rest of my life and be happy."



PHOTOS COURTESY OF TRICIA ZIMIC

Clockwise, from top left: *Pride*, porcelain, clear glaze, 13¾ x 13 x 12½ inches, 2017; *Diligence/Kintsugi*, porcelain, 24-karat gold leaf, 14¾ x 11½ x 11½ inches, 2021; *Wrath*, porcelain, 24-karat gold leaf, 22 x 14 x 18½ inches, 2023.

Zimic's sculptures, which sell for up to \$10,000, are in the permanent collections of the New Jersey State Museum, The Morris Museum, and The Meissen Collection, as well as private collections in the United States and Europe. *Diligence/Kintsugi* received the Phillips' Mill Community Association Patrons' Award for Sculpture in 2021. The following year it was shown at the biennale at the Albrechtsburg Castle, in Meissen—where the European manufacturing of porcelain was established more than 300 years ago—and was chosen by the Meissen Manufactory above the other sculptures exhibited for reproduction. Twenty-five reproductions will be sold, starting at \$10,000.

"Porcelain is a unique clay because it has a tendency to crack as it dries and when it is fired," Zimic says. "You have to be very skilled or you will end up with a crack that you'll have to live with, but it allows you to get incredible detail." Zimic uses this tendency to crack to artistic advantage with kintsugi, the Japanese art of mending broken pottery with lacquer mixed with powdered gold, silver, or platinum—Zimic uses only gold—celebrating, rather than hiding, any flaws.

Zimic fell in love with clay around age seven. "I made this little rabbit and thought, 'This did not exist before,'" she recalls. "It felt very godlike." At Parsons, she studied under renowned ceramist Frank Giorgini and Maurice Sendak, the author/illustrator of *Where the Wild Things Are*, the children's book that had fueled her imagination. "I'd envision these characters," she says. "I liked the humor."

Each of Zimic's works are hand-modeled. The process

“I love dressing them up. *Pride* is basically King Henry VIII.”



PHOTO BY LAURA BILLINGHAM

Zimic hand-models her sculptures in her 1,000-square-foot studio, a renovated two-car garage.

takes about a month. She begins with a sketch and, for more complex pieces, a maquette (a small sculpture). From there, she sculpts the figure over an armature, coaxing out the individual personality. She disembodies the limbs, refines the details and hollows out each piece, then reassembles the sculpture off the armature, affixing the limbs with slip (liquid clay) and letting it dry slowly. As it dries, she monitors the piece, nursing and repairing any cracks that might develop. Once it is dry, she will fire it in a kiln at Cone 5 (2,160 degrees Fahrenheit) for thirty-three hours. Some pieces she leaves unglazed, giving them an eggshell-like finish, allowing light to seep through.

Her 1,000-square-foot studio, a renovated two-car garage with an extra room and epoxy floor, is a short walk from her early nineteenth-century stone-and-cedar farmhouse. A north-facing glass door bathes the studio in natural light.

Zimic, who is sensitive to the effects of humans and climate change on the animal kingdom, is known as a “conservation artist.” At an early age, she fell in love with the plants, seeds, pods, and animals that populated the somewhat wild suburban Long Island backyard of her youth. “The soul of where this began,” she says, “was being left alone in nature.”

In her new series, *Self Heal*, Zimic employs kintsugi to emphasize the stresses that endangered animals experience due to vanishing habitats and climate change. “I mend and then use the gold leaf to ‘heal’ an animal back into existence,” she says. “When I create something that wasn’t there before, it still feels very godlike.” 🌊

Patti Zielinski is the chief arts writer for River Towns.



PHOTOS (ABOVE LEFT AND RIGHT) COURTESY OF TRICIA ZIMIC

From left: Sloth, oil on linen, 20 x 30 inches, 2017. Maned Wolf, hand-colored etching, 10 x 7¾ inches, 2023.