

Kasper Bosmans

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Husbandry

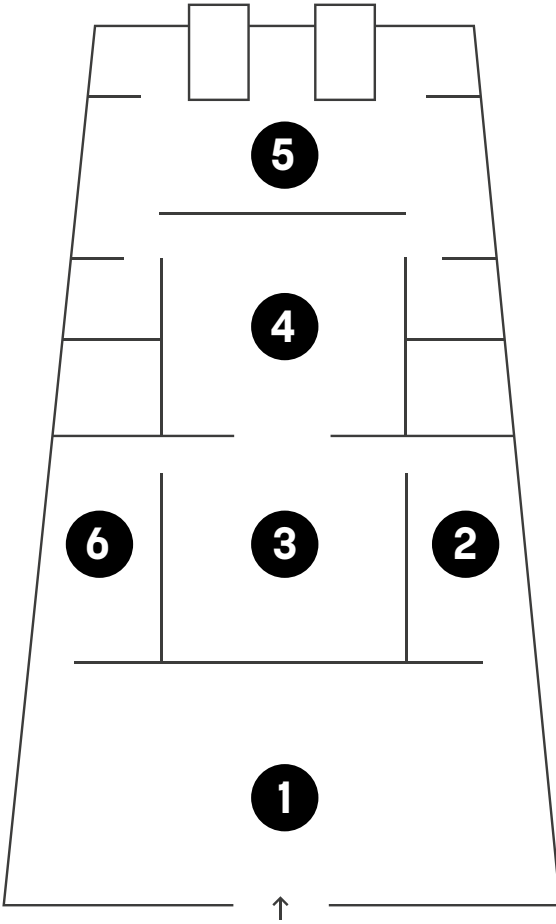
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Kasper Bosmans, *Legend: American Picket Fence and the Pink Thread*, Gouache and silverpoint on poplar panel, 28 x 21 cm, 2021. Courtesy of the artist and Gladstone Gallery.

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PLAN & ROOMS



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INTRODUCTION

Kasper Bosmans is a storyteller. Fascinated by tales that resonate across time, he unpicks their threads and playfully weaves them into new stories. Starting from specific examples – whether an obscure anecdote, artisanal recipe, or news item – Bosmans employs local, vernacular traditions to speak about today's global questions. In our era of increasing polarization, he mixes references from different periods and cultures as a way to tease out their similarities, highlighting just how much we have in common.

His works take the form of bold murals, installations, sculptures and his signature *Legends*. These small painted wooden panels fuse formal traditions such as heraldic shields or illuminated manuscripts

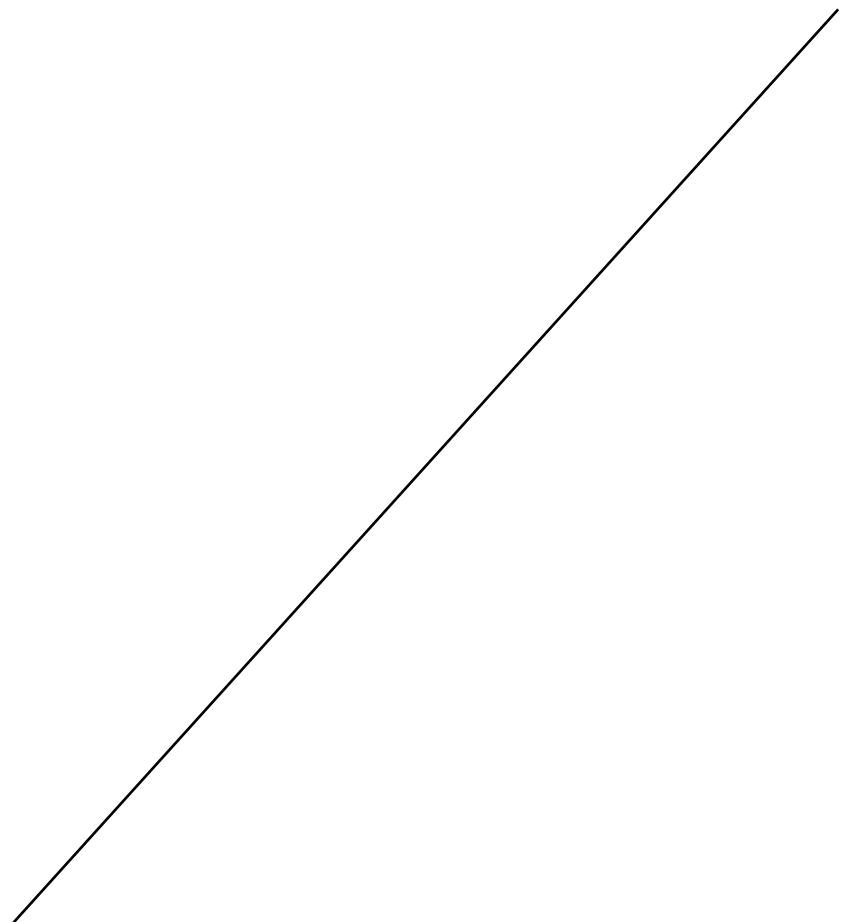
with an iconography culled from children's books or flat, digital imagery. Avoiding the didactic explanation of his other pieces, the *Legends* instead offer enigmatic clues to Bosmans' thought process, while existing as artworks in their own right.

Bosmans is intrigued by the possibilities offered by diverse techniques and materials. He presents here several new productions made together with specialist artisans. And running like a pink thread through the exhibition are references to queer culture, as evoked in the pink bobbin that appears in the *Legend* he painted for the project (see cover image).

At the intersection of nature and culture, *Husbandry* is a term used to designate care and cultivation, the rearing of animals or growing of crops. Animals feature prominently in the works included here, always in relation to their cataloguing or controlling by mankind. Husbandry is also the good stewardship of a household and Bosmans' references are often domestic.

Bosmans is particularly interested in history “as seen from the kitchen” and this guide is structured according to the ingredients – whether animal, vegetable or mineral – that Bosmans employs to cook up this delicious visual feast.

Curator: Zoë Gray



BIOGRAPHY

Kasper Bosmans was born in 1990 in Lommel (BE). He lives and works between Brussels and Amsterdam. He studied at HISK in Ghent and at the Royal Academy for Fine Arts in Antwerp.

Kasper Bosmans was included in the group exhibition *Un-Scene III* at **WIELS** in 2015 and was a WIELS artist in residence in 2016. Bosmans is represented by Gladstone Gallery.

BEARSKIN: worn by berserkers, ferocious Viking warriors, in the belief that this would endow them with the spirit of the animal and enable them to go “berserk,” a particularly violent example of man’s domination of nature. This new mural, *Berserk* (2022), brings together several works by Bosmans that explore animal skins and their markings: how these have been interpreted by man, and how man has influenced them through selective breeding. The design also features a caparison – a decorative, protective cape for a horse – used historically as a way to announce the owner’s identity, like an animal-borne advert. To counter-balance the exotic polar bear and noble horses, Bosmans selects the modest hedgehog as the third main motif of his composition.

He sees the hedgehog as the embodiment of a collector, as they were said to collect fragments of fruit on their spines by rolling on the ground. In his choice of imagery, pattern and the grand scale of this piece, Bosmans references epic murals, while simultaneously employing the wall-painting itself as a collecting device on which to present many of his smaller *Legends*, each one of which tells a related story. In this way, his pictorial construction replicates the experience of reading and researching online, where one can move fluidly between different windows of data, at the risk of being overwhelmed with information.

STONES: gathered from the stomach of a chicken. *Stones (maag)* (2016/2022) is a reworking of an earlier piece, which recounts how chickens swallow stones in order to grind up their food to aid digestion and help produce their precious egg shells. This process is thought to be a learned instinct – itself seemingly a contradiction in terms – and Bosmans is fascinated by the play of chance it encompasses.

EGG: symbol of fertility, renewal, potentiality and perpetuation. The eggs of Bosmans' large wall piece come from the work of the Dutch 17th-century painter Melchior d'Hondecoeter. Bosmans creates an index of eggs of every bird species depicted by d'Hondecoeter, whose meticulous ornithological paintings marked the development of a new art historical genre. They were typical of his epoch in their desire to catalogue the natural world, and d'Hondecoeter's research was fed by knowledge brought home from the expeditions of the Dutch East and West India Trading Companies. His paintings are thus intertwined with colonial expansion and the traffic of enslaved people, and brought together Asian and European birds in a way that was only possible in art. The work's title *Bird Nose Count* (2020) uses an old-fashioned word for census, and Bosmans continues d'Hondecoeter's quasi-scientific approach by reproducing all 115 eggs to scale. He employs enamel, a material closely associated with 20th-century advertising – think Pastis, beer, stock

cubes, chocolate – thus connecting an organic form and animal product with the aesthetics of marketing and consumption.

COLANDER: a kitchen utensil used to drain or separate foodstuffs; and a metaphor for sorting or separating more broadly. All four works installed in this first gallery underscore processes of selection, cataloguing and collection. For this new series, Bosmans asked several friends to count the number of holes in their colander and to measure the diameter of each hole. He used this information to create abstract portraits of his friends, reproducing precisely to scale the “holeyness” of each circular utensil on rectangular panels. While the scale, format and grid-like pattern of each piece recall minimalist painting, Bosmans in fact silkscreens the motif onto enamelled steel plates that are leftovers from the production of advertising panels or street signs. He is particularly drawn to this material that was once ubiquitous in public space but which has become largely obsolete.

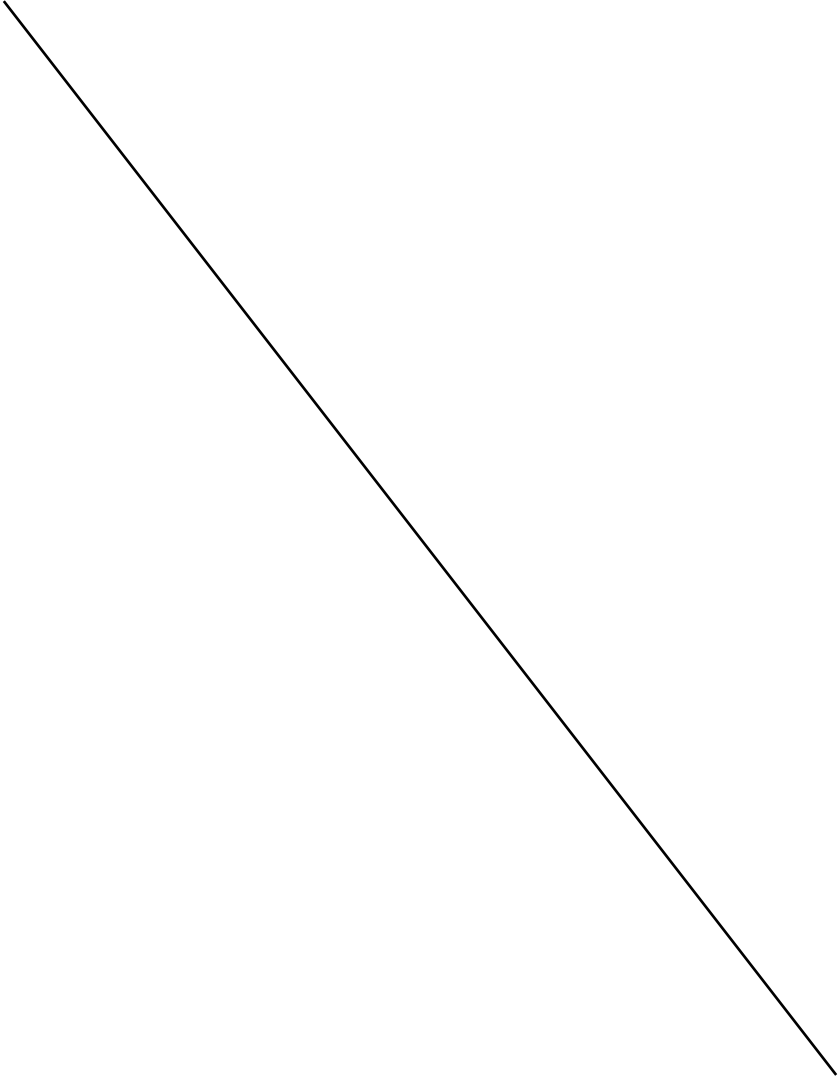
SWITCH: Up until the 1970s telephone cabinets or switchboards were used to connect people by telephone with the help of a (usually female) operator. Every large company had such a modular system, placed in a custom-made cabinet that reflected the organization. The system could be adapted, expanded or reordered in line with changes to the company. Bosmans is interested in the folkloric qualities of these systems and how the cabinet around the switchboard could be adapted to reflect its user's taste. For example, here he reproduces a dashboard featuring pressed flowers which he saw in the Telecommuseum in Rotterdam.

Switchboard (WIELS in preparation for Wolfgang Tillmans) (2021) is a portrait of this institution during the installation

of a previous exhibition and presents a schematic snapshot of its employees, sponsors, lenders and other stakeholders. ***Switchboard (Colander & J.Zelf)*** (2021) reproduces the number of holes in a colander, which is seemingly random yet driven by its specific logic of sorting or sieving. The photographs were taken by Piet Zwart and are the only works in the exhibition not made by Bosmans. Zwart was commissioned in 1930 by the PTT (Dutch State Company of Post, Telegraphy and Telephony) to make a children's booklet about mail and telephony, whose main character, J.Zelf was a man made of toilet rolls.

PETALS: *Pressed Flowers* (2021) are marble octagonal sculptures, inside which flowers are preserved: fragile elements encased within a hard shell. The series began as an intervention for *Podio Del Mondo Per L'Arte*, a project by artist Marinus Boezem running since 1976, for which he has invited artists to contribute a work to the 19th-century corn exchange in Middelburg (NL). Struck by

the predominance of male conceptual artists amongst the invited participants, Bosmans proposed an 'effeminate' piece whose ephemeral contents remain hidden from sight.



SAND: timeless yet ephemeral, sand is used in diverse manufacturing processes, in the creation of new territory or simply for cleaning the floor. From Tibet to the Navajo in North America or Aboriginal people in Australia, coloured sand is used to create temporary sand paintings, often connected to healing ceremonies. In Belgium there is also a tradition of sand painting and Bosmans' hometown of Lommel is known for its annual sand painting competition. For his sand painting, Bosmans created a shallow elm frame in the form of a spider's web, onto which sand is poured and pigment is stencilled. A web is again a form of filter, built by the spider to trap its prey (or, in Bosmans' version, its jewels) and the artist uses this motif to evoke the predatory aspect of collecting.

The work's title *Home is dear, home is best* (2022), comes from the fable of Zeus and the Tortoise, credited to the Ancient Greek storyteller Aesop (620-564 BC). It tells how Zeus invited all the animals to his wedding, but only the tortoise failed to arrive. When asked why, she said she preferred her own home – a familiar feeling in these times of quarantine and social isolation – and as a punishment, Zeus made her carry her home with her forevermore. Bosmans illustrates the tortoise in the accompanying *Legend*, which also refers to the 1884 novel *A rebours (Against Nature or Against the Grain)* by Joris-Karl Huysmans. Its protagonist, Des Esseintes, loathes contemporary bourgeois society and retreats into a world of his own making. He purchases a tortoise to match his Oriental rug, but – finding its shell too dull – decides to have it encrusted with precious stones, a barbaric act which kills the tortoise.

Bosmans considers the decadent figure of Des Esseintes as an example of the queer,

male collector described by architectural historian Aaron Betsky in his book *Queer space: architecture and same-sex desire* (1997). Betsky argues that in the 19th century, the self-construction of queer identity included “building up a fantastical world by gathering objects from all times and places”. The domestic realm was a closet, featuring “a collection of artefacts that defined the individual by serving as an objective map of his passions, by evoking other worlds than the one in which he was imprisoned, and by mirroring him in objects became a queer version of the self-enclosed world of the family.”

Bosmans conceived this room as such a closet, but which also functions as a display cabinet: the visitor is encouraged to enter into the centre of the web, to observe the surrounding ornamentation. In a self-deprecating gesture, the artist thus portrays himself as the queer spider and the visitor as his prey.

BUTTER: modest yet rich kitchen staple, moulded into stackable repeating units. Before the erasure of customs borders within the European Union, many day-to-day items were subject to import tax and were thus the material of contraband. Bosmans' relatives were involved in smuggling butter across the Belgian/Dutch border, and still recount tales of derring-do from this era. Bosmans found a text describing butter smuggling are the "most romantic crime" of the 20th century. He decided to 'pervert' (in his own words) the macho smuggling narratives of evading capture in the countryside to suggest possibilities for rural cruising and covert homosexual activity. He titles the works *Boy Butter*, in a nod to the predominantly male smugglers, but also to hint at butter being used as a

sexual lubricant. On the walls, Bosmans presents bronze casts of packs of butter, wrapped in handwoven fabric, evoking the bundles of butter that were strapped to the body and worn under clothing to avoid detection. The wall-pieces and the central column – also cast from blocks of butter and titled *Vuil ventje* [Dirty Boy] (2022) – gently poke at the seriousness of the industrially produced units of Minimalist sculpture, which – like butter smuggling – was also historically a male dominated field. Bosmans installs his bronzes on a wall painting whose title is *Colour chosen by a kind person* (2019/2022), one of his instruction pieces in which the commissioner can decide the colour.

WOLF: hunter at the top of the food chain; creature of transformation, symbol of liminality, of dawn and dusk; harbinger of bad weather. Wolves accompany Mars, the Roman god of war, and Odin, the Norse god of wisdom, poetry, magic and death. Tales of human children raised by wolves abound, from Romulus & Remus to Mowgli. Bosmans connects this ancient symbol with a modern-day phenomenon: the creation of wolf corridors. These are strips of land left between urban developments, not for human recreation or appreciation, but in the hope that wolves might again roam the landscape. Due to this re-wilding policy, wolves are now breeding again in Belgium for the first time since the 1960s. As befits a corridor, the work takes the form of a narrow frieze. Its motif is the repeated figure of a running

wolf, originally taken from a Roman ring and carved into a cylinder seal, which Bosmans then rolled into molten glass. He cuts the repeated motif of the running wolf with a series of bronze tiles, featuring a pair of scissors, to underline the symbolic cuts and the geographic obstacles in this lupine migration.

RUBY: blood-red coloured gemstone, with a cross-cultural history of spirituality, mentioned often in the Bible. Also used in ornamentation, for example on noblemen's armour, scabbards, and harnesses in India and China. Rubies were traditionally laid beneath the foundation of buildings to secure good fortune for the structure. Bosmans inserts two rubies into the wall of WIELS, lit from behind to enhance their colour. They are placed like cartoon nipples on the wall, anthropomorphizing the building and bringing it to life, while also functioning as a portrait of the artist.

DOG: a carnivorous mammal, domesticated relative of the wolf and fox, who will lie on its back to play dead or have its tummy tickled. Bosmans created a series of abstract dogs, reduced to a cuboid made of glass, marble or cardboard, atop which the animal's nipples are suggested by eggs, sugar cubes, plums, or sweeties. Bosmans was triggered by a photo he saw of the 1969 work *Untitled (Dwarf Parade Table)* by artist Paul Thek (1933-1988). This was a heavily laden table supported by chairs and a statue of a dwarf (as referenced in Bosmans' *Legend* painting), which evoked both a banquet and a funeral bier. Suspended underneath the table was a taxidermized dog, whose nipples were made of egg shells. Bosmans' works are an homage to Thek and his tragicomic practice.

PUBLICATION

This exhibition is preceded by Bosmans' first monograph, titled *Dovetail*, co-published by WIELS and Walther König (2020). Designed by Nerijus Rimkus, it features images of Bosmans' exhibitions from 2014 to 2020 together with several texts: an essay by WIELS senior curator Zoë Gray, an interview with the artist by Martin Germann, and texts by Philip Van Den Bossche, Piero Bisello and Julia Mullié, the book's editor. €29.95, English

COMPLEMENTARY PROGRAMME

The exhibition is accompanied by a lively programme including guided tours by Kasper Bosmans and WIELS curator Zoë Gray; conversations with artists Sophie Nys and Willem de Rooij; and lectures by Chloé Deligne (ULB) and Barbara Baert (KU Leuven). There will also be a book presentation of Bosmans' monograph *Dovetail* with a roundtable discussion.

THANKS FOR YOUR VISIT!

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More info & events: wiels.org

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