

Vivian Sky Rehberg, "Review of Kasper Bosmans' Husbandry at WIELS," *Artforum*, October 1, 2022

ARTFORUM

REVIEWS BRUSSELS

Kasper Bosmans

WIELS Contemporary Art Centre

By Vivian Sky Rehberg



Kasper Bosmans, *Berserk*, 2022, latex-paint mural, dimensions variable.

Kasper Bosmans's "Husbandry" opened with *Berserk*, 2022, a vibrant mural that instigated the viewer's hunt for clues of the historical sources and stories that abound in his narrative-driven paintings, sculptures, and installations. At the center of *Berserk*, a graphically rendered motif of a cloaked, prancing horse is repeated three times above a painted wall of yellow and dark-green bricks mortared in pink. The horses' monochrome caparisons extend into soft-edged chromatic fields of blue, orange, and burnt ocher. The diagonal thrust of these animal and rectangular forms lend depth and movement to the otherwise static composition. To the right of the horses is a stylized hedgehog with its nose pointed up and its spines seemingly relaxed. To their left, the skin of a nose-down polar bear, with a blue-and-green bootee overlaying the pelt, illustrates the human/animal hybrid indicated by the mural's title. A berserker (as anyone who has seen Robert Eggers's 2022 film *The Northman* will know) is a rampaging, bearskin-clad warrior from pre-medieval Norse legend. With *Berserk*, Bosmans signaled histories of human/animal interactions and of relationships between nature and culture as key themes in "Husbandry."

To get to the bottom of Bosmans's preoccupations, one had to consult letter-size gouache-and-silverpoint panel paintings from the artist's "Legends" series, 2013–, which hung in vertical trios across the span of the human/animal mural, as well as throughout the show. These "Legends" function both as an archive and as coded visual captions for the specific works they accompany. Pictorially, they nod as much to family crests or heraldic emblems as to the imagery you might find in a children's dictionary. The painting chosen to emblemize the exhibition as a whole, *Legend: American Picket Fence and the Pink Thread*, 2021, features a red patch of land against a black background that appears to be fastened by a white picket fence. A bright-pink thread weaves in and out of one side of this quintessential American symbol of the ideal home, as if to queer both this metaphor for prosperity and broader problematics of property, borders, and defense.

"Husband" etymologically signifies not necessarily a male partner in a marriage, but a steward, a caretaker, a cultivator, whether of a home and livestock or of land—the opposite of a berserker, you might say. Bosmans inlays patriarchal notions of what it means to husband with gleaming alternatives, such as the sexy male *NIPPLES*, 2022, made of cabochon rubies, inserted into the whitewashed wall near his embossed glass frieze *Wolf Corridor*, 2022, inspired by lupine folklore and recent rewilding policies encouraging wolves to return to Belgium after their decimation in the nineteenth century. Bosmans represented the animal home as closet and lair in the small room dedicated to *Legend: Spider Web (Home is dear, home is best)*, 2022, a *zandtapijt* (sand carpet) that harkens back to a technique of painting with stenciled pigments on smooth sand in and around the home. This art form is celebrated in the artist's hometown of Lommel, Belgium, but is similar to the ephemeral mandalas integral to a range of ceremonial traditions around the world. In this sand carpet, a rare ladybird spider guards scattered gems in a semicircular elm-wood display case shaped like her web, into which the viewer could enter. Hanging nearby, *Legend: Home is dear, home is best*, 2022, portrayed the bejeweled tortoise from Joris-Karl Huysmans's 1884 novel *À rebours* (*Against Nature*), a literary reference to queer male practices of collecting and domesticity.

In his sculptures and installations, Bosmans employs materials as diverse as repurposed enameled steel, marble, glass, bronze, and textiles. Each work refers to information and stories that are coded, nestled, and buried like the flowers flattened between minimalist marble disks in *Pressed Flowers*, 2021. The stories needed a complicit participant to smuggle them out, like the contraband butter packages Bosmans's family used to trade in across the Belgian/Dutch border, scores of which he reproduced in bronze for his sculptural installation *Vull venjte (Dirty Boy)*, 2022. Perhaps to be complicit we must be more like the hedgehog, carrying the artist's tales with us as the little animal collects fruit on its spines, or like the tortoise, who is at home everywhere.