

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Caroline Dumalin, "Nice to Meet You," *Mousse*, September, 2016

MOUSSE 55
NICE TO MEET YOU

188

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KASPER BOSMANS AND CAROLINE DUMALIN IN CONVERSATION

Caroline Dumalin talks with Kasper Bosmans in his third-floor studio at WIELS, where he recently began a six-month residency. Bosmans discusses his uses of cultural matter and memories that were once common and close to home. He systematically abstracts and arranges the acquired knowledge into figurative "legends," composed of both encyclopedic facts and mythological anecdotes.

Kasper Bosmans is a visual artist who lives and works in Brussels. Recent solo exhibitions include: *Specimen Days*, S.M.A.K., Ghent, 25.06–04.09.2016, *Decorations*, Witte de With, Rotterdam, 09.09–31.12.2016, with an upcoming solo show at Gladstone Gallery, Brussels, 18.11.2016–15.12.2016.

Caroline Dumalin is Curator and Coordinator of the Artists-in-Residence Programme at WIELS, Brussels.

FOLK ACTIVISM

CAROLINE DUMALIN When I first visited your studio about three and a half years ago, you had also just moved in, but there was nearly no work to see. You showed me a picture of a donkey carrying a purple banner, which you identified as a painting. Your painting has since become less intuitive and more structured. When and how did this shift occur? **KASPER BOSMANS**

At that time, I found it difficult to accept a painting as a unique object. I now try to make a "legend" painting for every occasion that prompts new work. These are, as the name indicates, legends to read or decipher the work, and it doesn't matter if they were made before or after the related work's completion. I started out making them as substitutes for textual explanations—they function as mnemonic devices to condense and store information. Collecting information for figuration keeps me going. I'd rather see my oeuvre culminate in a grand opera than as a group of forcedly autonomous works. **CD**

So you perceive these stylized and coded paintings as by-products that help you deal with the metaphorical blank canvas. What information are you, or they, currently processing? **KB**

Witte de With is celebrating its twenty-fifth anniversary with 25+ commissions, and I was invited to create works based on their archives. The legends will be present, but only visible during a public event. For each selected archive box I made a legend painting on paper, which is pasted on the inside. The one in the archive box of Paul Thek, for example, refers to his *Dwarf Parade Table* (1969), which features a dog that hangs underneath the table as if it were walking upside down. I noticed that the dog had played an important role in Thek's domestic life when we found a photo album in the archives, which resulted in a new interpretation of the installation. The main component of the show responds to a question raised by director Defne Ayas as to what the "plus" could mean. What is missing from the archive, from the exhibition histories? Folk art! Anonymous works by people who are not or do not want to be known as artists. **CD**

How did you go about including such a vast and elusive category? **KB**

The idea was to couple the invited artists with an external archive, and I chose that of Asger Jorn's Scandinavian Institute of Comparative Vandalism, now housed in the Silkeborg Kunstmuseum. The institute was founded in the early 1960s with the ambition to revisit the history of art as we know it, literally by traveling around and documenting pre-Renaissance Nordic art. Vandalism here refers to the Vandals,

a Germanic tribe that migrated from Scandinavia across Europe and is believed to have caused the downfall of the Roman Empire. Folk art, in their approach, provided an alternative to the classical origin story of European art. **CD**

What attracts you in that alternative reading, besides that it symbolizes the road not taken? **KB**

I always associate folk art with pre-individualism in art, when it was still close to craft. That all ended when Giorgio Vasari wrote his *Lives*. The Scandinavian Institute of Comparative Vandalism also makes for a problematic case study because of Jorn's dominant personality, which undermines their collective endeavor. His texts accompany the *10,000 Years of Nordic Folk Art* photo books, all but one published after his death. Jorn's analysis is visually interesting, because of his selection, ordering, and combination of images. He provided an accumulative account without conflict, in contrast to the schisms that historians often like to emphasize. It's an interesting contradiction: the institute was dealing with an anonymous heritage that, ultimately, can't be separated from this major artist's biography. **CD**

You seem to take it as a cautionary tale for the artist as historiographer who lacks a necessary degree of detachment. Has this influenced the role that you yourself have taken up, in terms of using folk art as a material? **KB**

I want to approach the subject in a poetic, associative way and simply show some of the most striking photographs that Gérard Franceschi took for *10,000 Years of Nordic Folk Art*. I don't intervene, or even know much about them. The majority of the exhibition, as you can see in the scale model, consists of large murals that I've modeled after decorative surfaces. **CD**

Your contribution continues a pronounced interest in folklore and local traditions, which seems to have been present since the very beginning. **KB**

I've always been drawn to a kind of "domestic activism." I recently saw a beautiful show at the New York Historical Society about political patchworks. The young United States doesn't have a long-standing history of high art. I even dare to think that the American flag is directly derived from a patchwork. **CD**

What is it that you appreciate in folk art? **KB**

Folk art is very accessible, sometimes superficial, and always anonymous. I feel it can be read by everyone, which makes it somehow universal. It's a social idea—art

GLADSTONE GALLERY

189

FOLK ACTIVISM
K. BOSMANS AND C. DUMALIN



Legend: Decorations, 2016. Courtesy: the artist; Marc Fox Gallery, Los Angeles; Gladstone Gallery, New York / Brussels

GLADSTONE GALLERY

MOUSSE 55
NICE TO MEET YOU

190



W/DW25+ *Mural: Migration (Cauta)*, 2016; *Dwarf Parade Dog (Lemon Nipples)*, 2016, *Decorations* installation view at Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art, Rotterdam, 2016. Courtesy: Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art, Rotterdam. Photo: Aad Hoogendoorn

GLADSTONE GALLERY

191

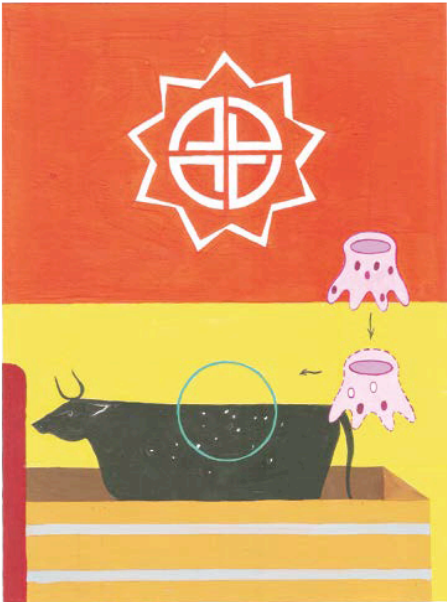
FOLK ACTIVISM
K. BOSMANS AND C. DUMALIN



Hermès in Exile (Corinth, Mounted), 2016. Courtesy: the artist and Marc Foxx Gallery, Los Angeles. Photo: Robert Wedemeyer



Legend: Decorations, 2016. Courtesy: Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art, Rotterdam. Photo: Aad Hoogendoorn



Legend Sint Rombout + Vitiligo, 2016. Courtesy: the artist; Marc Foxx Gallery, Los Angeles; Gladstone Gallery, New York / Brussels

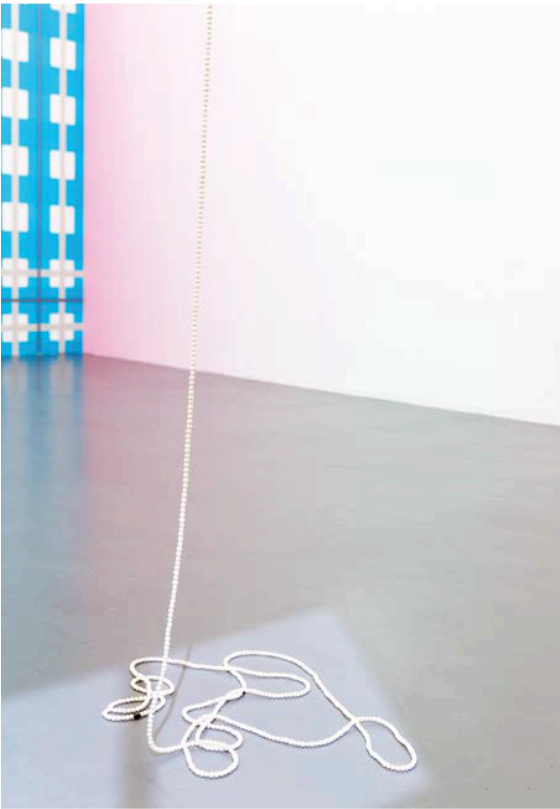


Hermès in Exile (High), 2016. Courtesy: the artist and Marc Foxx Gallery, Los Angeles. Photo: Robert Wedemeyer

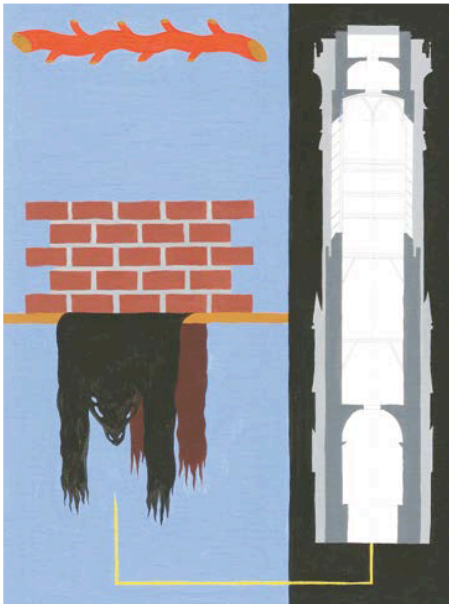
GLADSTONE GALLERY

MOUSSE 55
NICE TO MEET YOU

192



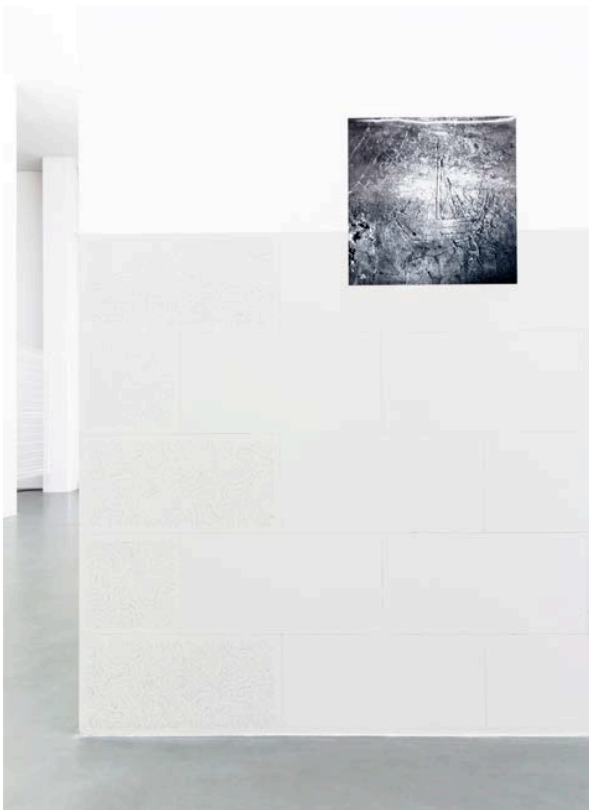
Kasper Bosmans and Marthe Ramm Fortuyn, *Strand of Pearls 2*, 2016, *Decorations* installation view at Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art, Rotterdam, 2016. Courtesy: Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art, Rotterdam. Photo: Aad Hoogendoorn



Legend Sint Rombout + Vitiligo, 2016. Courtesy: the artist; Marc Foxx Gallery, Los Angeles; Gladstone Gallery, New York / Brussels



Legend Sint Rombout + Vitiligo, 2016. Courtesy: the artist; Marc Foxx Gallery, Los Angeles; Gladstone Gallery, New York / Brussels



WDM25+ *Mural: Vermiculated Rustication*, 2016; photographs from Asger Jorri's *10,000 Years of Nordic Folk Art, Decorations* installation view at Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art, Rotterdam, 2016. Courtesy: Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art, Rotterdam. Photo: Aad Hoogendoorn

GLADSTONE GALLERY

193

FOLK ACTIVISM
K. BOSMANS AND C. DUMALIN



WDW25+ Mural: Urbanism; WDW25+ Mural: Migration (Gibraltar), 2016, Decorations installation view at Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art, Rotterdam, 2016.
Courtesy: Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art, Rotterdam. Photo: Aad Hoogendoorn

GLADSTONE GALLERY

MOUSSE 55
NICE TO MEET YOU

194

or objects made by and for the people. I value its simplicity and precision in expression. I use anecdotes that underlie folkloric culture as a structure to achieve a work, but I take care not to arrive at a synthesis. I want this material to stay pure, by containing all ideas in a figurative form. **CD**

Can you give an example of how you've used such an anecdote? **KB**

My series of sand carpets combine two unrelated anecdotes that share only the time and place in which they were current: the tradition of housewives who scrub their stone floors with sand, and the use of caged canaries to detect poisonous gases in mines. Another example is the legend painting that places the tale of Saint Rumbold, who defeated a demon in the swamps of Mechelen and had its hairy skin buried underneath the cathedral tower, next to the cows of Fukushima that developed the skin disease vitiligo after the nuclear disaster. The latter can be characterized as a dermatological diptych, dedicated to the subject of skin, without aspiring to any philosophical discourse. I want all of these subjects, no matter how small and manifold, to be part of my work. **CD**

You grew up in Lommel, a Belgian city adjacent to the Dutch border, known for its sand quarries and nature reserves. To what extent did this background influence your personal language, which seems particularly sensitive to the symbolism of animals? **KB**

Many people comment on the recurrence of animals in my work, and perhaps I'm at the point of continuing this impres-

sion for the fun of it. I don't think about my background much. I am sensitive to place; I see each context as a specimen, and then try to pin it like a butterfly. In this way, a specific anecdote can represent a more general phenomenon or problem. For instance I made a very Belgian work around the Cinquantenaire Museum in Brussels. When it rained, I'd rush to an area in the museum where the roof was leaking and catch the water in a bottle. The underlying story is that part of the museum's collection consists of spoils, trophies, and diplomatic gifts that ended up in the hands of the Burgundian dukes, the house of Habsburg, and so on. The ensuing legend painting therefore consists of a vessel of water and a magpie. It's an institution that was founded to propagate the Belgian identity, and the problematic ways in which artifacts from other cultures were obtained is inherently part of that. The water seeping in is such a striking image that I felt it needed to be preserved and seen. Somehow the museum, with all its historical and political bearings, has produced a precious mineral. I had a glass sphere made to display the water, inspired by a makeshift magnifying glass used for embroidery. This brings us back to the idea of folk activism. **CD**

The magnifying glass is also a thing of the past, as are many other "devices" that you turn to. What attracts you about anachronism? **KB**

The market directs our attention to high art, and our economy is focused on tourism. But rarely anymore do we speak of the Catholic or Hellenistic heritage that has influenced our culture so immensely. In terms of style, the veil of anachronism installs a detachment that makes one better able to see connections across past and present.

EILEEN MYLES AND ELIZA DOUGLAS IN CONVERSATION

Model-turned-painter Eliza Douglas recounts her decision to leave New York for Europe and start a new life afresh in the arts after a long period of being too afraid to fulfill a lifelong dream. The field of painting—because of its inherent constraints—has come to fit the overwhelming possibilities of her rebirth.

Eliza Douglas is an artist who lives and works in Frankfurt am Main, Germany.

Eileen Myles is an American poet and writer who has produced more than twenty volumes of poetry, fiction, nonfiction, libretti, plays, and performance pieces over the last three decades.

A HISTORY OF LONGING

EILEEN MYLES I've been around different versions of you and your work for the better part of a decade. You're a tall person, and some of your work for sure is about being a figure and a gender-variant one. I saw you in Anohni's work, operating in a context with a lot of transwomen. I know you've done some modeling, and I suspect you've always done it on your own terms. You've played in a band. And of course we stood with our former partners in *Vice* magazine as gay power couples. You are in many ways a representative figure. You have hauteur and some mystery, and I think a quietly radiant, subversive sense of humor. So what's your history with painting? When I encountered your recent work in Frankfurt I thought, wow, this is it. You're destabilizing and entirely reconstructing what one might expect next from Eliza Douglas, and I am entirely blown away. I'm looking at an alphabet, I'm looking at an abstract superhero, I'm getting a real belly laugh about the body and what is painting and what are words. I experience these paintings as kind of a birth, like when Superman steps out, and there always was something about Clark Kent that kept our eyes on him. **ELIZA DOUGLAS**

It is meaningful to me that you experience my work as a sort of birthing process. Other than an intro to painting class I took with Amy Sillman twelve years ago, I basically have no history with painting. Or maybe the history is one of longing, like looking out the window at all the kids playing and

not being allowed out. I wanted to be an artist all along and thought about it constantly, but for various reasons was quite paralyzed and unable to even try. I left New York a year and a half ago in a state of crisis—after all these years of being too afraid to do what I really wanted to, I gave up, and was beginning a career as a social worker. Finally I felt a certain level of desperation and something snapped in me—an umbilical cord of sorts. In a few weeks I vomited out a bunch of work, made a portfolio, and abruptly dropped everything to go to the Städelschule in Frankfurt. I arrived quite scared, with no real plan. I didn't even know what medium I wanted to work with, I was overwhelmed with what felt like the limitless possibilities of art. This is largely what led me to painting; the tangible boundaries paintings seem to have. They are mostly contained within squares or rectangles, and there is a set of tools that are standardly used to make them. And then there is the challenge of the medium's history. At least thirty-five thousand years ago someone painted a pig on a cave wall on an Indonesian island. People have been painting for a long time. Some say it has died, some say it has been resurrected. And what makes a good painting? And how the fuck do I make one, especially given that I have no painting "skills"? Since I was taking this plunge, which felt suicidal, I figured I might as well go all the way and be a painter. Along with its weighty history, painting is particularly polarizing. Choosing painting was the ultimate way of

GLADSTONE GALLERY

195

A HISTORY OF LONGING
E. MYLES AND E. DOUGLAS



All Souls are Snowflakes, 2016. Courtesy: Air de Paris, Paris. Photo: Ivan Murzin