

VANESSA PASCHAKARNIS

Domesticated Beasts

Sculptures in bronze and marble

Drawings and prints

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Synopsis of text by Larry Gaudet

The marble heads and torso-like bronzes in *Domesticated Beasts* – the first show in Toronto by the German-Canadian sculptor, Vanessa Paschakarnis – celebrate the elemental connections, the epic dialogue, between the human and the beastly.

The heads are of animals, carved from rosa portugallo marble, the stone polished to glow pink like a baby's skin, but also veined by mineralization in soft blacks and greys that, along with scars incised by the artist, age the works with the experience that a hard life etches into soft flesh. Mounted as sculptural busts on steel plinths, the heads graze in repose with sublime eyeless pathos. These are mythic beasts of burden, evolved from hybrid ancestry, alive with bovine muscularity and equine grace, tolerant of the yoke of an admiring gaze, but doubtless more at home in the depths or the wilderness where they can hunt, or be hunted, unwatched.

The bronzes, hung with steel cables, are human in their essence, rendered in the form of shawls: as textured carapace – a scarred, armoured exterior – protecting a sizeable cavity: home to the invisible source of ourselves. Paschakarnis calls these sculptures “bells.” They do function something like church bells, melted of ecclesiastical formality yet still invested with melodious sonic potential. When struck with a flicked index finger, the bronzes resonate with wild tones and offbeat echoes, the diverse acoustics meant to symbolize the richness and range of human feeling.

In this exhibition at Alison Smith Gallery, the experience of contemplation is bracketed by two modes of perception. The marble heads prey on our susceptibility to anthropomorphic arousal, the act of investing animals with human qualities. There's a desire to stroke or feed the heads, because they look so gentle up close, despite the foreboding implication in the jawlines. In complementary contrast, the torsos stoke the zoomorphic impulse to witness the animal inside the human. The works, all scaled to human proportions, are designed to nurse one toward a physical encounter with a creature presented as a psychic or spiritual double, a vaguely familiar yet alien sibling.

In *Domesticated Beasts*, the achievement can be appreciated as the privilege granted to us, the humans in the room, to contemplate our humanity in the context of our animality. It's a poignant exercise in the selective breeding of attributes common to the intelligence of so many sentient creatures, not just humans: the capacity to fear and to endure pain, the basic need for affection and for protection, the instinctual belief that life is a struggle, often without progress, requiring that we keep plodding ahead on foot, paw, or fin because that's what we were born to do.

In this show, Paschakarnis bring into foreground the power and resilience of the nobler virtues, but also ignoble ones, too: our inhumanity. The sculpted creatures bear the slashes of cruelty, a reminder that we often treat animals as so much less than human, and some humans worse than animals. In dissolving boundaries between species, Paschakarnis explores the possibility that all living creature are created equal but also the terrible reality that they're not.