

Metal : Espinosa, Dodi, «Mythologizing», Winter, 2011/12



Born in 1983, Rinus Van de Velde is a Belgian artist who lives and works in the neighborhood of Borgerhout in Antwerp. He studied sculpture, but has mostly been active as a drawer since. For Van de Velde, drawing means imposing order on a stubborn reality. The point of departure for his work is the staged world of photographic representation. His grand scale drawings, in fact, hearken back to a personal archive of photographs. By adding text captions to his images, he lays aside the original facts in order to create space for a new and personal story.

Van de Velde doesn't think his work can be generalized and brought back to one statement. His work is a practise instead. If there is a statement, it is evolving with each new work he makes. In that process, he tries to test several statements, often art historical ones, and always in an explicitly inauthentic way. For example, by working with a fictive or existing character. This process of working implies in a way that he tries to avoid formulating one so-called personal statement.

Hello Rinus, I would like to know when you first became interested in art. In the end of December 1999 I spent a few days in Paris with some friends. We had planned to visit the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, but when we arrived there, there was a long queue. I estimated it would take about three hours to get in. Luckily,

What's the most important thing you have learned during your art studies? I didn't learn a lot of concrete things from my teachers, but I think I did pick up an attitude.

Do you think it's important to follow art school? Do you believe in the established education system applied to arts? I'm not sure it is important to learn concrete skills, because every skill you need is so specific, you have to discover it yourself. But I do think that spending four years in an art school allows you to focus on art, because you're surrounded by people that are also working on art. Being in this 'safe' place, where it seems there is no outside of art, makes it easier to develop the obsessiveness you need to become an artist.

Inside this bubble you started with small-scale coloured pictures, and suddenly a strong contrast marked your creations, passing from small postcard format to large scale drawings and from colour to black and white charcoal drawings. How has your career developed into the use of this technique? I started to find it more and more important to make drawings that you could actually inhabit, and that are at the same time obviously fictive. So I started to work on a larger scale because it allows the spectator and myself to imagine that one can actually step into the drawings. You also have to scan the image: you can't see in one blink of the eye. The choice for black and white has to

the 'mythic roots' of art. It has an anecdotal and narrative potential, and is inherently subjective. To be able to focus more on the fundamentals of drawing, I felt I needed to enlarge the size of my works, so that your eye could float over the image. The larger format also meant that the drawings distanced themselves from the photographic source material. Besides that, I developed a specific drawing technique in the last three years, by using a chalk based grounding to prepare the paper, which extends the possibilities of the formal aspect of drawing. Another reason why I switched to charcoal is because I found the colours were in a way an obstacle. You have to think if the green goes with the red, or what happens when you put one colour next to another. It slows down the process, and it has always been important to me to be able to work fast, so that I can come to a multitude of drawings. By only using black and white, all images are in a way linked to each other. Every image can hang next to another. For me, my work doesn't exist of single pieces, but forms an archive that tells a story on the wall. Mixing the colours or switching pencils from one colour to another is too slow.

You also incorporate several texts into your drawings, as in the case of your fictive friendship with Vladimir Majakovski. What is your main intention in the interaction between texts and graphics? At first the texts served as a title, but

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a friend convinced me to wait in line, because when I was finally inside, I felt attracted to the paintings. It was the first time I had that sensation. I saw works by Nolde and De Vlaminck, which I can still bring to mind very well. Once I got back home, I started reading about art obsessively. I needed a fundament, a history and a bigger story to locate the works I had seen in Paris. It really opened up an incredibly large and fascinating world.

What about drawing? I discovered drawing through my practise as an artist. After having made sculptures and paintings, I found out that drawing was the most interesting medium for me because it is so basic and immediate. It only takes a piece of paper and a pencil, so to speak, and you don't need a huge storage space and lots of assistants. Because my work is autobiographical, albeit in a deformed way, I think drawing suits me best. When it comes to concrete encounters, I remember seeing a Paul Noble exhibition that made me realize that drawing is very much about designing a plan, an idea... It is the perfect medium to visualize something that has not been made before, which makes it ideal to create a fictive universe, as is the case in my work.

do with the primitiveness of it, but also with the fact that charcoal is better suited for large-scale drawings. And I am also not interested in making photorealistic illusions: my illusions are, I guess, mostly narrative. They have a documentary value, and often relate to the past. I think I link black and white with memories.

What do you find interesting about drawing versus other mediums? And using charcoal instead of other drawing utensils? At a certain point, I wanted the drawings to become more autonomous. For me, the medium specificity of drawing is a very important aspect in my work. I have always been interested in the consequences of using this very particular medium in contemporary art. Drawing traditionally occupies a marginal position in the history of plastic art. I am interested in the medium of drawing exactly because of its fast, experimental nature. Drawing is a means of finding your way about things that is quicker than, for example, sculpture. I agree with Walter Benjamin's view on the symbolic nature of the 'horizontal' drawing, stating that it "is not a window on the world," like a painting, "but a device for understanding our place within the universe." In this respect, drawing is the perfect medium to study and question

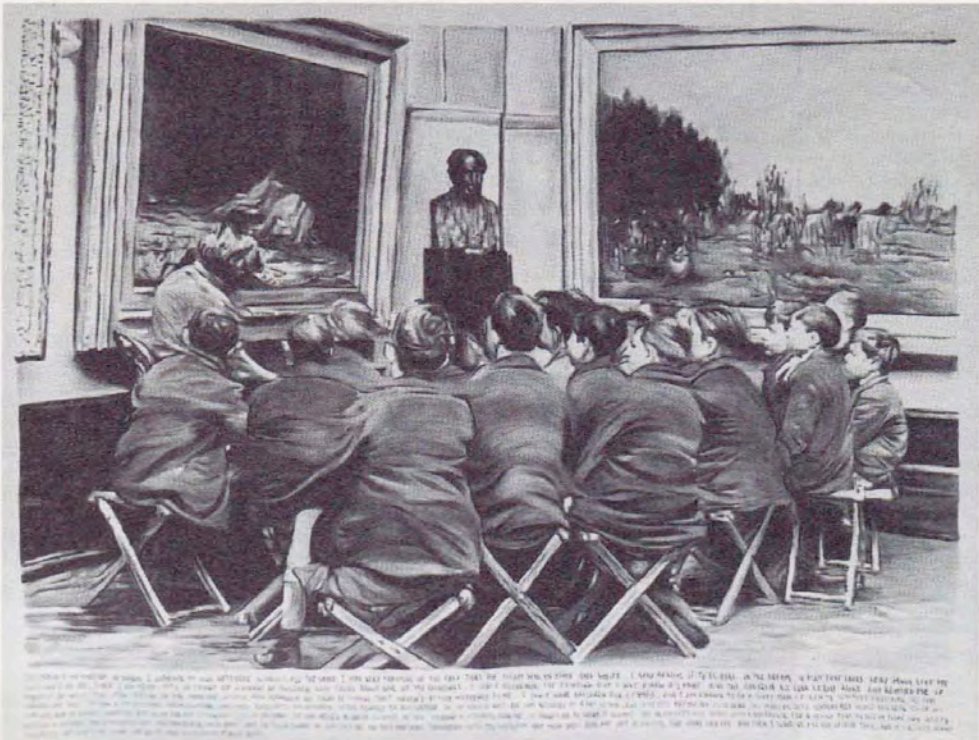
I felt they were too easy to ignore. I thought they were an important part of my work, so I decided to incorporate them in the work itself. I wanted to force the spectator to take my intentions and my own reading of the work into account. Later on, the texts took on a more narrative form, and eventually they became short stories or fragments of a larger story.

At the same time, text is a way for me to deal with the ambivalent nature of images. They enable me to structure a multitude of images that can be read in a multitude of ways. You might call that a form of appropriation, but to me it's a natural way of being an artist: I use existing matter to make something new and personal. In doing this, my own perspective, or persona, is always at the centre.

What other fictive relationships have you developed in your different series and why? Haroun Tazieff, a volcanologist, William Crowder, a modernist and Richard Burton, a traveler... They are all representations of attitudes I want to relate to.

Has literature influenced you? My work is primarily influenced by the genre of the biography, and by the lives of artists and other characters behind them. There is a literary element to this too, as

The man speaks of my immense legacy, 200cm x 270cm



The studio will be a gateway to the splendid fiction that is larger than life, 200cm x 240cm



"I don't believe that I am born as an artist, although every day I try to lie to myself that I am. When I can't believe in the lie anymore, I agree with Jacques Brel, who said, "Le talent, ça n'existe pas, le talent, c'est avoir l'envie de faire quelque chose"

I focus on the mythical and thus fictionalized dimensions of the biography. For some time, I've also worked on my texts together with a befriended writer named Koen Sels. Through his background, he inevitably brought some more direct literary influences in the texts. I know he likes the labyrinthic, 'large' novels of 'postmodern' American writers like Thomas Pynchon, Don DeLillo and David Foster Wallace, and also feels connected to Romanticism in all its different forms. Both influences also relate strongly to my work. For example, there's the multitude of characters on the one hand, and the desire to imagine a personal universe on the other.

Who are your favourite writers? My own favourite writers are very diverse, but I mostly like them for their abilities as narrators. I read, among others, Borges, Sebald, Dostoyevsky... But whenever I read literature, I feel that I am losing my focus on art. So I don't read that many novels anymore.

How do you find yourself being a narrative artist that uses a marginal technique in the history of plastic art? Good. I love narrativity in art, and drawing is a beautiful medium. Both are underestimated in a different way, but I don't care too much about that.

And how do you see yourself in the art scene market? I feel connected to Gerard Richter, who once said, "Gallerists are important. Not only at the beginning. Without them, nothing works, because you need one (or several) who exhibit and sell the work, who take care of everything, who know everything, and who stand up for you. Ideal people!"

What do you think is the main function of the artist in actual society? Machines have functions, human beings and artists especially don't. There is no such thing as a given role of the artist. I think it is precisely because artists move through a domain that's separated from the world. They can reflect artistically on that world, or find an artistic attitude towards it. An artist doesn't play games – such as politics – for which someone else has set out the rules.

And for you, what's the most important quality while talking about art? Every artist has to develop his or her own vocabulary to talk about their work. I saw lectures by, for example, Luc Tuymans and Dana Schutz; their way of relating about their work couldn't be more different, but they are both equally valid to me. I remember once seeing a lecture by Raymond Pettibon. After the first question he paused for five minutes to take the time to think, and in the end answered with 'yes' or 'no.' This too makes sense.

During the last year your career has been evaluated very quickly, how do you cope with success? Success is an ever-changing thing. It is not fixed; it develops, and that's what's so good about it. In the beginning, I though success was having a show in the local art gallery in the village. After a while, success became selling a work, and nowadays success is something different for me. In other words: I never think I am successful, because when you achieve something, it just points to achieving something new.

You said that drawing is the perfect medium to study and question the mythic roots of art, the same way your work refers to myths. What's the meaning of this word in your universe? I think it refers to the way we edit, model and structure our lives into something meaningful and bigger, into something that transcends our day-to-day existence. The myth has a certain structure that allows you to understand your life as something narrative, as a process that moves towards a goal, a conclusion. Several of these myths exist in our culture, and they all seem to serve as a mirror in which we see what we want to see. In my work, I try to design an obviously fictive myth that is sometimes even bombastic and arrogant, but at the same time I like to believe in that fiction, use it as an instrument.

Normally you refer to myths in your different exhibitions, how do you manage your relationship with these figures? It's true that my work refers to myths. I think that in general, you could say that I am mythologizing my own biography, by constructing a fake drawn and written autobiog-

raphy. By weaving my fictitious story into another 'real' biography of a historical figure, I try to make his story my own, and create what one could call a mythical biography of myself. The 'I' in this biography, however, does not overlap my real self, since it is a more complete, composed and edited self. I believe this self-conscious untruthfulness is a necessary strategy in dealing with identity and the self. By doing this, you are at the same time, of course, deconstructing the myth of a biography. Both processes go hand in hand.

What are you working on now? Can you tell us a bit about your upcoming series or even myths? Now I'm experimenting in the studio, trying new ways of drawing. Looking and reading a lot about other artists. Wandering through the city. Watching movies and trying to get warm. Some future projects will focus more straightforwardly on my own life and close surroundings, compared to the series I did on historical or fictive characters. I am thinking of designing a mythology of what is actually going on right now in my life, or even let my life be altered by a mythology I design for my work.

Finally, in your opinion, are you born and artist? Or is it something you learn? I don't believe that I am born as an artist, although every day I try to lie to myself that I am. When I can't believe in the lie anymore, I agree with Jacques Brel, who said, "Le talent, ça n'existe pas, le talent, c'est avoir l'envie de faire quelque chose."

*All works: Charcoal on paper, 2011.
Courtesy of Tim Van Laere Gallery*