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Daemen, Merel: Interview

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Rinus Van de Velde

An artist, charcoal, the studio.

Nederlandstalige versie

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Belgian artist Rinus Van De Velde (1983, Leuven) produces large-scale charcoal drawings accompanied by texts, written in collaboration with publicist Koen Sels, to connect his visual output. Van De Velde studied sculpting at Sint-Lucas in Antwerp, after which he took a post-academic course at the HISK in Ghent. He relies on a daily routine, follows a tight schedule in the studio and draws every day producing a large quantity of work. In the past the artist used fictional as well as historical characters. Heroes and anti-heroes alike, such as the sculptor William Crowder, the vulcanologist Harroun Tazzief, the poet Vladimir Majakovski, and the legendary chess-player Bobby Fisher, to name but a few. In recent solo-exhibitions 'the Story of Frederic, Conrad, Jim and Rinus' (Tim Van Laere Gallery) and 'The Islander' (Zink Gallery) characters reoccur; philosopher Frederic, writer Conrad, and gallerist Jim are all based on close friends and colleagues of the artist. Since the last few years Van De Velde is no longer using paper for his drawings; he's made a switch to canvas treated with plaster. This way he can work more as a sculptor/with sculpting techniques, physically working the charcoal with his hands and fingers, pushing and pulling it into forms.

rinusvandevelde.com





Why is a studio important for you?

I think in a lot of ways the studio of an artist is defining the kind of art he makes. When I was younger and I didn't have money, I worked in my small apartment. My drawings were small back then. At the HISK my drawings grew bigger along with the space. In the last studio before this one, my drawings could grow to life-size. In my current studio I can also build decors. I think you shouldn't pin yourself to having a studio though. You should always be able to go back to that tiny apartment you once started in. When you are young you may get fooled by this notion of size. It can be depressing. For example, when looking at recent work by Paul McCarthy and Mike Kelly you're confronted with the enormous size they always work in. But when you consider their early work as well, you'll see they started small too. You have to be able to work with what you have.

So why a studio? Outdoors there is more space.

I am definitely a studio artist. Guillaume Bijl for example doesn't have a studio. He doesn't need it. But I can't work without a space of my own. I am not the kind of artist that goes on the streets and becomes inspired there or makes work there. I'm not an artist like Gabriel Orozco that makes pictures of things he finds on his path. I need that white space.

You've switched a considerable number of studios. Is this one the ultimate space for you?

First I had my apartment as a workplace, then I moved to HISK, then there was my studio at Veronik Willems's place and then my studio in the Bothastraat. This is the fifth. Each place has its limitations soon. You rapidly go to that ultimate border of possibilities. I always struggle with storage space. Guillaume Bijl once said to me "the bigger the studio of an artist, the worse he is." Of course, with him not having a studio himself, he said something about the quality of his own work (laughs). But he has a valid point nevertheless.

Would you consider going back to a smaller studio?

No, at least definitely not at this point. But I do notice that it goes in stages. For the preparation of my last solo exhibition at Zink in Berlin, we built a mountain in my studio with a small house on it. After the mountain had been there for a week, I thought "Shit, I can't break it down for some time now." That happened only 6 months later. If you are confronted with consequences like that you do fantasize about how great it would be to work at a kitchen table again. But it fluctuates.





Are you okay with being alone all the time here?

I used to be constantly alone in my studio. That was difficult sometimes. I came up with all kinds of strategies against loneliness, like watching TV, listening to an audiobook, going out for lunch or dinner in the Café de Stanny every day, etc. If you are always busy working, you lose grip on the outside world a bit. The outside world and people in it transform into a kind of fear, something you want to avoid. Now there is Maarten and Erik, my production assistants. That is good remedy against paranoia and loneliness. Things happen because of them. You have a dialogue. The fear fades away. But there is always a part of me that misses being alone. My headphones can make me happy, and the sliding door that I can close. It's constantly looking for a balance. Sometimes I feel guilty that I am napping for example, or thinking of watching a movie, or walking in the park. I don't want to be an asshole. Yet, I shouldn't be feeling like that, and I definitely have to keep napping and walking and seeing movies. I am getting better at dealing with those kinds of things though.





Are there things you cleaned up before we came? Things you don't want others to see?

No, but if there was standing something in the studio which I was really not certain about, I would have turned it around. If I was trying something out, I would have put it away, I guess. I think you don't very often really see a studio how it really is as an outsider because, I guess, artists have the tendency to always want to create little exhibitions. A studio is a place where you need to test things, you know. It is difficult for me sometimes because there are people working here all the time. At school I found that hard too. While testing out, sometimes you know it is going to fail, but you still have to test the waters. When people see that, it could feel painfully. But that's how it works.

You had an exhibition in march 2013 in CAC Malaga where you portrayed yourself in the studios of famous artists and scientists. You obviously also have an attraction towards workplaces of others. Do you still think a studio is a romantic place, being an artist yourself?

Yes. I do. A place where people work in has something extremely mythical. There is a famous picture of Franz Kline looking out of the window of his loft in New York. Years later Maurizio Cattelan sees it and decides, because of that very image, he wants to be an artist. When I was younger I watched that Basquiat movie and I thought how cool that must have been. Now I realize I am not that kind of a person or artist to

be doing those sorts of things, shooting heroin, making wild paintings. But it attracts me a lot. It is a still image. You don't see all the bullshit around it. You just see someone working, making things. And that is beautiful. Furthermore it is also interesting of course to see how people work, to see their methods. Neo Rauch for example has a super clean studio. You never see his sources, his influences, you never see sketches. He hides everything. You just wonder, you know. How does he do it? What is inspiring him?



What do you prefer, the mystery or the transparency?

A bit of both, I guess. One extreme is for example the Francis Bacon

studio. Everything is completely trashed. Everywhere you look you see crap. Rag scraps, little pieces of paper, books, etc. The other extreme is something like the Gerard Richter studio. That almost looks like the room of a surgeon. If it fits, it fits. I recently saw a picture of the studio of Monet, with him posing in the middle of the room, his famous waterlilies in the background. It shook me into adoration. An incredible image. You start dreaming. I immediately wanted a couch like he has in that picture. You imagine him napping in that. But then reality kicks in and you realize that Maarten could come in on you, napping in the middle of the room, while he wants to work on a decor.

Where might your studio find itself between those two extremes?

I don't think my atelier is very romantic. I am afraid it is very practical. You can't have both. That is why it is so interesting for me to crawl under another's skin, to think about how Ellsworth Kelly's atelier would look like, to imagine I am that kind of an artist, to build a decor here, to sit in it and think "So that's how it feels!" It's not per se about that one moment, it is more like fulfilling a kind of fantasy, maybe a kind of surroundings-therapy. In the gardens of retirement homes they build bus stop shelters with benches for patients with dementia that want to run away. There never passes a bus, but apparently it appeals to the elderly, and sitting there calms them. You have an urge, you sit in this soothing surrounding and afterwards your drift-urge is over.





In your work you orchestrate scenes, a kind of parallel reality. At the same time your work deals about looking for authenticity as a person, or as an artist. Maybe about a moment you collide with yourself. I find it a bit of a paradox. How do you see that?

I think the question about authenticity is a very relevant one. Thinking about it, you often first run into very romantic ideas like being alone on an island. There you would find the true, authentic art. Often it has to do with isolation. Alone on a mountain. Or, like at the exhibition I made that was displayed at Tim Van Laere, in Antwerp, to live in the woods with 4 others in a mini-community. Or being a kind of hiker, walking alone through abstract landscapes. When I saw that image of Monet, I thought "Fuck, I really want to make a painting like those lilies!" But I can't choose for myself. I am too much of a multi-fragmented guy. Maybe that is the reason why I try to be all those people in one/at the same time. I am definitely not going to paint waterlilies. Monet already did it and is a

am definitely not going to paint waterlilies. Monet already did it and is a lot better at it. But what I am able to do is re-build his studio next door, and put a couch in there.

Is it sometimes confusing in a way, to play someone else in your drawings all the time? In your work you tend to play into that a little. There seems to exist a confusion about what is true and what not, in the sense of paranoia maybe. How do you experience that?

It is important as a viewer that you realize my work is about fiction. It is not my intention to fool the public. If I would remake the Monet studio, I don't want to trick you into thinking I am really making waterlilies. You also see in Cindy Shermans' work when she is some character or another. It is also about that feasibility. I try to show that construction in drawings. You feel for example that it is built in an hangar. You must feel it is not real. You sometimes show yourself like you would have wanted to be.



What about irony? Is there room for irony in your work?

In my field of work, it would be crazy if there wasn't the slightest form of humor in there. Because I am not crazy. I am not schizophrenic. I don't make outsider art either. And yes, that puts things into perspective a little bit. Maybe it therefore also has something humorous. I find it more difficult though to think about irony. Irony so easily turns into cynical. It gives me a kind of weird detached relationship with my work that I don't like so much.

I do somehow see some irony in your work though.

My work is really not so ironic. I don't necessarily want it to be at least. If the character in my drawings suddenly becomes an adventurer, it is because I would want to be different. Because I would want to be more like that. It is not laughing with that kind of way of wanting to see the world. Of course you realize when you are making it, it is not about you, and it has some self-reflection in it, and therefore maybe some irony. But not in any way is it criticism. I used to make work about the art world. Some read it as critique, while actually I really love it. It fascinates and interests me. Stories about it, lives spent, certain people. I don't want to make an ironic stance against it. Irony can have something very vulgar. Something you can spread over everything without adding meaning. If I make work based on an anecdote of Franz West, I do understand it can seem ironic, but I really do that out of some sort of admiration for him. It has nothing to do with nihilism. In that world, in those decors, nothing is nihilistic. If I am making drawings afterwards, of course there is going to be this kind of relative awareness, a moment where you take distance. But that doesn't mean there is irony at work. This painting for example is an image supposedly of the father of James Ensor on his death bed. There is no irony. It is heavy. But there is room for that in my work.



What are your plans for 2015?

There are a couple of art fairs that I am going to make some work for. Dallas, Cologne and Brussels. I also make some work for Paul Smith, and there is a public assignment. I will be at the Biennale of Venice with some work. And Beaufort. In September I plan a big solo again at the Tim Van Laere Gallery and in December I am going to have a show in Sao Paolo, Brazil.



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