

## The Magic of Charcoal

Rinus Van de Velde, Rising Star in the Flemish Art World

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[ J A N V A N H O V E ]

'A James Dean skilled with charcoal' is how one critic characterised Rinus Van de Velde at the start of his career. It was an apt comparison, because this young artist displays an almost provocative virtuosity. A lot of hype soon developed around his work, which consists mainly of monumental charcoal drawings. Wherever he exhibited, collectors, curators, critics and enthusiasts fell under the spell of his images, the insistent presence of his figures and the obvious skill with which it is all put down on paper. But what lies at the heart of this fantasy world? Why does the artist himself appear as a character in almost all his works? And where does one situate these drawings in the adventurous art scene that has managed to reach out from Flanders to an international audience in recent decades? We shall try to answer these questions in this article.

Rinus Van de Velde (Leuven, 1983) was no child prodigy. Although in the course of time he conceived a huge admiration for Picasso, who was able to draw a bullfight so masterfully when only six years old, Van de Velde himself only became interested in art as a teenager. It was sparked off by a visit to an exhibition on Fauvism in Paris. The energy that radiated from the works by Matisse and his fellows made a deep impression on this young visitor, although as he freely admitted he did not understand much about it. He wondered where this vitality originated, and how these silent canvases could have such a powerful effect on him. He sought answers in books, firstly the catalogue of the exhibition and then in more general works on art history, including E.H. Gombrich's *The Story of Art*. On the basis of the artists' lives and background, he gradually started to understand something of their work. Without realising it, he had found the key to a world that would take a lasting hold on him.

### A quick and light medium

As a result of his experiences in Paris and his subsequent increasing interest in art, Van de Velde decided to study art. He opted for sculpture at St Lucas in Antwerp, attracted mainly by the physical work involved. But the complex and protracted work process soon started to pall on him. In the course of his work



Rinus Van de Velde, *An investigation into the hyperpersonal ...*, 2015,  
Charcoal on canvas, artist frame, 210 x 250 cm,  
Courtesy Tim Van Laere Gallery, Antwerp

he discovered that drawing suited him much better, because it enabled him to achieve a result sooner.

'Drawing is a quick and light medium that suits my temperament better,' he says. 'I was soon doing one work a day. Drawing gives me more of a sense of freedom than painting. When you paint you have to face up to a powerful tradition, from Van Eyck to Gerhard Richter. Whatever you do, you soon find yourself working in the style of one or other great predecessor. This applies much less when it comes to drawing. Drawing has by tradition served an auxiliary purpose. Most drawings are sketches or preliminary studies from which a painting or other work will later emerge. I find that a shame, because drawings are worthwhile as works of art in their own right too. My drawings are intended to be fully-fledged, independent works of art. Which is how I arrived at these large formats, although initially my drawings were much smaller.'

Van de Velde made his debut with drawings in coloured pencil. Their small format enabled him to work in series and to hang the sheets in each series alongside one another on the wall so that a story could take shape. In the early period he learnt a lot from looking at other artists' work. 'Copying what you think is good is the best way of finding your own direction,' he says. It was only after a few years that he evolved towards black and white, larger formats and

charcoal as his main medium. His most recent drawings often reach three metres long and two high – in 2014 he even drew a panoramic view of the city that was ten metres long. He prefers to work on canvas, using charcoal on a coating of plaster, which gives him every opportunity to introduce contrasts and nuances into his scenes. The result is that his charcoal drawings often have the quality of a painting, though they also evoke the atmosphere of old film stills, or of an old black and white strip cartoon. Many of Van de Velde's works show dark scenes illuminated by bright light.

## The myth of artisthood

Van de Velde initially worked on the basis of found images. His archives contain thousands of photos cut out of old magazines such as *National Geographic* or simply taken from the internet. He is not interested in photos that he can easily identify: each image has to have something odd about it to be suitable for use. Van de Velde is keen to emphasise that his work is imaginary. This enables him to travel to a different place or time and step into the shoes of other artists, scientists, sportsmen and adventurers. For instance, you encounter both the painter Elsworth Kelly and the poet Vladimir Mayakovsky in his drawings, as well as the volcanologist Haroun Tazieff and the chess-player Bobby Fischer. Although he describes his work as 'a fictional autobiography', it is only partly about himself. It is more the case that the artist is a character in his own stories. He wonders what it would be like to paint like Elsworth Kelly, and what he would have been doing in Mayakovsky's day. The fantasy world he draws gives him the opportunity to explore new possibilities of reality.

One of the more important themes in Van de Velde's drawings is the myth of artisthood. In the early days he was fascinated by the painter Jean-Michel Basquiat, who died prematurely and whom he learnt about through the film on his eventful life. Someone else who also had a major influence on him was Rodney Graham, who, like Van de Velde, is fond of putting himself in another character's shoes and then inventing a story around it. In the monumental charcoal drawings Van de Velde presented at the Venice Biennale in 2015, he portrayed himself amidst a set of fake Andy Warhol Brillo boxes. What does it mean to be an artist, and what makes an artist's work original and special? These questions form a *leitmotif* in his oeuvre.

## A shrewd career

Rinus Van de Velde's career is a perfect example of those of today's young artists. After studying at St Lucas he took various jobs. For instance, for a time he toured as a technical assistant with Meg Stuart's dance company. This introduced him into a creative environment and left him sufficient free time to draw. He also worked as a driver for the Antwerp artist Guillaume Bijl, who pointed the way to the HISK, the Higher Institute of Fine Art, in Ghent, where talented young artists are given two years to work under the guidance of established artists, museum people, art academics and curators. This institution played an important part in Van de Velde's development. 'At the HISK I learnt to under-

stand and explain my work better,' he says. 'As a young artist you work mainly intuitively. At the HISK you learn to see structures in your work, to establish a framework for it and to express it clearly in words. Which is extremely important in the art world. At the same time you are given time to eliminate your weak points. What is more, at the HISK you come into contact with people who may be able to give you the opportunity to exhibit; but in my view it's the wrong approach if you only take the course to build up a network.'

Van de Velde started exhibiting in 2004. Four years later he was given his first show in a museum: at the S.M.A.K. in Ghent, Belgium's leading museum of contemporary art, he showed a series of drawings about a fictional artist under the title *William Crowder – 40 years of sculpture*. After that things went very quickly. Van de Velde's work found its way to arts centres and galleries in Spain, the Netherlands, Brazil and the United States. In 2009 his work was shown at Art Basel Miami. In 2015 he took part in the Flemish Community exhibition in the Palazzo Nani Mocenigo at the Venice Biennale. His first major solo exhibition is in 2016, at the S.M.A.K. In the meantime he has found a base at Tim Van Laere's gallery in Antwerp, where he has shown several series that have attracted a lot of attention. Even the music world has discovered his work: the well-known Flemish singer Raymond Van het Groenewoud chose one of Van de Velde's drawings for the cover of his album *De laatste rit*.

Rinus Van de Velde, *Driving on the highway, I can't help but wondering where all the other roads go*, 2015,  
Charcoal on canvas, artist frame, 154 x 233 cm  
Courtesy Tim Van Laere Gallery, Antwerp





Rinus Van de Velde, *It's all about rescheduling my desire*, 2015,  
Charcoal on canvas, artist frame, 210 x 325 cm,  
Courtesy Tim Van Laere Gallery, Antwerp

## An uninhabited island

In 2014 a well-illustrated book on Rinus Van de Velde's work was published by Hannibal. It includes two series that provide a good impression of the artist's unusual subjects and methods.

The first series, *The Story of Frederic, Conrad, Jim and Rinus*, is about the experiences of Van de Velde and his friends in a commune in the woods. So as to work as realistically as possible, and above all to remain in command of the scene he was going to draw, he built the whole of the setting himself, together with his friends. In addition, to get as close as possible to the atmosphere of a film image, the scenes were lit by a professional lighting technician. The photos were only taken when the whole setting was ready and the characters in their positions. They then provided the basis for Van de Velde's charcoal drawings. This means the work of art is the end product of a process that involves much more than pure drawing. As he himself says, Van de Velde made it 'absurdly difficult' for himself, but the quality of his drawings is probably due in part to these intensive preparations.

The cast of *The Story of Frederic, Conrad, Jim and Rinus* comprises four cliché characters: the artist, his art dealer, a writer and a philosopher. A story takes shape around these characters, as in a soap or a sitcom. The events are in themselves trivial: you see the friends playing chess, holding a discussion, loafing about and having a bit of a tussle. Yet Van de Velde is able to give a poetic quality to each scene. To achieve this he uses such film techniques as close-ups and tight framing. And above all he is a master in the evocation of moods, the depiction of action and capturing striking details. The viewers have to feel the realism, but they must also see that each work of art is a construction.

The second series, *The Islander*, is located on an inhospitable island in the sea. Van de Velde built the setting for this series himself too, and in fact exhibited it together with the drawings in a Berlin gallery. The exhibition is about a young man – the artist himself – who is washed ashore on a desert island. As always, Van de Velde starts fantasising about what might happen in this sort of situation. Whereas the atmosphere in *The Story of Frederic, Conrad, Jim and Rinus* was primarily sultry, in *The Islander* it is all about misfortune and adventure. The elements are unleashed, the castaway suffers great hardships. Until a lifeboat moors at the island, containing three characters who are not entirely unknown to us...



Rinus van de Velde, *They call themselves Bossie and Marty – I have never asked their real names or where they come from, supposing they preferred to remain anonymous*, 2015,  
Charcoal on canvas, artist frame, 210 x 230 cm,  
Courtesy Tim Van Laere Gallery, Antwerp

## An obsession with drawing

Drawing is an obsessive occupation for Van de Velde. He engages in it every day and it calms him. And, like Cindy Sherman, he is his own constantly available model. In a series of self-portraits, for example, he presents himself as a tennis-player and as a miner, or while cleaning his shoes or drawing in his studio.

But however obsessively engaged with images Van de Velde may be, at the same time he is aware that images cannot be trusted. Which is why he adds extensive subtitles to many of his drawings. He thinks them up together with a friend. This is quite unusual in visual art. 'I don't like simply sending images out into the world and leaving their interpretation to the viewer,' he says. 'For each drawing I want to give an indication of what I intended and of the story behind it. Even if most people do not read the subtitles, they still make me feel good. Though I must add that the stories are not the most important thing to me. The setting is at least as essential as the plot. And each story is in the first place a reason for drawing. For me, drawing is the beginning and the end.'



By opting to draw in charcoal, Van de Velde occupies a distinct position in the art scene of the Low Countries. Just as Luc Tuymans and Michael Borremans have given a new impulse to painting, and Berlinde De Bruyckere injects her sculptures with an unprecedented expressive power, Rinus Van de Velde rejuvenates drawing and shows its new potential. In the case of all these artists, an original formal idiom is combined with sound traditional skills. This is probably the explanation for their undeniable success, not only in the Low Countries, but also far beyond. ■

*Translated by Gregory Ball*



Rinus Van de Velde, *Some part of me knew something was out of joint...*, 2015,  
Charcoal on canvas, framed, 310 x 540 cm  
Courtesy Tim Van Laere Gallery, Antwerp