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Interview with Rinus Van de Velde

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Set in the studio for the exhibition, courtesy of Galerie Zink

Rinus Van de Velde describes his works as 'fictional autobiographies'. These huge, high-contrast narrative paintings are seeped in deadpan humour and references, and often project the artist as the 'hero' of intensely questioning vignettes. His new works, currently exhibited at Galerie Zink in Berlin, are the result of a long process that began with building a wooden cabin in his studio: a cabin you will find amongst the paintings when you enter the gallery. Rinus speaks to *Elephant* about the show, solitude, and undoing the limitations of reality.

How did the works in your current exhibition at Galerie Zink develop?

First of all, I wanted to create a kind of environment with strict limits: a closed circuit that could generate a story and would be conceivable as an image itself. For my show last year at Tim Van Laere Gallery, I built a big set in my studio (four wooden cabins in a forest), which I didn't show in the gallery. I wanted the drawings to be the only end product, and treated the set as something temporary, an invisible presence. At Zink, though, I wanted to make a set that I could also show in the exhibition, to see how the drawings would relate to it. The idea was that it would be something in between a sculpture and a set, a physical presence that would be placed in the middle of the gallery, as a leftover from the scenes we would stage. Before I came up with a well-defined narrative, I decided to create a rock surrounded by water on top of which I built a house. I imagined myself arriving there after a heroic swim through the ocean and deciding to live there, in complete isolation. In the story that evolved from that idea, I gradually become this bearded outcast that is completely estranged from society and loses himself in hallucinations and nightmares.

So it was by constructing the set, that the story and the images took on a clear shape. When the set was finished I started photographing different scenes, which I used as sketches for the actual drawings.

How do you think the set's presence in the exhibition affects the reading of the works?

My work always balances on the border between fiction and reality: I create a fictional autobiography that is nevertheless strongly embedded in reality. Compare it to the fake bus stops they sometimes build near homes for people that suffer from dementia and have escapist tendencies. The bus stop allows them to wait there for a while and live out their fantasy, and when the bus doesn't show up in the end, the

desire to escape has tempered and they return home. The set I built has a similar function, as it allows me to test constructions, fantasies and desires that have an actual impact on reality.

By showing the set in the exhibition, I reveal that it is a construction, that the photographs weren't shot on location. In the drawings, you can also notice the surrounding of my studio; I don't try to hide elements that don't belong to the picture, like a chair or the roof of the studio. When photographing, I would always take one step too far away from the set, so to speak, so that its fictitious nature would always be apparent.

Besides that I also like the idea of showing how the work is constructed. Building sets became a major part of my work. You could say I started putting too much effort in preparing for a drawing, mainly because I can't draw from imagination. In a way, drawing became only one aspect of my practice, and I found it important that this was somehow reflected in the presentation.

Finally, I also like that there is something that fills the space of the gallery. Before, I always had the feeling that something had exploded and a centrifugal force had blown everything on the walls.

Apart from yourself, who are the figures in your paintings? And is their true identity ever relevant to the work's narrative?

In the new series, three of my friends play a role. Two of them were already introduced in a previous series, called 'The story of Frederic, Conrad, Jim and Rinus'. Frederic is played by a close friend who is a philosopher, Conrad by the writer I collaborate with, who is also a good friend. Their fictitious biographies are based on true facts, which is also the case with my own character. The only difference is that I am the only character who bears his own name; in the end, it is my fiction they figure in. In the show at Zink, I hallucinate that Fredric and Conrad come to visit me on the island. Another friend of mine is their ferryman, who is said to be 'a man without qualities' on one of the drawings. Their true identities are not important; they are just inspiring guys that hang around in my studio quite regularly.

You've often said you work alone. How do you think solitude and imagination relate to one another?

I think solitude and imagination do go hand in hand, but I have to say my working process changed a lot over the past few years. Whereas I used to spend my days alone in the studio, I am now collaborating with a few people. Two friends helped

me build the sets, another friend — the one that plays Conrad in the drawings — writes the texts together with me, and a third one does the photographs. I noticed imagination also benefits from these kinds of collaborations. The actual drawing I still do on my own, but in general my practice is not that individualistic. You could even say we form a small scene of people who work on something together, and inspire each other's work. I like this way of working a lot, since I don't like to be alone at all.

Much of your work seems to depict people (particularly men) in various states of listlessness. Why do you think this is?

You could get this impression because the drawings are all staged. When shooting a scene, we are not really acting at all, but posing for the camera. The idea, in the end, is not to make stills from a movie that doesn't exist, but to make drawings, compositions. There is a weird formality about the silent poses of the characters in the images, which could of course easily be mistook for listlessness. Nobody is really interacting and everybody is on his own. We are all individuals trying to cope with a given scene, which is most of the time quite harsh and awkward. But I like the artificiality that this way of working brings about. In many ways, my work is about posing and self-presentation. When you take a picture of someone who is freezes his action, you give him too much time to think about how he comes across. The result is a picture of how people would like to be seen by others, or by a camera.

Do you consider your work to be existential in any way?

It is definitely existential in the sense that it is self-centered: my own character has become the motor of my work, generating questions about where the story should go and what kind of artist I should be. But I don't think there is one single self that character grows into. As strange as it might seem if you consider the formal limitations I have given myself, my work has always been a method to not become a singular artist. My own taste in art is quite eclectic, and I can't see any definite fundamentals for a clear-cut artistic program of my own. One of the main reasons why I chose to work on a fictional autobiography, is that there are no limitations to what my character can become: he can be a 19th-century sculptor in one series and a hallucinatory outsider in another. In this parallel universe, I can test all sorts of positions without choosing one for the rest of my days. On the other hand, the limitations of my actual life do find their way into my fictional world. It is this tension between and blurring of two dimensions, I am most interested in, I guess.

Rinus Van de Velde will show at Galerie Zink until 9th November 2014.