



Day in the Life: Rinus Van de Velde

As a teenager, *Rinus Van de Velde* dreamed of following in the footsteps of his avant-garde art heroes. The only problem? He quickly realized he was more of a routine-loving homebody than a rebellious hedonist. In Antwerp, we meet the wild child who never was—and hear how art allows him to lead a double life. Words by *Pip Usher* & Photography by *Marsý Hild Þórsdóttir*.







Back when Rinus Van de Velde was an ordinary teenager living in an ordinary village in rural Belgium, he saw something on television that would change what happened next. It was a biopic of Jean-Michel Basquiat, the prodigiously talented *enfant terrible* of New York's '80s art scene. "I realized that, apart from all the normality I saw [here], this was also a way that you could lead your life," Van de Velde, who now lives in Antwerp, recalls. Born to a teacher mother and an engineer father, he had never met a bona fide artist before. Captivated by this televised portrayal of a tortured creative, he began to pretend to be such a man himself. In his bedroom, he'd quietly practice drawing—all the while fantasizing about the other, more exciting, life that he felt certain was out there waiting for him. He visited Paris' Museum of Modern Art and queued for three hours to see an exhibition on fauvist art. After that, it was decided: He too would join the iconoclastic ranks of art's avant-garde. "There was always a longing to be somebody like an artist or a rock star," he says.

In many ways, Van de Velde has accomplished what he set out to do. The 34-year-old is a leading figure in Belgium's contemporary art scene, with his work represented by galleries in Berlin and Antwerp. His large-scale charcoal drawings, many of which are self-portraits, show scenes of epic heroism and far-flung travels. In one, a wild-haired man hangs suspended by his feet with ropes as he daubs paints on a canvas in the center of a studio strewn with artistic trappings. Another depicts four hardy men aboard a tiny boat with a foam-tipped wave threatening to curl over the side.

In this hypermasculine world, gallantry and adventure go hand in hand and death lurks just over the next wave. It's precisely the unruliness that Van de Velde dreamed of from his bedroom several decades ago. And yet it's also diametrically opposed to his current real-life existence. "It's an autobiography, but a fictionalized autobiography," he explains from the home he shares with his girlfriend and their two-year-old twins. "For example, when I want to make a drawing of me in the jungle, I would never go to the actual jungle but I would stage one here in my studio."

Herein lies the paradox of Van de Velde; he's a dreamer and a free spirit who doesn't actually like to travel and who lives by a rigid routine. Each day he's in the studio by 8 a.m., and every lunchtime he joins friends at the same restaurant nearby. Sunday nights are spent at the



Van de Velde's conceptual approach is reminiscent of post-impressionist painter Henri Rousseau, who was famous for painting exotic jungles and animals that he had never seen in real life.



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movies. Even his monochromatic charcoal drawings are constructed within strict parameters. “I can’t cope with total freedom,” he admits, laughing. “If you put me in a studio with a lot of paint and a lot of color, I would get confused and frustrated because there’s too much possibility. I need restrictions.”

This inherent set of contradictions has been the defining feature of Van de Velde’s biography. After graduating from Antwerp’s St. Lucas School of Arts in 2006, he remained in the city, attracted to its cheap studio space and concentrated creative community. After a while, he found that his life had become entrenched there: close friends, a girlfriend. But still he found himself enamored with those teenage dreams of adventure.

“I started fantasizing about this life I didn’t have because I was always in my studio, which is a bit of a white cube,” he explains. “So, I started to invent this story, or these memories which never happened, and it enabled me to stay in my studio, where I like it most, and still think about experiences which I could have had.”

Alone in his studio, TV murmuring in the background, Van de Velde translated these fantasies into art. Working from a database of images collated from film stills, newspaper clippings, history books and more, he decided to deliberately ignore any text that accompanied them. Instead, he envisioned his own narrative. What was happening in each picture? And what role did he play in it? From there, he’d begin to draw, often inserting himself into the action as the floppy-haired, hollow-eyed protagonist. With each imaginative character, a fresh identity was assumed and a new experience had—from the safety and seclusion of his studio. “It’s all about pretending, not about reality,” he says.

As his body of work developed, Van de Velde progressed into building his own sets, transforming the studio space into whatever fantasy had captured his imagination. His latest exhibition, held at the Tim Van Laere Gallery in Antwerp, was based loosely on the rip-roaring escapades of Tintin in the graphic novel *Prisoners of the Sun*. But instead of Tintin he inserted his own alter ego, a forgotten abstract expressionist who went by the name of Robert Rino. Kidnapped by a collector, Rino was being forced to create art against his will as he waited in the jungle for rescue. In addition to his usual large-scale charcoal compositions, Van de Velde filled the gallery with pop-colored tropical plants, the open trunk of a pistachio-green car and wreckage from an aircraft that had nosedived into the center of the room. All were fashioned from wood and painted cardboard, lending a zany, cartoon-esque dimension to the

more somber scenes depicted in the drawings hung across the walls. “A lot of the time, I think it’s more interesting to fantasize about going to a jungle than to actually go there,” he explains. “I don’t like to travel that much and, when I do, I really don’t get why people are traveling the world to learn about it. You can also learn a lot from books or just by thinking about how it would be to be at a certain place.”

Having a fictional alter ego such as Robert Rino also allows him to experiment with appropriation art. Van de Velde showed a collection of work at a gallery in Amsterdam that was based around the fabricated experiences of Rino. “I made charcoal drawings showing his life and his career. And I also made some fake abstract expressionist works inspired [by] de Kooning and Twombly which were [exhibited as] original Robert Rino in the show,” he says. Although his own art has always been markedly different from that of the postwar painters, Van de Velde used Rino as a tool to connect with a transformative period in modern art’s history. “I liked the fact that when I was making these original Robert Rino works my whole practice was kind of split up and became schizophrenic,” he says.

Such untethered imagination—coupled with a highly distinctive drawing style—invites viewers into Van de Velde’s universe. From there, the inclusion of text draws them further into the drama unfolding on the canvas. As a teenager, he remembers arriving in Paris and looking at paintings with only a small plaque to guide him. In his own work, he has decided to lift the artist’s shroud so that his drawings carry clear meaning and emotional clout. “I think the best art is very individual,” he says. “It’s so related to the artist’s persona.”

This year, Van de Velde plans to collaborate with friends on a film that will expand upon his charcoal drawings and his sculptures to create an even more immersive experience. It’s a careful, deliberate deepening of the oeuvre he’s developed over the years and the next chapter in this wild fictional autobiography that’s emerging—even as his own role as leading man becomes ever-more family-oriented.

“Everyone has this internal image of themselves, or this goal of what they want to be. They don’t actually want it. They want things to stay the same,” he says. For him, that means an afternoon tennis lesson, time with the kids, and a little more drawing before bed. It’s certainly a different vision of freedom from the one embodied by Basquiat. And yet, to Van de Velde, those quiet, structured hours stretching ahead make for “a perfect day.”

Van de Velde’s signature style—swirling charcoal lines that melt into one another—unifies his otherwise eclectic oeuvre.