

the picture plane with a multitude of gestural expressions and comic icons, Van de Velde's use of charcoal and coloured crayon is far more considered, closer in appearance to a photograph. Which, for their accuracy of the real, conjures the conundrum of 'truth' in them, and the strength of the image stands for the truth; we understand photography in the same way. And by reinventing an image of an event that already exists in time and space as an extension of him-self, leaves the audience grasping for the truth in them; and that his images as artworks must surely have a level of reality, for their being so real.

It becomes perverse and positively problematic when we realise that what we are looking at is essentially unimportant. The artist absorbs the nothingness of something to remove it of its original meaning and value, in favour of introducing a new narrative. Which for his brilliant ability to sabotage stock reality, has us see his drawings as both arbitrary and essential to how we see the world. Such decisions of the choice of image have proved crucial to the works of many of Van de Velde's contemporaries. Artists Luc Tuymans, Gerhard Richter, Robert Longo, and Sigmar Polke before them, intended the picture plane to involve the influential as well as the accidental. Granted

The beauty of a drawing is that it has a narrative all its own. That you start drawing somewhere, and at a certain moment the paper is entirely covered, and you can only erase or apply another drawing on top of it, which leads to a very specific end.

^ Rinus Van De Velde, *This is their headquarter,...*, 2018, Colored pencil on paper, 15.5 x 19.4 cm, Courtesy of Tim Van Laere Gallery, Antwerp

> Rinus Van De Velde, *What are we looking at? ...*, 2019, Colored pencil on paper, 14 x 18.7 cm, Courtesy of Tim Van Laere Gallery, Antwerp

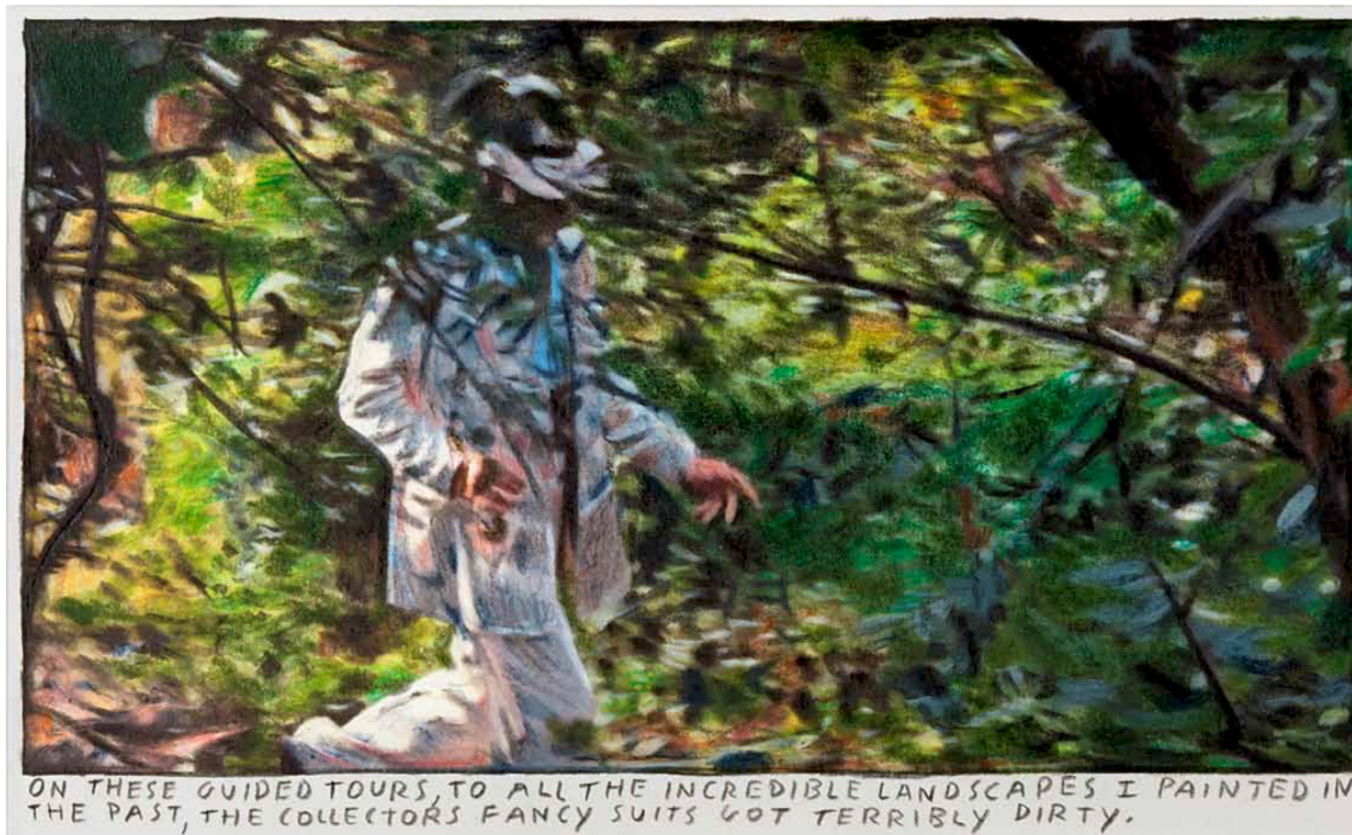
they are painters and Van de Velde a dedicated draftsman, but in their collective approaches there is an appreciation of the significance of the image, as delivering a greater reality back to us, as context appears influential to Van de Velde's work, but not central to it.

If the truth paralysed, painting before the invention of photography, then post-camera, painting in the modern period, under the influences of the abstractionists and avant-garde alike, became an unfettered platform for free expression. That has seen figuration reintroduced to painting as a device for dealing with reality anew. The liberty of Van De Velde's art, bearing in mind the rise of the irrational in art, is that instead of his images being fixed, as in painting, he can reincarnate them many times of their meaning. Faithfully recreating a scene from instagram or international press in coloured pencil and repositioning it, he claims it as his own. As though the attention and time applied to copy something in colour pencil, entitled him to include something of himself in the image that wasn't there before; as he does with his Dada like one-liners. (Raymond) Pettibon himself explains the relationship of image and language when he says "there's always a latent or inferred image in my writing, and I can almost always assume if I do a drawing that I will eventually have text." And for Van De Velde works like "Joe while you

were shopping for groceries... 2018", or "He always put the towel in the exact same spot... 2018", are preoccupied with his own way of introducing some kind of story to an image. Like Pettibon, Van De Velde's image explains one thing, whilst the words are a snapshot of something else entirely. This instantly removes the image as we understand it, from reality, explaining it as nothing more than an illusion of light and shade.

The inventiveness of the artists' work is in his ability to successfully subvert something of its original meaning, to reclaim and recreate it, and then remove his new aesthetic value from it, by introducing words or phrases that seemingly hijacks the images of their original meaning. Saying that, there is as much truth in his works as there is in reality. Which makes for a remarkable juxtaposition of the fictional acting as fact, only for the facts to become fictional again. It is about the transformation that occurs in Van de Velde's work that alters one's perception of everything in real-time. As his decors or props become sculptures that are arranged in such a way to create a set that serves as an installation, whilst also acting as a walkway into his short film, in which Van de Velde films these objects as a 'sequence of shots'. Add to that his colour drawings, seen in a more conventional gallery-like setting, that initially appear as these isolated images, which after the film have their own





particular association to the artist's cinematic styled narrative. All of which proves compelling for his revising reality several times over.

Interview

Rajesh Punj: It would be interesting if we could open the conversation by talking about your current exhibition at Tim van Laere Gallery, here in Antwerp.

Rinus Van De Velde: You came to the opening?

RP: Yes, and I joined you at the gallery dinner after. The exhibition was my first baptism, if you like, of your work.

RVDV: Okay.

RP: When I look at your work now, with the large

drawings that are leaning up against the wall behind you, and of the works I saw at the opening, for your technique and use of material, they recall the arresting images of American artist Robert Longo. Whom I was aware of at art school as an artist of interest, and whom I was fortunate enough to interview in Paris. Which has me thinking about his 'hyper-realist' images and monotone palette. As with his works, when you get up close to your drawings, they have that same kind of abstraction about them, whereby their detail is essentially made up of a whole series of abstracted and tonal arrangements of light and dark colouring. Your 'Seascape' work, for example, appears as this almost photo-real image of the sea. Capturing so collectively the weight of water, that as the audience we gaze at and into the work in a kind of wonder.

RVDV: I once met Robert Longo in New York at this studio, and it was a wonderful moment because obviously we are compared for our same use of materials. His are charcoal, and black-and-white drawings, many of which are on a large-scale, as are mine. But for me, it is important that I see my work as 'drawings', which we can come back to. I am not a painter; I am drawing for very specific reasons. But dealing with your reference to Longo, I think he is a much more of a conceptual artist. When I was at his studio, I saw him working with his assistants, with possibly five or even ten of them working on each of the pieces, to have them as realistic as possible. And also, as you know, the images he uses or claims as his are very iconic and politically charged. As for my work, it is more about storytelling, about a narrative. I always refer to my work as a 'fictional autobiography'. I am making a story about a life I have never lived. So it is much less political than Longo. So obviously in a formal way, there is a close connection, I think (as well) my work is less hyper-real. I am a little bit against the idea that I am into this tradition of hyper-real artists. The studio is not full of books referring to photo-realism. I think what you describe of coming closer to the piece, to see a greater level of abstraction, is incredibly important to me.

RP: Which then leads me to think of German painter Gerhard Richter - of figuration becomes false or abstracted.

RVDV: That there is a kind of speed to the drawings as well. Because I am aware that Longo spends a great deal of time on one drawing until it is perfectly done. For me the notion of speed, to delivery something in the moment is as important, and that the work, like a sensation, has its own endpoint. As opposed to a painting, which in my option is endless, because you can always rework it, and overpaint things. The beauty of a drawing is that it has a narrative all on its own. That you start drawing somewhere, and at a certain moment the paper is entirely covered, and you can only erase or apply another drawing on top of it, which leads to a very specific end. And you step back and see the drawing finished. So Robert Longo is someone who is at the back of my head, and there are many other artists that like.

RP: I want to ask about the seascape. And again I refer to (Gerhard) Richter, having recently seen a whole series of his waterworks at the Guggenheim Bilbao.

RVDV: I think the seascape is becoming a major theme for the contemporary artist. Because you have (Raymond) Pettibone, you have (Gerhard) Richter, you have Thierry de Cordier who make unbelievable seascapes, and now I made a couple of them. But in my work it has a different meaning to how they use it, I think. I made this exhibition The Villagers, about a

^ Rinus Van De Velde, On these guided tours, ..., 2018
Colored pencil on paper, 12.2 x 19.9 cm, Courtesy of Tim Van Laere Gallery, Antwerp



state village in the middle of a mountainscape, where I am one of the inhabitants. Which is part of a chapter of this fake autobiography, and the seascape for me is a summary of the whole exhibition.

It says something about being isolated in this little village of elves, and it is about the notion of authenticity - and a search for authenticity. I pretend to be living in this village far away from everybody, surrounded by the sea, looking for something genuine, and at the same time it is the least authentic thing you can do, is to try to imagine you are somebody else. And that summarising the great paradox in my work that I really like so much. That is it always about people looking for who they are in an authentic way, but it is really about creating this alter ego. So I become this schizophrenic guy who is desperately trying to look for the truth.

RP: Like putting on a suit.

RVDV: Yes. So that's why in many ways I feel closer to the ex-wife of Longo, Cindy Sherman, than I do to Robert Longo; because she is more literally dressing up, and taking on a role as somebody else. Playing with icon Hollywood clichés, with works that are talking much more about identity. And I do see a closer relationship to her work, thinking about identities and narratives, than to the political imagery of Longo. Not to say that I don't appreciate Longo, I have enormous respect for his work, but I feel, as I say, something entirely different.

RP: Longo with his studio and assistances, is working towards a 'machine aesthetic', that intentionally and successfully tries to eliminate the traits of the

In a very traditional sense, you could say that a painting is like a vertical surface, that is a window to the world. And as for drawing, Walter Benjamin once said, you look at a drawing on a horizontal plane because it functions much more as a design or a map of some kind.

^ Rinus Van De Velde, *They're an artist couple working with the abstract expressionist legacy...*, 2019, Colored pencil on paper, 11.7 x 29.7 cm, Courtesy of Tim Van Laere Gallery, Antwerp

> Rinus Van De Velde, *He is on his way to steal an interesting identity...*, 2019, Colored pencil on paper, 12.1 x 24.7 cm, Courtesy of Tim Van Laere Gallery, Antwerp

medium that he employs. To arrive at something that surpasses that.

RVDV: So do you wonder why he is doing that with the medium of drawing? Which is something I always wondered about his work? I think to make statements like his of a shark for example with its mouth wide open, with all of its teeth exposed, it is an incredibly strong image, and I think of it as a painting. Making such strong statements for me belongs to painting. As for drawing, it is much more subtle I think.

RP: Drawing then allows for more possibilities.

RVDV: It is much more a 'medium in the margins', how to say. It was always considered the preparation tool for the painting. It is this private character, and that with the drawing you could easily see the hand of the artist because they were sketching. For example, the Carracci family of the Renaissance period, who were known for their beautiful paintings, introduced to their drawings little jokes, if you like, that appeared as cartoons in a way. So you witness a greater freedom with the medium of drawing, and this was what interested me. Also in a very traditional sense, you could say that a painting is like a vertical surface, that is a window to the world. And as for drawing, Walter Benjamin once said, you look at a drawing on a horizontal plane because it functions much more as a design or a map of some kind.

For example, if they design this cup (that I am holding), they would first have to make a drawing of it. Therefore it is much more related to the designing of your world and to designing your own narrative - an object. This is why drawing was so important for me and still is, because it is about designing or creating this other universe. As for painting, it is much more about saying 'this is what I think about

the world', or that this is my statement. Which is why I am drawn to drawing.

RP: Bearing that in mind, besides the charcoal seascape, the works that were as visually arresting were the series of smaller postcard-sized images, executed in coloured crayon, for their ability to successfully create a world within a world. Cinematic scenes that feel as imagined as they are incredibly real. I sense that they successfully exemplify your ability to create a compelling narrative within the boundaries of the image, to which, as has become your signature, you add a concurrent or conflicting narrative- as drawings are they independent of everything else, or integral to it?

RVDV: This is something I started doing two years ago. Again because I made these small drawings when I graduated from high school. At the time I didn't have a studio and was very limited with space, so I deliberately started making these small drawings, which I would stick to one wall, to have an overview of everything I have done of the past months. But then, of course, I was thinking about the medium of drawing being very marginal, and I thought to get rid of that and treat it as an autonomous medium. So one strategy could be of scaling or 'blowing up' the drawing. But then practically with coloured pencils, I couldn't very easily fill these giant sheets of paper with colour, so I started using charcoal, because it goes quicker onto the surface, and was easier to apply to a large-scale work. Which led to my making many charcoal drawings works in this way, for more than ten years, until at a certain point I was with Tim (Van Laere), and we were looking at some older works, and by chance, a colour drawing appeared, and I wondered why I had stopped making them. Sometimes you have an idea ten years ago and you believe it is stupid, and



& INTERVIEW

I had stopped doing it only because I wanted to make the medium more autonomous. And of course, in the last ten years, a great deal has changed in the way we look at drawing. Since then drawing has become independent and self-sufficient if you like. And I feel like it is not as much in the margin of painting anymore.

RP: *Less at the service of painting and more its own entity.*

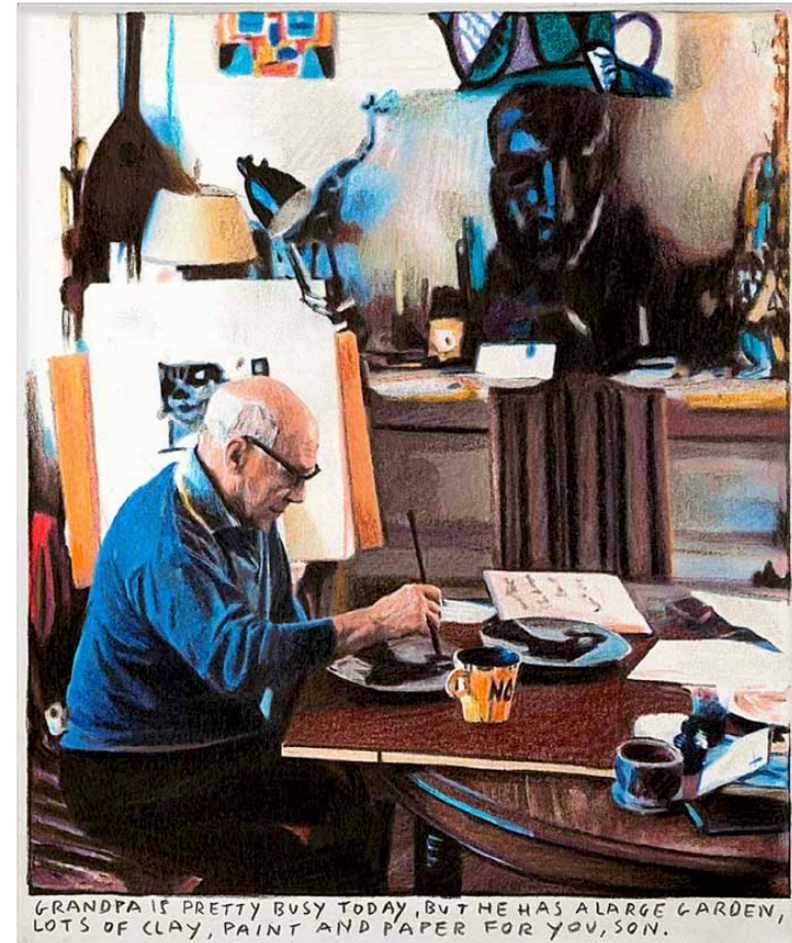
RVDV: Now you have artists like (Raymond) Pettibon, who are drawing all the time. For example, you can see shows of Paul McCarthy, entirely of his drawings. Which are fantastic. So it is not that there is a clear division now. But I believe ten years ago it was a little bit different.

RP: *Likely a drawing show then would have merited a great deal of attention.*

RVDV: And as well now you can study drawing at high school - sculpture, painting, but also drawing. Which says a lot I think. So I started making these small colour pencil drawings two years ago, and I really enjoyed it because it gave me this kind of freedom to do it wherever I wanted, not only here in the studio. I could also work again with this found-footage imagery. Of images that I find on Instagram or the internet, and be much more free about it. Because with the charcoal drawing they too started out as found-footage, whereby I was trying to inhabit these images, but then it became too much about appropriation, so I started physically building these décors in my studio, from which I took a picture from a décor, with me standing in the picture, and then that picture I used as a sketch, as a traditional painter would make hundreds of sketches before they would work on a bigger canvas.

I made a whole décor or installation and placed myself in it, I took a picture, and from that, I had a guide of how to make my drawing. But then, of course, it took many months to finish one drawing, because I had to build the thing, and preparing the canvas took a lot of time, which made me realise I had lost a little bit of the freedom, and the lightness of the medium of drawing which I liked so much; and all of this I found again when making the smaller coloured drawings. Because I can start making one, and just throw it away if it isn't working, and to throw away a much larger canvas is way more difficult than getting rid of a piece of paper. And I realised, as I said, I was looking for this kind of freedom again, and of mixing all of the images up a little bit. Because I was making these décors, which I still do, but now I am filming them instead of photographing them, and I can also make a film because I wanted to create a film as an autonomous work. And I don't want that I use too many of the film-stills, towards my drawings, and as preparation for them. Because you can imagine then you have this weird exhibition where we show

I don't think it is as interesting to say (what is and isn't real) this is the truth. I don't wish this, because I am not an authority on the truth. I don't want to be in that position, and the same of what I said about making statements in painting, I am not that kind of artist who is going to make an assentation and say that this is how the world is now. I like that everything is much more ambivalent and that there is hesitation, it is false or fact? The lie is much more interesting I think then telling the truth.



^ Rinus Van De Velde, *Grandpa is pretty busy today, ...*, 2019 colored pencil on paper, 20.8 x 16.7 cm, Courtesy of Tim Van Laere Gallery, Antwerp

the film, and then all of the drawings appear as stills from the same film, and then you feel that they are financing the film, just by selling the drawings. Which for me is a little stupid. I want the drawings to add another layer to the whole installation.

RP: *So the drawings go from being images to cinematic stills, and back to individual images.*

RVDV: Yes, the drawings can be stills from the movie, sometimes scenes from films I have seen online. Other

& INTERVIEW

MARCH | 2020 | ART&DEAL



times they are pictures I have taken from my iPhone or something that appears in the newspaper. And for all of that, I like that it is all mixed up and that there is no clear strategy about it, because otherwise it becomes too formulaic, and forced. I once made this exhibition at SMAK, in Ghent, and every drawing was based on the décor we had built, and then those objects were also included in the exhibition. So we had this show of all of the cardboard props, which were surrounded by all of the drawings. And that, when I think about it, was too obvious and easy to understand. You saw a life-sized boat made of card together with the drawing of the boat, and it was very much one-on-one, too didactical, in that I was explaining too much of the way that I work. Which is much less interesting I think.

RP: The irony is that when you see something so well produced, so beautifully executed, we assume to think that it represents the truth, in a similar way to our accepting the word in print as explaining the truth. As we endeavour to look for the truth in everything.

^ Rinus Van De Velde, *I was in charge of all the outgoing invoices...*, 2018, Colored pencil on paper, 15.7 x 18.5 cm, Courtesy of Tim Van Laere Gallery, Antwerp

> Rinus Van De Velde, *In this small town...*, 2019, Charcoal on canvas, 86 x 103 cm, Courtesy of Tim Van Laere Gallery, Antwerp

RVDV: This is an important point about what is the truth? My work is always based on fiction, placed alongside reality. It is about the truth and a lie. Where is the real in all of it? And this is interesting I think, for me to mix it all up. I don't think it is as interesting to say (what is and isn't real) this is the truth. I don't wish this, because I am not an authority on the truth. I don't want to be in that position, and the same of what I said about making statements in painting, I am not that kind of artist who is going to make an assertion and say that this is how the world is now. I like that everything is much more ambivalent and that there is hesitation, it is false or fact? The lie is much more interesting I think than telling the truth.

RP: It is interesting to understand the truth, or truths, as being the basis for so many ways of looking at the world. In terms of the order and disorder of social media, and the role that reality plays on our lives as living machines almost. I think it important as well to acknowledge that we of a post-modernism era, with as many narratives as there are truths, and the moment of the master narrative or the definitive truth having disappeared as out-dated. So therein lies the idea that everything engenders something different for everyone.

RVDV: I think as an artist it becomes even more important to create your own narrative. I am not so much interested in showing you that there are different narratives, one from another. I also approve of this 'post-post-modernist' moment we are in, as you say, and that there is no one narrative anymore, but that everything is fragmented. This we know, and now the question is how are we dealing with this fractured world? And I think one way of coming to terms with it, is of telling stories, and of telling lies possibly as well. But also of trying to structure this whole moment of fragmentation, wherein lies a potential and very powerful beauty. If somebody tries to give meaning to this fragmented world, they are applying meaning to something fictional. It cannot be the truth, we realised after modernism that there is no such thing as a defining truth. There is your truth and my truth. But is as interesting to think about your truth alongside my truth, and see that we believe in different kinds of facts.

RP: But again when we look at your work, not as a critic or connoisseur, we are determined to find fact in them, and it is as though these works should deliver that, or why do they exist?





RVDV: Yeah, yeah, yeah, (they think) it has to be true. That is interesting I think. I understand what you mean by that. If something is well-produced, that it then leads one to think it must have truth to it.

RP: Interestingly I think anything that requires of us a level of commitment or engagement, has to result in something real. I think as humans, as a society, we have for better or worse programmed this into our psyche. And for you to easily create a convincing persona turns everything we understand of reality on its head. With your work, we are invited to live out your lie, in a way that has us question what we believe in already, which is rewarding.

RVDV: That is beautiful.

RP: In terms of the images that stand as your work, obviously many of them have no real relationship to you, other than your having chosen them from the news paper or instagram, and that they become part of your life, for the time that you reproduce them in coloured pencil. That they then become part of your life, involves your alter-ego.

RVDV: Yeah, that's nice. I never thought about it in that way. That makes sense I think like the audience.

RP: And of course I am interested in the other element, like an opposing force within the work, of the narrative, and its location and association to the corresponding image.

RVDV: Crucially for me, the work cannot exist without the introduction of words as sentences, because I tried it many times, of having the works without words, but it becomes too much like an

But I also like what language can do in a non-visual way. With an image, I can tell you one thing that it comes from reality or a décor, but with a text, I can go so much further. I can have a monkey suddenly fly over the mountains for example, and I could never draw that because then it becomes fantasy. In writing there is so much more freedom I think, you can go in any direction with words. So for me, I cannot imagine the drawings now without their text.

^ Rinus Van De Velde, During those years..., 2018, Colored pencil on paper, 12.6 x 22.2 cm, Courtesy of Tim Van Laere Gallery, Antwerp

> Rinus Van De Velde, He constantly watches sport on television..., 2018, Colored pencil on paper, 13.9 x 26.8 cm, Courtesy of Tim Van Laere Gallery, Antwerp



^ Rinus Van De Velde, Hey Joe, could you bring me two cokes..., 2019, Colored pencil on paper, artist frame, 20.3 x 16 cm, Courtesy of Tim Van Laere Gallery, Antwerp

image. You can have your interpretation and I can have mine. But it is very important for me that when the work leaves the studio it has a place in a larger narrative. And I realise I can only determine the specific place of the drawing in my narrative by adding the text.

RP: Almost like a graffiti tag, of ownership if you like.

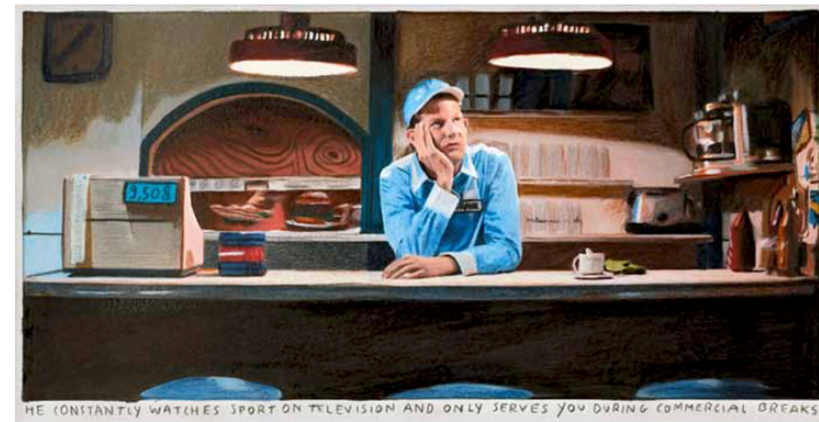
RVDV: I don't know how I can do that in any other way? For me when I make a drawing, while I am making the work, I am constantly thinking about the drawing behind the image, as applied to my bigger story. And then when the drawing is complete I come up with a line, which most of the time I have already decided before the drawing is done, and that becomes the last thing to do. It feels like with that (the wording) I am finishing the drawing, because then in that action it becomes part of my bigger narrative.

RP: By introducing script or text to the image, I see it as sealing it into its situation of becoming an artwork.

RVDV: For example, if you look at this work of two people in a snowstorm, and you will likely see them as two people isolated by the weather etc., and then I have written underneath the image 'determined to visit every museum on the list, I was pretty sure that the last one was somewhere here'; so suddenly it becomes about me, and about old museums, I would like to show at in the world, which becomes the story, and which gives the work meaning.

RP: Or not, if we consider the wording has no relationship to the image - each to their own.

RVDV: I don't know, as I said to do it to arrive somewhere else.



& INTERVIEW

RP: So you are conscious that the image changes irrevocably when you introduce sentences and script to them. Because appears to set so many things in motion, including changing the status of the image from photographic to representational, and of making the work about non-reality, and the non-relationship between what we see and what we read. Essentially you create something so strong, only to undone it of its visual strength. Which is about the artist in you. But then if I think about it deciding on 'the line', the verse that goes beneath an image must be quite precious.

RVDV: Yes it can become quite precious.

RP: How does it come about?

RVDV: It happens sometimes that I write a line down, and then I think it doesn't work or that it isn't appropriate, but then I have to throw away the drawing because you cannot erase it. I can never change a line. So this is the final part of the process.

RP: Your script has an almost visual quality about it, not just in terms of how you write it out in charcoal, word for word, but also of the additional imagery that the phrase conjures outside of the central image, as an opposing force, or idea. Which becomes the basis for many of the contradictions in your work - firstly of the image's credibility as yours, of the level of reality inherent in your work, and the significance or otherwise of the phrases that introduce opposing narrative; and of the value of image and text to the overall experience.

RVDV: It becomes a huge step, a final act in finishing a work. It is comparable to (Peter Paul) Rubens, who produced many of his paintings from his studio in Antwerp, with his assistants working on them for a very long time, and then he would come in and introduce his highlights. It was the most important part of the process, as it made a 'Rubens' a 'Rubens' painting if you like. It is the finishing touch that I feel comes with the text, and as you say, I also like it visually, without even reading it, that you feel that there is information there.

RP: Evidence of some kind of you.

RVDV: There is something that the author wished to tell you, or there is a fable or fact to be had from the painting.

RP: The work as an image is two-dimensional, but when you introduce text, as you do, it takes it to another plane. As if there is more to be had in our minds than what is in front of us. Which has to do with the image being about you, when in fact it doesn't, or in other words, that there is a truth to what we see.

RVDV: Because the signs are supposed to stand for it. But I also like what language can do in a non-visual

way. With an image, I can tell you one thing that it comes from reality or a décor, but with a text, I can go so much further. I can have a monkey suddenly fly over the mountains for example, and I could never draw that because then it becomes fantasy. In writing there is so much more freedom I think, you can go in any direction with words. So for me, I cannot imagine the drawings now without their text.

RP: They are 'mute' drawings otherwise.

RVDV: When I started looking at art, the very first exhibition I saw was almost twenty years ago now at Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris. It was a show about Fauvist painters, and at the time I didn't know anything about art. I was a young guy, seventeen years old. I just went into the museum, and remember being mesmerised by the works. I remember asking myself, 'what are these people doing representing the world in such strange colours?' That was my only idea, and then I thought to read about it because I wanted to understand it better. So I bought the exhibition catalogue and I read it, which led to me acquiring another book about eternal beauty, by Ernst Gombrich I think. So I read art history just to understand. Which shows that reading was always an important part of the process of learning for me, and not as much about looking at works. It was about the lives of the artists as well. Reading about a work's context was initially how I trained myself to look at art. And it was only after seeing that exhibition, that a couple of years later I started thinking maybe I should as well, and I started drawing.

So it comes from reading with me, from understanding and from reading the title, specifically of who made the work, and of the work's title. Titles themselves are very important for me, to have a better understanding of a work. Despite that, for my work, I didn't want that everything rested on the title, so I thought I would write what I wanted to say on the work itself. And in that way you weren't able to and cannot disconnect it from the image. That is how it started, and I would write the title of the work on a piece of paper, and attach it to the drawing, and that created the kind of narrative I was looking for.

RP: But then your titles are based on lies if you like.

RVBV: Yes. It explains something, but it is a lie.



> Rinus Van De Velde, *Please, come back next Thursday.*, 2019, Charcoal on canvas, artist frame, 103 x 76 cm, Courtesy of Tim Van Laere Gallery, Antwerp