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Vincent Van Duysen



Archaic Love

Autumn has begun in Antwerp where the first Issue Behind the Blinds is sold out. I brought one and Vincent Van Duysen is glad to discover the magazine. He will read it tonight after I'm gone. We are happy to meet, in his house. The light is crisp. The sun is shining. It's calm and a dog is barking. The door opens. He welcomes me. The ceilings are high. We start talking.

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I focus on individuals with
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VVD: I rarely come to Brussels but that's ok, I travel a lot for work. And when I'm back in Belgium, home is here. This house is my shelter. My sanctuary. Sometimes, I do not leave these walls.

RR: The trick is finding a balance between cities and travel. Movement and static. Your house is beautiful.

VVD: The house facade dates from 1870. It's composed by two houses that were united in 1870. The house itself dates from the XVIIth century. It used to be outside the walls of Antwerp, in the countryside. It was a leisure house for men to meet, drink and discuss. And maybe more. In the attic and cellar, there are traces from the past.

RR: You can sense energy behind the walls flowing in.

VVD: I bought the house 15 years ago. A notary family owned it. It was divided into offices. I created volumes. I created a box. I changed the walls. I kept the staircase, dating from a transformation in the 40s, but I made it look softer. I'm more of a linear, geometrical creator, but I like this staircase round and soft.

RR: What's in this living room?

VVD: There's a Thomas Houseago mask. It's almost Hellenic. It's archaic and has this duality between closed and open. I appreciate this inside-outside connection. This bridge to the outside, into nature, is also here with a patio leading to a tree, to a garden. It's spatial composition. I compose spaces with bricks, oxygen, air and light.

There are giant doors. Music is on. Sounds like an echo whispering in the autumn light. There is water leaking in the entrance. We are searching for the origin.

RR: What's next?

VVD: I am travelling next week to Milan, London, Paris, New York and Los Angeles. I'm working on a house in the South Hamptons. I just finished the interior of a boat (*come look at the pictures and he shows me the pictures at his desk*). I work quite a bit in the States. Then I'll rest in Marrakesh, in a medina. I'll probably go out for walks in the Atlas. I love the Atlas.

RR: These walls and this light remind me of Morocco.

VVD: Yes, there is a strong connection. I've known Marrakesh for 20 years but it's not the same today. It became too much of an attraction. I love Tanger, its people, its culture.

RR: What about Paris, Belgium, Antwerp?

VVD: I have 4 residential projects in Paris. I'm working a lot on private estates. There's a Belgian hotel project. A convent transformed into a hotel. I think it will be very beautiful. I'm also proud of the youth hotel. It's a wonderful place. I'm working on service flats for the elderly in South Antwerp, on the river. There are security rules. But my task is to make the place a feel-good space, with views on the water, sun, light and oxygen. This is where my projects meet: in the art of living. I want people to feel good in the spaces I design. My work is always linked to the wellbeing of people. I focus on individuals with a soul to explore.

RR: We live in a world where the connection between bodies and space has been lost. It seems you are trying to reunite bodies with space?

VVD: Yes. I want to create soothing spaces. My projects are serene. They must disconnect people from daily stress.

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It's dryness, sky, raw elements.
I enjoy its silence and density.
It inspires me.

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RR: What strikes me is the wellbeing this living room procures. There's density and tenderness. It reminds me of the warm desert air. Its density is similar to what I feel here. It offers satisfaction.

VVD: I love the desert. It's dryness, sky, raw elements. I enjoy its silence and density. It inspires me.

RR: Alex Ross wrote a piece in the New Yorker on flowers in the Grand Canyon. What seems to be dead is alive, a gigantic organic living environment with life layers unfolding everywhere.

VVD: Architecture is not only building but creating well-being. You need to care about the inside and not only build walls. Architects are generally too taken by their mathematical equations. We need equations but there's more.

RR: What is more?

VVD: I seek for synergy between my clients and my creations. I want to enter their souls and answer their needs.

RR: How?

VVD: I tailor-make spaces in which they can feel comfortable. There are very few architects that pay attention to wellbeing. Victor Horta and Henry Van de Velde did. The same in Italy with Achille Castiglioni or Carlo Scarpa. Today we have too many star-architects who disregard what exists inside the walls they build. 'Interior design', as they call it, is not minor. It's essential and cannot be devaluated. Interior design is where it all ends up. Souls cannot be captured by mathematical equations. They need care.

RR: How do you strike a balance between the quest for wellbeing and the quest for essentialism? Between the need for modern comfort and the archaic attraction of brutalism?

VVD: I was a pupil of postmodernism. But soon enough I was looking for something else. I always knew I would not be the typical architect. I'm more intuitive, sensual. It all happened in my first apartment, in the early 90s in Antwerp.

RR: Here we are again, in Antwerp.

VVD: That's where I started to play with archaism and raw materials to reach physicality and sensuality. Sensuality is everywhere in my projects. At the time, Ilse Crawford, editor of Elle Decoration UK (a person I deeply respect), understood. She called my apartment "a sensual home". She was right.

RR: Tell me more about brutalism and intuition.

VVD: Brutalism is something I used here and there when it made sense. Juliaan Lampens did it. But brutalism became a trend. I dislike trends. My projects need to make sense. They need to reflect the dialogue I have with my clients. And I need to be a chameleon. I need to adapt while still remaining true to myself. That's where intuition kicks in.

RR: Each creation is a variation?

VVD: Yes. I'm into variations.

A multiplication of variations with an underlying theme or line.

RR: There is a meditative aspect to your work. You design spaces where a woman and a man can contemplate. There's a special kind of concentration your work enables.

VVD: We live fast and we are stressed.

We need to slow down. We need to focus.

RR: Your work helps.

VVD: I create spaces dedicated to persons.

I want to offer them a possibility.

RR: What about elimination as a technique?

VVD: Elimination is a process I use. Once you eliminate, you can add pieces and create layers. Not many. Just what makes sense. You need to strike a balance and offer space for objects to breath. That's also why I love the work of Jean-Michel Frank: his ability to eliminate and focus on the essential. You need to eliminate and yet produce comfort. We all need a couch and a table. There are books in the living room.

Too many people live in bookless spaces.

It's a sign, but of what? Now the sun is taking time to set. Lights are dim and it feels we're back in Morocco.

RR: How do you manage your creative flow and is the flow continuous?

VVD: It's constant. It keeps on coming. I have this recurrent dream with water. There's a lot of water flowing and I grab onto something. I manage to survive. Waves will not stop coming. We live in a continuous flow. You need to develop techniques. I use silence. That's the best way to resources myself, isolation. Passion materialises with ups and downs. Agitation maybe expresses itself in liquid dreams.

RR: I see sacredness in your work.

These beautiful huge doors remind me of Flemish cathedrals.

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VVD: Roman churches are sublime. I love the thickness of their walls, their rhythm. I love interior courtyards and secret gardens. There’s sacredness in architecture. Palladio of course. His love of the golden section is one example but there are a few: the monumentality of Scarpa, Tadao Ando, Peter Zumthor, Luis Barragán, Louis Kahn, Mies van der Rohe. I always visit the pavilion when I’m in Barcelona. It’s a temple to me. There’s sacredness in Le Corbusier as well. His work in Chandigarh is magnificent.

RR: What about star-spectacular architects today?

VVD: They entertain this unfortunate love for complication. All this complicated architecture adores awfulness.

RR: They are not into beauty?

VVD: They generally treat beauty with disrespect.

RR: The word itself is degraded?

VVD: Beauty is not considered as worthy. But beauty is what I adore. Beauty is what I do.

RR: If there’s beauty and sacredness, is there not sacrilege? Is creation sacrilege?

VVD: A lot of people know my work through (cerebral) photographs. When they penetrate the space they idealised in images, they maybe get this perception of sacrilege. But they quickly get curious. They want to touch and see. It gets physical.

RR: About physically, your work reminds me of what Georges Braque and Kurt Schwitters expressed. They reduced the palette of ingredients to a few, combined them to provoke a sense of great physicality based on hard thinking lines.

VVD: Yes, there is a connection. I love their hard lines, the abstraction and the sensuality of their work. It makes sense.

RR: There’s also a tension between static and dynamic. What kind are you?

VVD: I’m more into static architecture, non-dynamic, linear, geometrical.

RR: Except for the staircase here in this house? It’s a wonderful curve.

VVD: Yes.

RR: What about fashion? What does it mean to wear?

VVD: Fashion is well known to be ‘architecture for the body’. I agree and I’m fascinated by fashion. Some fashion designers are architects.

At the end everything transmits into the art of living. I try to combine all aspects of life.

RR: Have you bought anything recently?

VVD: I like the basics, the classical men’s wardrobe. I buy a lot of the same. Again it’s about small variations on the same theme. There’s Martin Margiela. I have some of his first pieces. I’m a fan of Christophe Lemaire, fan of Raf Simons, also Nicolas Ghesquière for Vuitton. And of course the sensuality of Dries Van Noten. I just bought a photograph by Wolfgang Tillmans, an early piece from Berlin. It expresses this rawness, rock, sexuality, roughness. There’s also softness to it. I’m interested in that combination.

RR: Any strong emotions, have you cried, recently?

VVD: Yes I cried watching ‘Amour’ by Haneke. Haneke does this to you. He confronts you. He creates a place where emotions are not hidden and unfold. That’s essential.

Have a safe ride back home.











