



Words - Hettie Judah *Photography* - Kuba Rymowicz

What place is there in the art world for everyday concerns — an irritating rash, a physiotherapy appointment or sore feet? In recent works, Lily van der Stokker has included notes about such small health worries in her monumental wall paintings. Throughout her career, the Dutch artist has addressed curious areas of the forbidden and taboo: ageing, money, housework, ailments and aesthetics dismissed as feminine, decorative and girly.

Part of New York's East Village art scene in the 1980s, for a few years Van der Stokker ran a gallery in a burnt-out shop on 6th Street. Inspired by the powerful use of text by feminist artists including Jenny Holzer and Barbara Kruger, she introduced apparently casual notes — "Private Mistake", "100% Stupid" — into colourful diagram-like drawings. Following a solo show at Feature Inc. in 1990, she was selected by curator Éric Troncy for the experimental exhibition *No Man's Time* at the Villa Arson in Nice. Van der Stokker and the other artists — among them Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster, Carsten Höller and Philippe Parreno — developed the show during a month-long residency, exploring interests in social context and human relationships, a tendency later dubbed "relational aesthetics".

Over the last decade, Van der Stokker has installed major solo exhibitions at the Hammer Museum in L.A., the Stedelijk in Amsterdam and the Migros in Zurich, recreating her wall paintings in full at each site. Writer Hettie Judah sat down for a chat with her during the installation of a new exhibition at Camden Art Centre in London.

HETTIE JUDAH *Hi Lily — congratulations on the show, it's looking fantastic. Since we're talking for THE PLANT, I think we should start by talking about flowers — how did you start working with floral motifs?*

LILY VAN DE STOKKER Everything I do in my art is quite abstract, and pretty much the only figurative element that I use in my artworks is the flower, but then a stylised flower. It started with one of my first wall paintings on a radiator in Rotterdam. There were two little flowers in it, although you almost couldn't call them flowers — they were so small. A good friend said: "Well, Lily this looks interesting. But the flowers? I wouldn't do that." My interest was awakened. I thought: "Why is this supposedly a forbidden element?" That was the beginning of me starting to make more and more use of the flower elements, because it was obviously forbidden, taboo, childish, decorative...

HETTIE ...Feminine?

LILY I didn't have that in the picture yet — but flowers were not to be taken seriously I soon found out! I was totally fascinated by it. In 1991 I was participating in *No*



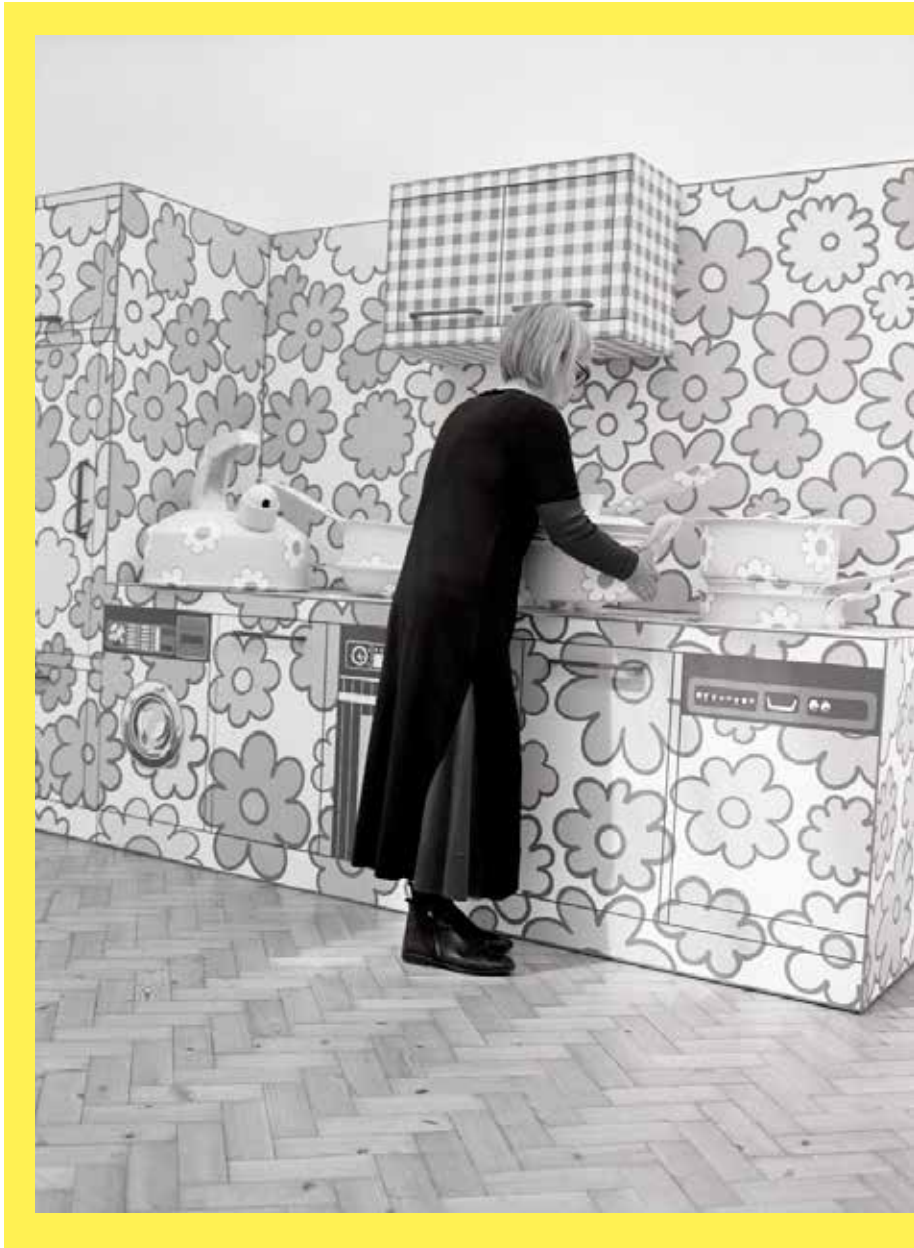
Man's Time at the Villa Arson in Nice, a large international exhibition with these neo-conceptual artists like Liam Gillick, Angela Bulloch and Philippe Parreno. Éric Troncy, the curator, invited me to write a text for the catalogue. I wrote: "I am a beauty specialist... I don't know much about real flowers, but I love decoration. Overall-patterns, symmetry, wallpaper and cute nursery decoration. It's a fantastic strength of beauty. It is so attractive."

I was starting to get exhibitions and I was getting extreme, sometimes aggressive responses — but I was getting big support from my gallerist Hudson from Feature Inc. in New York. Most of the work that I made then in those early years was all around the decorative, the flower, optimism and colour. In 1991, I drew a marker flower drawing *Nothing Really*. Recently I wrote a long text about this piece. And as a wallpainting we installed it in the summer of 2021 in an exhibition in The Hague titled *Is it possible to be a revolutionary and like flowers?* It's interesting that now 30 years later, people do take these works seriously, while in my early years, people were thinking that I'd kind of lost it. People did walk out of the exhibition [at Museum Fodor, Amsterdam, 1991] angry, and gave me the finger saying: "This is 1960s stuff".

HETTIE *Were they suggesting there were hippy associations with your use of flowers?*

LILY Yes, but I didn't want to relate my work to that at all. I do think I'm even quite like the male minimalists and the conceptualists. I admire them. I am certainly not against them. It's more that I also want to be allowed to do what I want to do. But my adventure obviously was a complex one. I was getting more and more into the decorative. There is this connection with softness, sweetness, cuteness, prettiness, baby language. Of course, in art school I learned about Mondrian, Bauhaus, purism. Then in the early 1990s, a period started where I was letting in abundance. My motto was not 'less is more', but 'more and more' — I wanted to draw more curls and more embellishments. And the word embellishment is already gendered language. Curlicue in Dutch says it even more nicely — *tierelantijntje* — happy use of decorative beauty that has no content.

The words for feminine decoration are negatively loaded for lots of people, but not for me. The more I worked in it the more I thought of it as being a source of power. Pretty and at the same time it wasn't beautiful. I think beauty and ugliness have always been present in my work. The decorative is more meant to be a pleasant and relaxing beauty, positioned outside of the art world. At the same time loads of people think it's trivial, which is negative. In a lot of my work, I turn the negative thing around



and try to make it into power. And the trivial attracts me as a subject matter. The flowers are connected to female life, and they are considered to have no brain. But then that's also a good thing, because they are innocent.

HETTIE *There is a theatrical aspect to what you're doing as well. When I was going around upstairs, I felt that some of the works were like an image waiting for a body.*

LILY Indeed, because the wall paintings cover the architecture around us, rather than making a square artwork as a window to reality. The reality is in the room, and it's us. We are walking next to the wall painting.

HETTIE *The works talk quite a bit about babies and motherhood, which, again, is something in art that's not necessarily seen as respectable subject matter.*

LILY Everything that has to do with babies and motherhood sort of didn't exist as a subject matter in the art world as I saw it. We had had feminism in the 1970s — everything was good. Emancipation was done — this is the message I got, right? But then, in the 1980s, when I became active as an artist and started exhibiting, I found out with my female artist friends that there were all kinds of female artists that didn't want to talk about or be associated with anything feminine or feminist. They thought it was bad for your reputation, so they would distance themselves from it. But I didn't: with a group of female artist friends we started meetings with talking, yelling, and having fun, and inventing a new thing there. In the 1980s the women wanted to be equal to men, to have equal pay and equal rights for jobs and stuff. But to have anything feminine was not present.

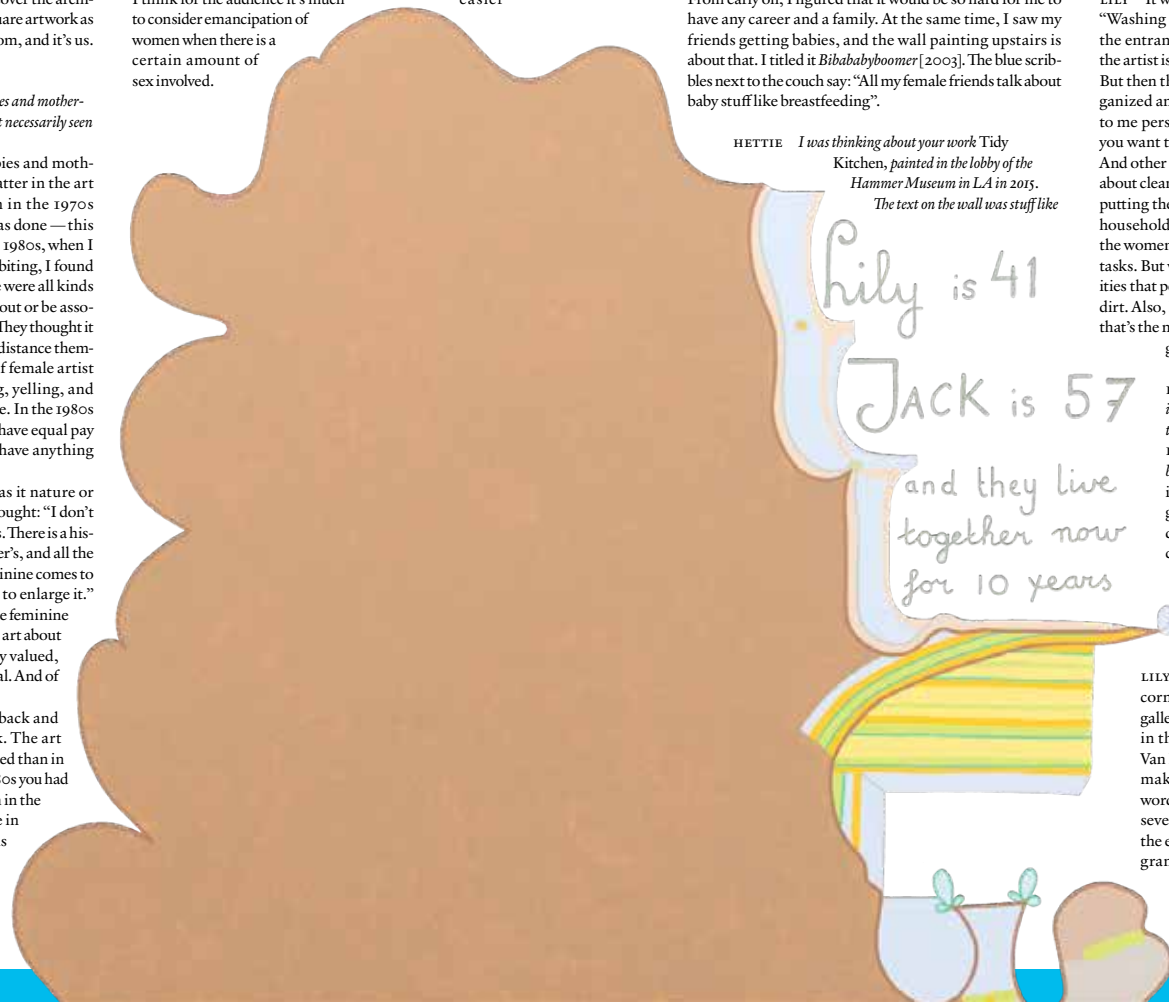
And what was then the feminine? Was it nature or nurture? I didn't know. At some point, I thought: "I don't care if it's brought to me or if it's in the genes. There is a history, and I'm part of that history, my mother's, and all the women that went before me. Whatever feminine comes to me, I'm using it in my art, and I am going to enlarge it." So, I wanted to highlight and strengthen the feminine cliché and put it on a pedestal. I am making art about feminine things that are maybe not highly valued, like sobbing and crying and being emotional. And of course, the decorative.

For almost 30 years, I've been going back and forth between Amsterdam and New York. The art world in New York was much more politicised than in the Netherlands. In New York in the late 1980s you had Barbara Kruger and Jenny Holzer, and then in the early 1990s, there were certain women here in London like Tracey Emin and Sue Williams suddenly making art about sex abuse and

about their sex life. There was an exhibition in Los Angeles called *Bad Girls*. It was clearly difficult to make art about female issues. In the press, it was more than critiqued: it was trashed. But then these women came making work about their sexual abuse, and — whoa! — suddenly this was exciting. I thought: "Maybe I'm not a bad girl, maybe I'm a good girl! I'm making a different kind of art." Looking back at it, I think these are important artists and I love them. But I think for the audience it's much easier to consider emancipation of women when there is a certain amount of sex involved.

But there is the opposite: if you make art about motherhood, everybody thinks, "ah, that's yucky. That's boring." I'm going a step further, bringing in all kinds of subject matter like healthcare, administration, bringing up children. When I was 16, the birth control pill was just invented. I remember my mother saying to me: "You have a choice." When I was 24, and finished art school, I thought, "I'll have kids later. Because first I must do career stuff." From early on, I figured that it would be so hard for me to have any career and a family. At the same time, I saw my friends getting babies, and the wall painting upstairs is about that. I titled it *Bibababyboomer* [2003]. The blue scribbles next to the couch say: "All my female friends talk about baby stuff like breastfeeding".

HETTIE *I was thinking about your work Tidy Kitchen, painted in the lobby of the Hammer Museum in LA in 2015. The text on the wall was stuff like*



"Pulling out hairs from the drain" and "Toilet clean in 7 minutes" — it was making me think about the Manifesto for Maintenance Art 1966! by Mierle Laderman Ukeles. She describes two different kinds of creative activity: development, which is pure individual creation, and maintenance, which is looking after things, repairing, cleaning, organizing. She writes: "Maintenance is a drag, it takes all the fucking time." I feel like you're asserting maintenance art in the gallery. It's a very radical gesture.

LILY It was really exciting to put those powerful words "Washing and Cleaning" very large on a museum wall at the entrance in the lobby. Because the romantic idea of the artist is like: drink, drugs, smashing paint on a canvas. But then there are also male artists who enjoy being "Organized and Tidy". Some people connected this artwork to me personally and some artists were saying, "Oh, do you want to clean my house then if you like it so much?" And other people were thinking that it was a lamentation about cleaning work. But it's not that at all: *Tidy Kitchen* is putting the domestic on a pedestal. Celebrating all these household activities. Of course, we know that it's more the women that historically have always performed these tasks. But what I'm saying is: these are all beautiful activities that people also enjoy doing, caring and cleaning the dirt. Also, I think people should be getting paid for it. But that's the next step. The first step is: take it seriously. Then get paid for it.

HETTIE *There's also something in there about the idea of the artist as a hero doing heroic things or art that's glorifying heroic actions as well.*

LILY One more thing about that work *Bibababyboomer*. This drawing is like 20 years old: it was made during a time when all my artist girlfriends were suddenly getting babies and disappearing into motherhood. It's sort of a complaint artwork, because I can use art for complaining, I think.

HETTIE *You don't only mention motherhood; you also have grandmothers. That's even more forbidden!*

LILY Grandmas are quite low in status. I made a corner wallpainting with chequered boxes at [my gallery] Feature Inc. in New York in 2003 and again in the Stedelijk in 2018 that says, "Grandmother Van Der Stokker, and some little kids." That doesn't make sense, and that is okay, because to use the word grandmother was most important. I've made several wall paintings and sketches about age and the elderly artist using the words grandmother and grandfather. There was a recent one: "Art by my



grandfather, he is cute". My partner has grandchildren. They are 16 or 17 and my partner is 78. His grandchildren think he's cool because he has an artist girlfriend, but they basically think, of course, that he is not up to date. They are up to date because they're young. So, they think that grandfather is cute. So, I used that sentence for an artwork.

HETTIE *There's also the work upstairs: "Old people making art that is spectacularly interesting". These all seem to be untouchable issues in the art world as well: age, maintenance, care work.*

LILY Before those old age pieces, I first started to make wall works about my own age: I have a wall painting that says, "I am 42" [shown at The Habitat, London 1998]. And then I started to include the age of Jack my boyfriend 59, and of my mother 84. And after age and years almost automatically old age came in as a subject matter. I think I made them because I realised that at one point, I would be an older artist. I thought that was sad: when you're older, you're not modern anymore, and then you're out. I thought — let's turn it around and imagine that older artists make the most extremely experimental art possible. And then what is experimental anyway? And is that then so modern,

or is modernity even overrated? Nevertheless, it gave me a nice alibi to try to visualise extremely experimental art and to make the opposite of beautiful art, ridiculous art or ugly or whatever. When I was painting the optimistic flowers, I was also on a conceptual search for beauty. But at the same time, the beauty was very close to ugliness. With "extremely experimental art by older people", I could go for the ridicule as much as I wanted. You open the door for yourself as an artist to have no boundaries, which is a pleasant situation to be in. Because then you can do anything.

HETTIE *Certain artists get very nervous about their work being seen as decorative. They're worried about their work being seen in relation to furniture and domestic elements.*

LILY The decorative is a complex gendered term. Male minimalist art from the 1960s you could now consider having become decorative, but my decorative art is now revolutionary. So, I'm not so afraid. Exactly because it is so forbidden. That's why I went into this. In the early 1990s

I think I invented my own girl power, although I didn't know the term yet. I was really into pink and curls, and I was thinking: "Why am I not allowed to do this? And why do I enjoy drawing curls that much? And what does that mean? Why do people think that everything pink is dumb and hilarious?" I got some bad reviews.

HETTIE *There was this thing in the 1990s over here with what we'd call the 'ladettes': women that were behaving like ultra-men, they were drinking lots of beer and being 'bad girls', as you say. That was the form that feminism was taking at that point.*

LILY Yes. I came out of that, and then started to take a new step. And then, after me, women will take other steps, I'm sure. I hope so.

HETTIE *Were there particular points of reference that your colours came from?*

LILY There were in the early 1990s, when I was making my extremely pink work. I made some drawings with female names, sort of my inspiration at that moment. These were women forbidden by feminists, like Dolly Parton, Brigitte Bardot, Cicciolina, and — what's the name of that woman who was doing this Yin Yang thing with her breasts?

HETTIE *Annie Sprinkle?*

LILY Yes, Annie Sprinkle. And Ru Paul. You could call it bimbo feminism. They visualise an extremely sexy bodily feminine. And with lots of pink. Long curly hair. I wanted to have that on architecture, which I did, for instance in my *Pink Building* [2000] in Hanover. Some people were laughing at me, interviewing me, and saying: "Lily, why did you make that ugly building?" I didn't care: it was there and we made it.

HETTIE *That kind of femininity is all to do with artifice. So, it's not necessarily anything that has to do with being intrinsically female: it's to do with the big hair, the makeup, the over-the-top clothing.*

LILY It is interesting to let it come in and take it seriously, to see what it stands for. Why is it considered to be dumb? Maybe the dumbness is even a power? In the German newspaper, the *Frankfurter Allgemeine*, I got a big review, and the headline was: "Unbeschreiblich Weiblich" — this is a punk song from Nina Hagen — it means "in-describably female". And that's how they described my pink building. So that was a great compliment. And in that same article they quoted something I said in an interview with John Waters: that I was into "bird brain feminism." This so-called stupidity of women is for me a source of inspiration and empowerment: to see what this so-called dumbness is capable of. §





