

LILY VAN DER STOKKER

LILY VAN DER STOKKER LIKES TO CALL HERSELF AN ‘ENDGAME ARTIST’: HER WORKS HAVE HELPED HER EXPLORE THE BOUNDARIES OF ART. HER HUGE, PASTEL-COLOURED WALL PAINTINGS, WITH PINK CLOUDS, BLUE BACKGROUNDS, BRIGHT YELLOW FLOWERS AND TRIVIAL, SUGAR-COATED TEXTS, WERE LABELLED ‘GIRLY’ FOR YEARS. THEY’RE BANAL AND NAÏVE TO SOME, GENIUS AND SUBVERSIVE ACCORDING TO OTHERS. DESPITE THE HATERS SHE HAS A GROUP OF LOYAL FANS, WHO FOR SOME REASON ALL SEEM TO BE MEN: ROB PRUITT, JOHN WATERS, DAAN VAN GOLDEN, VIKTOR & ROLF, CHARLES ESCHE, TO NAME BUT A FEW.



Curlicue, 1994, acrylic paint on wall, 370 × 520 cm, Gallery van Gelder, Amsterdam

LILY VAN DER STOKKER WAS RAISED IN THE NETHERLANDS AND DECIDED AT A VERY YOUNG AGE THAT SHE WANTED TO BECOME A CONCEPTUAL ARTIST. SHE WAS A HUGE BRUCE NAUMAN-FAN BUT WAS OVERWHELMED BY HIS USE OF DIFFERENT MEDIA. IT MADE HER DECIDE TO COMMIT TO A BODY OF WORK BASED ON DRAWINGS, WHICH IN TURN HELPED HER DISCOVER A CLEAR VISUAL LANGUAGE AND FORM.

IN 1983, WHEN SHE WAS 29, SHE LEFT AMSTERDAM FOR NEW YORK WITHOUT MUCH OF A PLAN. SHE STAYED IN THE CONCRETE JUNGLE FOR YEARS, STARTED HER OWN GALLERY IN THE EAST VILLAGE (NAMELESS AT FIRST, LATER, WHEN SHE RAN IT WITH HER FRIEND CAROLIEN STIKKER, QUIRKILY CALLED IT STIKKERSTOKKER) AND MET HER LIFE PARTNER JACK YAGER, A CHARISMATIC CAMERAMAN AND ART LOVER. TOGETHER THEY VISITED EXHIBITIONS, CONCERTS AND HAPPENINGS FOR OVER TWO DECADES. IN HER OWN WORDS: ‘WE WERE CULTURE VULTURES. WE WENT OUT EVERY NIGHT.’

SHE MAINTAINED A STRICT WORK ETHIC, SOMETHING SHE HOLDS IN HIGH REGARD TO THIS DAY. SHE WAS UNINTERESTED IN NETWORKING, BUT FOND OF MAKING A LOT OF GREAT FRIENDS, WHO ENDED UP SUPPORTING HER NO MATTER WHAT. IT GOT HER VERY FAR. LILY NOW RESIDES IN NEW YORK AND AMSTERDAM. SHE HAS BACK TROUBLE FROM THE HEAVY WORK SHE DID ON SCAFFOLDING, BUT SHE REMAINS FIERCE AS EVER. EMMELINE DE MOOIJ VISITED LILY IN HER SURPRISINGLY STARK YET FANTASTIC THREE-STORY APARTMENT NEAR THE VONDELPARK IN AMSTERDAM.

INTERVIEW BY EMMELINE DE MOOIJ



Interesting good things, 1993, Gallery Dooley Le Cappelaine, New York

Emmeline de Mooij: I'd like to talk about the element of decoration that is very present in your work. You like to incorporate patterns, flowers dots, swirls and coils, as well as upholstered furniture. About your use of furniture you once said: 'Couches are about my desire to make my art around people.' It made me think of how needy and imperfect we really are.

German philosopher Peter Sloterdijk describes humans as beings who tend to envelop themselves in a cloak or a 'mood', a bubble that consists of clothes, objects and architecture. We protect our weak body because it's sensitive to influences from the outside, but more often we decorate it as a way to set our mind at ease. We re-create the outside world in our living room because we're unable to control the universe and that frightens us. What do you think is the function of decorating?

Lily van der Stokker: I absolutely love embellishments. There is something very comforting and pleasant about them and at the same time they are cheap and meaningless. Decoration is intent on seducing us and on being pretty; it's manufactured for us to feel good and to increase our comfort level. 'Less is more' is completely untrue as far as I'm concerned: the more the better. Some people wouldn't be able to stand over-decorating while others are addicted to it. My gay friends in New York, for example, are designers of floral patterns and they live by 'Oh, that's so ugly, we love it!'

In the late '80s you saw a lot of punk kids in New York who got married in church for the fun of it; they didn't believe at all but loved the ritual. I think that's really cool. I like the church, but I'm not religious myself. I'm fascinated by the abundance of grotesque decoration the Catholic Church has become known for. Think of those religious objects Sarah Pucci, the mother of Dorothy Iannone, used to make. Dorothy and her lover Dieter Roth made a great book on her mother's work.

When I went to art school, we were encouraged to make minimalistic or abstract expressionistic work. I had a great time in art school, but if I dared use the word 'nice', everyone glared at me. That word was too girly. Later I started doing drawings adding words like 'nice' and 'cute', as some kind of protest, but

mostly because I felt like it. Gradually I found more of those great words like 'pretty', 'sweetheart' and 'darling'. I made a huge bright-pink wall painting titled *Curlicue*, consisting of curls, flowers and clouds... I got completely hooked.

You've lived in New York for a long time. How do you define your work in the context of American art? Would you characterize it as typically Dutch or European?

I left for New York in 1983 and started travelling back and forth between Amsterdam and New York from then on, together with my friend Jack Yager, a New York cameraman, whom I met in 1985. The '80s and '90s in New York City mostly influence my work, but I think there is a certain Dutch quality to what I do: a type of cosiness that is specific to the Netherlands, especially the Brabant region where I grew up.

The art world experienced a crash during the late '80s. White male painters had been dominant during that decade, despite the feminist wave of the '70s, but because of the financial crisis painting lost its popularity. This paved the way for more affordable art. New York galleries started showing a new trend in the early 90s that some liked to call 'pathetic art'. The genius no longer received all the attention, and was replaced by the loser. Suddenly people talked about 'art by minorities': women, blacks, gays and lesbians.

During the eighties I was quite involved with the women's movement. In New York I would see posters from the Guerrilla Girls in the streets, but in the Netherlands the gender issue was not part of the dialogue. The butch way in which those women applied language definitely influenced me but I wanted to express my thoughts in a different way. I was more drawn to the small, weak aspect of women, and of myself. Of course I was a feminist, but I wanted to take it a step further: have more fun with it, make it more exciting, and maybe be a little naughty.

In the early '90s I had my first solo show at Features in New York. From that moment on invitations started to come in to create my friendly wall paintings around Europe and the US. People asked me about the feminine visual language I applied and I got the feeling they didn't see me as a feminist at all. A lot of people thought of my work as naïve and immature, maybe even female-unfriendly. In 1993 I saw the work of Sue Williams, Karen



Kilimnik, Tracey Emin and the Bad Girls gain popularity in New York. I felt I had to take a stand and started calling my work 'Good Girl Art', because the work was not about being suppressed. But it wasn't that easy to be myself. Male artists were never asked why they made such macho works. Everyone is used to boyhood dreams, but when women start to reflect on disease, like L.A. Raeven, or on sweet girl clichés in connection to a woman holding a gun or killing an animal, like Tinkebell, we are in shock. Women's subjects are so different that I don't really care whether they provoke for the sake of provoking or if they follow a certain strategy. Anyway, I think artists are most interesting when their work balances on the edge of what's allowed and what's not.

What kinds of changes in the role of women have you witnessed over the years? And what do you think about women's position in the art world?

A lot has happened since I started studying art. In the '70s many female artists discovered new media like video and performance art in response to all those painting men. You had Carolee Schneemann, Valie Export, Martha Rosler, Joan Jonas in the US, and Lili Dujourie, Nan Hoover, Lydia Schouten in the Netherlands. '70s activism brought along female artists but they weren't part of the commercial market. In New York I witnessed the success of Barbara Kruger and Jenny Holzer. They were the first women who were active on the same level as men, and were paid the same kind of money.

In the '80s, '70s performance art was already forgotten. It was as if people thought: 'Ok, so much for feminism. Let's go back to making art.' For artists to live, art needs to be bought; articles have to be published; the work has to find its way to museums. Female artists were liberated in the seventies, but art buyers were still men. The collectors, the critics, and the structure of museums were far behind the artists.

Right now we all think women's position is all right, but I recently had a conversation with Carole Green, a New York gallerist who shows successful artists like Rachel Harrison. She observed that when one of her artists reaches success, the works made by male artists are more likely to increase in value than the art done by women. In the so-called real world of money and the market, the situation is not equal at all. Sarah Thornton describes in *Seven*

Days in the Art World how the world of auctions is completely dominated by men.

What I'm happy about is how Charles Esche changed the policy for new acquisitions at the Van Abbe Museum and started buying video art by women from the '70s. 'They're still pretty cheap', was the unfortunate and bizarre joke that accompanied the good news.

I sense a kind of ambivalence in your art. You sometimes make big statements but the viewer doesn't know how much irony is involved. Or would you say your work is not ironic at all?

There is no irony in my work; I see it as a kind of conceptual detachment. At some point I embraced the 'sweet' and 'optimistic' as my subject. I simply loved drawing this way, adding endless amounts of curls, clouds and flowers. I drew 'Nothing' and it turned out to be pink. I found a superficial girly kind of beauty. The texts in my wall paintings reflect on people and activities that are unimportant. I'm inspired by the notion of giving pointless information. To me language is both figurative and abstract. The viewer tends to look at text as reliable pieces of information and I like to play with that expectation. Over the last couple of



Pink Building, Expo 2000, Hannover



I am ugly, 2009, Air de Paris Gallery, Paris



I am an artwork, 2004, Feature, New York

years a lot of subjects have seeped into my art, subjects that don't seem to be worth a work of art, like birthdays, the price of coffee and tea in New York and Amsterdam, raising children, or thoughts on what is the best time to buy a winter coat. I do like to play a kind of game, knowing the audience is involved. Sometimes I add text in speech bubbles. I call those paintings 'Talking Art Works'. The works reflect on themselves: 'I am an art work and I am three years old.' In the New Museum in New York I made three identical wall paintings that apologize for being the same in the speech bubbles. I ended with 'Sorry. Greetings Lily'.

In an interview you once said: 'I try to think of my work as not new or old, not negative or good, but turn around the concept of modernism or progression, and go backwards.' Could you elaborate on why you're interested in regression?

Decline is such a nice concept to work within; it's a challenge to take the negativity out of it. In the early '90s, modernism and its unconditional belief in progress became superficial, almost old-fashioned. And I wondered: if modernism is no longer the driving force behind artists, what is? Nowadays, you see more and more artists depicting the 'loser' and 'trash' element, trash in the literal sense or trash as in the excess of images, recycling old images. When artists are no longer driven by modernity, old-fashioned becomes an option. In a few drawings I try to diminish modernism and to portray decline or maybe standstill. I connect gridlock, or meaninglessness, to the element of femininity. I don't think I'm creating a new image with my harmless, friendly decorations. I apply an existing, old-fashioned visual language. The title of my work *Nice and easy*—aren't those the clichés women have to appeal to? Without wanting to return to a situation of repression, I state that these are beautiful qualities.

You once stated that art is always political. In your work, does the political element come from an underlying feeling or do you work methodically, researching one specific subject? Do you read a lot? Are you involved with current events?

In the late '80s I started reading philosophers like Rosi Braidotti and Luce Irigaray. What appealed to me about their work was how they focused on the female gender in their thinking. I read

everything by and about Gertrude Stein. Her consistently abstract and plot-less language inspired me to reconsider the hierarchy of language. In the early '90s I read more than I do now. I was in tune with all the art magazines; Jack and I saw a lot of experimental music and theatre in New York. In Artforum I mostly looked at the ads, to see who did what where, also quite important.

Now, I'm more involved with further examining the themes I started working on back then. I did a few solo shows on ugliness, at Museum Boijmans van Beuningen in Rotterdam in 2010 and in the Leo Koenig gallery in New York. I worked out my theme on lies and ugliness that I had begun exploring in 1991. Right now I'd like to return to my sweet works.

How was it to meet John Waters? Did you reach new insights then?

The last time I saw him he announced that the new word that inspires him is 'filth'. It was 'dirt' before, so that's different. John had to laugh about it. He is a very charismatic man, who is now involved in huge film productions. Though dirt and trash, the vulgar, are his source of inspiration, he seems very organized and has a great work ethic. There are a lot of similarities in our work. Simply put, he knows how to provoke using the gender issue. To me, his best works are the campy, disgusting and amateur films he did with his friends in his parents' backyard in Baltimore. He was one of the first ones, along with my gallerist Hudson, who understood the kind of work I did and why I was interested in glorifying this silly aspect of femininity.

I was very intrigued by this passage from the John Waters interview:

'John Waters: *We're all going to sleep in our pyjamas* (2008) looks like a giant box of tissues. Which comes first—the words or the imagery?

Lily van der Stokker: The tissues!

When I first showed my work to the New York gallerist Hudson in 1989, he said it reminded him of female hygiene products. What a super compliment and great way to think! It opens your mind. In the pyjama drawing the words came first. One early morning I was sitting in the tram and I looked at all the people and I thought: 'Half an hour ago they were still in their pyjamas.' I like the softness and the intimacy of the pyjamas and sleep.

A few years ago, I did a small painting that said *Sleeping in the gallery* and a second painting *Taking off my shoes or so*. I sometimes joke, saying I'm calling my next show 'bed and bathroom art'.

What other artists do you like? You talk about Rob Pruitt, Daan van Golden. Do you think you're part of a school? And what inspires you?

Not that long ago I called myself a 'feminist conceptual pop artist'. Although I talk a lot about women and femininity, a lot of the people I work with and admire are male 'classics', like Marcel Duchamp and Andy Warhol, Samuel Beckett and John Cage. In New York I became friends with and an admirer of Rob Pruitt. He really is a Warhola kid, an artistic child of Warhol. In my closet, you'll find books by Franz West, Erwin Wurm, Rudolf Stingel, Bas Jan Ader and J.C.J. van der Heyden. I consider myself to be an endgame artist, someone looking for the borders of art.

Endgame artists are mostly men, right?

But there are a lot of women who have inspired me too. I will name a few: Valie Export, Ana Mendieta, Andrea Zittel, Lisa Yuskavage, Mary Heilmann, Annie Sprinkle. And Marilyn Minter's stiletto feminism, which is less well known in Europe.

You once said other artists are jealous of your negative reviews. Could you tell me something more about that?

Artists always want to sell, but to receive bad reviews and still be able to sell is even better.



Whoopy I am Ugly, 2010, acrylic paint on wall and mixed media, 740 × 304 × 26 cm, Leo Koenig Gallery, New York