

# Lily van der Stokker, "Friendly Good" At The Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam



**Clayton Press** Contributor ⓘ

Arts

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*“What I do is every bit as avant-garde as the work of John Cage who would sit and listen to the construction of a wooden box and view that as an artwork in sound. In the same way, I also flipped it and said 'I'm going to make sweet cute things and so just deal with it'. This is art, and it's real art. It's content. So, take it seriously.”* Lily van der Stokker.

In 2001, Bob Nickas, the independent scholar and curator, proposed a moratorium on 26 words and phrases that had been used to write about the work of Lily van der Stokker. This lexicon included: banal, pubescent, decorative, sentimental, groovy, exuberant, cynical, perverse, naïve, girlish, effervescently, dippy, comical and silly. It is not that these words were inappropriate or even inaccurate. It was more that Nickas was asserting a wish that van der Stokker and her work to be taken more seriously in art culture and in art criticism. In the same essay, Nickas quoted a conversation that van der Stokker had had and recalled,

“ years ago when I showed my work to someone, the first thing he asked was if I were on drugs. It looked like a psychedelic experience to him. And I thought, wow, that's a big compliment. I do like the combination of psychedelics and New Age and girly stuff. It's a perfect mix. You get something that's ... so sweet it can kill.

This is a “revolutionary” statement, one of the words Nickas did not list. Van der Stokker is neither rebellious nor subversive, but her work is radical in its all-inclusive, one-size-fits-all humanistic orientation. Van der Stokker *IS* your friendly feminist, or as they say in Dutch “*vriendelijk feministe*.”



Lily van der Stokker (r) and Eva Heisterkamp (l) during installation at The Stedelijk Museum. 2018. PHOTO BY EVA PEL.

Nickas's voluntary vocabulary embargo never succeeded, partially because van der Stokker, one of the most naturally and unashamedly honest artists you could ever meet, used and continues to use these words herself. In a conversation with John Waters, the transgressive film director and artist and one of the artist's most enthusiastic supporters, van der Stokker said, "I am trying to be a friendly person and my art has to be about that. I like the colors to be bright and cheap looking so that I can combine my conceptualism with pleasure." With van der Stokker, what she makes and what she says—which is often one in the same thing—straddles a place between postmodern art theory and Zen punchline. It is simultaneously High Art and low comedy from the Low Countries.

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Van der Stokker's "conceptual approach supplies those very mundane things we all have to deal with but of which art usually steers clear, with a distinctive and memorable interpretation. It marks the adventurous and idiosyncratic position that van der Stokker occupies within contemporary art." In other words, van der Stokker's subject matter is utterly and completely trite and banal. This is an exceptional compliment. She documents her trans-Atlantic life—and through it our lives—like the 17th century Dutch painter Jan Steen, who stood apart for his witty, moralizing scenes of domestic Netherlandish life. Van der Stokker, like Steen, plays a highly visible role in her own paintings. She scatters real life stories—the good and the bad, the pretty and the ugly—throughout her work, and the meaning of them is immediately relatable because she is "everyman." But, unlike Steen,



van der Stokker's humor is not edgy or titillating. It is far gentler and, often, subtle. Van der Stokker's woes and worries do not evoke pathos, unlike Steen's. Her humor and brand of theatricality become all the more ironic, staged in a characteristic deadpan style. Van der Stokker is journaling her life, her relationships, her realities, and making us think . . . "Hey. Me too! I just might be normal."



Lily van der Stokker. *Tidy Kitchen*. 2015–2018. PHOTO GERT JAN VAN ROOIJ. IMAGE COURTESY OF THE STEDELIJK MUSEUM, AMSTERDAM.

Van der Stokker is also revolutionary in how she is positioned in the conventional art economy. She earned a degree in drawing and textiles from R.K. Scholengemeenschap St. Dionysus, Tilburg, and a second degree in monumental (no less) design and painting from the Academy of Art and Design St. Joost, Breda. Yet, van der Stokker has made few traditional paintings on canvas or panel. She is a prolific drawer, making, rethinking and refining works on paper. She paints (or conquers) walls, even huge expansive ones, defying her petite size. (Her “consumers” are cool collectors and curators, who—like van der Stokker—accept the potentially short life of a wall painting.) She paints floors or applies vinyl stencils to them. She paints (and decorates) used and new furniture. Her best-known work may be two



public commissions. In 2000, she painted the entire exterior and roof of a multi-floored structure, titled *The Pink Building*, for the World's Fair in Hannover, Germany. Later in 2013, van der Stokker designed fabricated an exact replica of a ceramic teapot she had found in a second-hand store (increasing its height to 7 meters, or 23 feet, and titling the work *Celestial Teapot*) to sit atop the roof of a high-rise shopping center in Utrecht, Netherlands.

When you enter the new entrance to The Stedelijk, there are two mega-sized vinyl stickers applied to the oversized glass windows. One cries, *Help me help me*; the other shrieks *Help I am in the museum*. This kind of self-deprecating humor—van der Stokker's cry for help—is a wacky welcome sign for the exhibition inside. Van der Stokker considers this text as if the hulking Stedelijk structure is behaving like a human and shouting out in a childish manner. At the same time, *Help me help me* is projecting the sometimes-familiar visitor anxiety and apprehension about going to museums and encountering “the unknown”: ART. “Help me!”

Once inside The Stedelijk there are seven rooms—rather domesticated galleries—six of which are thematic. You enter into *Tidy Kitchen* (2015-2018), which chronicles day-to-day activities—mostly pure drudgery—in flat blue and green lettering on sickly Pepto-Bismol pink and yellow walls. So much pink, so much yellow. She said, “The reputation of pink is one of low intellect. For me, nothing and pink represent a comfort zone, a return to the womb, to the mother, to sleep, to the bed; a world without ambition or hierarchy; the ground. Here, pink is a world of pleasure, of goals unreached, a world without urgency or pressure.” In this domestic narrative, van der Stokker records “Pulling out hairs from the drain,” “Breakfast crumbs on the floor” and “Dirty sock in the corner.” Considering that van der Stokker

characterizes herself as a “Beauty Specialist,” and that she has “commissioned myself [sic] to research happiness and friendliness in my artwork, and with that take a stand against irony and cynicism,” you have to—HAVE TO—laugh. Everyone has a dirty sock in the corner and then some. (What’s lost and hidden under your bed?) More critically, van der Stokker wants to let you know “That you can turn everything into art. That you shouldn’t have to walk around all the time feeling ‘No, that isn’t possible.’ Instead you should be walking around feeling ‘So, that’s possible too?’”



Lily van der Stokker. *Mistake Painting*. 2018. PHOTO GERT JAN VAN ROOIJ. IMAGE COURTESY OF THE STEDELIJK MUSEUM, AMSTERDAM.

Next, you enter *Nothing*, a room full of drawings and a wall painting titled, *Mistake Painting* (1991-2018.) In the work itself you see text: “Nothing Really 100% stupid.” This work alone questions the very nature and real purpose of art. Van der Stokker needles herself and us, asking, “What questions can you ask about art? How does art talk

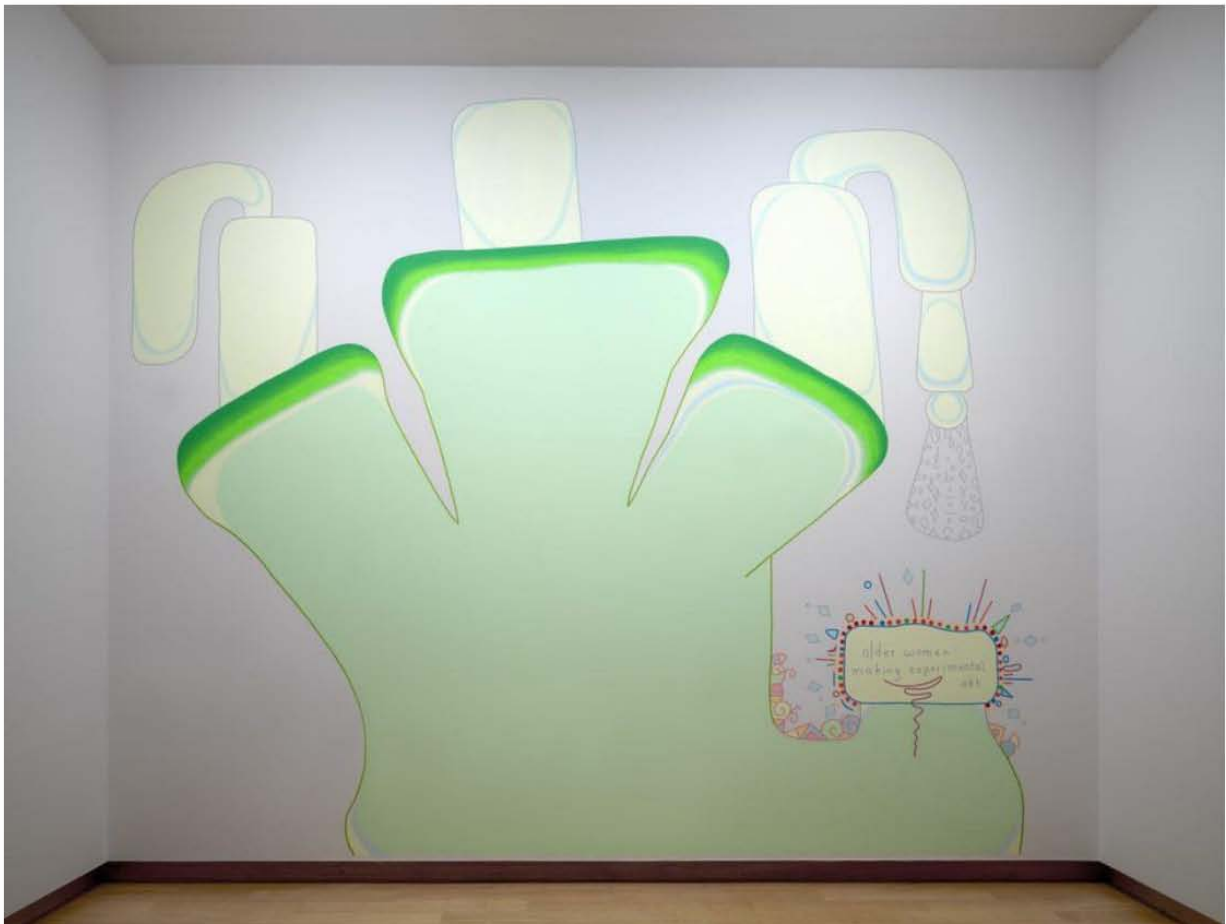


about itself? Can an artwork also be funny, sweet, and positive? Can it comfort? Can a work of art represent the truth? And does an unsuccessful work also have a right to exist?" *Good Old Abstract Art* (1992) is a modest drawing with large consequences. Made from mundane materials—felt tip marker on ordinary copy paper, the antithesis of conventional fine art—*Good Old Abstract Art* operates as both a statement and critique. Van der Stokker pokes fun about the modern and contemporary art canon referring to "abstract art" like it is a fond and familiar pet. It is the good-natured, adaptable dog—*Kooikerhondje* as the Dutch would say—laying in a corner always willing to work for his boss. At the same time, van der Stokker is nonchalantly and quite politely commenting, "What the hell? More of the same stuff by the same guys?" Van der Stokker, you see, takes a stand in her benign way on the major issues.

The third gallery has more of these pedestrian drawings—treasures, really—and *Friendly Good*, a wall painting that originated in New York in 1990. Originated? Yes. Van der Stokker recycles her images, her icons and her titles (or affirmative expressions) both in English and Dutch. As for the drawing, van der Stokker had figured out that when she made semicircular bumps around a shape, like a decorated birthday cake, it looked all sweet and cute. She also started using eye-popping nearly Day-Glo colors, like the ones seen in children's toys. She inserted Pop Art-ish flowers and arrows, the kind of icons seen in advertising, which some critics viewed as cheap or flat. For van der Stokker, it is all theme and variation, making the work transportable and reusable. *Friendly Good* reappeared in 1993 as *Vriendelijk Aardig en Goed* (Friendly Kind and Good) at 's-Hertogenbosch, The Netherlands. It has been reproduced several times, never losing is

approachable welcomeness.

So, next comes a gallery of relationships, *Family*, where van der Stokker makes her social network an important theme. In the early 1990s, the artist started making drawings with the sentences like, “If I would open a gallery again it would be family oriented.” About this time, she also named (or rather included) relatives, friends and acquaintances in her work, like Éric Troncy and Gijs van Tuyl, both European curators, and Roberta Smith and Jerry Saltz, the New York art critics. These are portraits in name only, because they are word paintings. Her mother and grandmother are there, so are “little kids.” It is sort of a reunion, like the closing scenes of the film *Big Fish*. Van der Stokker speculates about the expectations of the visitor who might wonder “Who is that grandmother? Is that the artist herself or her grandmother? Is this work about specific people or is it perhaps about my own grandmother?”



Lily van der Stokker. *Experimental Art By Older Women*. 1999–2018. PHOTO GERT JAN VAN ROOIJ.



The fifth gallery is titled *Everyday*, and considers the banalities of everyday life—a phrase coined by the Polish anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski—and the passage of time. The gallery is dominated by a wall painting, *Experimental Art By Older Women* (1999-2018). It is a topic that she has returned to several times, deliberately posing the challenge, “Why do we rarely take art from this group in society seriously?” It is also an ironic question given that van der Stokker was born in 1954, and is among a growing number of women who have been making art for decades, but who are only now receiving institutional (and commercial) attention.

The sixth gallery addresses *Health Care*, a newer subject in van der Stokker’s work. Personally, the artist is exceptionally, proactively health conscious. This stems from her own medical experiences, as well as with chronic back problems associated with wall painting. The theme also stems from her concerns for and the care she helped to provide to her long-term partner, Jack Jaeger, who died in 2013. Apart from themes about the spiritual and spirituality, there are few mainstream contemporary artists who address health and well-being: physical, psychological and spiritual. This seems peculiar given the centrality of health and medicine as a cultural, social and political issue, especially as we all age. Van der Stokker’s art fearlessly elevates our awareness: “Yesterday, for example, on a terrace, behind me,” she recalled, “everyone was talking about his or her therapist or their heart problems, it’s what everyone talks about all the time. So, I wanted to make work about it to see how you could bring that into the art world.”

There is a seventh room near the entrance. It should not be overlooked. It contains films and ephemera tracing van der Stokker's career. In a way, the room is about beginnings and discovery, ends and loss. The earliest work is a hand-drawn map that van der Stokker made and handed out in New York in the mid-1980's. It also includes a photograph of van der Stokker and Jack Jaeger, her life partner for more than 25 years. As with all long-term relationships, sometimes there was friction, but throughout theirs, love conquered all. The other presence is Hudson, the single-named founder of the gallery Feature, Inc. who died in 2014. Van der Stokker has had several gallerists, but Hudson was that rare gallerist who "got" van der Stokker and her work from the beginning. The presence of Jack and Hudson are part of the larger "family reunion" of the retrospective.



Lily van der Stokker. *Thank You study drawing*. 1995. IMAGE COURTESY OF LILY VAN DER STOKKER.



In his 2001 review, Nickas concluded, “What I do know is that the creation of her work and writing about it have one thing in common: it only looks easy.” This holds true today. Van der Stokker’s art is indeed a friendly art. Although it shares emotional, psychological characteristics with Jan Steen’s 17th Century reflections on everyday life, van der Stokker’s work is wonderfully warm and cozy, totally unpretentious and resolutely democratic.

Lily van der Stokker, “[Friendly Good](#),” The Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam through February 24, 2019.

Lily van der Stokker, Migros Museum für Gegenwartskunst, Zürich, November 30, 2019–February 16, 2020.

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