

LILY VAN DER STOKKER

CURRENTLY
ON VIEW
Works by
Lily van der Stokker,
at Koenig & Clinton,
New York, Sept. 4–
Oct. 18.

Interview by Steel Stillman
Studio photography by Gert Jan van Rooij

STEEL
STILLMAN
is an artist and
writer based in
New York.

IN THE STUDIO



Best regards



Heel veel



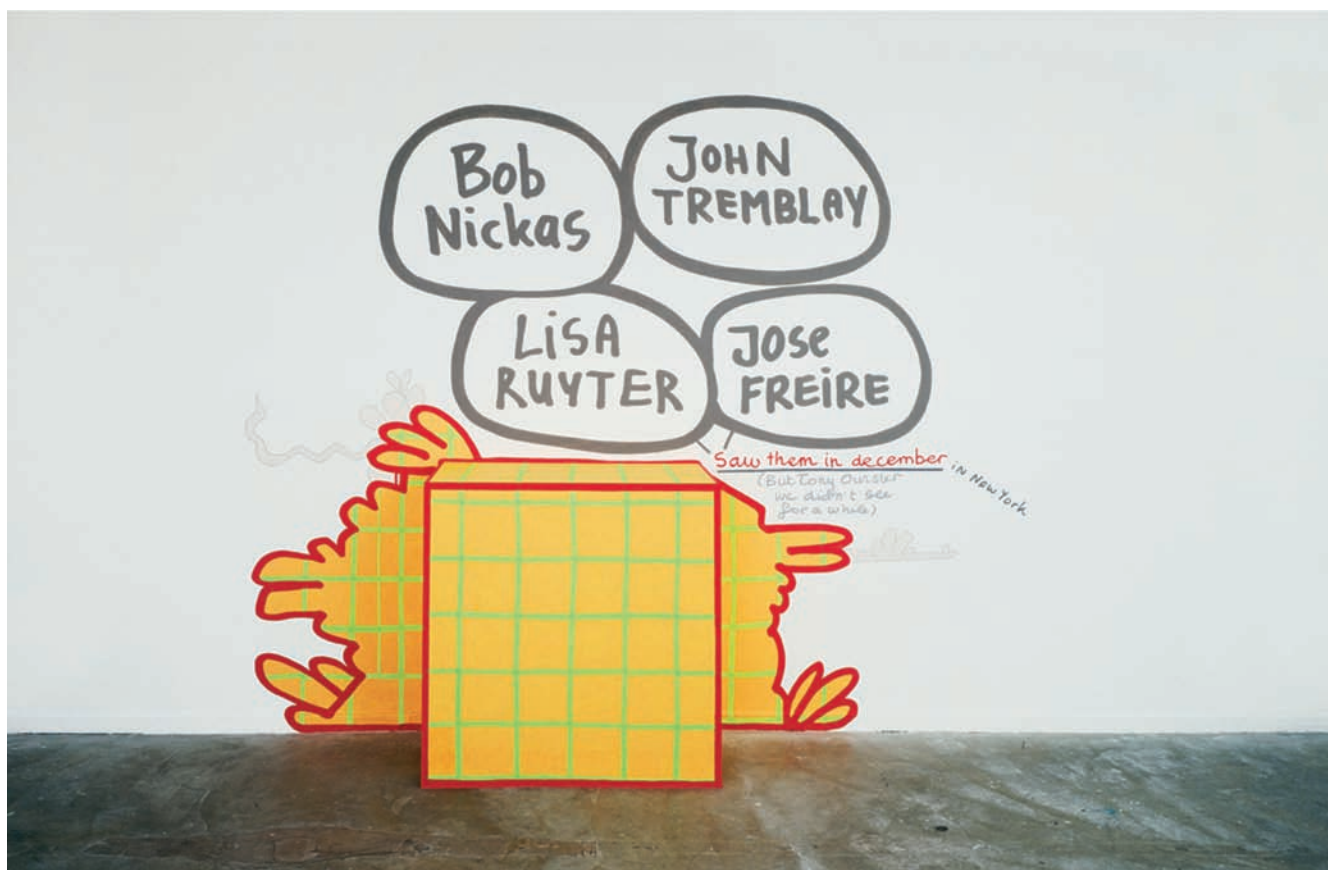
Doggy art

Blue blo
volgende

Lily van der Stokker:
Wonderful, design
 for wall painting,
 1992, marker on
 paper, 11½ by
 15¾ inches. All
 artwork this article
 courtesy Air de
 Paris, Paris.



Bob Nickas . . .,
 2002, acrylic
 paint on wall
 and wood box,
 dimensions
 variable, at
 Le Consortium,
 Dijon.



IN HER ROOM-SCALED MURALS, Lily van der Stokker marries hand-lettered words to lively doodlelike forms that speak directly to us. She first gained art world attention in the early '90s with wall paintings featuring generic cloud and flower motifs and boldly painted adjectives that exclaimed “wonderful” or “good” or “friendly.” Executed in bright primary and secondary colors, plus copious amounts of pink, these images rose up from the floor or hovered mid-wall. Their visual style recalled the graphic vernacular of teenage girls, all looping lines and curlicues, but their voice, in phrases like “good old abstract art” or “love + work,” was more grown-up. By the mid-'90s, van der Stokker was adding sculptural elements—first store-bought couches, then painted boxes and chairs, and eventually custom-made rugs—and broadening her graphic range.

Over the past 20 years, the artist has offered increasingly idiosyncratic congeries of blobby shapes, in color schemes from sober (blues, tans and grays) to manic (fluorescent yellows, oranges and greens), while addressing, by means of textual components, themes ripped from daily life. In series that sometimes overlap and often continue for several years, she has investigated love, aging, personal and professional friendship, gossip, money, children, beauty and ugliness, and art that talks about itself. Exciting and challenging to both eye and mind, van der Stokker's work combines the pleasures of 20th-century painting—Miró or Chagall meets Warhol, say—and the deadpan wit of your favorite comedienne.

Van der Stokker was born in 1954, in Den Bosch, The Netherlands. She earned a teaching degree in drawing and textiles from the R.K. Scholengemeenschap St. Dionysius, Tilburg, in 1975, and then a second degree in monumental design and painting from the Academy of Art and Design St. Joost, Breda, in 1979. In 1983, she came to the U.S. for the first time, and, in New York's East Village, opened a no-name art gallery (it was soon dubbed Stokker Stikker) which she ran until 1986, with help from two compatriots—her boyfriend, Jack Jaeger, who had been a cinematographer (and remained her life partner until his death in 2013), and the artist Carolien Stikker.

Since moving to New York, van der Stokker has had nearly 60 solo shows in museums and galleries around the U.S. and Europe—notably at the Museum Ludwig, Cologne (2003), and Tate St Ives (2010)—and has participated in hundreds of group shows, among them last year's “NYC 1993: Experimental Jet Set, Trash and No Star” at the New Museum. Most of these exhibitions have featured wall paintings, but she regularly shows framed drawings as well. (Since 1995, all her finished drawings have been proposals for wall paintings.) In addition, van der Stokker has received several public commissions. For *Pink Building*, her 2000 project for the world's fair in Hanover, Germany, she painted the outside walls and roof of a massive 148-foot-tall warehouse with a pink floral motif. *Celestial Teapot*, a giant replica of an ordinary ceramic teapot, was installed last year on the roof of a building in a high-rise shopping center in downtown Utrecht. This month, the artist is having a one-person show at Koenig & Clinton in New York, which will

be followed, in January, by a major installation in the lobby of the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles.

When she isn't traveling to install, van der Stokker divides her time between New York and Amsterdam, where I visited her last spring. She has two studios there, one in a scrappy municipally owned building close to the city center, the other in the light-filled top floor of her triplex apartment in a quiet residential neighborhood. We began our conversation there, and concluded it in late June via Skype.

STEEL STILLMAN Were you involved in creative activities as a child?

LILY VAN DER STOKKER I was, and my parents were very supportive. I especially remember getting compliments for a drawing I made of a fairground in correct perspective when I was 6 or 7. But I liked dancing and writing as well. When I was 13, in what now seems like a foreshadowing of my interest in wall painting, I was given a standardized test that revealed I had an aptitude for spatial problems. The conclusion was that I'd make a good architect, if only I were male. My father had wanted to be an artist and my mother a teacher, though both were thwarted by World War II and, later, by the responsibilities of marriage and children. So you could say I started out by combining their ambitions, and only realized that I didn't want to teach after earning my first degree. I then changed direction somewhat





and enrolled in a second art program, in Breda, where I discovered the thrill of large-scale projects.

STILLMAN Did you work on murals?

VAN DER STOKKER Not really. Mostly we worked on hypothetical designs for urban centers—proposals to turn a tree in a plaza upside down, for instance, or for cutting a building in half, à la Gordon Matta-Clark. I made my first actual wall painting in 1983, four years after I finished school. It was an exciting project, a commissioned mural for the outside of a building in the main shopping street of Breda, and it made me want to do more. With it, I made enough money to visit New York for the first time.

STILLMAN Was it your plan to eventually settle there?

VAN DER STOKKER I didn't know. My original idea had been to travel around the U.S., but when I arrived in New York in the fall of 1983 with just a backpack and made my way to the East Village, I knew I wanted to stick around. At the time, most young artists seemed to be looking for lofts to rent, but I wanted a place closer to the ground. In Breda, I'd been involved in a nonprofit artist collaborative, and I thought I'd like to try organizing something, perhaps a performance space, so I looked for a storefront where I could live and work. I found one on East 6th Street, between avenues A and B, and soon opened what became one of the dozens of barely professional galleries that dotted the neighborhood. Colin de Land was next door, in a space whose black walls were the result of a fire suffered by a previous tenant.

The gallery became my third art school, and over the course of the next three years, until its lease was up, I learned everything about how not to behave as an artist. There was nothing worse, for example, than standing at openings, getting slowly drunk and having artists push their portfolios under my nose. But on the positive side, I met tons of people in those years and was inspired by many of the crazy projects and performances that made the East Village of that era famous.

STILLMAN When did your mature artwork begin?

VAN DER STOKKER In 1986, when the gallery closed, I was still a relatively unformed artist, making intuitive paintings in a more or less unexamined way. But that year I moved in with Jack [Jaeger], and a very creative period began. In the afternoons we'd visit gallery and museum shows, and every night we'd go out to music or dance performances or to see films. I'd been making large paintings on canvas but was questioning the need for such big things. On a practical level, there wasn't room for them in the apartment on Lafayette Street; but more importantly, making them big didn't seem necessary to getting their meanings across. So instead of painting, I began making hundreds of small drawings on approximately 11-by-16-inch paper, adding words to them as I went along about whatever I was thinking. Working in daily sessions that often lasted eight hours, I was trying to figure out what makes an artwork: what was on and around its surface; how and why its surface got attention; and why words could be so important. I was trying to get at the essence of art and art-making, and of my relationship to the world, by putting down every thought that came to mind, no matter how silly or embarrassing. The more I

worked the more I felt my ideas could go anywhere, that the paper had an endless dimension.

STILLMAN These drawings, like so much of your subsequent work, have the playfulness of doodling, and yet their calligraphic quality veers toward language and writing.

VAN DER STOKKER I've always been attracted to lines—my teenage drawings were full of them. But then, in the late '80s, as my research intensified, it dawned on me that lines themselves were signifiers. Even doodles have meaning: they signify nothing. As I delighted in the pleasure of producing nothing over and over again in all kinds of ways, I began to include underlining and arrows, and to connect these doodles to writing. Linear abstraction, I understood, was not so remote from the abstractions of language. Many of these early drawings called attention to the rectangle of the paper. I'd make looping, framelike circles near the edges or doodles in the corners, imagining that the history of painting on canvas was a history of edges, corners and more centrally located hot spots.

It took me a while to realize that words could be an essential part of my work—though, of course, I was aware that Jenny Holzer, Barbara Kruger and others were doing a

lot with text at the time. I remember getting very excited one day when I quite spontaneously added the word “warm” to a drawing that was blue and cloudy and dotted with little wave motifs. I didn't know why at the time, but for some reason that drawing seemed as powerful to me as a Richard Serra sculpture. Not long afterward, I made a drawing centered on the phrase “I love you,” and this one felt equally strong. It then occurred to me that I'd invented something I'd been missing not just from my own work but from the art world as a whole: a way of focusing attention on genuine emotional content. I was elated. Using everyday words and expressions felt as revolutionary as B. Wurtz putting bags from the bread he'd eaten that week into his sculptures. It may have been because of my training in monumental design, but these drawings seemed huge to me, like skyscrapers.

STILLMAN In a sense, your career has been a continuation of that period of intensive drawing.

VAN DER STOKKER Sometime around 1988, I decided that the essence of my art-making was based on my hand, a drawing tool and marks on paper. I admired people like Bruce Nauman who could make big, complex installations and

Transfer That Money, design for wall painting, 2008, colored pencil on paper, 8¼ by 11½ inches.



fabricate elaborate objects, but I had no interest in building walls, relying on impressive materials or engaging specialists. I wanted to keep my life simple and have my pieces look as though anyone could make them without much trouble. In the early '90s, I bought a large flat-file cabinet for my studio, fantasizing that I could spend the rest of my life filling it up. And, funnily enough, that's what I've done. That cabinet has become my treasure chest. Sometimes my gallerists wish I'd sell more of its drawings, but I have a hard time parting with them.

STILLMAN When did you start turning the drawings into wall paintings?

VAN DER STOKKER In 1988, I began painting them on the walls of Jack's apartment. The first wall paintings weren't much bigger than the drawings themselves, and with them I felt as though I were knitting the space around me. Right from the beginning, I found pleasure in getting out beyond the

rectangle of the page, in going around corners and filling up someone else's private space. Then, when I began making them in galleries, in 1989, I discovered an even more potent consequence: the significance of taking intimate thoughts into the public arena and blowing them up for the world to see. There is so much in our lives that we keep hidden from one another—problems with family, money, work and relationships—and these secrets and concerns almost never show up in artworks. Turning my small drawings into giant wall paintings has a certain magic, and is quite liberating.

STILLMAN Not long afterward you began adding sculptural elements.

VAN DER STOKKER Over the years my work has evolved in a more consciously decorative direction. In 1994, I began regularly installing store-bought couches, sometimes covered with fabric of my own design, in front of wall paintings. The first of these accompanied a series of flower wall paintings with the phrase "thank you" in them. I think of the couches, rugs and other elements I've since incorporated into my work as images, as sculptures not meant for use. They intensify the invasiveness of the wall paintings and envelop you in a cocoon of artificial domesticity.

I once wrote a short essay about Yayoi Kusama, in which I described her as wanting to live in a dotted world, putting dots even on a horse or on the surface of the water. I think I have a somewhat equally repetitive and totalizing impulse. In my doodles, with their rounded shapes and curls, and in the allover patterns of my more recent installations, I'm decorating the art world as a good housewife might.

STILLMAN In fact your use of pattern has become even more conspicuous in the past decade.

VAN DER STOKKER The plaid and flower patterns I use are ubiquitous—though, as I mentioned, I invent my own variations. My usual aim is to make them feel friendly and lighthearted. They refer to the coziness of the home, to wallpaper and textiles, and to the fabrics we use to surround and comfort our bodies.

In sophisticated circles, many of these patterns are considered cheap, decorative or in bad taste, though my biggest challenge is to keep them from becoming creepy. I'm working on a new bubbly wall painting in which a large, possibly patterned shape may be combined with the phrase "best regards." If it were shown at Disney World, where everyone expects light stuff, there wouldn't be a problem; but in an art context, where every centimeter is freighted with implication, that same piece could easily be seen as cynical or aggressive.

STILLMAN Do you feel, like many artists, that you are sometimes misunderstood?

VAN DER STOKKER From the beginning, some viewers had problems with how sweet or cute-seeming my work is. I remember being surprised when people walked away from my first museum exhibition, in 1991, with their noses in the air, commenting that my work looked ugly, ironic and unrealistic. They said it looked like children's wallpaper, or like it had been made by a teenage girl, and that it wasn't art.

Hello Chair, 2014, acrylic paint on wall and mixed mediums, 65¼ by 103½ by 30 inches, at Air de Paris. Photo Aurélien Mole.





STILLMAN My guess is those viewers missed the crucial element of masquerade in your work: it appropriates the visual appearance of a teenager's doodles to raise adult questions.

VAN DER STOKKER Exactly. When I first started out, I had no idea that what I was doing was provocative. I thought I was researching ideas of art, beauty, goodness, happiness and so on in a detached conceptual way. I was a woman in her 30s taking on the *role* of a naive girl, but it turned out I was also pushing buttons. There's no such thing as gender-neutral art. Few people complain about or even notice that there's a lot of artwork that looks as if it were made by teenage boys—think of Matisse and Picasso, for starters. The vocabularies I use, whether visual or textual, are very well known. They're in advertising, on TV sitcoms and dramas, and, as my longtime New York gallerist, Hudson [the late proprietor of Feature Inc.], pointed out years ago, on packaging for feminine hygiene products. I'm not inventing anything, I'm just combining vocabularies in my own way. I'm trying to put something soft, sweet and emotional back into the world. Everything I do comes out of my own experience, and my experience is not so different from anyone else's. That sometimes frightens people.

STILLMAN What are some of the effects of a career dedicated to wall paintings?

VAN DER STOKKER I often regret that I can't see them again, and that the photographs that survive are never as good as the real thing. Then there's the question of what will happen to them after I'm gone. In 2005, Jack shot eight hours of film of my assistants and me as we installed a series of wall paintings at the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven, and that footage is in the collection of the museum, where

it can be used to re-create those works, or others like them. But in general I'm dubious about that kind of undertaking. Twenty years ago, I would occasionally yield to requests by galleries or museums to make my wall paintings without me, but I soon put an end to it. You can't imagine how many ways wall paintings can go wrong! So unless some specially trained restorers come along, it may be better in the future to just exhibit old installation photographs. It's a shame, but, as Hudson used to say, things in life disappear.

Recently I've begun working on some very large paintings on canvas, in part to have as my legacy, so that people can see how I made things. But I find working in the studio quite slow, and if I'm not careful the paints become moldy before I get around to using them. As I did years ago, I find making works on canvas less exciting than working on the wall, because everything has to be handled within the rectangle. And big as the paintings are, they are never big enough!

STILLMAN Do you know what you'll do for your show in New York? Or for the Hammer?

VAN DER STOKKER I'm not sure yet. My studio is full of portfolios crammed with half-finished ideas, so there are lots of possibilities lying around. For New York, I've been thinking about making some new sweet work, readdressing themes I explored first in the early '90s, but I may change my mind. And for the Hammer, I might do more of what I did last year at the New Museum, which was to make wall paintings that talked to one another. I like making work that laughs at itself, that has a sense of humor. But perhaps I shouldn't say more. The more you talk about the things you're going to do, the less they turn out that way. ○

Dreaming makes the world go forward, 2010, acrylic paint on wall and mixed mediums, 94½ by 221¼ by 47½ inches, at Tate St Ives. Photo Steve Tanner.