

Over the past decade, Dutch artist Lily van der Stokker (b. 1954) has received international attention for large-scale wall paintings that are striking for their eruptions of bright colors and playfully subversive, doodle-like imagery. Deliberately optimistic, oftentimes humorous, but never naïve, her approach to conceptual art is radical among artists working today by virtue of being so extremely accessible and visually appealing. Taking on such “forbidden” subjects as happiness, femininity, ornamentation, and pleasure, van der Stokker questions their relation to serious culture today. Her paintings present a conscious contrast to contemporary art’s frequent detachment from the reality of ordinary people and signal a shift away from the cynicism and irony of art from recent decades. She describes herself as a “desire to make things that can be understood by everyone” and explains that she would rather make art that instantly appeals “to the heart, not the head.”

This project, her first solo museum exhibition in the United States, features new site-specific wall paintings that touch on the subjects of family and friends. In a departure, however, from her works’ usual sentiments of happiness and kindness, van der Stokker introduces the taboos of money and family problems. Phrases of “girlish” hand-written texts proclaim the names of people that she knows, personal statistics, trivial notations, and gossip-like observations. Enlarged and in the context of museum walls, this “useless information” (as she has called it) becomes worthy of our attention even as it provokes questions about its sincerity.

Despite their many stages of planning, beginning with detailed colored pencil drawings, her paintings retain the appearance of spontaneous sketches. “Cheerful” colors, curved shapes, and decorative patterns (plaids, flowers) are executed with “stay-inside-the-line” neatness. This unique combination of exacting craftsmanship and deliberate unorthodoxy also define the 3-dimensional constructions (boxes with weird angles, miniature furniture) that extend the paintings into our realm. Like the matter-of-fact banality of her texts, they provide accessible formal links and punctuations between painted and architectural elements, all the while retaining the frivolous “uselessness” of ornamentation. As film director, John Waters, so aptly described van der Stokker’s work, it is “a subversive celebration of everything that is artistically incorrect.”

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