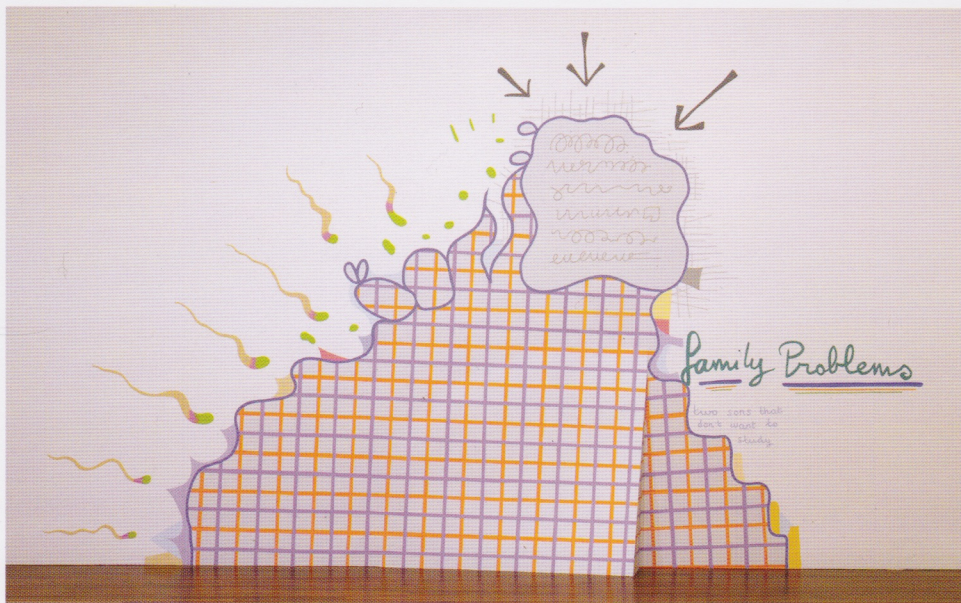


# Lily van der Stokker



WORCESTER ART MUSEUM





*Family Problems*, 2004, 8' 6 1/2" h. x 14' 3" w. x 8 3/4" d., acrylic paint on wall, plaster, and wood

# Lily van der Stokker

November 18, 2004 - April 3, 2005

**H**appiness, femininity, ornamentation, pleasure, gossip, money—these are just a few of the “forbidden” subjects, which Lily van der Stokker has reclaimed from the modernist dustbin and positioned at the heart of her enterprise. Over the past decade, 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. Her paintings present a conscious contrast to contemporary art’s frequent detachment from the day-to-day

reality of ordinary people and signal a shift away from the cynicism and irony of art from recent decades. She has described having a “desire to make things that can be understood by everyone” and explained that she would rather make art that instantly appeals “to the heart, not the head.”<sup>1</sup>

The project for Worcester, her first solo museum exhibition in the United States, features four 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, family problems, and what she describes as “not so nice” feelings towards others. Phrases of “girlish” hand-written texts



proclaim the names of people that she knows, personal statistics, trivial notations, and gossip-like observations. "Jack has \$3700 in the bank but not for long...spending it all on CD's and books" or "Katerina is a nice person, last year now I can't stand her anymore." 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 intimate, detailed colored pencil drawings, her wall paintings retain the appearance and "doodling feeling" of spontaneous sketches. "Cheerful" colors (with fluorescents mixed in for brightness), curved shapes, and decorative patterns (plaids, flowers) are painted in a perfectly flat, uninflected style and executed with "stay-inside-the-line" neatness. This unique combination of exacting craftsmanship and deliberate unorthodoxy also define the 3-dimensional constructions ("wonky" boxes with weird angles, miniature furniture, etc.) 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."<sup>2</sup>

During the late 80s-early 90s, van der Stokker was making small drawings and canvases, which were very informal and anti-theoretical for the time. For example, a series of "mistake drawings" embrace a self-deprecating attitude: "...when you make a drawing, everybody makes mistakes. I thought, let's take the mistakes out and make a new drawing out of these mistakes. Let the mistakes be my inspiration."<sup>3</sup> In retrospect, these works were the harbinger of an aesthetic that is pervasive among artists today and can be characterized by a handmade look, intimate scale and child-like marks. Van der Stokker's inclination to take seriously the apparently frivolous or trivial was not only symptomatic of her sense of daring ("art's all fantasy, it's all theatre, it's an adventure"<sup>4</sup>). It also exposed the limitations of modernism's repressive and hierarchical rules and countered the negativity of postmodern



*Katerina and I can't stand her, 2004, 3' 7" h. x 9' w. x 17" d., acrylic paint on wall, MDF and wood*





*Jack and Money in the Bank, detail*

irony, while confirming her deeply held belief in the communicative power and value of art.<sup>5</sup>

For a 1991 exhibition in Nice, van der Stokker wrote, "I am a beauty specialist. I have commissioned myself to research happiness and friendliness in my artwork, and with that I take a stand against irony and cynicism." "In my practice as an artist," she later noted, "I have learned to be, and all I want to be, is modern. This is what I have learned and it is my ultimate goal to be a modern artist. But somehow modernism, as I know it, bores me. Not to look at, but I can't do it...I feel the urge to use a certain visual imagery that is forbidden in this modern world..."<sup>6</sup>

Van der Stokker has been focusing on making acrylic paintings on various wall surfaces and scales since the early 90s, with invitations coming from individuals for paintings in their homes, from galleries throughout Europe and the US for group and solo shows, and increasingly from museums around the world.<sup>7</sup> With *The Pink Building*, commissioned for The Expo 2000 in Hannover, Germany, van der Stokker dared to experiment with ornamentation on a dramatic scale, covering the entire façade and rooftop of a 15-story building with a yellow and blue decorative pattern on a hot pink ground: "I just wanted it to be decorative, the color and the form; and make a big statement...It's just a very strong thing to do, a whole building in pink."<sup>8</sup>

In the Worcester installation, van der Stokker again has demonstrated her extraordinary sensitivity to scale—not only translating the size and character of delicate colored pencil lines of the initial drawings into wall-size marks and objects, but also in her understanding of each painting's relation to the architecture and to one another, and the relation among the elements of individual paintings. While *Jack and Money in the Bank* soars to near ceiling height (18 feet), across the room the diminutive *Little Fatty Olga* hugs the floor.

Occupying nearly an entire wall is the flamboyant checkerboard "body" of the *Jack* painting—a top-heavy, cartoon-like blob outlined in purple (the sibling of a Carroll Dunham or Keith Haring figure?). Enlarged orange and pink script boldly announces the main character and his dilemma: "Jack has \$3700 in the bank but not for long" (those last four words underlined several times as if for emphasis). Sprouting from the very top is an arrow that leads us back down the wall, pointing to more intimate details: "spending it all on CD's and books" is whispered in tiny gray text just above a Lilliputian table and chairs decorated in pink plaid. One tiny chair faces us and the other is turned toward the wall, seemingly engaged equally in the abstract realm of the painting and the 3-dimensional world of the room.





On many occasions over the past few years, van der Stokker has bridged the 2- and 3-dimensional realms (the painting's space and ours) by incorporating into her wall paintings pieces of furniture and constructed "boxes" like those in *Katerina* and *I can't stand her* and *Little Fatty Olga*. With *Family Problems*, she introduces a subtle yet complicated curve to the wall that kicks out into the gallery like a pleat in a skirt. This physical deviation not only interrupts the flat plane of the wall but also the otherwise seamless nature of the image—the painted "plaid" shifts alignment with this change in the wall.<sup>9</sup> The painting's spatial complexity confounds any easy identification of foreground or background, dominant or secondary elements.

"The totally uselessness of sharing this display of privacy with a larger audience, which privacy in a way always is, is fascinating, a bit of a struggle, too...Private is inside your brain, shame, arguments and violence, thought-bubbles, mistakes, telephone doodles. That is probably why I always try to enlarge handwriting in my wall paintings as exact as it is small, to keep the smallness even when it is large. To highlight tiny things..."<sup>11</sup>

The painting, *Katerina and I can't stand her*, is quintessential van der Stokker yet full of surprises. With her apparently innocent palette of pastel pink and peach, a scattering of curlicues and stylized flowers (a ready-made "symbol of friendliness" she has yet to improve



*Little Fatty Olga*, 2004, 17 1/2" h. x 32" w. x 8 1/2" d., acrylic paint on wall, MDF, and wood

*Family Problems* also provides a lexicon of the lines common to van der Stokker's vocabulary (arrows, cursive loops, underlining, etc.). They consciously relate to writing but remain emphatically abstract, or what she describes as "a body language of line."<sup>10</sup> Arrows direct us to a large gray "thought bubble" where we see rows of doodles that also read like a column of abstract "text" (perhaps the painting's thoughts?). Just below the more prominently painted and underlined phrase "Family Problems," the painting goes on to confess more private details: "two sons that don't want to study."

upon), the artist cleverly confirms that the social meanings of color and image indeed are fraught with gender and age bias. For all its apparent innocence and sweetness, the *Katerina* painting is complicated first by its "friendly" text, which abruptly turns mean-spirited ("Katrina is a nice person, last year now I can't stand her anymore") and second, in the way the sophisticated sculptural component confounds any simplistic experience of the painted imagery.





Van der Stokker's homage to the informal, stereotypical drawings of teenage girls has been lauded as "celebrating femininity in a way that generally isn't feminist...It is celebrating what was once thought of as bad."<sup>12</sup> In terms of a feminist practice, her "girlish" repertoire seems neither a critique of a previous generation's obsession with the uniqueness of the female body or its obligatory status as the object of the male gaze. Rather, with her public celebration of "girliness" and the exposure of the complex private relations of family and friends, van der Stokker's subversive yet optimistic practice can be credited with expanding the possibilities of feminist content in the visual arts.<sup>13</sup>

An extremely abbreviated list of titles of van der Stokker's wall paintings from the past decade speaks volumes about the terrain she has dignified as a subject for art: *Thank you Sweetie*; *Curlicue*; *Everything is Fine*; *Kissy Kissy*; *I am 42*; *Nice Weather Today (Cutesy)*; *How Nice It Is*; *My Mother*; *At Home*; *People I Know*; *Girlfriends*. When recently asked about the feminist content of her work, van der Stokker answered that, "obviously I use 'girliness' as a cliché."<sup>14</sup> On

another occasion she confessed, "Yes, it is nice to make girlish art if you are a girl. It is nice to make male art when you are a man. It is also nice to do none of those things."<sup>15</sup>

Susan L. Stoops

*Curator of Contemporary Art*



## Notes

1. Artist quoted by Leontine Coelewijn in brochure accompanying exhibition, *Lily van der Stokker and Works from the Sixties*, September 5 - October 11, 1998, at Stedelijk Museum Bureau Amsterdam, Amsterdam, The Netherlands.
2. Paula van den Bosch, "Visiting Uncle Jan, Aunt Annie," *Uncle Jan, Aunt Annie*, February - December 2004, Bonnefantenmuseum, Maastricht, The Netherlands, 3.
3. Artist talk, Worcester Art Museum, November 18, 2004.
4. Artist in radio interview by Mark Lynch for "Inquiry," WICN, Worcester, Massachusetts, November 15, 2004.
5. In a conversation with the author during the Worcester installation, which touched upon artists changing the "rules," van der Stokker cited Mary Heilmann, Keith Haring, and Gertrude Stein as important models.
6. Artist quoted by Mirjam Westen, in "How much nerve does it take to stand up for 'feminine stupidity?'," *Lily van der Stokker: Friends & Family* (Dijon: Le Consortium, 2003), 332-334.
7. The first wall paintings, painted in 1988 on the walls of her Lafayette Street apartment in New York, she described as "exact copies of doodle drawings made in ballpoint pen."
8. Artist in interview by Amy Kellner, "It's very nice to be an artist and people ask you for wonderful things," *Lily van der Stokker: Friends & Family* (Dijon: Le Consortium, 2003), 9.
9. Although this 3-dimensional element was conceptualized in the initial drawing, the details of its actual fabrication were determined on site. This was but one example of myriad decisions and adjustments the artist made throughout the process of translating her drawings into 3-dimensional wall paintings.
10. Artist in conversation with the author, November 17, 2004.
11. Artist in interview by Angelika Nollert, DC: *Lily van der Stokker: Small Talk*, (Cologne: Museum Ludwig, 2003), 23-24.
12. John Waters interviewed by Charles Esche, "As pink as possible," *Lily van der Stokker: Friends & Family* (Dijon: Le Consortium, 2003), 458-9.



Family Problems, detail

13. Van der Stokker follows in the footsteps of Lynda Benglis who, in the midst of the women's movement in the 1970s, consciously worked outside accepted feminist practices and dogma at the time and transgressed mainstream artistic taste and decorum in her fascination with forms of vulgarity and self-parody.
14. Artist in conversation with the author, November 17, 2004.
15. Artist in interview by Angelika Nollert, DC: *Lily van der Stokker: Small Talk*, (Cologne: Museum Ludwig, 2003), 24.





Photo by Jack Jaeger

## About the Artist

Born in 1954 in 's-Hertogenbosch, The Netherlands, Lily van der Stokker divides her time between Amsterdam and New York. She recently has had solo exhibitions at the Consortium in Dijon, France (2002), the Museum Ludwig in Cologne, Germany (2003), and the Bonnefantenmuseum in Maastricht, Holland (2004). The Museum voor Moderne Kunst in Arnhem, Holland, organized a major survey of her drawings (2003). Among numerous group show in the United States, her work has been seen at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis (2000) and the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago (1998). She is represented by Feature Inc., in New York City, with whom she has exhibited regularly since 1990.

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Cover image: *Jack and Money in the Bank*, 2004, 18' h. x 17' 8" w. x 21 1/2" d., acrylic paint on wall, MDF, and wood

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