

I See Voices

by Matthew Thompson, Assistant Curator

In literature, the concept of “voice” refers to the dominant tone of a specific work. Although related to style, voice is differentiated by the idea that it need not—and often does not—coincide with the actual views or orientations of the author. Voice is much like a character. Voice posits style as something to be inhabited, to be worn like a costume.

This concept of voice is apparent in the work of David Shrigley and Lily van der Stokker, the two artists featured in *To the Wall*. As Shrigley has stated, “As an artist, I am also playing a part. The narrator in my work is somebody other than me. It’s some crazed person who either over or under-moralizes everything.”¹ There are genuine and personal aspects to both artists’ work, but these are constantly put into conflict with the authorial “voice.” In van der Stokker’s work, for example, the textual elements, while revealing supposedly personal information about the artist, often contain purposeful inaccuracies. The texts “Lily is 41 and Jack is 57” and “Jack is 60, I am 44” appear in separate wall paintings both made in 1999. These casual lies are “insouciance with a shade of seriousness: van der Stokker makes herself any age she wants—not to seem more youthful but to question notions of age.”²

This blurring of personal and persona is further enhanced by both artists’ use of drawing as their primary medium. Emma Dexter points to drawing’s “anecdotal and narrative potential, its inherent subjectivity, its leaning toward the popular and the vernacular.”³ All three of these qualities run throughout the works of the artists in *To the Wall*. Drawing is, with few exceptions, the earliest intentional artistic act that we engage in as children. The wonderful thing about drawing is this populist quality. Everybody has done it. And our daily lives, whether as adults or children, are suffused with it. It combines aspects of the practical and the whimsical, used when we need to sketch out an idea or plan, or when we unconsciously doodle during a meeting or phone conversation.⁴

This type of playful doodling is central to Lily van der Stokker’s aesthetic. She is perhaps best known for the large-scale wall paintings she has been producing since the late 1980s. With explosive, candy colors and perversely sweet imagery, her works are an idiosyncratic melding of the accessible, the pleasurable, and the conceptual. Often dealing with such intellectually taboo subjects as happiness, sentimentality, family, friendship, and girliness, van der Stokker’s work questions the role of seriousness, beauty, and banality in art. According to van der Stokker, she

draws much of her inspiration from the “boring, everyday world.”⁵

Although her earlier work was consumed with beauty, her more recent work has become a complex meditation on the notion of ugliness. Her new work created for the Aspen Art Museum, *Is This Nice?*, (2007), came out of a series of drawings that are attempts to make ugly images. In taking drawings that she considers failures and placing post-it notes on the areas that she thinks are the ugliest, she then recreates the drawings—magnifying the unsuccessful bits in an attempt to make them even worse. According to van der Stokker, what initially seemed unsightly becomes strangely compelling, like “an ugly little dog that you start to love.”⁶

But even ugliness is complicated for van der Stokker. In early designs for the wall painting, the text read, “Sorry, it’s ugly.” As van der Stokker notes, making ugly things is not so easy, because of the shamefulness of exhibiting an ugly work in a museum exhibition.⁷ The apologetic tone of the initial text is replaced by an unsure, nervous question: “Is this nice?”

Despite the labor-intensive nature of her work, and the scale at which it is presented, van der Stokker’s wall paintings manage to retain the impulsiveness and directness of small sketches. Van der Stokker’s wall paintings are photographed directly from drawings on A4 paper, enlarged to room size, and traced onto the wall. Even the built elements frequently incorporated into her wall paintings—in the case of *Is This Nice?*, a day-glo cabinet filled with socks—are scaled to the actual dimensions and distortions present in the drawing. In van der Stokker’s case, the cabinet is a practical, while still humorous, insertion into an apparently useless context.

Like van der Stokker, David Shrigley’s work is both humorous and conceptual, although his aesthetic is diametrically opposite. While van der Stokker’s works are labored, going through several layers of revision, Shrigley’s work has a spontaneous, almost half-finished appeal. His spare, crude drawings and unmannered texts are the result of his continual attempt to, in his words, “reduce my ideas to their barest form; to communicate as simply and directly as possible.”⁸ The mostly black and white drawings found their earliest iterations in cheap publications that were published by Shrigley himself. His works have always had an egalitarian air, from modest, ephemeral public works to numerous publications, t-shirt designs, and animations.

Aside from its easy and relatively inexpensive availability, Shrigley’s work is also made accessible through its humor. Although both artists use

humor to break down the barriers of taste and engender a sense of immediacy and familiarity, Shrigley's wit is decidedly darker.

Shrigley's work often takes the form of a haphazard taxonomic description through his use of mislabeling and playful juxtaposition. His installation in *To the Wall* plays with misrecognition in a number of ways. The dominant aspect of the installation is a geometric wall drawing that covers the entire end of the gallery, spilling out onto the office doors. The text at the top of the drawing, placed so as to be obscured by the beams in the gallery when the viewer first enters the space, reads "meaningless lines." According to Shrigley, the lines are remarkable in being meaningless. Most things on the wall in art exhibitions mean something, so these meaningless lines, once labeled as such, become special.⁹ With its imprecision and self-declared absurdity, *Meaningless Lines* (2007) subtly undermines the history of wall drawings in conceptual practice, a ham-fisted antidote to the rulebound precision and dead seriousness of an artist like Sol LeWitt, for example.

Furthering this play with ideas of seriousness and expression, Shrigley has created a garishly colorful, sloppy finger painting near the top of the installation that spills from wall to ceiling and is labeled "The Sun." Opposite *The Sun* (2007) is a black papier-mâché teardrop, which hangs down from one of the beams traversing the space. Only after the viewer has entered the installation and investigated the space will he or she notice the text on the back side of the column, labeling the object as a "Wasps' Nest." Two other papiermâché objects round out the installation: a faceless, yarn-haired head sits atop another beam, and a stalactite-like object that hangs from the peak of the ceiling. Un-lit and in the center of the installation, it is painted white to disappear into background. Again, Shrigley plays with the misrecognition, first with the featureless face, which becomes sexless and disembodied by its lack of description, and then with the hanging object, which, like *Wasps' Nest* (2007), is labeled on the reverse, visible only to the viewer as they exit the installation. A black question mark is painted in the middle of the form, as, according to Shrigley, the object's identity is open to negotiation.¹⁰

In the work of both artists, text playfully subverts language itself and provides an absurd comment on even more absurd realities. Drawing, with its inherent narrative qualities and connection to popular forms of communication—like cartoons and graffiti—allows each artist to pull the viewer into a more intimate space of identification. And, by drawing directly on the wall, they engage both the architectural and institutional frame of the gallery. This accessibility is further reinforced by the manner in which

each artist plays with style, questioning prevailing assumptions about seriousness, beauty, and permanence in art.

NOTES

1 David Shrigley, interview with *Monokultur*, 2007, <http://www.davidshrigley.com/articles/monokultur.htm>, accessed October 25, 2007

2 Julie Carniglia, "Lily van der Stokker," *Artforum*, February 2000, p. 122

3 Emma Dexter, Introduction to *Vitamin D*, New York: Phaidon Press, 2007, p. 6

4 Ibid

5 Lily van der Stokker, interview with Catherine van Houts, *Het Parool*, September 1994

6 Lily van der Stokker in conversation with the author, October 25, 2007

7 Ibid

8 David Shrigley, interview with *Les Inrockuptibles Magazine*, 2007,

<http://www.davidshrigley.com/articles/lesrock.htm>,

accessed October 25, 2007

9 David Shrigley in conversation with the author, October 25, 2007

10 Ibid