

John Waters and Lily van der Stokker Interview

John Waters: The wall paintings that will make up your show at Tate St Ives are hilarious, touching and boldly girly. And this is a museum by the beach. Are you a beachy kind of girl?

Lily van der Stokker: Huh?

Your 'sweet' work can sometimes make people angry. So you either delight or infuriate people. That's great, isn't it?

A well-known artist told me once he was jealous of my bad reviews. Sweetness as real subject matter is still very hard to get for many people. It's tricky because the work looks simple. I would love to make art that's understandable for everybody... but over the years, I think I'm doing more complicated things.

But your work is instantly recognisable now.

My female visuals have many layers. Some people don't get that either. I'm quite detached from it, but at the same time I'm emotionally very connected to it.

Is there irony in your work?

No. I love the decorative – the flowers, the curls and the nothingness. I love it because I am a girl, but then I'm also an artist, and I love everything that I learned, such as Minimalism and Conceptualism.

But can something be pitiful, aggressive and perfect at the same time? That's how I feel your work is.

I adore pitiful little things that make you want to cry and hold somebody. There is a work from 1992 that I sold several times. It has the text: 'Poor (old) abstract art.' I love saying 'Poor

baby!', or 'Poor Vincent van Gogh'. One of my favourite lines is: 'Women are very good at crying. And I think they should be getting paid for it.'

Your works are aggressive too, no?

You as a viewer could get angry because you are afraid of what you see. You could say I'm aggressive in a sense that I like to enlarge female clichés, such as the decorative and bad taste pink. I'm not afraid of that.

Well, if you're a good feminist, that means you're a troublemaker – which is what contemporary art should be about in the first place, isn't it?

Yes, because as an artist you are not all goody-goody, looking for truth. I do think people have to be a little honest, but lie a bit at the same time, because nothing is clear.

One of my favourite works of yours is called *Darling*, done with marker pen on paper. It makes me think of the Julie Christie movie with the same title, or wallpaper gone crazy. In this piece and others, I've noticed you use little marks that in cartoons usually mean 'stink', or sometimes highlight a character's bright new thought. So, 'thinking' or 'stinking' seems important to you, which makes me wonder... are you a minimalist intellectual?

A minimalist intellectual? No, I am a feminist Conceptual Pop artist! And a bit stupid as well.

Well, I don't mean that in a bad way. But you use humour, correct?

Sure, yeah, laughing about my own feminism and about machismo is helpful. I don't want to impress with highly intellectual or highly technical stuff, because I think the simplicity of the subject matter has to be strong and unexpected.

But you're not anti-craft?

No, I'm quite precise how I make a work.

Your colours are so bright and sweet – cotton candy colours – that it's like feeling nauseous after going on an amusement park ride. Are you the sweet tooth of the art world?

I am trying to be a friendly person and my art has to be about that. I liked the colours to be bright and cheap looking so that I could combine my Conceptualism with pleasure. I'm not as bright in colour as I used to be, but there's a lot you can express by it. The big themes that have always intrigued me are optimism and childishness, and why the use of bright fun colours has such a negative message.

I don't know if it's negative. I think it's more confrontational. Do you think you flirt in your art?

Rob Pruitt [the American artist] once said that I am this little white cartoon figure that annoys everybody by his speech bubble remarks... Yeah, I guess you could say that I'm playing – playing games with meaning. And at the same time, I adore embellishment, swirls and curlicues. Lots of it! It's never enough.

Are you saying that you can't gag from cheerfulness?

I *drool* from cheerfulness... sorry!

Do you have any of your art hanging in your house?

No. It's everywhere, but it's not on my walls. I like making and exhibiting it, but I'm not living in it.

I want to ask you about the words you use in your wall paintings. You talk about the weather a lot, which I think is very funny. Gore Vidal once said something, and I am paraphrasing here: 'No one talks about the weather to me because they think I'm too smart to waste time discussing it.' Is talking about the weather filling a meaningless void?

I like things that have as little meaning as possible. It's about pleasure and does not want to change the world. It's even a little bit old-fashioned.

You say old-fashioned, but, to me, it is not vintage. It seems new.

I try to think of my work as not new or old, not negative or good, but turning around the concept of modernism or progression and going backwards. I got the idea for the *No big deal* pieces when I started to read Gilles Deleuze's *Difference and Repetition*. On the first page he talks about his philosophy, and then he says, well, you can say a lot about it, but you could also say that we have a very nice sunset today. I closed the book and said to myself: "Great. I will make a whole series about the nice weather."

There's one piece called *Not bad this weather* 1998. It looks almost like a castle in a theme park. Do you go to theme parks?

No, but last year I saw an exhibition of an artist called Anton Pieck. He was the designer of a big theme park in Holland, but as an artist he's a total no-no. I was interested in him because all the little houses he made were so round and cosy and had snowflakes hanging from them. Like tears. So cute. People love cute. People love tear jerkers. I'm intrigued by how he gets this tear jerker-like imagery.

***We're all going to sleep in our pyjamas* 2008 looks like a giant box of tissues. Which comes first – the words or the imagery?**

The tissues! When I first showed my work to Hudson (the New York gallerist) in 1989, he said it reminded him of female hygiene products. What a super compliment and great way to think. It opens your mind! In the pyjama drawing the words came first. One early morning I was sitting in the tram and I looked at all the people and I thought: 'Half an hour ago they were still in their pyjamas. I like the softness and the intimacy of the pyjamas and sleep.'

You make a lot of jokes about being old. You aren't old, but it seems as if you want to be.

Hey, I am not making jokes! I feel sorry for us getting older, especially artists becoming old-fashioned and not being modern anymore. It's a sad thing I could cry about. It would be so nice to be old-fashioned and hip at the same time. I wish we could be

extremely experimental until the end, and still be taken seriously.

One of your works, *Extremely experimental art by older people* 1999, is a drawing that also has real furniture in it. Is sculpture a way you want to go?

My assistant thinks that it comes from my past, because I was brought up in a furniture store, but I don't think that's true. On one hand, I like to add furniture because it expresses my concepts of the decorative and the domestic. On the other, I like to add stuff such as boxes and things that I put in front of the wall paintings. People ask me: "What's in the boxes?" And I say: "Air, nothing. It's all fluff, it's to make useless extras."

I love the fashion inspired by your work. I wear that Viktor & Rolf men's shirt with your ludicrous flower pattern all over it. How did that come about?

Viktor & Rolf liked my work for years and asked me to design something sweet for men. In the end they came to my studio and took a design for a T-shirt from 1992 – an all-over flower pattern which had in it the word "good" with rays around it.

I think you should have a retrospective of all your pieces that use the words 'Thank You'. Those are my favourites; just think – 'The Thank You Show'.

I would *love* a 'Thank You' show!

Was it hard to get your career started?

No, it wasn't. After art school I had no sense of career making, but I started to organise art, my own (very unprofessional) art

gallery. I arrived in New York with my backpack on a trip in 1983 and rented a store front. I wanted to organise exhibitions, but I was quite uncommercial and thought I just wanted to make anonymous installations in my store front as if it were a park. I didn't want to have a name for my gallery – I just wanted to push the door open as if it were an extension from outside. But then I started meeting American artists who all wanted to sell. Pretty soon after, I met my boyfriend Jack and Hudson. The career came quite easily and was always fun.

Were you also doing your own work then?

No, very little, because I didn't have time for that.

The initial critical reaction to your work was a review from Peter Schjeldahl. He said that you directed your attention 'towards friendliness, childishness and stupidity'. He meant that as a compliment.

It was a great review about optimism in art and about the use of the word "good" in my work – one of my best first reviews. I sort of signed my paintings with the word 'good' so that people could get in the mood. Quite funny.

You use the word 'cutesy' a lot about your work. Is that a threat? You embrace the critical terms that most other artists would shun.

Like me pointing a gun at you and saying: 'Hey, I will cutesy you.'

All your artwork is about girls and cuteness, yet you always seem to release pictures of yourself where you look grumpy, which really makes me laugh...

It's so true!

Now, when are you going to make a movie?

About what?

A horror movie of sweetness?

No horror movie, please!

Well, what kind? It could be the ultimate chick flick that would scare all women. A romance, perhaps?

No... a cry movie... with lots of singing that is a little like whining, like *Whine Rock*.



John Waters in a Viktor & Rolf and Lily van der Stokker shirt, Baltimore, February 2010
Photo: Susan Allenback
Courtesy John Waters

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