

Blissful banality

Hettie Judah on finding beauty in the mundane



1. Known as *A Mother's Duty*, c. 1660–61, Pieter de Hooch (1629–after 1684), oil on canvas, 52.5 × 61cm. Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam

In Pieter de Hooch's *A Mother's Duty* (c. 1660–1661; Fig. 1), a woman dresses her young daughter's unruly hair. It's a painting I know best from a flat-toned postcard I bought at the Rijksmuseum as a student. Leafing through my (ever filling) drawer of unsorted cards, I've periodically paused to admire how De Hooch captured the wear on the floor tiles as their remaining fragments of glaze wink in the sun and the play of grids and frames that lead the eye into the darkness of a box bed, or the light beyond the hall.

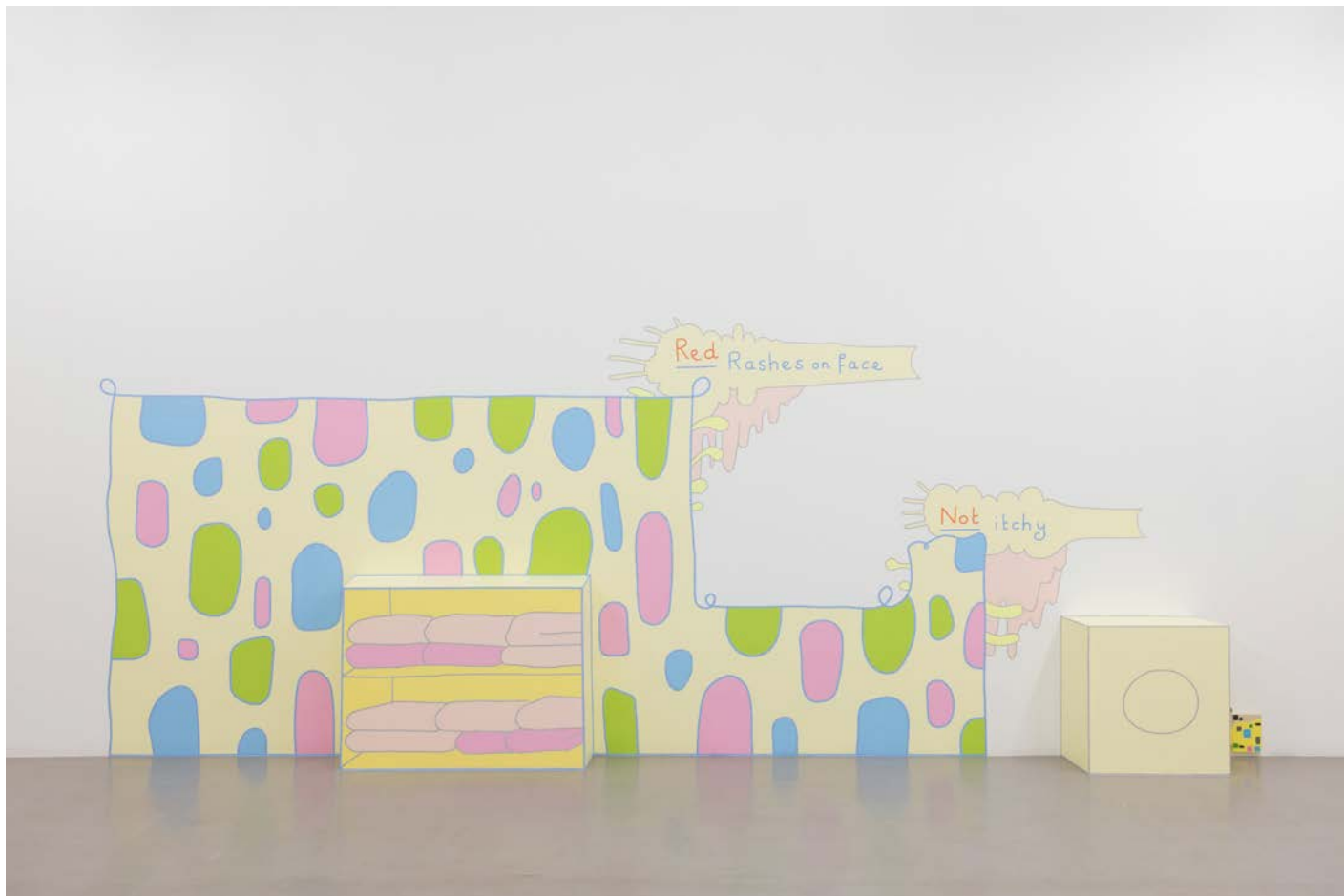
Two decades after buying the postcard, having wielded a fine-toothed comb over stubbornly nit-prone children, I leafed past it again and realised the mother was inspecting

her daughter for headlice. In a society in which cleanliness, beauty and virtue were considered closely entwined, De Hooch's subject was not a novelty. Gerard ter Borch presents an identically posed small girl leaning into her mother's lap in *The Family of the Stone Grinder* (1653): an image of virtuous poverty in which the mother exerts a formative influence on her infant much as the father exerts a formative influence on a blade held against his grindstone.

I thought about De Hooch's dutiful housewife after talking to Lily van der Stokker as she installed her show 'Thank You Darling' at Camden Art Centre (Fig. 2). Netherlands-born Van der Stokker came to creative maturity in

New York in the 1980s. Encountering work by Barbara Kruger and Jenny Holzer pitching urgent text through punchy graphics, Van der Stokker started incorporating words into her paintings. Where Kruger and Holzer borrowed aesthetic and delivery from propaganda and rolling news, Van der Stokker seemed to take her cues from teenage diaries: '*Lief zijn voor elkaar*' reads a drawing from 1989 ('Being sweet to one another'); '*Ik vind alles goed*' ('I like everything'). Her paintings spread on to gallery walls and, later, floors and furnishings.

During the 1990s, Van der Stokker was associated with a group of artists – among them Liam Gillick, Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster and Philippe Parreno – identified by French



2. Installation view of Lily van der Stokker's 'Thank you Darling' at the Camden Art Centre in London, 2022

curator Nicolas Bourriaud as working within a tendency he dubbed 'relational aesthetics'. Her chatty painted environments engage through the niceties and petty grievances of the everyday – the relative price of a cup of tea in different cities, a minor rash, ageing. In 2015 the artist installed the enveloping *Tidy Kitchen* in the lobby of the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles. Boxed-off portions of text offer domestic details: 'pulling out hairs from the drain'; 'tea stains on the table cloth'; 'toilet clean in 7 minutes'.

Van der Stokker remembers the excitement of painting these words on the museum wall, flying against the image of the artist rebel. She is attracted to banal subject matter, which can make audiences very uncomfortable. It also put her at odds with other women artists of the 1990s.

This was the era of *ladettes* in London and of 'Bad Girls' at the New Museum in New York; of art that was upfront about sex whether abusive, owned or craved. Of the New Museum show she thought: 'Maybe I'm not a bad girl, maybe I'm a good girl?' Looking back, she sees the importance of 'Bad Girls' and loves many artists in the show. 'But I think for the

audience it's much easier to consider emancipation of women when there is a certain amount of sex involved.'

On the grand scale, our lives are shaped by social, economic, political and environmental forces far beyond our individual control. Much of the time, though, our thoughts are occupied by everyday stuff: childcare, invoices, birthdays, mildew on the shower curtain, a row with a friend, blisters. This is Van der Stokker's territory: the sphere of our tangible influence.

In her *Manifesto for Maintenance Art, 1969!* Mierle Lademan Ukeles draws a distinction between two systems of activity: development, which is 'pure individual creation; the new...' and maintenance, which must 'keep the dust off the pure individual creation; preserve the new...' Ukeles positions maintenance and development in relation to class and sex and asks who gets to do what kind of work, and which is valued more (I shall leave you to fill in the gaps). While Van der Stokker is not actually carrying out maintenance work in the gallery, she is proposing it as a subject worthy of celebration: like Ukeles, she argues for 'keeping the dust off' to be valued as a subject for 'pure individual creation'.

Ukeles's *Manifesto* also raises the question: 'What is the relationship between maintenance and freedom?' It is immediately double-edged: those burdened with maintenance may lack the freedom to engage in pure individual creation, but no one would have the freedom of pure individual creation without maintenance work. As Ukeles puts it, 'After the revolution, who's going to pick up the garbage on Monday morning?'

There are, however, many nuanced freedoms bound up in that question. As the writer Maggie Nelson observes in her essay 'Art Song', 'many artists from so-called marginalized groups' face a battle not for the freedom to make work addressing violent and painful social issues, but 'to be heard, seen, or taken seriously when they choose to address almost anything else'. Seen in this light, the banal becomes privileged subject matter. To celebrate small everyday concerns in a painting asserts the value of a particular kind of freedom: the luxury of sitting back and indulging in a little nitpicking, metaphorical or otherwise. **A**

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