

Lily van der Stokker and the Banality of Language



BY MATTHEW MCLEAN

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The artist's exhibition at Migros Museum, Zurich, reflects on the political uses of platitudes and truisms



Lily van der Stokker's 'Help help a little old lady here' opens with a single word: 'Yeah', ensconced in a globe, floating on an expanse of wall like a planet in space (*Yeah*, 1990–91/2019). The work's blank facticity has the awesome gnomonic power of a mystic chant, shaken up with a measure of pop triviality. (Mr. Spock's verifying refrain, 'Affirmative, Captain,' in *Star Trek*, 1966–69, can't have been far from the artist's mind, I feel.) In this survey of 36 years of the artist's murals – outgoing curator Raphael Gygax's final show at Migros Museum – Van der Stokker appears as a master of the capacious banality of language and its infinite gradations of implication and nuance. Throughout the exhibition, she proffers up seemingly humble truths, platitudes and truisms, which, on second thought, reveal themselves as politically entangled.



Lily van der Stokker, *Yeah*, 1990–91/2019, acrylic on wall, 161 × 176 cm, Courtesy: the artist and kaufmann repetto, Milan/New York; photograph: Lorenzo Pusterla

Take *Childcare* (1991/2019). The title appears in a jaunty mix of upper- and lower-case letters in red, above a blackboard-sized rectangle of white enclosing, in the lower left corner, a daisy in red and yellow. Its width welcomes the viewer into its field: I almost wanted to escape through the picture plane into its promising space of care and kindness. Childcare is good: who would say otherwise? But how good we think childcare is – how much we're willing to pay for it, especially when the children are not our own – is another matter. In its platitudinous warmth, the work draws the viewer into the topic and then, in its simplicity, abandons them to figure their own way out. In *The Rent (Design for Wall Painting, 2002–03)*, the artist again serves up a brutal scenario with a smile. At the top of a yellow rock, the kind on which Wile E. Coyote would come a cropper, the artist begins a drastic balance sheet: 'the rent (per month)', 'gas' and 'electricity'. At the rock's foot is a rubbish sack. The whole composition is filled with cartoonish doom. Viewed in this context, the placement of *Help, Help Old Lady* (2018/19) on a wall midway up a staircase, feels like both a joke and a genuine plea for assistance. Who's going to pay for the elderly?

On another wall, a blue mound overshadows a somewhat smaller lilac one: one is labelled '€25,000', the other '€15,000'. The difference in the heights of the forms in the work (*€25,000*, 2019) are not proportionate to the disparity in financial sums, so the labels feel drastic, but arbitrary. In his 1986 essay on the case of Sunny von Bülow, the wealthy heiress allegedly murdered by her no less wealthy spouse, Martin Amis noted that the difference between US\$75 million and US\$150 million was nothing 'in our terms. But in the life of pure money, \$75 million and \$150 million are chalk and cheese.' The two mounds in Van der Stokker's work are spongy, almost creamy, and taper up into perilous peaks, like mutant blanchmanges. The butter is gone: might we consider eating the rich?



Lily van der Stokker, *Birthday*, 1998/2019, acrylic on wall and wood, 171 × 151 × 46 cm. Courtesy: the artist and Air de Paris, Paris; photograph: Lorenzo Pusterla

Van der Stokker's idiom of niceness – her colouring-book clarity; her frenzied crayon palette of grass green, icing pink and neon yellow; her invitations to comfort (a comfy armchair makes up part of *Birthday*, 1998/2019) – has often been read as a feminist investigation of ideals of softness, meekness and politeness. In 2020, our whole media landscape – the one the artist gestures towards in *Evening TV* (2019), with its description of 'all day problems in the evening tv' – is rife with appeals to politeness and civility. We are kind online; we don't, whatever our politics, refuse a table to a Republican lawmaker – even when their leader imagines 'very fine people on both sides' when white supremacists kill innocent victims. We 'go high', even when faced with unimaginable lows: and what sometimes emerges is a kind of strangulated babble, politesse straining towards and against politics. The title of *Nice Being Left Right* (2014/19), in which two mammoth pink lumps splattered with flowers declare the niceness of being, respectively, on the left and right of each other, sort of says it all. Yeah? Yeah.

Lily van der Stokker, 'Help help a little old lady here' was on view at Migros Museum für Gegenwartskunst, Zurich, until 23 February 2020.

Main Image: Lily van der Stokker, Evening TV, 2019, acrylic on wall, 420 x 361 cm. Courtesy: the artist and kaufmann repetto, Milan/New York; photograph: Lorenzo Pusterla

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