

# The Guardian

'You can't get my colours in a paint store': the sugar-coated creations of Lily van der Stokker



'When I make the designs, I know that these could be or will be monumental images' *Delicious Plus*, 2016 by Lily van der Stokker.

Beloved by the likes of John Waters, the Dutch painter's installations seem frivolous – but there are deep questions about art hidden beneath their candy-bright facades.

Flowers blossom in bursts of cartoon euphoria throughout Lily van der Stokker's new exhibition *Thank You Darling*. In one rectangular mural they repeat like absent-minded doodles in the margins of school notebooks. The word "THANKS" is painted in the mural's corner in an apparently simple bit of gratitude for pretty colours and shapes. That work even comes with a real red sofa to kick back on, and a vase of flowers to smell. Could art seem more easygoing?

The Dutch artist's candy-bright installations, where murals creep up walls and round corners in psychedelic curlicues, annotated with words and fragments of conversations or thoughts, have been amassing wide-ranging fans for three decades. An early bouquet graced a Viktor & Rolf T-shirt. John Waters, the cult director of "trash" cinema, is a vocal admirer. Van der Stokker's public art projects include painting an entire building exterior pink for the 2000 World Fair in Hanover and creating a supersized chintzy teapot that sits atop a shopping centre in Utrecht. Yet for all the works' popular appeal, tricky questions about art and everyday being lie beneath the sugar-coating of nursery pastels, bubblegum pinks and dazzling fluoros.

Van der Stokker traces her style to her time in art school in the 1970s, where monochrome abstraction dominated and debates buzzed about the death of painting. "I started to question everything: why make art? What to give? Who needs anything I do?" she recalls. One answer was to reduce painting to its essentials: a frame with four corners, in which things happen. She then began exploring the simplicity and all-over pattern employed by revered abstract painters, in a rather different fashion: "I started to fill

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this void up with fluff, clouds and doodles, all kinds of nothing-y nonsense ... to celebrate the essence of abstraction once more.”

When she first started painting flowers in the late 1980s, perhaps unsurprisingly, they rubbed some people the wrong way. “Flowers are a forbidden symbol in the art world. This fascinated me. Why is it forbidden?” she asks. “It’s connected to children, women, the domestic, decoration, fabric, and so on.” Van der Stokker flaunts such taboos, often with the kind of positive messaging you get in a greetings card.

She has used text within paintings to open the gateway to other prohibited territory, too: the banal but comically resonant flotsam of daily life. In her forthcoming show, works draw on her experience of humdrum money issues, ageing, health problems and grumps about her friends’ endless baby talk. A new installation is based on a toy kitchen but a disgruntled mutter upends the cute domesticity: “Do not like pandemics.” Another mural announces: “Red rashes on face / not itchy.”

After creating murals for external building walls, Van der Stokker made her first mural for a gallery interior in 1990. “The wall is a very good facilitator with many possibilities,” she says. “Wall paintings can have various shapes and the architecture is its frame. One of the attractions and complexities is that I like invading the space and making it my own. And after the show, I don’t take anything home.”

To illustrate how radical all of this is, it is worth remembering the feminist artists she came through with in the 1990s: the confessional work of Tracey Emin, or Sue Williams’s paintings tackling domestic abuse. As Van der Stokker points out, art about tough backgrounds fits squarely with an accepted idea about what’s transgressive and avant garde; its perceived edginess is appealing. By contrast, she has pursued what’s truly off limits. “If I make an artwork about family problems, administrative tasks or the common flu, it might not seem so revolutionary,” she reflects. “But I’m bringing in a whole spectrum of new subject matter that is normally absent in art.

“When I think: ‘This is subject matter somehow left out, why not make art about that? Is it stupid? Can it be art? Or could it possibly be art? And in what shape?’ That is interesting: to keep your thinking open.”

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## Vivid colours: three more artworks from the show



### **Childcare (1991-2019)**

This big painting on linen is based on a drawing from 1991 and riffs on the white squares of minimalist painter Robert Ryman. It includes a yellow flower in the corner and is crowned with the word "CHILDCARE". "Childcare was totally unsexy, boring, frumpy and certainly not a subject at all present in the art world that I could see," Van der Stokker says. "On the back, I wrote: 'Design for monochrome.'"

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### **Transfer That Money to Me (2010)**

In this earlier work, Van der Stokker channels concerns we can all relate to. “The text is iconic, I think, in the sense that it connects to everybody’s shameful mind,” she says of words most people have burned to shout at someone. “Not that ashamed, though, because it feels good to yell it out with a smile. And the wall painting is doing that for us.”

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### **Evening TV (2019)**

This work illustrates Van der Stokker's extraordinary palette. "I put fluorescents in many of my colours," she explains. "They make the [sense of] optimism have more impact. It's a special palette I've developed. You cannot have it mixed in a paint store; my colours can only be made by me."

*Thank You Darling is at Camden Arts Centre, London, to 18 September.*

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