

Lily van der Stokker Wields Cuteness as a Weapon Against Everyday Art World Sexism

The 72-year-old painter has been mocking self-important male artists with gleeful curlicue paintings and floral murals since her days running an Alphabet City gallery in the '80s.



Lily van der Stokker, *Revenge*, 2026. All photography by Olivia DiVecchia, courtesy of the artist and Kaufmann Repetto.

By Sarah Cascone
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Lily van der Stokker wants you to take cute things seriously. For decades, the Dutch artist has used doodled flowers, fanciful curlicues, cheerful bubble letters, and pastels typically described as “candy colored” to make her large-scale wall paintings.

“People can get so angry about this,” van der Stokker tells *CULTURED*. “People said that what I did had no content, or that it was superficial.”

But she has always believed that the so-called “feminine” or “decorative” is just as artistically valid as any other style. Her current show, “Male Art Exhibition, Great Show!,” at New York’s Kaufmann Repetto, uses her signature squiggles and flowers to poke fun at the idea that men are currently lacking opportunities in an art world that has been making inroads toward greater inclusivity.



Lily van der Stokker, *Untitled*, 2026.

A pair of her wall paintings greet visitors, baby blue with cartoonish flowers. (Both are priced at \$100,000; sales come with a high-resolution projection and a certificate of authenticity with detailed formulas for accurately recreating the custom colors.)

On one wall, van der Stokker has painted an overwhelming pile of the names of male artists both living and dead, including Pablo Picasso, Sol LeWitt, Yves Klein, Paul McCarthy, Jeff Koons, Damien Hirst, and Franz Kline. On the wall opposite, a short statement: “Mondrian: boyish art with rectangles.”

The joke first came to the artist on the occasion of a panel discussion last year for “I Hit You With a Flower” at the Stedelijk Museum Schiedam, a 2024/25 exhibition that explored the idea of a recent resurgence of *meisjeskunst*, or “girly art” in Dutch, an originally derogatory term coined in the 1980s now being reclaimed. If the show’s works were a reflection of female gender identity, van der Stokker reasoned, surely the same case could be made for the sharp-edged masculinity of Piet Mondrian’s grids in primary colors.

“If there is feminine art, then there must also be male art—and why not mention it? Why not enjoy it for what it is?” van der Stokker asks. (She first proposed staging an all-male exhibition back in 1994; her letter to a curator about the idea is displayed in the show.) Van der Stokker notes that men’s art is rarely described as manly or macho—and even though many art exhibitions only include men, they are never advertised or promoted that way.



Lily van der Stokker at her Kaufmann Repetto show in New York.

“We should stop giving men this neutrality, this centrality,” says her dealer Chiara Repetto.

Other smaller framed works on paper in the show, priced at \$5,000, include a “machismo” artist top 10 list (Anselm Kiefer is “big!” and Richard Serra is “bigger :)”) and a warning to men that “you’re lucky we want equality, not revenge,” based on a sign van der Stokker spotted on International Women’s Day.

She provides additional context for many of the pieces in a written guide. With Jan Hendrickse and his “male beer crate art,” for instance, she recalls how he first introduced himself by offering her a drink from a crate of beer—she later realized this was part of his art.

Some of van der Stokker's most prominent works over the years have been installations, including her white-on-pink floral design for *Pink Building*, 2000, in Hanover and a large-scale teapot sculpture, *Celestial Teapot*, 2013, mounted on top of a building in Utrecht. In New York, she created a large mural, *Thank You Darling*, 2023, along the elevated High Line park, featuring pastel flowers and the artwork title written in puffy bubble letters.



Lily van der Stokker, *Machismo Top Ten (in Blue)*, 2025, marker and pen on paper, 9 3/4 × 13 1/4".

Born in 1954, Van der Stokker was drawn to art from childhood. She left high school at 16, spent four years at a textile school, and enrolled in art school in 1975. But she would first make a name for herself as an art gallerist, not an artist.

In 1983, armed with the paycheck from her first big art commission—33,000 Dutch guilders, which was the equivalent of about a year's salary at the time, or \$10,000, to paint the boarded up windows of a

building in Breda—van der Stokker set off for New York with the plan to travel the states. She carried little beyond a weekend bag and a brooch of a pair of wooden shoes a friend gave her for good luck. “I told my mom, ‘I’m going to New York, and I’m not going to write,’” Van der Stokker recalls. “I didn’t know anyone.”

She lived and worked at a youth hostel in Chelsea and rented a wall at Harry Shoulberg Studios on 14th Street, cleaning up her workspace each day to make way for the evening tenant. (Eventually, she did call home.) Van der Stokker felt called to Alphabet City, a neighborhood then teeming with galleries.



Lily van der Stokker on scaffolding in front of wall painting at Veemarktstraat, Breda, 1983.

When a landlord of a fire-damaged building at East 6th Street and Avenue B learned she was an artist, he agreed to rent her the ground floor for three years on the condition that part of the space become an art gallery. (Technically, van der Stokker wasn’t supposed to live there, but she did anyway.)

The very first show was a rock garden by an obscure artist, Baruch Himmelstein, who responded to a flyer seeking exhibition proposals that van der Stokker hung in a cafe on St. Mark’s Place. For the duration of the lease, the artist-run space hosted experimental, adventurous programming, like Inge Oosterveld’s *Gray Apple*, a performance that passed through the gallery and dispersed onto the street, silent save for the humming of wine glasses as the participants ran their fingers over the rims.

Once, when foot traffic was low, van der Stokker's early collaborator Joop Klinge stood for hours in the gallery window, clad only in his underwear.

New York was also where van der Stokker met her partner, the artist Jack Jaeger. The two forged a transcontinental life together, moving back and forth from New York to Amsterdam until his death in 2013. Now, she is establishing the Stokker Jaeger Foundation, an outgrowth of the Stokker Jaeger project space she opened last year in Amsterdam—a return, in a way, to van der Stokker's gallery days.



Portrait of Lily van der Stokker making the wall painting *Good* in Shedhalle, Zurich, in 1990.

Her breakthrough as an artist came in the form of a 1990 solo show at Feature, the New York gallery owned by the late dealer Hudson. Van der Stokker, who had recently seen an art show where each work had been the product of physical violence, offered a counterbalance in the form of her first major wall painting, *Friendly Good*. In a world where aggressive, tough art seemed to be the norm, something so sweet was subversive in its own way, almost difficult to swallow.

Van der Stokker's very first review, by Roberta Smith in *The New York Times* in November 1990, wrote admiringly of the "double edge" to her "terminally cheerful" aesthetic. Dan Cameron, in *Art & Auction*, dubbed the show the "Sleeper of the Year." Two years later, in the *Village Voice*, Peter Schjeldahl said Van der Stokker's "stuff is stereotypically pure girl," and "suffocating, grotesque, and stupid," but "incidentally reveals by contrast how much of art is a boys' club."

At Kaufmann Repetto, a third, smaller wall painting advertises a fictional show at Stokker Jaeger: “White Male Artists Over 60.” Van der Stokker was inspired by Arnoud Holleman, an old friend who was showing her his new work, but bemoaning his lack of opportunities to show it today. She didn’t make the piece to ridicule such sentiments, but she also doesn’t have much patience for them. Yes, she says, the current trend may be toward inclusivity: “If that is going to happen for the next 200 years, then they can complain.”

“Lily van der Stokker: Male Art Exhibition, Great Show!” is on view at Kaufmann Repetto through Aug. 28.