

ArtSlant - Not So Pretty In Pink (And Why That's a Good Thing)



Huh

Lily van der Stokker
Koenig & Clinton
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Not So Pretty In Pink (And Why That's a Good Thing)
by William J. Simmons

Imagine a summit called by feminist activists and artists representing all of the nuanced wings of the movement. In this time of uncertainty about the role of feminism in the art world, these delegates wonder who could best represent the complexities of feminism and feminist theory without apology. The name they arrive at is Lily van der Stokker, whose new show at Koenig & Clinton is a sprawling pink spectacle comprised of flowery sculptures and wall paintings that illustrate the artist's theoretical and artistic astuteness.

Van der Stokker, who lives and works in New York City and in Amsterdam, is well known for her candy-colored, Woodstock-esque drawings, paintings, and large-scale installations. She combines flamboyantly meaningless phrases and exclamations—oopy, ucky, uffy, and puffy—with highly sophisticated commentaries on the art world. Her greeting to viewers at Koenig & Clinton hangs on a makeshift shop sign that one might see in a thrift store: *only yelling older women in here/nothing to sell*. *Huh* seems flippant and frivolous and mindless, but it is in this understatement that van der Stokker lulls viewers into complacency, only to shock them into attention.



Presiding over the exhibition, firstly, is a feminist bastardization of the great heterosexist construct of the monochrome, the discourse that, in its urge to reject the decorative and the handmade, has often represented the deterministic impulse of the male genius-artist. By evoking a kitschy, store-bought Babies "R" Us ambience alongside the history of the avant-garde, van der Stokker brings her aesthetic commentary into the realm of gender, thereby combining sexual politics with the formal qualities of her work. Color becomes not only a representative of gender roles, but also a metonym for the historical and conceptual underpinnings of painting. With quietly ominous rolls of toilet paper placed inconspicuously throughout the gallery, van der Stokker recalls Judy Chicago's 1972 installation for the iconic *Womanhouse*, *Menstruation Bathroom*. For both Chicago and van der Stokker, the stuff of the body, be it blood or the stereotypical colors that swaddle our children, has the capacity to become paint, to oscillate between artistic and activist worlds.

However, it would be simplistic to say that using pink is the sole criterion for criticality; van der Stokker supplements her intervention with incisive theoretical commentary that walks hand-in-hand with the overwhelming environment she has created. An enormous drawing that adorns the gallery wall, *Laying Here Together* (2014), is composed of two cloud-like shapes that are stacked upon each other and share a boundary, while maintaining their distinctness. As drawings that come alive with a silent dialogue between them, these larger-than-life "bodies" invite us to consider the nature of difference. The handwritten phrase for which the piece is named, "very nice to lie here together, lovely to be next to you; we are the same," is a sentiment that not only points to the artist's interdisciplinary approach, but also to the politics of difference that govern her thinking.

In her combination of drawings like *Laying Here Together* with color-coordinated sculptures and readymade rolls of toilet paper, van der Stokker brings together different artistic approaches—most obviously painting and sculpture—that are literally forced to lie together, in the same way that she seeks to consider the interaction of the monoliths of gender. The erotics of the exhibition beget a celebration of all aspects of the sexual experience, yet, in *Laying Here Together*, there is certainly something melancholic about the segmented figures' impossible yearning to exist as one. Who are these figures, and how do their genderless bodies reconfigure our understandings of sexuality as a simultaneously aesthetic and social phenomenon? What sort of gendered or artistic dynamic does van der Stokker hope to evoke? The answer is left tantalizingly unclear.



Van der Stokker proves that theory need not be boring, that the “feminine” need not be retrograde, and that stupidity does not equal a lack of criticality. She interpenetrates a beautifully shameless exhibition with incisive questions about the way bodies and identities relate to each other. What results is a celebration of difference through van der Stokker’s simultaneous critique and affirmation of a specifically feminine viewpoint. She attempts to mediate what could be labeled an “essentialist” vision through more contemporary visions of gender and sexuality. Van der Stokker loses sight of none of the conflicting strands of feminism, and revitalizes socially-conscious work in an increasingly insular and simplistic art world.