

MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY

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ARTFORUM



Gladys Nilsson, *Plain Air*, 2018, acrylic and paper on canvas, 40 × 60".

Gladys Nilsson

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GARTH GREENAN GALLERY

“Honk! Fifty Years of Painting,” an energizing, deeply satisfying pair of shows devoted to the work of Gladys Nilsson that occupied both Matthew Marks’s Twenty-Fourth Street space, where it remains on view through April 18, and Garth Greenan Gallery, took its title from one of the earliest works on display: *Honk*, 1964, a tiny, Technicolor street scene in acrylic that focuses on a pair of elderly couples, which the Imagist made two years out of art school. The men, bearded and stooped, lean on canes, while the women sport dark sunglasses beneath their blue-and-chartreuse beehives. They are boxed in by four more figures: Some blank-eyed and grimacing, others skulking under fedoras pulled low. The scene might suggest a vague

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kind of menace were it not for the little green noisemakers dangling from the bright-red lips of the central quartet, marking them as sly revelers rather than potential victims of some unspecified mayhem. The painting's acid palette and thickly stylized figures obviously owe a debt to Expressionism, whose lessons Nilsson thoroughly absorbed during regular museum visits in her youth, but its sensibility is more *Yellow Submarine* than Blaue Reiter, its grotesquerie leavened with genial good humor.

The Marks portion of the show focuses primarily on the first decade of Nilsson's career, while Greenan's featured works made in the past few years, the two constituent parts together neatly bookending the artist's richly varied and lamentably underappreciated oeuvre. The earliest paintings, made between 1964 and 1966, mark Nilsson's coming out as a member of the Hairy Who, a sextet of alumni from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago—including Jim Falconer, Art Green, Suellen Rocca, Karl Wirsum, and Nilsson's husband, Jim Nutt—whose show at the Hyde Park Art Center on the city's South Side announced a new and proudly idiosyncratic visual style both geographically and temperamentally distant from what was going on in New York. Though interested in the same sorts of mass-media flotsam and consumerist jetsam as the Pop artists, the Hairy Who didn't keep postwar American culture at arm's length. Instead, they reveled in its bright vulgarities, mixing in a good dollop of surrealist irrationality and goofiness to boot.

Nilsson's broad and lively acrylic-on-panel pieces—such as *Nightclub*, 1964, which features a villainously mustachioed man with an emerald-hued face ogling the high-kicking legs of a trio of showgirls, or *Piano Man*, made the same year, with its reprise of the tiny lime-colored tooters, now in the mouths of a lounge keyboardist's audience—give way to *Space Drawings*, 1967, a knottily detailed suite of works variously combining ink, collage, and watercolor that propose a charmingly sweet steampunk world of man-machine hybrids and free-floating doodadery. It was this sort of effusive figuration that would come to dominate her art throughout the 1960s and '70s—in unexpectedly luminous paintings on Plexiglas such as *Hot*, 1968, whose central character is a strangely benign sort of flaming ogre, like a cross between a distorted tomato and one of Ed “Big Daddy” Roth's mutants, or in the canvas *Dipped Dick: Adam and Eve After Cranach*, 1971. In this diptych (its title is a bawdy play on the term), Nilsson again engages with art history, reconceiving the Renaissance masterwork as a kind of amoebic cartoon, with its ur-human protagonists rendered as blank forms before an Edenic tree teeming with drooping candy-colored protuberances.

Just shy of her eightieth birthday, Nilsson continues to maintain an active studio practice, and the selection of nine larger paintings at Greenan attests to both the longevity and the evolution of her signature style. In these new works, bodies—usually female—swoop and bend amid exuberant jewel-toned landscapes. Although the artist has said the figures are not meant to be taken as autobiographical, it's hard not to see something of Nilsson in works such as *Plain Air*, 2018, a punningly titled acrylic-and-paper collage that depicts a reclining artist with a sketchbook in hand; or the merrily boisterous *Gleefully Askew*, 2019, in which a mostly nude woman is not a static subject, but rather the engine of the action, a painter like Nilsson herself: joyful, mischievous, free.

— *Jeffrey Kastner*