

MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY

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Gladys Nilsson

Press Packet

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Griffin, Jonathan, and Gladys Nilsson. "From the Hairy Who to Solo Success." *The New York Times*, February 2, 2020, Arts and Leisure, p. 22.

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Carrigan, Margaret, and Anna Brady. "Private View: Must-See Gallery Shows Opening in February. Gladys Nilsson: Garth Greenan and Matthew Marks, New York." *The Art Newspaper*, no. 320, February 2020, p. 50.

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ARTFORUM



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

Gladys Nilsson

MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY | 523 WEST 24TH STREET

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

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*

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Art

From the Hairy Who to Solo Success

Gladys Nilsson, 79, enjoys revived interest in her artwork.

By JONATHAN GRIFFIN

In 1966, Gladys Nilsson and five other young artists organized an exhibition of their work in Chicago's Hyde Park Art Center, and overnight became the talk of the town. The group called themselves the Hairy Who.

Their art could be caustic, outré, vulgar and loud; psychedelic patterns and clashing colors abounded. It was bad taste and brilliant fun. Tattoos, graffiti, comic books, fanzines, games and toys, newspaper and magazine advertisements were all influences, as was the encyclopedic, global collection of the Art Institute of Chicago. Rooted in the Surrealist traditions of Chicago's art scene, it was unlike anything else in America at that time.

Ms. Nilsson's work stood somewhat apart from that of her peers, especially her watercolors of animalistic creatures which are rendered with extraordinary delicacy and subtlety. She also adopted a graphic technique borrowed from her husband, fellow Hairy Who member Jim Nutt, for painting in acrylic on the back of Plexiglas, as in "A



ARTWORKS: GLADYS NILSSON, GARTH GREENAN GALLERY AND MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY

Cold Mouth" (1968). Some of her earliest paintings are included alongside her most recent canvases in "Gladys Nilsson: Honk! Fifty Years of Painting," a two-venue survey opening Thursday, Jan. 30 at Garth Greenan Gallery and Matthew Marks Gallery.

In 1969, the Hairy Who amicably elected to disband. Along with other artists of the 1960s, they are now often lumped under the banner of

Chicago Imagism. Ms. Nilsson has since chosen to follow her own idiosyncratic path. (Reviewing a gallery show in 2014, with work combining collage with gouache, colored pencil and watercolor on paper, Roberta Smith of The New York Times described the work as "altogether looser, funnier and more aggressive than before," and "her strongest yet.") With renewed interest in recent years in



ALEXA VICIUS FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES



Clockwise from center left: the artist Gladys Nilsson in her attic studio in Wilmette, Ill.; Ms. Nilsson's diptych "Gleefully Askew" (2019), her largest painting yet; "Very Worldly" (1967); and "Observing" (2019). "I have been waiting a long time to have people catch up with me as an individual," she said.

Imagism and in figure painting more broadly, Ms. Nilsson, 79, is enjoying a late uptick in attention, as demonstrated by this, her most extensive exhibition to date.

I first visited Ms. Nilsson and Mr. Nutt at home in suburban Wilmette, north of Chicago, three years ago. For this interview I reached Ms. Nilsson by video call (it was her first experience with FaceTime, and she was thrilled by the technology). The pair have lived in their art-filled home on a tree-lined, brick-cobbled street since 1976; she keeps her studio up a narrow set of stairs in the attic. Despite her now white shock of curly hair and wire-rimmed spectacles, Ms. Nilsson's mischievous smile is still recognizable from photographs of her as a fresh-faced art school graduate at the Hyde Park Art Center, flushed with excitement. These are edited excerpts from the conversation.

You've been busy!

Unless I'm having an off day, I seem always to be ready to work. My usual is that I go up into the studio for anything from two to five hours in the afternoon. But if I'm finishing work on something, or I'm just starting something, and I need space, I'll go to the mall. [Laughs.] I go out for lunch, go through the stores, fondle a little fabric, try on some shoes, do that kind of stuff. Clear my mind. But I always have a snapshot on my phone of what I left the studio with. Jim can't understand how I can go to the mall and still think about my painting. But for me, it's very easy to do. [Laughs.]

Your exhibition at Garth Greenan Gallery includes "Gleefully Askew" which is seven feet high — the largest painting you've ever made.

I'm reinventing myself as I age. I always wanted to paint big, and I never got around to it. Now, dammit, I'm going to paint some big pieces! It was the largest sized frame that could be carried up the stairs into my studio. That's why it's a diptych. My next birthday will be 80. I'm not too old to take on anything — although it was kind of hard to climb on the ladder. I figure I've got two or three more big pieces in me.

Where does the impulse to paint big come from?

Every time I've walked past really big paintings in a museum, like Rubens' Marie de' Medici series in the Louvre, I've thought, "Oh my God I want

to paint big." Moving paint around and making big motions with your arm is fun. It's as much fun as going through the department store and seeing what the new fashions are. I like to paint really tiny things too. What could be better than to be able to paint something really tiny and to then paint something really big? It kind of shows that I can do everything!

Your technical prowess is so much a part of your paintings' impact. Beyond the imagistic content, what hits me first is color, form, texture, pattern, painterly incident.

I really enjoy doing all of that, but when I look at work by somebody else it doesn't have to have that. I do appreciate the technical prowess in things — like Charles Burchfield's watercolors. But after I've appreciated it, I get lost in where they're taking me on a

visual level. Watercolor is my primary medium — because I enjoy how far I can take those subtleties. My fingers and my brain and my brushes just die in the pigment, I love it so much.

A lot has changed in your work over the past 50 or 60 years. What has stayed the same?

Well, obviously, the use of the figure. There's a certain amount of pattern. The use of color — I love to play with color relationships in pleasant manners and in jarring manners. Using the figure in inventive scenarios, a certain kind of distortion. I love to watch people. I collect postures, in my mind, when somebody doesn't think that they're onstage so to speak, when they're slumped or moving in a strange or exaggerated manner. It also comes from looking, say, at James Ensor's little etchings of people on the beach or "The Garden of Earthly Delights" by good old Hieronymus [Bosch], where there's some really weird stuff going on!

Are the female figures ever you?

Not really, unless I set out specifically to do a self-portrait, which is almost never. As I've aged, my women have aged. In that sense I'm following my physical shift through time. Hair has gotten grayer, things are drooping

more, waistlines are expanding.

Tell me about your training at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago.

I felt like I was a holding pattern until I got out of school, in terms of following my personal thread. But then in my last semester, one day I walked into the lunchroom and several people I knew but didn't like were all sitting together at the same table. It was an overwhelming experience to see them there. I couldn't control myself. I went up to painting class and I did a painting that really went beyond painting the model. It was a group of people that had sharp tongues and looked weird; it was not what you were supposed to paint in art school. That was the start of figuring out that I could paint what I wanted to paint, rather than what I was told to paint.

Is there ever cruelty in your work now?

No. That was just that one instance. I love all the people in my paintings. I would take care of them, no matter what they look like or what they are doing. They might be misguided, they might be a little naughty, but they're nice. Because I'm nice.

Even the earliest paintings in this exhibition depict interactions between men and women. Was that

a preoccupation of yours in the mid-60s?

No. I was happily married, and everybody in my paintings had to have a significant other. In the early work, there would be a lot of times when I would be counting how many men and how many women were in the pictures, so that everybody would have a mate.

I admire the way you make paintings that deal with relationships in a way that is not reducible to sex.

There is a lot of giggling in the work. They titter behind their hands. They peek in tantalizing ways. They are just being a little naughty rather than being lewd, or downright nasty, or pornographic.

You and Jim have a significant collection of work by self-taught artists, such as Martín Ramírez and Joseph Yoakum. What draws you to that kind of work?

The work that interests me is by people who have a need to explain or explore or put down what they have to get out. They aren't stopping because they don't have formal training. They're following their thread without worrying about it.

Do you regret that your recent success didn't come sooner?

Well, I've had success in being identified with the Hairy Who.

But I have been waiting a long time to have people catch up with me as an individual. I'm old enough, certainly! As long as I can keep my energy level up, and keep working, I'm ready for whatever is going to unfold. And hopefully it will include airline tickets to go places! I used to have a joke with Jim, when I'd go out to run errands, I'd say, "Be sure to listen for the phone, in case the Louvre calls!"

What has your experience been of the way that the art market treats female artists? Your prices seem lower than those of male artists.

Well you have to remember — with the exception of the Plexiglas pieces — my works were in watercolor on paper, which has long been considered a minor medium.

What about being married to Jim, whose work has always been very sought after? Do you talk about the discrepancy in pricing?

No, no, no. I think that conversations like that could have the possibility of being very disruptive in an over-60-year marriage. I love Jim's work, and I'm so happy for the successes he's had. But he has the turn of being there with me in New York this time!

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THE BROOKLYN RAIL
CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE

Art | In Conversation

GLADYS NILSSON with Robert R. Shane

“A big belly laugh is as interesting
as a twitter behind the hands.”

Star Trek and opera are among the many sources that have informed Gladys Nilsson’s hilariously irreverent paintings and collages since her time as a Hairy Who? (1966–1969) member. Erotic and grotesque characters engaged in humorous plots and subplots populate her densely packed, carnivalesque scenes in acrylic or watercolor. In 1973 the Whitney Museum of American Art held a solo exhibition of her work.

I sat down with Nilsson on the occasion of her New York exhibition *Honk! Fifty Years of Painting* held jointly at Matthew Marks Gallery, exhibiting work from 1963–1980, and Garth Greenan Gallery, showing new paintings from 2018–2019.

In her home studio in Chicago’s suburbs, amid flat files of her work, endless stacks of art history books, and a handful of paintings in progress, Nilsson spoke—and laughed—about her time as a student at The School of the Art Institute of Chicago, where she now teaches; comedy, which she considers “a very high art form,” and the mischievousness of the vibrantly aging female protagonists in her latest paintings.

Robert R. Shane (Rail): Thank you Gladys Nilsson for welcoming me into your studio—

Gladys Nilsson: My pleasure—



Portrait of Gladys Nilsson, pencil on paper by Phong H. Bui.

Rail: And to talk about your work and your two concurrent exhibitions in New York at Garth Greenan Gallery and Matthew Marks Gallery. In terms of your process, do you have a backstory for your characters when you are creating them? I'm thinking of *Tidy Up!* (2018) in particular. [Laughter]

Nilsson: Well, what else are you going to do when you have a tall, skinny canvas and you need to bend over? That was a challenge, shape and canvas-wise. The idea of shifting and changing the sizes of the canvases came up and I wanted to paint a really big figure, but I didn't want to paint a big figure where the feet and the head would be contained within, so that's why she started to get bent over, and then why? what was she doing? "Oh, I know—she could be pulling the canvas up!" And I worked really hard to try and make the feeling like that is the canvas that she's pulling up. You can see behind there, like she's sweeping things up under the rug, that classic comment.

Rail: Yes, and that's what's so funny because the canvas becomes an extension of the landscape so it's like she's pulling up the floor, and then there's that hard floor beneath it. It's such a surprise!

Nilsson: Oh, I'm so glad you get that feeling from it because I was really worried, I thought "are people going to get this?" Then I thought, well, what difference does it make if *you* get it! I like to present myself with something different to solve, and I've always been that way. I like to try new things, even though they might seem old to somebody else. It's the way of doing things, and so on. I'm having a great deal of fun with the paint.

Rail: To get back again to the kind of stories for the characters—

Nilsson: What are they doing and do I have a tale? Well, some of them do and some of them are just... the necessity to shift and change postures, and manipulate the body, like for instance with that one [points to a painting in progress on her easel], see how the twist and turn that's taking place? Because her fanny is hanging over the area and she's twisted and her front part is coming forward, that's just



Gladys Nilsson, *Gleefully Askew*, 2019. Acrylic on canvas, 84 x 112 inches. © Gladys Nilsson, Courtesy Garth Greenan Gallery and Matthew Marks Gallery.

kind of like turning it. My whole life has been spent watching other people and observing. And when I mention collecting postures and attitudes, it is a very real thing because I'm constantly intrigued by the interactions that take place before my eyes, and it would be something about the way somebody [*exhales loudly*] snorts at somebody else, and the attitudes that I really like—I use them all, whether they're singularly placed or an interaction.

Some of them come based off of seeing a particular incident, and then I elaborate on it, explore on my own and make up the story. For instance, back in '68 we moved out to California and I started watching *Star Trek*, the original. It was near the end of its run on TV, but I watched the show on reruns and I became so enamored. I loved the actors, and I loved what they were trying to do with their little wagon-train to the stars, as Gene Roddenberry would describe it. But what they were presenting wasn't enough, so I started to invent my own characters and plot lines. I had several years of Star Trek-based content, where the characters who occupied my rectangles would be wearing the same kind of clothes that they did and their haircuts were the same, and pointed ears for Vulcans and so on. So I would weave through things that would make no sense to anybody else but they did to me, and I was just having fun with it. Because I do tend to work in *one-thing-flows-into-another-thing-flows-into-another-thing*. And I tend to do a series of things.

I was asked to make a poster for the drama department's production of Clare Boothe Luce's play *The Women* at Columbia College, Chicago, which I agreed to do only if I could come to rehearsals—which I did, from call backs and second readings. I loved it, it was so fun to see all the women trying for roles, and then the whole process of putting on the play, so much so that it instigated a group of watercolors (1982–83) and a gallery show devoted to them. And I loved the storyline, I loved the interaction, I loved watching all of these women dealing with one another.

Then, sometimes you get in a lull as to what to do if you are using figurative elements that aren't portraiture or something like that. One time I woke up in the middle of the night [*Laughs*] and snapped my fingers and said "Oh, I know—it's *The Birth of Venus!*" Because we had been to Italy a few years before in 1972 and had seen that and the *Primavera*, which are just—my god, Botticelli—these two paintings were just glorious. And I did a whole group of watercolors based on *The Birth of Venus* where I divided the painting into three parts, into three small watercolors, depicting it as realistically as I possibly could, which of course made absolutely no sense. I had the zephyrs, I had Venus, and I had the people cloaking Venus. And then I took off from there and did a whole series where Venus took on many guises: she bent over, she got old, she changed genders, there was a man that was Venus, and then there was a woman who was leering at him, it was just all kinds of things like that.

[*Laughs*] So it doesn't take much to make me invent something that's happening, and there are times when things are very specific, but at other times, it's more about twisting and pulling the body.

Rail: It's refreshing to see the range of bodies you portray, particularly in the new work, and that they might have a paunch, they might have features that commercially would be unflattering.

Nilsson: That only a mother could love!

Rail: And certainly would not appear in *Vogue*. But your figures are uninhibited and unashamed.

Nilsson: Well, they're very secure in themselves, and—I've mentioned this, a lot of people ask about the figures of the people—the men just seem to be the same; the women are the ones who are changing, because I'm a woman and I'm changing, and they seem to be aging right along with me! I noticed that I would start to have a compulsion to put gray and white in the hair [*Laughs*] and I go, "Oh, okay, that's too bad," and things are...as you age, your whole physiognomy changes and it's about that, too!



Gladys Nilsson, *Gigantica und der Messerschmitts*, 1965. Acrylic on panel in artist's frame, 13 1/4 x 17 1/4 inches.
© Gladys Nilsson, Courtesy Garth Greenan Gallery and Matthew Marks Gallery.

I'm exploring what natural forces take over. Plus, they are uninhibited, and I always thought that when I reach a certain age, if I wanted to wear bedroom slippers somewhere I goddamn well would wear bedroom slippers somewhere, you know, like the old ladies that wear red hats and go on tours together, and have purple dresses on. [Laughter] Which is something—I haven't done that group yet, but I am reflecting on aging and how you have interest, and you are interesting, no matter what age level you are at. Our whole society is so youth-oriented that I'm sure that once a person hits twenty, it's like "Well, it's all downhill from now on." But the characters are very, "If you don't like the way I look, then don't look." And I rather enjoy that.

Rail: Ann Goldstein wrote of the Hairy Who that [it] embodied "a youthful fearlessness as it disobeyed authority and social norms through corporeal images that emote and mock and ooze and misbehave" and I think I see kind of maybe instead of a youthful fearlessness maybe an older fearlessness now—

Nilsson: [Laughs] Yes!

Rail: Which is very defiant in an ageist society, to present older and exuberant—

Nilsson: I pay a lot of attention to a lot of people—a lot of women—and how they present themselves and what the older woman looks like today versus what the older woman looked like when I was a teenager. Older women then were more like the grannies that would sit in a chair and give you cookies [Laughs] that kind of thing, rather than the granny that's in a jogging-suit out just having fun because she wants to. I keep coming back to when my mom turned 70, she had her ears pierced, which was the single defiant thing that she did because her mom would never let her pierce her ears, and my dad was not about to let her pierce her ears, and I was so proud of her for that one little act, that I think about things like that a lot: if you feel like it, why shouldn't you? If it's within reason, of course—because they're all within reason. [Laughter]

Rail: Looking at this one, *Boating* (2018), I see another white-haired figure—we were talking about aging—and they are figures also of desire, and they're erotic figures and, for me, that's also part of the

defiance of the work. There are voyeurs, male voyeurs, throughout the exhibition looking up at—

Nilsson: Oh my work is all about voyeurism—

Rail: Yup. [Laughter]

Nilsson: I mean they're not actually doing anything, they might be thinking about stuff and sometimes, if you look at some movies that are a lot more sensual when you don't actually see people doing something, they become a different level of eroticism rather than if you're just hardcore porn—well, who needs that? It's the hint. Fully-clothed with a little hat and saucy is sometimes a lot more interesting than naked. [Laughter]

Rail: Is the erotic connected to humor at all for you in the work?

Nilsson: Oh sure, because sometimes things are funny. No, I like humor. As I said, humor and comedy are high art forms to me, and I revere people who have made it work in film. Preston Sturges is a zenith director that just is so many things, so important.

Rail: Now we're looking at *Plain Air* (2018) and the white-haired painter, blue skin, is holding up her thumb to measure the landscape that she's sketching in the distance, her bloomers are showing, she doesn't mind. The collage has been relegated to this small canvas by her legs—containing art historical pieces. How has your relationship to art history changed over the years?

Nilsson: Oh, I love art history; I am continually looking back. And I think that kind of puzzles a lot of people, like, if I'm talking to students I might make references to things that are old—not to what's going on now. I admit to being very lax in being aware of what's going on now. I'd much rather look back, and I think just because of the solidity of things, you can get a lot more than you think you might get, a student can really gain a lot by looking at things, by really looking at things that might be centuries old.



Gladys Nilsson, *Oopsy*, 2018. Acrylic on canvas, 40 x 60 inches. © Gladys Nilsson, Courtesy Garth Greenan Gallery and Matthew Marks Gallery.

I loved art history—I took about five years worth in four years—I was always taking art history, not to do anything with it other than to just absorb. I just kept wanting more and more and those were focuses and I just loved sitting in the dark and having all of these images bombard me. I would just continuously be like, “oh my god I’m enthralled.”

So this one amused me because I know few people who actually have done *plein air* painting, and the idea of *plein air* painting, well when you’re painting a big watercolor, I can’t imagine going out and trying to paint it on there. I’ve seen photos of John Marin with an easel painting his watercolors and thinking, “no that’s not going to work for Gladys,” and so on and so forth, and I get the idea well sure you know *plein air* and playing with it because it’s spelled different and I like the fact that in this piece she’s out, supposedly painting nature but she’s really interested in her shoe—which happens to be a very nice shoe—I worked very hard to give her good footwear, at least on one shoe.

But she has a little canvas where she does have some art history in there, a couple of figures collaged and then one painted figure, and I really like that.

There was one instance when we were travelling somewhere, and I went through European galleries and I thought, “Oh that fish looks very familiar.” [Laughs] It was one of the things I had cut out and used in a collage. I was like, “ooh, I know that fish.”

Rail: It’s always struck me when I’ve read you talking about art school you always come back to art history—Whitney Halstead and Kathleen Blackshear—even more so than talking about studio influences.

Nilsson: Oh I did, I did what they wanted me to do in the studio classes—if it was a still life, if it was a model—I had no real sense of where I wanted to go in terms of formulating a sense of direction. And when I was in art school you really weren’t *allowed* to formulate a sense of direction. In my drawing class at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, I really focus on, “this is the class where if you want to explore something you can,” because I never had that opportunity.

And it wasn’t until I was in my last semester of school that I kind of found a thread—and I was severely chastised by my painting teacher that you don’t paint anything personal. [Laughter] And I fumbled around a few years after where I found the thread of where I wanted to go, and it included, obviously, playing with the figures and the ideas of things other than realism.

But art history: Now, I’m getting a little old and I’m getting tired in museums a lot sooner than I used to, but I can’t get enough. I’m always afraid that if I don’t turn that corner, I’m going to miss the one thing that makes life meaningful. And I get very enthused to go home and paint or draw—or do whatever form I’m doing at the time. So for me it’s a very positive experience to continually be absorbing all of



Gladys Nilsson, *Boating*, 2018. Acrylic on canvas, 60 x 36 inches. © Gladys Nilsson, Courtesy Garth Greenan Gallery and Matthew Marks Gallery.

this stuff that's gone on.

Rail: Looking at *Gleefully Askew* (2019), the main character is very mischievous, like so many in the exhibition at Garth Greenan. There's the large orange figure, she nearly takes up the height of the canvas, she's bending her arm over her head, and splashing her blue paint without care into the next panel, where two art handlers are trying to carry away a rather colorless painting, and they're somewhat nervous. And she wears only a small apron, but she has that sly look. I actually thought of *Fox in Socks*—the Dr. Seuss character—that sort of mischievousness.

Nilsson: Yeah, I was really pleased with how mischievous she came out. I mean, sometimes sly looks are a little more successful than others. And I worked very hard on that apron too, I'll tell ya, I tried to get it just perfect. Because when you're painting of course you have to have protection. And I have an apron that I wear when I paint and I have studio shoes when I was painting so that I wouldn't drip on my good shoes, so on and so forth. And I think she, well she finally does get one moon painted up there with the color that she's doing.

Rail: Even the space is mischievous—that knee goes behind that other plane, where we don't expect—so it tricks us as to where she is in space.

Nilsson: Well I kind of tweak that kind of reality, and have for many, many years, and it amuses me to see how slyly I can do it. You noticed it right away, but sometimes an observer might not notice that you're really encompassing, like: "Where are they? Are they inside? Are they outside?" and I just like to kind of push and pull that kind of thing—and what is she looking at? I don't know, but it's making sparks from down below.

I played with this, once it got set up, I knew I wanted to have it be this kind of unevenness. It wasn't like, "Oh my god I didn't measure," you know that's very purposeful, and I thought I could have it so that the canvases were butt up against one another to make it really into one big canvas and it just, it looked so bad. But the minute the separation was there it did make perfect sense with it, which is why it was "gleefully askew."

Rail: You're referring to the way the—

Nilsson: The way they don't line up. They don't match—

Rail: Right, the canvas depicted in the background, which spans across both panels, doesn't match up at the break in your diptych, and neither does the orange figure's paintbrush, and so it's almost like in Cézanne when you look at a still life and two ends of the table don't meet up with one another—

Nilsson: You know, your bringing that up reminds me of something an art historian said, like going all the way back: there's a particular still life that the Art Institute of Chicago has up that has three different levels of the back of a table. The art historians made it perfectly clear that that was purposeful because that was what that part of the painting *needed to have*—that the artist could have painted it straight-across and there are some still lifes where the ends of the table aren't that far off. But I've never forgotten that aspect of it—*that's what that needed, right there*. You form a dialogue and you form a relationship with the work that you're dealing with and it tells you what it needs to have done. At least for me I have a big dialogue with what I'm working on and I talk to it and it talks back to me and we go on and on and round and round. But I love that kind of thing, and then what you were talking about the Cézanne I mean it just...what fun, really. And fun is very good, and it's very important.

Rail: The narratives get very complex. I think of both your love of *Star Trek* and opera, the way they have the main plot and then the subplot in the background.



Gladys Nilsson, *Plain Air*, 2018. Acrylic and paper collage on canvas, 40 x 60 inches. © Gladys Nilsson, Courtesy Garth Greenan Gallery and Matthew Marks Gallery.

Nilsson: Yeah, you have your supernumeraries that carry the spears on stage, and the subplots too, thinking of Preston Sturges's films, where you have your main thrust of the scene, but if you've seen the film enough and you really start to dive into it, you become aware of the fact that way in the background there's something else being set up. And you start paying attention to that and you realize that there is a lot more there than what meets the eye. And I think I've always played with that kind of inclusion. The more stuff, the happier I am.

I just, never in my life would paint with these [points to the painter's palette the character in *Gleefully Askew* holds with her thumb sticking through the hole] but there's something so amusing because you go back into art history and you see people with their little thumbs through there and they're painting.

Rail: It's funny too because you talked about the apron in the studio literally providing some protection—but she's nude otherwise.

Nilsson: I know. [Laughter] Every once in a while I read these little weird blurbs in the paper, or on a TV chat show or something, where there are some people who actually vacuum in the nude—and I don't know if that kind of like "Oh no" as long as you don't cook in the nude! My women like to have certain kinds of adornment—and with her the only chance of adornment that she's going to have is an apron. Sometimes she might have shoes and socks on, or a hat, or a necklace, or a blouse and that's all. But here, she was ready to go and she just needed an apron. Doesn't cover much [Laughs]

Rail: Interesting reversal of art history, too; instead of the female nude being painted the female nude is painting. [Laughter]

Nilsson: And the men are serving as easels.

Rail: The title work for your two concurrent exhibitions is *Honk!* (1964).

Nilsson: [Laughs] Just that small piece!

Rail: It's funny because it's so unassuming, but *Honk!* actually carries many of the themes in your current work, there at an early stage you were doing older bodies, and—

Nilsson: But they were more with fake beards hooked over their ears and so on. Yeah, there was a certain amount of that kind of thing. I didn't title the show and I couldn't figure out. I was like, "where did this title come from?" And then I looked, I hadn't seen some of the work for a long time, and hadn't remembered that that particular piece was called *Honk!*, and then I thought "Well, that does kind of fit, because if you're honking, you're telling people to get out of your way" and phrased like that, it's like "Yeah! Get outta my way! 'Cause I'm here!" [Laughter] "Hey you—look at this!" [Laughter] Or something like that.

Rail: It's loud, it could be inappropriate. You had mentioned snorts when you talked about observing people, and that's something you hear, it's not just about the visual.

Nilsson: Yeah, well hearing and seeing and smelling all go into the observational mode, although you kind of hope that smell is a positive, rather than a negative. Once I caught a cab to go somewhere—I can't remember where—but it was at night and it was in the city, and I was meeting somebody at a restaurant or something, and the cab driver was chatty and I said, "Oh, that's a beautiful scent." Then the cab driver said, "Yeah! I just picked up Oprah Winfrey and dropped her off, and that's her perfume!" And it lingered in the cab, and that was a very positive odor-reminiscence, because I've never forgotten that, not because I was in a cab that Oprah Winfrey had vacated, I didn't see her. It was smelling that smell, that I'm never going to forget that incident. [Laughter]

Rail: Smell gets so much to instinct. Duchamp dismissed painting as "olfactory masturbation," that



Gladys Nilsson, *A Red Tree*, 2018. Acrylic on canvas, 48 x 74 inches. © Gladys Nilsson, Courtesy Garth Greenan Gallery and Matthew Marks Gallery.

painters just do it for the smell—but I think you really embrace the instinct and eroticism in your figures. They're sort of connected to the earth. A lot of the pieces—throughout your career—have been about the lower strata of the body.

Nilsson: That's probably to do with how I put humor on pedestal. Usually it's drama that people think is the higher level, but I think humor is really higher because it has a lot more substance, because if it's going to be good—like if you look at a comedy—it probably takes a lot more energy to make a really good comedy than it does to make a really good drama. And having said that, now every Shakespearean actor is going to bludgeon me, but I just regard the lower end of things—not the “lower” end of things but—I don't differentiate between “high” and “low”—and I like low. A big belly laugh is as interesting as a twitter behind the hands.

Rail: I was wondering about the relationship between the larger characters and smaller characters in your work. You've kind of played with hieratic scale throughout your career, there's a wolf piece at Matthew Marks Gallery—

Nilsson: *Lycanthropie Drawing* (1969).

Rail: It's so Mesopotamian in a way, with the one larger figure and the smaller subordinate ones bowing down to him. The recent work is almost kind of like *Gulliver's Travels* with the Lilliputian, the small figures around some of the larger central ones. Though the large figures seem unimpeded by what the smaller ones are doing, as in *Boating*. Their lives, the smaller figures', are in kind of a precarious state depending on what the larger figures might do.

Nilsson: They are, and I'm not quite sure if they realize how precarious their positions are. Maybe, I'm not sure. They probably floated from some place over there directly underneath. The more I look at this piece the odder it becomes to me because it's only this part that's in the water. So they could have floated from under there, and they're just, I don't know where they came from but they're, yeah, I know what you are saying. That's a really strange piece, boy I had fun doing that. I thought things were getting too serious and I

thought I have to do something that's not quite as serious.

Rail: But there're sort of two classes of people—you have these large protagonists and these smaller supporting characters—and it's very different from most Western painting since the Renaissance where the scale is more naturalistic.

Nilsson: Well see, the Renaissance, because you always had the little donors and you did have the little people on the side, so you did have that kind of scale shift. And if you go back a little further you might have people in windows looking out, and I can recall seeing some paintings where a square thing, whatever, was being observed by people in windows and the people in windows' have heads that are



Gladys Nilsson, *Lycanthropie Drawing*, 1969. Ink on paper, 27 5/8 x 19 3/4 inches. © Gladys Nilsson, Courtesy Garth Greenan Gallery and Matthew Marks Gallery.

so giant they're bigger than the people in the square, almost. I don't know that there's that kind of hierarchy going on—it's just that their size is different. I look upon them as being all equally important and I've often cited the tale of giving a lecture about my work at a university [Laughs] and showing things that interested me at a certain point I was like, "this is where my work comes from and this is what interests me." And one of the things I included is the specific slide of a Sears catalogue bathrobe ad that triggered in my memory. If you had the Sears catalogue as a kid like my family did, and you turned to look through and you have the bathrobe that's this big and you think, "this is our bathrobe, but it also comes in this color and this size." I suddenly realized that not only was I thinking of high art with the little donors of the Renaissance painting, but it was also the Sears catalogue that impacted how I do things, from when I was a kid. So that little bathrobe in that color was equally as important as the big bathrobe in that color, it was just a different color.

But you know you think about, in nature, when you have, say, the rhinoceros or the elephant and they have little birds that pick and eat fleas? The big people are very reliant on those little people, and the same with the sharks that have those fish that are only about this big that attach themselves and they swim and eat garbage between the shark's teeth. You know what I mean? You have two aspects that are reliant on one another. Now I don't know what these big people are doing for these little people or actually vice versa in this particular picture, but they all have their meanings and their uses.

Rail: And throughout the exhibition, the smaller figures and larger ones certainly have that relationship like the rhinoceros and the bird.

Nilsson: And they're all very—they exist very well with each other.

Rail: And so what's next? You're continuing work in this series?

Nilsson: For as long as it wants me to. I've got all this paint, I just keep buying more paint, I find more colors. I like to mix colors, but I also have to have a lot of tubes of paint to mix it with. And, as you can see, I do have several blank canvases. I want to paint something larger again. Although

I'm not quite sure if I would paint another diptych but I'd like to get into that size and I have to work into it because, as I said, that was really tiring. But if I present myself with it—I can't waste anything—I can't leave that just laying there. And I have a skinny, small skinny canvas which—thinking of stretching proportions—this is a weird shape, except I think I'm going to do somebody in a box or something. I'll be having a show in Los Angeles at the Parker Gallery opening up mid-May this year. So one of these, he would like to have something that's from 2020.

Rail: This has been a pleasure. Thank you for being so candid and sharing your story.

Nilsson: I'm delighted with talking to people. I'm very open, for the most part, about what I'm doing and how I do it.



Gladys Nilsson, *Space Drawing #8*, 1967. Ink and collage on paper, 14 x 11 inches. © Gladys Nilsson, Courtesy Garth Greenan Gallery and Matthew Marks Gallery.

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Interview

GLADYS NILSSON PAINTS LIKE SHE PEOPLE-WATCHES

By Ella Huzenis

Published February 21, 2020



Photo by Jamie Stukenberg, Courtesy Garth Greenan Gallery and Matthew Marks Gallery.

Gladys Nilsson, the 79-year-old Chicago-based painter, loves a crowd. Well, “I don’t like to be in crowds,” she clarifies. “But I like to watch crowds.” As an avid people-watcher, the dynamics of strangers intermingling in public spaces have inspired Nilsson’s work for the last fifty years. Her love of people is fully on display in her current gallery retrospective, *Honk! Fifty Years of Painting*, at the Matthew Marks and Garth Greenan galleries in New York’s Chelsea.

Huzenis, Ella, and Gladys Nilsson. “Gladys Nilsson Paints like She People-Watches.” *Interview*, February 21, 2020.

At both locations, vibrant compositions bubble with life. Her characters—some distinctly human, others animal, and the rest ambiguously in-between—engage one another in bizarre, spectacular landscapes: playing, fighting, flirting. Nilsson’s paintings and drawings reflect the cheeky, psychedelic exaggerations often associated with Hairy Who, the art collective she was part of in the late-’60s with five other alumni of the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. Her approach, however, is unique in its keen focus on human relationships. Nilsson’s works, which are rendered on canvas, plexiglass, and paper, are universes in themselves, formed from an imagination driven by a fierce fascination with all variations of the body.

As viewers might guess, the amount of energy Nilsson invests in each work doesn’t allow much opportunity for dwelling. Each painting, lovingly constructed, demands her complete devotion: “My pieces get very jealous if attention wanders, and you have to assure them,” she says. “You have to calm their nerves a bit, so to speak.” For Nilsson, who attended the gallery opening with her husband, the artist and fellow Hairy Who member Jim Nutt, the exhibition offered a surprising look-back. She walked us through some of the works, and how she’s kept painting interesting for herself over the last fifty years.

“HONK” (1964)



Acrylic on Panel in Artist’s Frame, 13 1/8 x 15 3/4 in. © Gladys Nilsson, Courtesy Garth Greenan Gallery and Matthew Marks Gallery.

“UNTITLED (STANDING)” (1969)



Ink on paper, 12 ½ x 19 in. © Gladys Nilsson, Courtesy Garth Greenan Gallery and Matthew Marks Gallery.

“I definitely don’t think about the very early work in the first room. So it’s like, ‘Oh gee, look what I did there.’ I mean, that’s so raw in comparison to the very latest work ... the kinds of exaggerations used in the figure, the simplicity of the palette. My palette has expanded enormously over the years. So there’s a rawness in how my technique was at that time, in how I was drawing.

I’m assuming this painting is where the show’s title comes from, and I looked at it because I thought, ‘Honk? Well that’s a strange name. I wonder where they got that from?’ And then I got to the show and I looked at [the painting], and I thought, ‘Well, that makes perfect sense.’ Here are all these people, and they’ve got these little horns in their mouths and they’re all old, even though they have yellow hair, and they’ve got canes. Everybody is facing everybody else, and it’s like some kind of quasi-mirror-image. So *Honk*, I guess, had a logic to it in terms of the show title. It’s kind of bizarre. I mean, it certainly attracts attention. ‘Why is that show called *Honk*?’ What a strange name for a show. Then I was thinking, well, ‘Honk! Get out of my way!’

I don’t know which side is honking to get out of the way, but yeah, they’re not moving. They have reached a stalemate. ‘Honk’ is a lot more interesting than ‘Stalemate’ as a title. Although, ‘Stalemate’—I might write that down and ponder it.”

“I love paper and I have so much paper. I probably don’t need to buy paper for the rest of my life because I was continually getting paper when it was on sale.

Black paper is really interesting, or black canvas for that matter. If you’ve ever painted on

black velvet, like those Elvis paintings that you would see on intersections—someone sets up to sell Elvis paintings. But I guess it’s really curious because it reverses all of the known factors that you don’t even think about when you do a line drawing on a white piece of paper.

Those silver ink drawings came out of really liking Aboriginal bark paintings, where you’re seeing a pattern drawn that depicts as much of the skeletal parts of a kangaroo as, say, the kangaroo itself. The Aboriginal bark paintings, all through school and after I got out of school, were things that I would just think about, like any artist thinks about things that have become source materials. Except with the bark painting—I didn’t know how it was going to come out from me and how I would use the ideas that I had been thinking about in them. And then for whatever reason, one day I thought, ‘Oh, well that seems simple. I’ll just do some silver ink drawings on black paper.’ And I really, really like working on it.

I like to present myself with different things to solve. You work over and over and over again on things that become your primary method. What each space requires is different, and I like to give myself a kind of pause to think about in any given work. If color becomes repetitious,

“DIPPED DICK, ADAM AND EVE AFTER CRANACH” (1971)



Acrylic on canvas in artist’s frame, two panels, Each: 85 ½ x 49 ½ in © Gladys Nilsson, Courtesy Garth Greenan Gallery and Matthew Marks Gallery.

then I make a point of having something slightly different in the next piece. It becomes interesting to me to shift relationships. ‘How far can I push this limited palette so that it still interests me?’ And, you know, I have to continue interesting myself.”

“The canvas paintings were all done in California. We had a three-bedroom ranch style in a very suburban area across from the college where my husband got a job offer and then I had a few pick-up classes. But aside from a few pieces that I do remember working on, like the big old diptych that’s in the last room at the Marks gallery, I have no memory of them really. The diptych, I remember putting together, and my admiration of [Lucas] Cranach [the Elder]’s painting, which is where that one comes straight out of. In museums, I spent a lot of time looking at the older works and how things were drawn, like Cranach or [Hans] Holbein [the Younger], et cetera. With the Cranach ‘Adam and Eve’ painting, how it just had these two people in this dense landscape, and how then life began after that. I liked that particular painting.

Jim and I were talking about that because he was painting on canvas at that time, and we were both represented in Chicago. So obviously the works had to go from point A to point B, but it’s like, “Well geez, how did we ever ship those things? What happened? Did they just throw them on the back of a truck without care? Did somebody throw them on the top of the car, and you drove with them with one hand out the window holding onto them?”

“A RED TREE” (2018)



Acrylic on canvas, 48 x 74 in. © Gladys Nilsson, Courtesy Garth Greenan Gallery and Matthew Marks Gallery.

Huzenis, Ella, and Gladys Nilsson. “Gladys Nilsson Paints like She People-Watches.” *Interview*, February 21, 2020.

The density of the canvases that I was doing that are in the Marks gallery—I was surprised at how extremely dense they were in terms of what was going on in them. My work has always had a certain kind of density in terms of shapes and colors and figuration and so on. But those paintings to me were super dense, especially the big diptych. I couldn't believe how much I had put into it and how I kept track of it all. I was especially taken with being able to confront that one again."

"My studio is on the third floor. It has a very narrow staircase. And the back of our car only holds canvases up to a certain size, which is where the 'Red Tree' size came from. I really like having the tree in the middle, and the tree divides the two people that are in it. It forms an edge of the painting, you know what I mean? She, in that one, is reaching around, and you can see her hand on the other side of the tree, which is the only link between the two people in that panel. I like diptychs. I think they're kind of fun.

Maybe I was in retrospect thinking back to how much I really liked working on the Cranach painting, and then sort of replicating it in more modern situations. Bringing up my characters into a situation where they might be confronted by a mystic landscape.

As time has gone on, one is very familiar with how one draws things so that a lot of times the initial drawing might be different one from another, but there are relationships that do carry over. One work into the next. In the early-to-mid-'80s, I did a whole group of watercolors based on Botticelli's 'Birth of Venus,' taking it through a variety of scenarios that would make no sense to Botticelli at all, but did to me: old Venus, wrinkled Venus, Venus on a bender. I had all kinds of different scenarios and ways of presenting that particular painting. And with the tree paintings—looking now at the Marks diptych and then thinking about the Greenan diptych—one flowed into the other with about a 45-year interim."

"Well, the female figure has taken over because the older I get, the more I think back on the women in my life—aunties and grandmas and cousins and that kind of thing. And the older I get, the older I look. You know, people joke about, 'Well, everything is wrinkled and sagging and bagging and all of that kind of stuff.' I've always thought it was kind of fun, inadvertently exploring what stage I am in life. More or less, all the female figures now magically have gray and white hair, whereas they didn't use to. Women work real hard, and they're the backbone, and now I'm celebrating that kind of thing by really using them as the main thrust.

All the characters have very good relationships, and what starts a painting could be a gesture, a posture that I can remember seeing, and I want to explore. I collect postures, I watch people, what they're doing and how they interact with one another. I invent interaction, and I elaborate on it. I have always been very free to bend and twist people into impossible ways of standing or falling or sitting.

I love to just watch people. I leave my front door and I walk down the street, and I see a mom pushing her stroller to get the oldest kid to daycare or kindergarten or something, and how they're interacting. Usually it's, 'I don't want to go.' 'Well you have to go.' Or, I'm sitting at my library where I go everyday to look at magazines and such, and I just see what people are doing there. Or I'm at the grocery store and I see how people are milling about. I just like the dynamic of crowds. I don't like to be in crowds, but I like to watch crowds.

“BOATING” (2018)



Acrylic on canvas, 60 x 36 in. © Gladys Nilsson, Courtesy Garth Greenan Gallery and Matthew Marks Gallery.

I come from a blue-collar background, and there was a lot to be said for getting through the day. I mean, there's a lot to be said for any strata of life getting through the day. The executive gets through the day in a way that's different than the factory worker. I know how hard my dad worked, and my mom, and I just like to celebrate little things, which can be buying a quart of milk. I just like seeing how people manage. You're in the department store at Christmas season, and people are just worn out and then they get excited because they see the sweater that Aunt Susie would be perfect in. And that peps them up. You know?"

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On View

Painter Gladys Nilsson Got Her Start as a Member of Chicago's Hairy Who. Now, at 79, She's Ready to Shine on Her Own

Dual New York shows at Matthew Marks and Garth Greenan explore five decades of her wild, ecstatic paintings.

Caroline Goldstein, February 21, 2020



Gladys Nilsson, *Plain Air* (2018). Courtesy of the artist, Garth Greenan Gallery, and Matthew Marks Gallery.

Gladys Nilsson was beaming. On a recent afternoon the artist—a member of the Chicago group the Hairy Who, a once-fringe movement that's increasingly beloved—was strolling through the galleries at Matthew Marks and Garth Greenan, admiring the precise curatorial choices in a much-anticipated fifty-year survey of her work.

Goldstein, Caroline. "Painter Gladys Nilsson Got Her Start as a Member of Chicago's Hairy Who. Now, at 79, She's Ready to Shine on Her Own." *artnet News*, February 21, 2020.



Gladys Nilsson, *A Red Tree* (2018). Courtesy of the artist, Garth Greenan Gallery, and Matthew Marks Gallery.

“It’s kind of thrilling really, to see them all in the same place” she told *Artnet News*, strolling through the dual exhibition, which also includes lesser-known aspects of her practice, like collages and early watercolors. Nilsson herself hasn’t seen many of the works in years, since they’ve been sold off to collectors or, in some cases, been languishing in storage.

The Hairy Who collective formed after its members graduated from the Art Institute of Chicago—where Nilsson is now a professor—and included Jim Nutt (Nilsson’s husband), Jim Falconer, Art Green, Suellen Rocca, and Karl Wirsum. It formed out of necessity, when the artists realized there were few places to show their raucous work. With the help of Don Baum, the exhibitions director at the Hyde Park Art Center, the six recent graduates mounted just a handful of shows over a period of four years, but their success was immediate and has proven lasting.

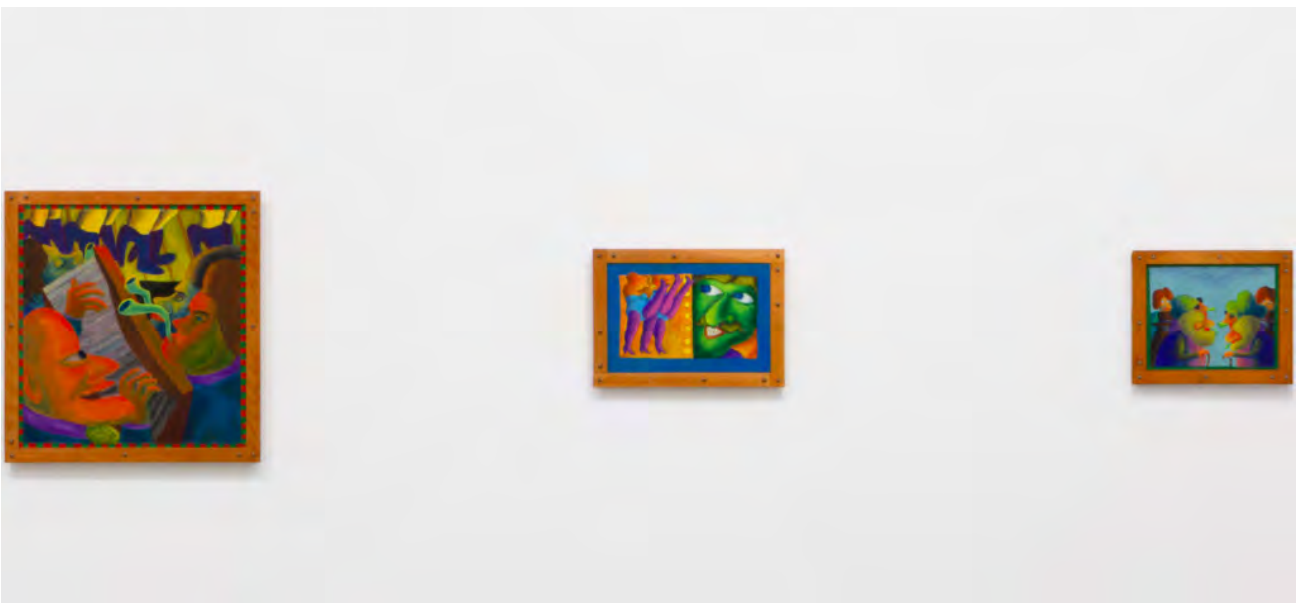
What distinguished the Hairy Who was their non-conformist, non-hierarchical approach to art making, which Nilsson credits to the tutelage of Whitney Halstead, an art historian who encouraged his students to look beyond so-called fine art—trawling corner shops, newspapers and magazines, music, film, and comics for offbeat inspiration.



The Hairy Who in Hyde Park, Chicago. Still from YouTube, courtesy of the Art Institute of Chicago.

The similarities in approach did not yield a cohesive visual language though. “The only way our work looks related,” Jim Nutt told Jonathan Griffin in 2018, “is if you compare it to the standard of an all-black painting by Ad Reinhardt.”

The joint exhibition, titled “Gladys Nilsson: Honk! Fifty Years of Painting,” is organized chronologically: at Matthew Marks, more than 40 works created between 1963 and 1980 are



Installation view of “Gladys Nilsson: Honk! Fifty Years of Painting” at Matthew Marks Gallery. Courtesy of the artist, Garth Greenan Gallery, and Matthew Marks Gallery.

Goldstein, Caroline. “Painter Gladys Nilsson Got Her Start as a Member of Chicago’s Hairy Who. Now, at 79, She’s Ready to Shine on Her Own.” *artnet News*, February 21, 2020.

on display, while down the street at Garth Greenan the paintings are the artist's most recent, dated between 2017 and 2019.

In the first room at Matthew Marks, super colorful, smaller scale works from 1964–1966 invite closer viewing. Nilsson described herself as being in a “holding pattern” during the early years after graduation, but it's clear that once she found her stride there was no turning back.

“I'm always fond of having other people think about what they'd like to read into it,” she says of her paintings. “I've always felt the viewer has to work for it, too.” In the work *Gigantica und der Messerschmitts* (1965) a giant, faceless figure with a swathe of fire-engine red hair is assaulted by tiny green planes; a star-shaped puncture where her mouth should be sends out two whiffs of air, like a balloon deflating.



Gladys Nilsson, *Gigantica und der Messerschmitts* (1965). Courtesy of the artist, Garth Greenan Gallery, and Matthew Marks Gallery.



Gladys Nilsson, *Very Worldly* (1967). Courtesy of the artist, Garth Greenan Gallery, and Matthew Marks Gallery.

While at school, she and Jim Nutt developed a fondness for German Expressionist films, which Nilsson said probably planted the idea of the German aircrafts in her mind. Similar planes resurface in later works, including her forays into paint on Plexiglas, a medium she adopted after watching Nutt play around with it.



Gladys Nilsson, *Untitled (Reach)* (1969). Courtesy of the artist, Garth Greenan Gallery, and Matthew Marks Gallery.

Goldstein, Caroline. "Painter Gladys Nilsson Got Her Start as a Member of Chicago's Hairy Who. Now, at 79, She's Ready to Shine on Her Own." *artnet News*, February 21, 2020.

Nilsson was drawn to the experimental nature of the process, which involves painting on a reverse film, and only seeing the final composition at the very end. “Building up [the illustrations] you just kind of keep going, adding more” she said, “and then when it’s finished you turn it around and: surprise!”

In some of her Plexiglas works and in earlier watercolors, Nilsson began incorporating cut-outs from magazines, posters, and even art history books, in a nod to Halstead’s mandate to pay attention to both high and low-brow visual culture. At one point the artist began working on round canvases encased in needlepoint hoops, which appealed to her because “the boundaries are already set for you.”

A series of works from the late sixties and early seventies reveal Nilsson’s deep appreciation for Aboriginal art, borrowing that form’s constellations of tiny dots and silhouetted animals organized in frieze-like procession.



Gladys Nilsson, *Dipped Dick: Adam and Eve After Cranach* (1971). Courtesy of the artist, Garth Greenan Gallery, and Matthew Marks Gallery.

Goldstein, Caroline. “Painter Gladys Nilsson Got Her Start as a Member of Chicago’s Hairy Who. Now, at 79, She’s Ready to Shine on Her Own.” *artnet News*, February 21, 2020.



Installation view of "Gladys Nilsson: Honk! Fifty Years of Painting" at Garth Greenan Gallery. Courtesy of the artist, Garth Greenan Gallery, and Matthew Marks Gallery.

One of the highlights of the show is *Dipped Dick: Adam and Eve After Cranach*, in which she recasts the classic 16th-century painting of original sin with Gumby-like figures, set against a rollicking landscape of color and pattern. (A wily, green-striped serpent tangled over a branch extending between the diptych's two panels.) The painting's title is a testament to Nilsson's affection for word play and the occasional dirty joke.

The large figures in *Dipped Dick* set the tone for the most recent works, on view at Garth Greenan. The biggest painting, finished by Nilsson just months ago, measures about seven by nine feet—that's the maximum size canvas that the artist could fit up the stairs and into her second-floor studio in Wilmette, outside of Chicago. "It's hard, it's very physical," the artist confirms. To reach the top of that canvas, she had to paint from a ladder. She breezily mentioned that she had quite a scare, nearly falling off recently. It's all in a day's work; even at the age of 79, she remains unfazed.

The figures who populate Nilsson's paintings from the last two years are almost indistinguishable at times: large-nosed, thick-trunked, with long, lumpy limbs. The women tend to have bosoms that bounce and flop. Their physical bodies are squeezed and pinched to fit inside the compositions, and every inch of the surface is filled with lively color. It's not



Gladys Nilsson, *Tidy Up* (2018). Courtesy of the artist, Garth Greenan Gallery, and Matthew Marks Gallery.

an overstatement to say that these impressive, outsized personalities match the artist's own spirit. "If you stretched her out," Nilsson told me, describing one of her blue-skinned giantesses, "she'd be too big for the frame."

"Gladys Nilsson: Honk! Fifty Years of Painting" is on view at Matthew Marks Gallery, 523 W 24 Street, through April 18, 2020; and at Garth Greenan Gallery, 545 West 20th Street, through March 14, 2020.

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THE ART NEWSPAPER

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Private view: must-see gallery shows opening in February

Huma Bhaba's humanoid sculptures and Hairy Who member Gladys Nilsson—the best new commercial exhibitions this month

MARGARET CARRIGAN and ANNA BRADY



Gladys Nilsson's *Dipdick: Adam and Eve (After Cranach) (1971)* Photo: Courtesy of the artist

Gladys Nilsson

Garth Greenan and Matthew Marks, New York

Until 17 April

A member of the Hairy Who, the group of six Chicago artists that rose to fame following a series of radical exhibitions at the Hyde Park Art Center on the city's South Side in the late 1960s, Gladys Nilsson has been rewriting the script on female body acceptance for the last 50 years. Her psychosexual imagery is funny, audacious and completely unabashed. Garth Greenan shows new works by Nilsson, complemented by a show of works from the 1960s and 70s on view at Matthew Marks.

Carrigan, Margaret, and Anna Brady. "Private View: Must-See Gallery Shows Opening in February. Gladys Nilsson: Garth Greenan and Matthew Marks, New York." *The Art Newspaper*, no. 320, February 2020, p. 50.

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Frieze

Profiles /

Gladys Nilsson's Metamorphic Women

BY PHILOMENA EPPS
06 MAR 2019

In two shows at Goldsmiths CCA and Hales Gallery, London, Nilsson furthers her life-long alchemization of objects and limbs



An unusual group of characters – three women, one sheep and a few indeterminate swine-like and elephantine figures – are grouped together on a beach. A snouted animal to the right of the frame is wearing a top hat. One of the women in sunglasses holds a chequered parasol above the sheep's head. Intertwined yet vaguely dissociated, they are all dressed in sagging variations of the same pinstriped swimming costume – their shoulders hunched, breasts drooping to meet protruding bellies, mouths arranged in loose, gummy smiles. This cartoonish scene is Gladys Nilsson's *Rented Bathing Suits*, an early ink-on-paper drawing from 1965.

Nilsson's artistic practice initially flourished through her involvement with the Chicago Imagists, who first emerged at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago in the early 1960s. Nilsson was one of several artists who exhibited under the moniker 'Hairy Who' at the Hyde Park Art Centre in 1966; their legacies were recently celebrated by the group's first retrospective, which closed at the Art Institute of Chicago this past January. Under the tutelage of influential educators like Kathleen



Gladys Nilsson, *Rented Bathing Suits*, 1965. Courtesy: CCA Goldsmiths, London

Blackshear, Whitney Halstead and Ray Yoshida, Nilsson and her peers were exposed to the history of 20th century art, favouring Surrealism, Art Brut, and Dada, in addition to paying critical attention to the traditions of non-Western and 'outsider' cultural practices. The visceral energy of these idiosyncratic movements fed into the Imagists' diverse vernacular, habitually portraying the quotidian as abject, wacky or surreal. Their expansive concept of art often meant that they were drawn to pop cultural references from television, music and commercial advertising.

In her painting from the late 1960s and early '70s – works of which can be seen at Goldsmiths Centre for Contemporary Art as part of their survey show 'HOW CHICAGO! IMAGISTS 1960s & 70s' – Nilsson began to manipulate and distort the two-dimensional human form, typically isolating and inflating particular body parts, eschewing any sense of proportion or gravity in favour of

Gladys Nilsson, *Deep Bend*,
2004. Courtesy: Hales
London



parody and physical exaggeration. In *A Cold Mouth* (1968), salmon pink tones and thick black outlines bring to mind the aesthetic of popular 1930s cartoons, while the extended legs in *More Fowl Beasts* (1970) feel irresistibly analogous to the stretched limbs of Popeye's Olive Oyl. In both paintings, bodies are gestural and active, with Nilsson humorously converging animal, fowl and human attributes into entangled, grotesque forms, usually occupying strange landscapes.

More Fowl Beasts was executed using watercolours, a medium that Nilsson began using as a non-toxic alternative to oil and turpentine while she was pregnant. In the 1990s, she began to experiment with collage, now another constant of her practice. To coincide with the show at Goldsmiths CCA, Hales London are hosting a solo presentation of works on paper made by Nilsson between 2004–2014. Working with watercolour and gouache in bright pastel hues, in *Deep Bend* (2004),

Hammocked (2013) and A Table (2014), a large, buxom female figure, typically dressed in a colourful blouse or slip, skirt and high heels, is surrounded by smaller observers. In quintessential Nilsson style, the women's limbs are seemingly elastic, with arms and legs looping around one another, even stretching to encompass nearby objects or plants.

The environment within A Table is appropriated for the ink, graphite and pencil series A Window (2014). Across multiple drawings, the same female figure is seen variously interacting with the domestic space, comprised of a large open window and a table and chairs. Each time, Nilsson reimagines the scale, with the furniture growing and shrinking depending on the woman's activity: she is found sitting on chairs, leaning out of the window, standing on the table, or sometimes even appearing to float in mid-air. With their exaggerated breasts or bulging crotches, some of the diminutive figures around her drape themselves off her body, poking or tugging at her clothes, or attempting to lift or look up her skirt.

In a 2014 interview with *The Paris Review*, Nilsson remarked, 'It's the same person going through time and experiencing different things ... You can't put your foot in the same river twice ... even if you do the same things [everyday], they're always different.' This evocation of a fantasy space shifting through time is crystallised in her mixed media work that combines collage, drawing and painterly textures. In *A Walk...* (2014), the space around the principal figure – and often the figure itself, dressed in a curious, ill-fitting lampshade-like dress – is adorned with images cut from magazines and books. There are architectural buildings, classical sculptures, drawings, fruit, flora and fauna, as well as fabrics and sewing patterns: motley juxtapositions inspired, in part, by Nilsson's interest in *Vogue* (as a longtime subscriber), Egyptian painting and Italian Renaissance altarpieces. These enduring references can be traced back to her Imagist beginnings, but Nilsson's work – like the landscapes and individuals figured within it – is perpetually in flux, always creatively shifting and being re-imagined.

Main image: Gladys Nilsson, *A Cold Mouth*, 1968. Courtesy: © the artist and Garth Greenan Gallery, New York

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the PARIS REVIEW

Eye Contact: An Interview with Gladys Nilsson

By Nicole Rudick November 24, 2014

AT WORK



Gladys Nilsson was born in Chicago in 1940 and grew up visiting the Art Institute of Chicago, which she then attended from 1958 to 1962. In the mid- to late sixties, she was a member of the Hyde Park–based art group the Hairy Who and created exuberant figurative paintings using both acrylic on Plexiglas and vibrant watercolors on paper. While at SAIC, Nilsson studied with the art historian Whitney Halstead, who taught his

Rudick, Nicole, and Gladys Nilsson. "Eye Contact: An Interview with Gladys Nilsson." *The Paris Review*, November 24, 2014.

students to look beyond Western art and also beyond traditional realms of art to more vernacular sources. Though Nilsson has periodically integrated cut-paper elements into her paintings since the sixties, she has recently begun to make heavily collaged works, in the series “Plant” (2010) and “A Walk ...” (2014). But perhaps none of Nilsson’s work exemplifies Halstead’s directive better than the collages currently on view at Garth Greenan Gallery, in New York. The series, called “A Girl in the Arbor” (2013), comprises thirteen lush works, each of a woman sitting on a brown chair under a blue arbor and surrounded by greenery. The surface of each collage is littered with tiny cutouts, some of which compose and adorn the large female figure; many others seem oblivious to her and are engaged in their own affairs.

I met Nilsson the day before her show opened late last month, and we talked over the phone a few weeks later—she, in Chicago, where she still resides—about the intricacies in these collages, her experiences as a budding art student in the city, and the horror of trying on swimsuits.

You visited the Art Institute as a grade-school student and then as an art student, and you’ve said that in that time, it changed from a nineteenth- to a twentieth-century institution. What did you mean?

What I meant when it changed from being a nineteenth-century building into a twentieth-century is that the building had been modernized. Things were hung in new places, and some galleries were configured differently.

When I was in grade school, a friend and I—she and I drew cows—would walk around a bit in the museum,





and I remembered a catwalk in the back, over a large area that no one ever went to, that had large plaster casts of building facades and statuary from other times and other places. It stuck in my mind because it was a very curious area. So when I went to school there, I spent a lot of time trying to figure out where this area was. But I couldn't find it. At first I thought I had imagined the place, until I discovered old pictures in the archives of the museum.

Do you recall looking at Seurat's painting at the institute?

Yeah, very much so. I wasn't necessarily crazy about it. I liked it, but it wasn't a favorite. But I found sitting and looking at it because it had a nice bench in front of it. That it was one of the most soothing things for me—not that I was in turmoil. It was just a very quiet experience, because Seurat has got a lot going on surfacewise. But then it's also an extremely static painting. I spent a lot of time looking at it, and it's probably the one painting that I remember most, aside from Jackson Pollock's *Blue Poles*, which is a whole other thing.

What's the issue with that?

There was a collection of abstract art that was hung in the large gallery, which was placed between the front and the back of the museum—you'd have to walk through it. And when it opened, I remember coming up the back, from the school, coming around a corner, and there was *Blue Poles*. It stopped me dead in my tracks. I'd never really spent any time with big Jackson Pollock paintings. Certainly through art history and survey courses I was familiar those kinds of paintings, but *Blue Poles* was very exciting. Somebody brought it up at my opening, considering that the arbor comprises slanting blue verticals. But *Blue Poles* doesn't have anything to do with my paintings—it was just the color I happened to use. Of course, I then thought, Well, that *is* interesting, that that one painting would resonate with me.



What was so exciting about that particular Pollock?

Most of them swirl and drip and so on, but that one has some other very specific things going on. When you get used to seeing what Pollock is known for and then you see his earlier paintings, from the 1930s—dismal Depression-era landscapes, street scenes that are not unlike a couple of the really dark and murky Charles Burchfield watercolors—well, I’m fascinated by that kind of shift. I’m thinking of Guston, too. There’s an installation of four of his figurative paintings up in the museum now. I spend a lot of time going through the museum—every lunch period, one day a week. I like to go through the Guston room because he’s using the same kind of palette he was using in his earlier abstract pieces, for the most part, but then suddenly the figure jumped into his work and they become so wonderfully goofy.

You’ve never put politics into your paintings, but when you were a student, you were a fan of German Expressionist paintings, of George Grosz and Otto Dix.

Very much. I have continued to like Grosz. Sometimes you like people when you’re a student, and then you grow away from the work or you grow out of the work. But the Germans have always stayed with me—as has Egyptian art and early Italian painting.

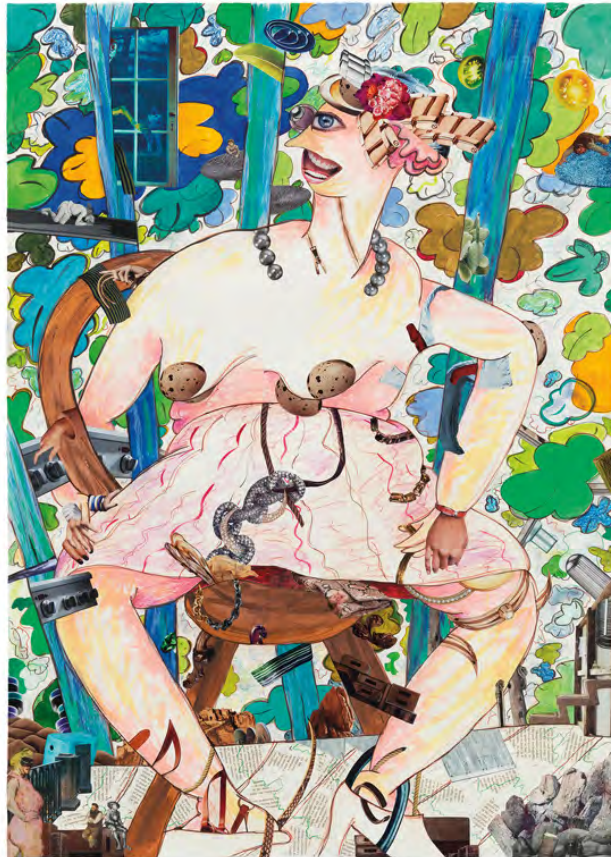
Grosz painted a lot with watercolors, which is important to me—I need to have a bunch of watercolors that I like to look—but one of the things that really fascinates me is Grosz’s use of ink pens. He’ll make just the outline of a figure, and you can look through it at another figure walking around behind him—a kind of stacking of figures. And he’s just ruthless in his depiction of the social mores of the time—the late twenties, thirties, going into the war. He’s drawing disgusting people. It’s a really hard-core depiction of life.

Do you approach any of your work with that attitude? Do you think of your figures in a kind of ruthless way?

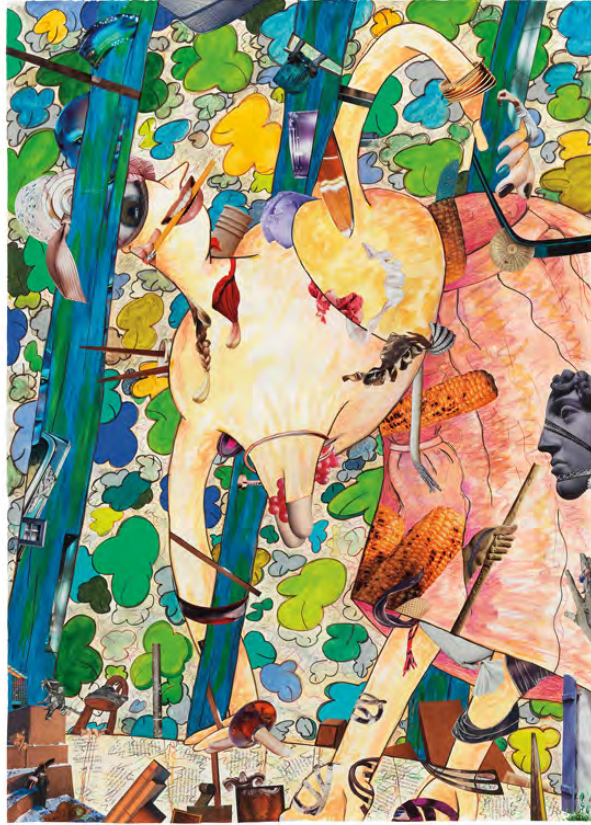
Well, I'm not ruthless. You can look at a piece of mine and think that it's a benign exploration, but I like to think there's an edge underneath it all in terms of certain commentaries on relationships. I'm an everyday person. I think in terms of just surviving the day on a personal level, rather than the solving of world problems. I just can't do that. Other people can do that on a grand scale. For me, because I know how hard people work, celebrating little victories is as important as a peace treaty being signed. I'm not degrading peace treaties, I just mean that there's a lot to be said for the person who gets up and goes to work and does a job they don't want to do but it's how they're able to survive.

What little victories are being celebrated in this new group of works?

Oh, that's an interesting question. But I'm not sure how to answer it. Maybe it's too broad a statement for the feel of this work. There's a large person who is very content and happy, but there are all these other things going on that perhaps she's not privy to. That's a theme that's been constant in a lot of my work. Sometimes my people know exactly what's going on, and other times they're just going along and suddenly they realize that there are little corner pockets that have some awfully strange stuff going on. When I'm playing with collage, I'm thinking about contrast and juxtaposing odd things. And because of the size of these particular pieces, I was able to find some bigger figures in my history books that I could cut up and play with. I might have a Greek sculpture sitting next to a Renoir figure or something like that. And it's great when I can find a little bit that has the appropriate glance, look, direction. I love that.



Rudick, Nicole, and Gladys Nilsson. "Eye Contact: An Interview with Gladys Nilsson." *The Paris Review*, November 24, 2014.



So I'm interested in building relationships between contrasting images and making it work visually. I start out with the big figures, and then I boil it down to smaller and smaller figures—tiny people who are doing silly stuff. It's about getting the larger figures in place so that I can unleash these tiny people who are risqué and haughty.

When you say creating relationships, do you only mean formally? Or narratively, too?

Both, because they do have conversations with each other. In *Girl in Arbor # 11*—she has an Egyptian head, and there might even be a Cleopatra or two in the head itself—there's a Michelangelo figure, God or Moses or somebody of import, who's sitting with his chin in his hand and looking down. He had to be looking at something, so there's a little Renaissance guy, and they're making eye contact. The little Renaissance guy is surprised, like, Who's looking at me? And God is up there pondering, What have I created?

And though I knew he had to be looking at something, it had to be exactly the right something, and it took me a while to find the right something. It's very satisfying to find matching things going on. At the bottom of *Girl in The Arbor # 4*, on the lower left-hand side, there's an El Greco woman, and she has suddenly noticed this little guy, who may or may not be a Watteau figure. So aside from creating an image that's big and bold and energetic and comprising strange things that make sense, it's also about finding the right figure to stare at the right place.

Even still, how do you know what to include? How do you know, when you're cutting things out, that certain images will make sense?

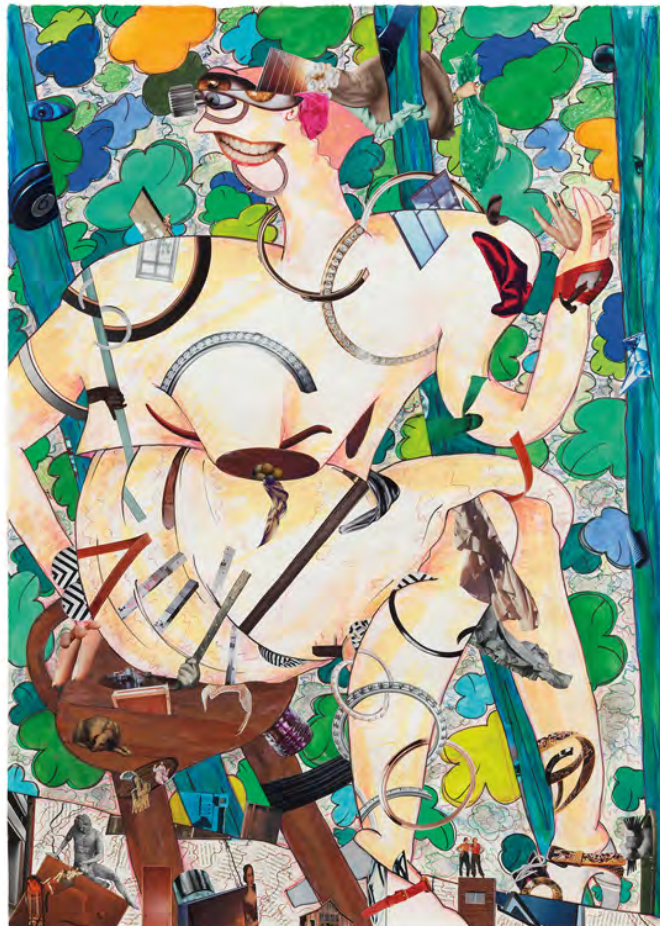
I would go through the books I was using to find one piece that physically fits, that matches the angularity and perspective. I'd cut out at least twenty little images and try them in that space. And either they work or they don't. Sometimes there's only one thing that works, and sometimes I'll have several things that work there, and I have to make a decision as to what to commit to the paper.

Is part of your aim with this series to comment on the idea of classical beauty and the way it's been depicted in both art history and popular culture?

If it is, it's unconscious. I'm not interested in classical beauty—or, I am interested in classical beauty, it's just that my idea of classical beauty might be completely different from someone else's. The woman in these collages is very happy with how she looks. She has a good sense of self-worth, self-beauty. She doesn't think there's anything wrong with her. Even though she might be made up of a lot of strange things—eggs on her boobs, two or three mouths—she doesn't hide.

But you're also using images from fashion magazines—clothing and makeup and jewelry—loaded imagery. Did you have something in mind beyond the fact that she likes the way she looks?

I've subscribed to *Vogue* for years and years, and I know how ridiculous all of it is, and I'm always amazed at how, if you don't weigh eighty pounds, you're useless. And if you're over the age of sixteen, you're useless as a model. It's the way modern society depicts women. I mean, I love to look at clothes, I love to think about





fabric and, Oh my God, I would love that outfit—though of course it would look ridiculous on me, I weight three hundred pounds more than that little skinny twerp of a model. But in any case, I love it.

And now some of the fashion magazines have full-figured models, because they have realized that women who are beyond a certain size want to look nice, too, but their notion of what a full-figured woman looks like is ridiculous. I did a watercolor series back in the eighties on shopping for bathing suits—which is probably among the most demoralizing experiences a woman can have—and how she thinks she look one way, but then she'd look in the mirror and she'd look absolutely horrible. But it wouldn't make any difference to her because she found something that fit.

So I always knew that I would use the magazines for collages, but I just didn't know how. And then at some point, back in the early to midnineties, I just started cutting them up.

In a number of these works, zippers and jewelry are wrapped around their bodies in various places, and the women look fabulous, but, at the same time, the objects look constricting.

Being able to cut out something that encircles so precisely was often a test of my ability. But she likes to have adornments. She needs to have adornments. Sometimes her adornments are crippling. They create rhythms, like when the arcs are repetitions of the arcs of her body. Smaller ones, too, like the way the leaf areas circle around. Somebody at the opening mentioned the idea of bondage, but that's not how I think of them. They're adornments that have gone way beyond practicality.

You've said that the woman in the arbor series is the same woman in each painting. Is that right?

Yeah, except that she is going through a metamorphosis.

What kind of metamorphosis?

It's the same person going through time and experiencing different things, which we certainly do. You can't put your foot in the same river twice. You get up every day and the day is different—no two days are alike and even if you do the same things, they're always different. That's the kind of change that is going through in the work. She's in the arbor with her chair, but every day is different. That's what life is like.

You have snakes as a motif in a lot of the works—images of snakes or snakelike objects—and the foundations of the arbors are made up of pages pulled from a book on snakes.

I have a number of old books from library sales or ones my son has picked up that are too worn to be sold. One is this snake book, but it had no visuals for me to use. It only had the author's drawings, and I'm not going to use somebody else's drawings. I can use Goya, but not contemporary drawings. So when I had a big empty area where the floor of the arbor would be, I knew I needed to activate the surface somehow. And I thought about the snake book and all the text in it. I tried very hard to not have it right-side up so you wouldn't be staring at it and suddenly reading about what the rattlesnake does. So I turned the pages askew and layered them, and they became like tile work. And that gave the surface a new texture. Contrast is important to what I'm doing.



Before we get into contrast, do the snakes relate analogously to the women?

No, no, it just happened. I've got a big wine book that I could have used instead, but somehow it was just the snakes. I suppose you could go all the way back to the Garden of Eden and Eve succumbing to the temptation of eating the forbidden fruit and all of that heavy-duty stuff. But no, it was just a happy accident.

I was thinking of the idea of transformation, of shedding one's skin and becoming someone different.

That works, too, I guess. Every time you go shopping for a new bathing suit, you try to transform yourself. Every time you put a new outfit on, you're shedding one skin and putting on another to present yourself in a different way.

Back to the idea of contrast. I think the surfaces in the works are so interesting, because you've got shiny paper from the glossy magazines, and you use text pages in an architectural way. Then there's the translucence of watercolors, the heaviness of gouache and cartoony forms made from colored pencil. The surfaces have so many different textures that, even though they're quite flat, they feel sculptural.

The surfaces of my work have become more scumbled and active and, with this series, because it involves so many different surfaces, that kind of contrast became very important. When I first added gouache to my work, I was doing watercolors that had some pieces from cut-up *Vogues*, and having just those two materials—the watercolor and the glossy magazine pages—didn't work well in my mind. I added gouache to bridge the gap between the two surfaces. In this series, I've used pen and pencil and colored pencils and crayons and gouache and watercolor and ink and collage. Some of the art books I cut from have a dry, flat, 1930s feel to the paper, which contrasts with the hard, glossy feel of the magazines. The surfaces are very lush, and I would get lost in making them. It's extremely satisfying. And if you don't like it, who's going to like it?

They're so complex—so many tiny details and so much going on—and yet it's they're seamless.

You know, you've got your big image that grabs you right away, and then, that unfolds and lets you in a little at a time.

There was a family Jim and I knew in our neighborhood in Chicago in the sixties, and they went to one of the Hairy Who shows where I had Plexiglas paintings, and they bought one, a nice little piece. Some years later, the mother said to me, My daughter said that she loves walking past your painting, because every time she walks by it, she finds something in it that she didn't see before. And I thought, That's the greatest thing an artist can have somebody tell them—that there are new things continually going on in their work.

I was looking at my plant series at the opening and I thought, My God, that little piece I cut out is small! And I placed it in exactly the right spot! No piece is too small for me to try to fit in, and maybe nobody else will notice it until years after the fact, but I know it's there and I know that it makes the area richer for having been there.

It's like pointillism—a tiny dot that maybe somebody notices, or doesn't, but it makes the painting.

Exactly. And actually, there have been a lot of dots in my work over the past few years. Maybe all of that standing in front of the Seurat is what's coming back. In fact, I was working on a watercolor before you called, and I was thinking, I've got to put more dots in this, a few in the background, to activate it—and it's amazing what a dot can do.

Maybe Seurat's painting has been secretly driving your work all these years.

That could be. It's a very important painting, and, gosh, I look at it every Thursday.

Do you see something new every time you look at it?

I don't. I just walk past it and I remind myself of its existence. It's history, to me, in terms of my walking through the museum as a young art student. And the room is usually so crowded that I spend more time looking at the people who are looking at it. Which is where a lot of the content in my work comes from—observation, and conversations people are having.

One time I had a layover between flights, in Houston or somewhere in Texas, and there were two groups of people waiting at the same gate. One group was the Bonne Bell makeup people, and the other was the Mary Kay makeup people—and they were totally different in appearance! The Mary Kay people looked like the kind of swank person who drives around in a big pink Cadillac. She had ladders of success for her sales people, so these men and women had pins in the shape of a ladder, with things hanging off of it. And the Bonne Bells were like runners or something—people who are interested in jogging and are sporty looking. I was reading a book, but the minute I spotted those two factions I put my book away and just sat and watched them, and it was a great deal of fun. And a lot of my work comes from just watching what people are doing—I'm kind of a voyeur.

Gladys Nilsson's work is on view at Garth Greenan Gallery through December 13.

MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY

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BOMB

GLADYS NILSSON AND JIM NUTT

by
Richard Hull



Gladys Nilsson, *Steady Bears*, 1970, watercolor, 15 3/16 x 11 7/8 inches.
All Nilsson images courtesy of the artist, Luise Ross Gallery in New York,
and Jean Albano Gallery in Chicago.

Jim Nutt and Gladys Nilsson are often described as “Chicago artists,” and it’s true that their work formed during a particular moment when Chicago Imagism appeared in the mid ‘60s with the three Hairy Who shows at the Hyde Park Art Center. But I would argue that for the last 40 years Jim and Gladys, who met as students at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago (SAIC) and have been living together ever since, could have been living anywhere. With fierce independence and a nonchalant attitude toward reigning trends in contemporary art, they create paintings and drawings that root from an intense need to make things, and to make them right.

For several years, Jim and I have been team-teaching a class about looking at and discussing paintings in the Art Institute of Chicago’s collection. A scrupulously detailed conversation about a Bruegel painting is fairly typical (we continued one in several emails), and though there are times we disagree about certain aspects of what a painting might do—much to the amusement of the students—we agree that there is always something new to discover. It is Gladys and Jim’s intense curiosity and connoisseurship of painting—and also opera and golf, among other things—that draws me to them. Of course, I admire the work, which, as Gladys put it regarding Jim’s work, has “a great deal of wonderful, masterful subtlety going on now.”

Jim and Gladys and I became friends 30 years ago, when the Phyllis Kind Gallery invited me to join them as a gallery artist. It was 1979; I was attending graduate school at SAIC. The first day I brought my work to the gallery, Jim and Gladys—whom I barely knew—were hosting a party for Roger Brown after his opening. Viewing their house and the unusual amalgamation of paintings and objects in it, and meeting some of the most interesting artists in Chicago, I felt lucky. Driving up to the house for this interview, I remembered that evening. After all these years, I still feel lucky to be in the presence of their wonderful home and great company.

—Richard Hull

Richard Hull: As I was coming up here I was thinking about your collection of works by self-taught artists, contemporary art, and ethnographic objects—especially with the Ray Yoshida show coming up at SAIC. As a teacher at the school he had a lot of influence on people collecting things. When did you start collecting?

Gladys Nilsson: We bought a small painting by a Sunday painter who couldn't quite get it right at a junk shop in the early '60s because, I don't know, it seemed like the thing to do. We didn't start out acquiring things with the idea that we must form a collection.

Jim Nutt: The False Image people [Christina Ramberg, Phil Hanson, Eleanor Dube, Roger Brown] and other students became aware that Ray was going to flea markets, and they started going as a group. It became almost a weekend ritual, but it also had something to do with his idea of going out and collecting images that you see in your eye. It wasn't unlike his instructing students to cut out images from wherever and organize/paste them in sketchbooks, based on formal relationships. The idea was to recognize the potential of a form or shape beyond the literal reference.

GN: When all of this flea market and Maxwell Street shopping was going on, we were in California. Even earlier on, before the Hairy Who shows started up, people were ripping out ads from backs of magazines or odd photos from newspapers, or picking up junk found on the street, and surrounding themselves with this curious mix in their studios.

JN: People acquired things just because they liked to have them. It's the kind of stuff that artists for years have had in their studios. They see something that interests them, quite often it's a postcard of a well-known painting, but it's also something from the vernacular or popular, easily acquired in the everyday world.

RH: Does what you collect influence you directly? Say, the African pieces or the works by self-trained artists in your home; do they have an effect on the way you use color or make shapes or images?



Jim Nutt, *Miss T. Garmint (she pants a lot)*, 1966–67, acrylic on plexiglass, enamel on wood frame, 72 x 48 inches. © MCA Chicago.

GN: That's been foisted on us and others of our ilk: that we were heavily influenced by our collections. I mean, I would be more prone to go to a museum, find an arm in a painting and use it as a source, than to say, "Oh, my God! Look how Joseph Yoakum draws a tree in a work in our collection. I must use that."

RH: So what you were making probably

influenced what you collected more than your collection influenced you?

JN: It's a normal way of acquiring things. You see something that you like and, if you can afford it, you buy it. Although Ray Yoshida often talked about literally taking shapes from objects that he had bought and using them in his paintings, so there was a direct connection between a painting

of his and something that he'd bought. I don't think that's ever been the case with us.

RH: I didn't think so. Actually, speaking about museums, Gladys, you go to the Art Institute every day when you're teaching at the school.

GN: When I'm at school, I go three times a day.

RH: I know you, Jim, go to museums all the time as well. During your last visit to the Met you were looking at Bruegel's *The Harvesters* [1565]; you said you had discovered something about it.

JN: It's one of the first paintings I was asked to do a visual analysis of—for line, plane, volume, texture, and space—as a freshman at Washington University. I did all these diagrams. It's a painting I've always enjoyed looking at. In any case, partly because they have a bench in front of it, and I was tired—

GN: That always helps. (*laughter*)

JN: —I did spend a lot of time just sitting there looking at it recently. And the longer I looked, the more I remembered my diagrams and some comments. I remember pointing out how a line intersecting another made the space deeper, and that one of the other students had said, "No, it doesn't. It makes it flatter." So upon looking at it again I realized that, yeah, it does make it flatter. Then all of a sudden I also noticed that there is something in the most distant mountains in the background: it's a tiny little point, like a steeple. It's no more than a 32nd of an inch and it's just the tiniest bit darker than everything else in the mountain. You wouldn't notice it; it took me a while to zero in on it, and, once I saw it, I began to see it in reference to all sorts of things. Then I also realized that in the upper left-hand corner there's a little disc, about half an inch; it's in the shadow of the frame, sitting up there. I mean, what the hell is that? It could be the moon, during the daytime—

GN: I suggested that, and you pooh-poohed that idea.

RH: You don't ever sit and look at the paintings together, do you?

GN: Oh, God; no. We might accidentally happen upon one another in any given institution, but we come in, coordinate when to eat, and that's it.

JN: Yeah, we have very different rates of speed and areas of interest.

RH: You have been together a long time, and you also have many similar interests. Are there paintings in the museums that you like, Gladys, and Jim doesn't?

GN: Oh, I'm sure. We try to avoid those kinds of discussions. (*laughter*) For

instance, about this Bruegel, he said, "Oh, I discovered something I never realized about it." And it became this game, I had to go and find what Jim had discovered. So, I'm looking at it and looking at it, and I'm thinking, I don't know. When I'm looking at a painting I might be looking with different motivations. I had noticed an odd thing in the lower right-hand corner and discarded it, because when he said he'd discovered something, I thought it was this monumental thing, like an enormous face coming out of a tree. Later I came upon the painting again; Jim was there and he pointed to that thing which I kept seeing



Jim Nutt, *Drawing for Wiggly Woman*, 1966. Courtesy of the artist. © MCA Chicago.



Jim Nutt, *Trim*, 2010, acrylic on linen with MDF frame, 25 3/8 x 24 3/8 inches. Courtesy of David Noland Gallery.

as being flat, like the edge of a mirror. He said, "No, it's volumetric, like a basket." We disagreed about that. Then he pointed out the disc in the upper corner. It was curious, like a knot in the wood.

RH: When you find something really unusual like that, does it occur to you to incorporate, not that, exactly, but something like that in your paintings? That is, surprises within the paintings?

GN: All my work is a surprise! I've always painted a lot of little people getting smaller and smaller, and the exchanges that take place between them, but it's not something like, "Oh, I'm going to put a thing up there."

RH: I guess even in your little people, all of a sudden there's an odd—

GN: Are they, or are they not, wearing underwear? That's always the question.

RH: You often make small sketches, thinking about shapes and figures. Do you create a full-blown sketch for each watercolor?

GN: Not usually. The only thing I might do would be a very small thumbnail sketch that indicates where I want the main figure or figures. Also, the pieces usually have a division of space, or a particular placement. Once I get the idea of where the main figures are going to be, the division of the space follows. My sketches are extremely rudimentary and spare—a couple of lines to indicate how the characters fit. The rest is the result of the dialogue between the paper and myself as the work develops.

RH: There's always an indication of a story in your work. How clear is the narrative to you, or do figures and shapes just happen?

GN: Sometimes the narrative is based on something very specific, maybe something I saw. It's always about interaction between people, and then it takes off from there. When the show was up at the Ukrainian Institute of Modern Art last spring, I was standing nearby a couple of students who were having fun inventing their own dialogue about the scenario. It shouldn't just be about what I'm thinking; it should also be about what somebody else brings to it.

RH: Something is different about your new *Big Birthday Gladys* watercolor. I can't put my finger on it.

GN: That is a very specific self-portrait, whereas lots of people think everything I make is a self-portrait because I tend to look like my work, or my work tends to look like me. (*laughter*) Quit laughing, Jim, Mr. Professorial!

RH: Its materiality seemed different—maybe it's all the dark areas, and then the clarity of the figures in the back.

GN: It's very dense and rich. I wanted to have a lot of smoke in it because of all the candles in it.

RH: Oh, maybe that's what it is! The smoke. Anyway, it's a beautiful piece. Why watercolor all these years?

GN: Well, when we had Claude and he was the new baby in tender baby skin, I suspended using oils.

JN: She had done some watercolors, but almost all of her work had been in oils. A significant amount of her time was spent taking care of Claude. I was in school and working, so it became a very practical solution. She didn't want to stop making art, so she started using watercolor. Then, without realizing it, one thing led to another over a period of time. I think she realized she enjoyed working with paper and watercolor.

GN: There was a visceral response—it really felt good.

RH: This is for both of you: when you came to the School of the Art Institute, you, Gladys, in '58, and Jim in '60, what were your expectations of what your art would look like?



Gladys Nilsson, *Big Birthday Gladys*, 2010, watercolor, 40 x 60 inches.

GN: I had no idea. I didn't know until two years after graduating from school. Before that, if I was in a life-drawing class, I drew representational. We had a still-life set up, I painted the still life. I had no real semblance of a direction. I would notice incongruous groupings of people in the lunchroom—that triggered the need to paint this vision.

RH: And Jim, you came to school and did a self-portrait every day, is that right?

JN: Unfortunately. *(laughter)*

RH: Do you have any of those?

JN: There are a couple that were beyond the actual self-portraits. I just didn't have a clue.

RH: But you probably both came to the School of the Art Institute because you could draw.

JN: No, no. *(laughter)*

GN: I always knew I wanted to be an artist; I was drawing all the time.

RH: Yeah, I did too. I always assume that's why everybody went to art school.

JN: I was going to go into architecture at Washington University in St. Louis and even that was not a plan that was well thought-out.

GN: Are you cringing at the idea of a building by Jim Nutt?

RH: Not so much that. I just know it would never get built.

GN: Hmm... he's well known for only one house, I wonder why that is?

RH: And he's not letting anybody in it.)

JN: I hadn't taken a figure-drawing class that was part of the freshman architectural program I was in. I dropped out of college, but decided to keep my hand in by taking the class. I went

into it thinking, Drawing won't be that difficult, it's just a matter of taking your time and you get everything right. Of course, it was a nightmare; everything was wrong. Without realizing it I got hooked—I was so inept that I really worked very hard. One thing led to another, and I ended up enrolling as a freshman again in the art department at Washington University. Then the following year I enrolled as a freshman at the Art Institute.

RH: So you were a freshman three times? *(laughter)*

JN: I had no real vision; I was desperately trying to get from one class to the next.

RH: Did you have an awareness of what was going on in the contemporary art world?

JN: Not a great deal. Being in St. Louis and in Chicago, there wasn't a great deal of contemporary art. In St. Louis, the

university is very close to the museum, so we spent a lot of time there. And the School of the Art Institute was inside the museum, so I was there once, twice, or three times a day for five years.

RH: What transforms you from a student, trying to do drawings and life drawing, into an artist? It seems that something happened in Chicago where people started getting interested in a kind of image making that was the opposite of what was going on in the rest of the country.

JN: Well, I don't think it was a product of trying to do something different. It could be explained by the fact that all the people who weren't interested in this sort of thing left town, and we were the only people left. (*laughter*) I certainly think that Whitney Halstead's ethnographic art history classes were influential.

RH: The Field Museum classes?

JN: Ninety percent of the class assignments had to be done while at The Field Museum. The school was in quarters at the time I took the ethnographic class: the first quarter was African, the second was American Indian, and the last, Oceania.

RH: So people were looking at the artifacts' shapes and adornment. Do



Gladys Nilsson, *A Little Tippy*, 2006, watercolor, 14 1/8 x 20 inches.

you think that was an influence?

GN: I don't know. You think about the generation that came before us, the Monster Roster; they were doing internal, from-the-gut stuff. Their art history teachers at SAIC, Whitney Halstead, and before, Kathleen Blackshear, in conjunction with Helen Gardner's book *Art Through the Ages*—were urging them and us to look beyond Western

art. Anything from street signage to whatever became something to play with.

JN: I don't think they were asking you to look beyond anything. They were saying, "You should consider this, along with everything else." In other words, they weren't promoting it as something beyond, they were saying, "It's part of it." Theirs was broader, apparently, than a lot of other approaches.

RH: A lot of schools at that time were probably teaching Abstract Expressionism as the whole way of looking at or making art.

JN: When I was at the Art Institute from '60 to '65, as a student, Abstract Expressionism was in its dying phase. It was being contradicted by a lot of things. A lot of stuff parroted what was seen in the magazines, and there were few contemporary paintings you could see. On the other hand, the Art Institute had De Kooning's 1950 painting *Excavation* on exhibit all the time.

RH: You appreciate that painting now, but did you like it then?

GN: The painting that really resonates with me, thinking back on student days, was Seurat's *A Sunday on The Island of La Grande Jatte* [1884]. That was the



Gladys Nilsson, *Seems Straight*, 1982, watercolor, 22 1/4 x 30 1/2 inches.

one big piece that I would continually go look at.

RH: That makes sense in terms of your work—the coloration, the large figure groupings, the smaller figure groupings, the really odd space in it.

GN: I'm always fascinated with odd space. I was fascinated by dots of color that you'd step back from and... I mean, the whole premise of Pointillist work.

RH: When I was a student, the thing I thought of was, It's a miracle! They put these colors together and it makes another color.

GN: Yeah. You say miracle, I say magic.

JN: To answer your question: I responded to the De Kooning positively, but I just didn't know what in the world—

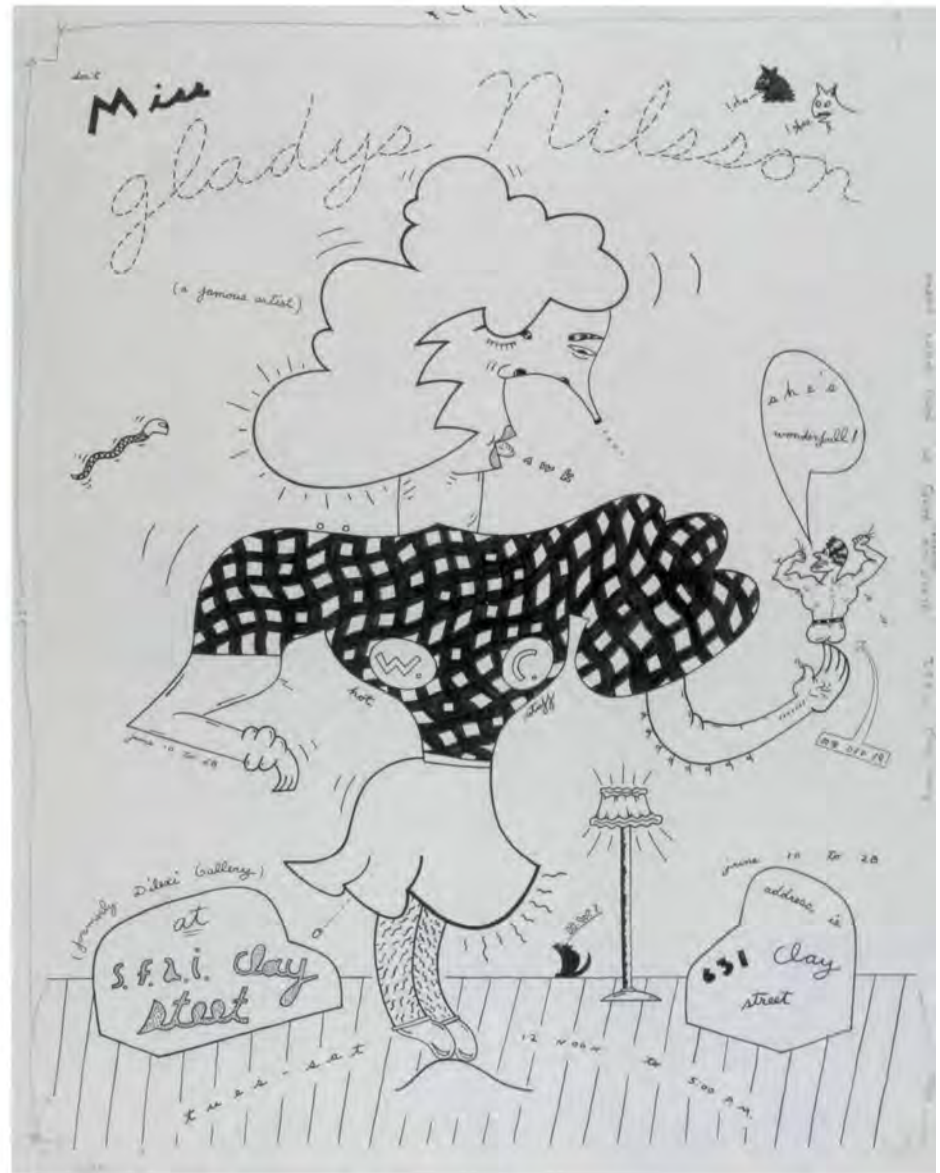
RH: You could do with it?

JN: Trying to do something with it just seemed so arbitrary. Viscerally, I liked the surface of the De Kooning painting, and have always found it engaging, it's just such a slippery painting. The painting that did it for me is El Greco's *The Assumption of the Virgin* [1577–79]. Unlike Gladys, I was always bugged by the Seurat because the grassy area in the center is dead and it just drove me nuts.

RH: So what about *The Assumption*?

JN: There are some heads, particularly on the left side, very vigorously realized. The bodies are not as firm in their realization. Then there's this strange, flat sarcophagus in the middle. Compositionally, it's symmetrical side to side, and, in a different sense, up and down. The Virgin's physical presence at the top of the painting is the formal opposite of the sarcophagus—there's space surrounding her at the top, and volumetric figures surrounding the unconvincing sarcophagus at the bottom. It's a reversal. It's a use of formal means to express the narrative of the painting.

RH: Gladys, in Chicago in the '60s a lot of women were involved in shows at the Hyde Park Art Center and elsewhere. Women were completely equal in terms of the respect and attention they got. Jim has said that when you



Jim Nutt, Drawing for Nilsson Show Poster, 1969. Courtesy of the artist. © MCA Chicago.

both moved to California for a while, for his teaching job at Sacramento State University, all of a sudden you were with the wives. You were both dismayed.

JN: Yeah, we were invited to a lot of different parties. We were in our late twenties, early thirties. So we'd go in and start saying hello to the host and hostess, and hardly know anybody. And I'd see a guy and I'd start walking over to him with Gladys, who's beginning to realize—I'm not picking up on it—that there are no women in this corner. The women are all on the other side of the room.

GN: Or in the kitchen.

RH: This is your first introduction to California?

JN: Well, to the art world in California; these were all artists.

RH: Were the women artists too?

GN: Some of them might have started out as such... There were couples who had met and married in art school, and then he kept up or didn't keep up, and she became not an artist. There were one or two women on the West Coast we knew were involved with art, but, basically, it reminded me of my childhood. You'd have a gathering and the men would be doing men's stuff

and the women would be in the kitchen with their aprons. It was like stepping back in time.

When we were showing in groups here in Chicago, there wasn't any difference gender-wise. It was all about your art.

RH: It was kind of unusual, wasn't it? If you think about it, men and women are equal in shows all the time.

GN: Seems it was unusual. Certainly what I've heard from women in other cities is that the good ol' boy system was really heavy.

RH: Yeah, it seems a phenomenon that was uniquely Chicago. Following the Hairy Who shows, most, if not all, of the focus shows at HPAC had women in them.

JN: The False Image was made up of two males, two females. They were all very good friends at school and their work looked really good together. There were fewer well-known women working in Chicago than men, but there were some exceptional ones: Miyoko Ito and Evelyn Statsinger come immediately to mind. On the West Coast you had Joan Brown, who's our age, and then Jay DeFeo, from an older generation. You had examples of well-respected women who were in shows, yet at these parties, it seemed like two different worlds. When Jim Falconer and I were dreaming up small groups to propose for shows at HPAC, it never occurred to us that by including women we might be doing something unusual. For the lists that we took to Don Baum—the lists from which the Hairy Who, in a sense, came out of—we were looking for work that we liked and fit together well and nothing else.

RH: Oh, I didn't realize that you brought him the lists.

JN: A number of us had been in Don Baum's group shows at HPAC, which was the only place where emerging artists had a chance to exhibit. In addition, Don included established artists in the shows, so it was a very exciting mix. It was a coup for a young artist to be in one of these shows. Typically a show had 30 or 35 artists, one work per artist. After being in three or four of those the

head begins to swell—"I wish I could get a little more attention." Fortunately, Don was very open to suggestions; he was always asking for ideas. So Jim Falconer and I hit on this idea: what happens if you have just five artists per show? Each could show five to ten pieces, depending on the size, and then each could make a bigger impact. We based our groupings on what we thought the work would look like together. Some groups were very figurative; some were very abstract. So Jim and I went to Don with about five lists.

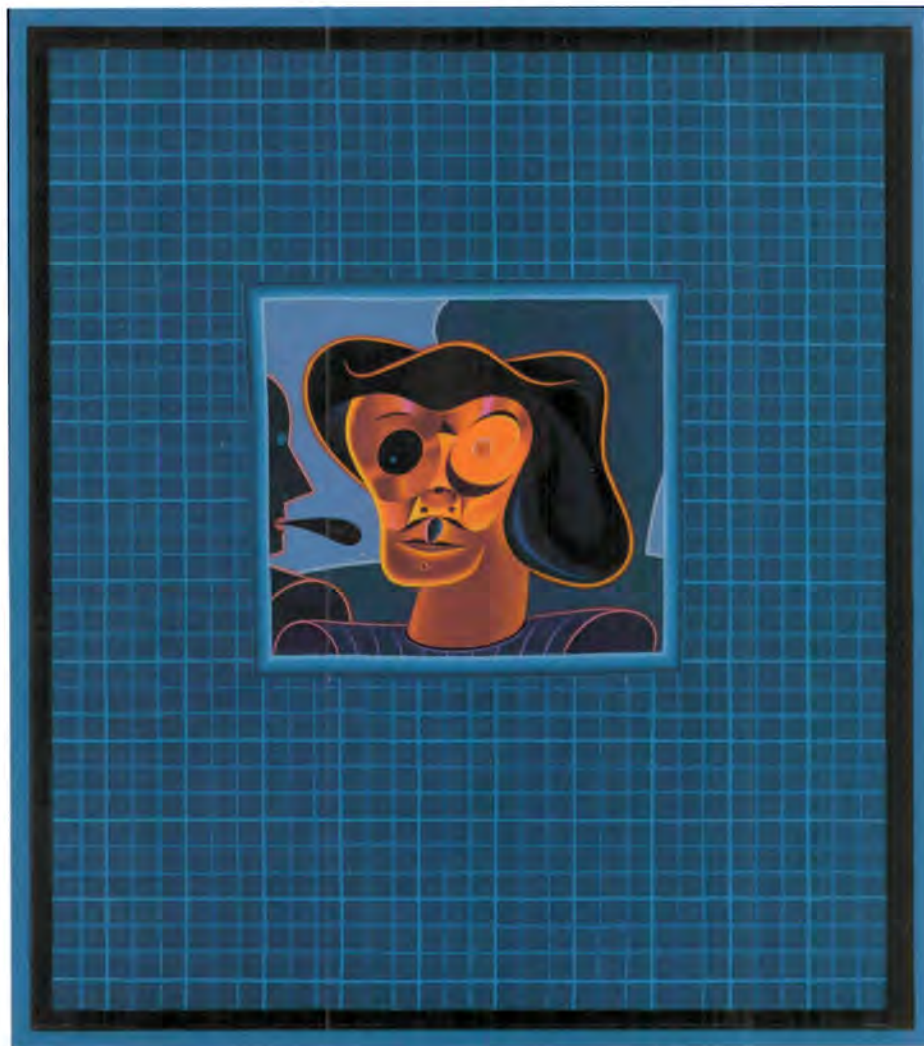
Don liked our idea. One of the lists had all but one of the members of what ended up becoming the Hairy Who: Karl Wirsum. He was in a different group we proposed. Don suggested adding Karl to our group, and though excited at the prospect of exhibiting with him, I was

a little nervous. I was influenced by Karl's work and I didn't think I could compete . . .

RH: You were afraid the work would look too similar?

JN: Yeah, in part. I was taking a lot of things he was doing and trying to make use of them. Also, I had only met Karl once, briefly, a few years before. I didn't have a clue if he would be interested in exhibiting with me or any of the others, who also did not know him personally, but very much admired his work.

RH: When you started showing together in the Hairy Who shows, did that spark some ideas among you, or did it change your work, having it next to Karl's, for instance?



Jim Nutt, *Ssh!! If You're Quiet No One Will Know*, 1979, acrylic on canvas and wood frame, 19 9/16 x 17 5/8 inches. © MCA Chicago.

GN: By that point I was pretty firm in how I wanted to deal with what I was dealing with.

JN: Yeah, if you look at the very first Hairy Who show in 1966, and then compare it with the work that everyone was doing, say, in the '70s, what you see is that other people's work didn't move into everybody's work. Everybody had established where they were going, and Karl was, by far, the most firm in his awareness—

RH: Actually all your work seemed to get more physically refined, right? I'm thinking about Art Green's work from then, those big, loosely painted figurative things. Slowly they became more and more tightly rendered.

GN: Certainly, in terms of refinement, when I look back at something from 1966 or so, I'm overwhelmed with how crudely drawn everything was. It was sparer at that time than it became in '68 or so. There's a great difference in the numerical content of figures, but I also played with a lot less color then. Everything was a little more simply dealt with.

RH: Jim, I'm curious how you go about starting a painting.

JN: Well, in a sense, it's always been the same. I start with a drawing. When I started getting involved with the plexiglass paintings, I'd make a full-scale drawing, a cartoon, which I would then tape to the plexi, look through, and use as a guide.

I could have started it and just done it freehand, but that didn't lend itself to what I had in mind, which was these flat areas bounded by a colored line. I wanted to work out the arrangement of all the forms before I started using paint.

RH: So when you're doing the drawings, you're thinking about the forms and the shapes rather than the image?

JN: Well, at this point, they're confused; I don't think about one or the other. Figuratively speaking, I always draw with an eraser in one hand and a pencil in the other. Every line is under threat. I have a thought and start it, and if I like it, I go on to the next part. We're not

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—Jim Nutt**

talking about a big part. If we're talking about a face, I usually start with a shape that will be an eye, then I'll try to get a nose to go with the eye. As I start to do another eye, I might need to change the first eye so the two eyes go together, and then maybe I need to change the nose. Sometimes it never ends.

RH: What do you mean, "go together"? You don't mean they're both going to be blue or have the same shape, right? The eyes in your paintings are sometimes quite different from each other.

JN: It's a continual give and take. There are all sorts of reasons to like or dislike something, different frames of reference. It's a constant shifting things around until I can get the whole thing to sort of work together, and that's something I discover as I'm developing it—

RH: As you're drawing?

JN: Yeah. I have a simple, preconceived notion; say, with the earlier work, it might be a large figure doing something—running, standing, pondering, or whatever—and then the environment it's in. With the portraits, it's been a female head.

RH: They've been female heads for how long now?

JN: Too long.

RH: Well, there's only one other alternative, right?

GN: Unless he slips into floral.

RH: Yeah, or animal. (*laughter*) Jim, do you do several drawings before you start a painting?

JN: No, I deal with all of the variations by erasing. When I moved off the plexiglass, I then started drawing on the surface of the canvas—

RH: And erasing?

JN: Yeah, or painting over, because it doesn't erase so well. When I started working smaller I went back to developing my ideas on paper, which is much easier to erase, and then I would transfer. It's a cartoon the same size as the painting.

RH: When do you start thinking about color?

JN: It varies. Now I do more drawings than paintings, but there was a period when I would work on a drawing knowing that I was going to go right to a painting with it, so often I was envisioning the color. Now, quite often I'm just drawing. Occasionally some color ideas will come to mind as I'm working, but other times not a thing until I've started looking at recent drawings and deciding if I want to develop any into a painting. I spend too much time on a painting, so I am desperate for an image whose feel is different from the last one. In that case I do start thinking about color in connection with the image and the character of the figure.

RH: Do you start thinking about the heads as characters?

JN: That has a lot to do with what works and what doesn't work.

RH: They're not all Gladys? (*laughter*)

JN: Not entirely. It usually has a lot to do with the way the eyes sit. When I'm out on the street I'll see a head and it will remind me of a well-known person. I'll notice facial similarities and stuff. As I'm drawing, sometimes it will occur to me that my drawing looks like it has so-and-so's eyes, male or female. The final image may make connections.

RH: And what's the deal with the noses, Jim?

GN: The nose is a very important part of the face.

JN: Well, if you're lucky enough to have one. (*laughter*) I'm always confused why somebody would think I'm so fixated on the nose. Here you have an image and it's got a red forehead and a yellow chin and a black this or that.

RH: Maybe because it's central?

JN: You know, when I was growing up, students would have rhinoplasties and there was a time when it seemed like every female star would have a cute little button of a nose. There weren't many stars like Barbara Stanwyck, who had a pronounced, characterful nose.

RH: So you've got the drawing down. Then you start coloring in. The paintings become so intricate, like Gladys's, in a way. There are broader areas and then there are really intricate areas. Do you lay in one flat color, slowly developing texture and form?

JN: I paint with the acrylic thinned down because I'm not looking for brushstrokes—visual brushstrokes don't bother me, but physical, impasto ones do. The acrylics are kind of translucent to begin with, so I know that an area will need three coats minimum—and four or five coats probably—before it's actually the color that I've mixed. Also I need to get rid of all the white ground, so I do paint the whole painting at one level or another. The surrounding area of a head will be held by a basic value and color for an extended period of time while I'm developing the inner forms. Same thing with the hair or things that tend to be a little more uniform in their overall value and hue.

RH: So are you adjusting the drawing as well?

JN: Not unless I realize that I've made some terrible mistakes, and then I go back to the drawing and make changes, transfer them to the painting, and so on.

RH: I know it takes you forever to do a painting. Is one of the issues that, because of the changes in color, there are all these relationships that get complicated, and you can't quite justify them or feel comfortable with them?

JN: Yeah, the best I can say is that I make a lot of mistakes and have to redo a lot.

RH: You guys worked here in the house together for how many years before Jim got a separate studio outside of the house recently?

JN: Thirty years.

GN: But never in the same room.

RH: You didn't pay attention to each other during the day because you were working?

JN: We'd say hi and acknowledge each other's presence.

GN: We were always aware of what the other was doing. We would never talk about it, except maybe in generalities, like, "Oh, that looks pretty interesting."

RH: So that'd be your exchange. You'd never sit down and help each other, looking at a painting?

GN: Oh, God! No.

JN: At the beginning I was presumptuous enough to give Gladys some suggestions and it didn't go very well. She was very polite. *(laughter)*

GN: There are maybe two colors that Jim really doesn't care for, so, jokingly, we'd say, "Oh, I see you're using blah, blah, blah." If somebody said you can never paint purple and green together, it just doesn't look right, I would say, "Oh yeah? Wait till you see this!"

What Jim was saying about realizing that the colors are wrong... There have been a lot of times when there's a big area behind figures where I have decided to put a color in: the minute the empty space gets filled in, I've known it's the wrong color, but because it is a watercolor I have to go through and fill everything in and then deal with it. The difference between the earlier and the later work is a more complex layering of paint.

RH: Maybe that's what struck me about the big self-portrait. There was a lot of layering, color coming through, and texture.

GN: Over the last several years I've been having more casual marks as opposed to solid areas. There are plenty of brushstrokes and mottled areas that I'm having a lot of fun with, maybe going back to the Seurat. So it's all one big circle.

RH: So you've seen Jim's paintings when he's close to having one done and

then he repaints it? Jim once told me that one time you, Gladys, said to him, "Oh, this is done. You should stop."

GN: Well, I tried that once or twice, trying to encourage him that it was a good painting, which, of course, is the wrong thing to do to anybody. Way back in California there was one sizable canvas he was working on. It seemed like every day there was a new painting on the canvas, a new version of the head. It was just amazing how the painting had totally different paintings underneath. There's a great deal of wonderful, masterful subtlety that's going on now.

JN: Thank you, dear.

RH: Maybe that's how we should end.

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GALLERIES

Gladys Nilsson puts whimsy in details

By Lauren Viera
TRIBUNE REPORTER

Whatever opinions you have (or have yet to form) about the Hairy Who, that 1960s-rooted collective of quirky visual artists who earned their kooky name via eponymous shows at the Hyde Park Art Center, Gladys Nilsson is a legend in her own right.

Nearly 70 years old, Nilsson seems to be in her prime, if the current retrospective show at the Ukrainian Institute of Modern Art is any indication. Co-presented by the Illinois State Committee of the National Museum of Women in the Arts, the show spans her entire career, which began in 1966, yet includes a modest 24 works, primarily Nilsson's signature watercolor-on-paper, as well as a handful of forays into other media. And unlike other retrospective exhibits I've seen this year, this edited-down assemblage is just right.

It begins, for no apparent reason, with "Landed," a 2-year-old watercolor and gouache painting courtesy of Jean Albano Gallery, which has acted as Nilsson's prime representative for more than a decade. An upside-down woman is surrounded by trees, a river, boats, a cat; the flesh of the objects is painted blue, purple and orange. Figures are pillowy but full of emotion. There's so much going on

at once, yet little vignettes act as entry points.

That's typical Nilsson. And while "Landed" isn't the best of this particular collection, it's a good enough place to start.

Every painting here is quintessential Nilsson and, by association, quintessential Hairy Who: colorful, whimsical, nonsensical, original.

But especially for those who, like this author, have a tendency to shy away from too much whimsy, Nilsson saves us with her technical prowess.

Watercolor, on which so many artists seem to rely for its unapologetic ambiguity, is kept neatly within the lines under Nilsson's charge, lending an organic scope of color to finite particulars.

This brilliant balance of buoyant jubilation and diminutive attention to detail is especially apparent in the newest painting in the room, "Big Birthday Gladys," completed earlier this year in anticipation of the artist's May admittance into the septuagenarian club.

The massive work features Nilsson at its center, turquoise-stockinged gams and orange heels sprawled in front of her, a world of characters revolving around her. Her expression looks almost blase, as if to say, "Yeah, I'm old. So what?" and all the hoi pol-



Myriad vignettes provide many entry points to Gladys Nilsson's typically colorful works, above.

loi – a wee spectacled man (perhaps representing her husband, fellow Hairy Whoster Jim Nutt), a team of candle-bearing people and animals – is probably an accurate portrayal of a fraction of the lives she touches on a daily basis, as painter and teacher.

It's an admirable work for many reasons, but there's an Easter-egg treat for those who look closely enough at the bottom edge: There, caught in a black-and-white photograph collaged into the foreground, is a little girl of about 4. She's come a long way since then.

Gladys Nilsson: Works from 1966-2010 at Ukrainian Institute of Modern Art, 2320 W. Chicago Ave., 773-227-5522; uima-chicago.org. Through May 23.

MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY

523 West 24th Street, New York, New York 10011 Tel: 212-243-0200 Fax: 212-243-0047

The New York Times

ART

ART; Thumbing the Nose, At Artistic Propriety

By Phyllis Braff

April 7, 1996

Gladys Nilsson and Jim Nutt *Art Gallery, State University at Stony Brook. To April 13. 632-7240.*

Irreverence has always characterized the work of Ms. Nilsson and Mr. Nutt, two Chicago artists best known for their 1960's activities with the Hairy Who group and for their contributions to the more assertive directions in post-abstract imagery.

If their comic-like, disjunctive, humorous figures seem less outlandish today, it is probably because life now provides us with so many parallels, from the glorified misfits in the film "Leaving Las Vegas" to biogenetic mutations to computer manipulated alterations. During the past several decades, we have also seen aspects of popular art, like cartoons and caricatures, taking a greater place in mainstream art.

Spanning three decades, this sizable retrospective of works on paper is a useful reminder of the leap that the Nilsson-Nutt generation made into themes of sex and violence during the 60's protest movement period. Selections make a sharp impact, although the assault on propriety is somewhat softened by the naive, cartoon-like, satirical approach.

Common to both the Nilsson watercolors and the Nutt colored pencil drawings are distorted, exaggerated body parts and busy, flat, well-organized compositions that blend personages of various sizes into the same scenario.

Nilsson's pieces have a sense of the pun, and her characters can seem impish with their long, rubbery, ropelike limbs. Nutt's settings are often stagelike, encouraging his bulbous but fluid figures to appear to be performers. There is a frenzied, storytelling quality to these raucous dramas, yet it may be intentional that they are never completely comprehensible.

Perhaps because the recognition element is more secure, comments on art and the history of art stand out as some of the show's high points. Crowded, cleverly coded narratives are reminiscent of Heironymous Bosch, and certain linear treatments of ghoulish figures recall Goya. "Leger Faire," the largest of the Nilsson pieces, is an effective reference to Leger's construction worker paintings, and her own portrait with a brush suspended from the mouth and other brushes held by multiple hands suggests a variety of inspired self-portraits over the centuries.

Braff, Phyllis. "Thumbing the nose, At Artistic Propriety." *The New York Times*, April 7, 1996, p. 10.

Los Angeles Times

Winning Watercolors: Rambunctious, biting and over-the-edge, Gladys Nilsson's watercolors are also benign, inviting and funny. Like whimsical illustrations for children's books, they pack an overdose of mini-narratives into a single scene. The main events they depict, such as a bow-legged woman serving a reheated piece of pizza, or a man peeking under a woman's skirt as she tries on a new hat, are not their main attractions. These everyday scenarios are just excuses for the artist to make room for the incidental details and touching subplots that give life its spice.

Watercolor is Nilsson's primary medium. Her 10 images at Ovsey Gallery contain a dazzling array of the diverse effects she draws from this simple, usually subsidiary medium. Sharp, sinuous contours, diaphanous veils, solid colors and touchable textures interweave in the jam-packed space of her art.

A typical watercolor by Nilsson consists of one to six figures—usually women but sometimes cowboys—who dominate the composition, and a dozen or two tiny characters caught up in their own little dramas. Like mischievous gnomes or eccentric elves, they run around the image, wreaking havoc on its consistency of scale, but rarely disturbing what's happening in the big picture.

The central figures in Nilsson's playful scenes are distorted but never demented. Their arms, legs, and necks bend and twist with the natural grace of an octopus's limbs. Their faces portray a rogue's gallery of malformations: Pinocchio noses, beady eyes, leering lips and expressions more suited to jack-o'-lanterns are the norm in their fantastic world. Nevertheless, Nilsson's characters are far from being evil grotesques. Endowed with a silly sort of dignity, they seem to be aware of their looks, but above such petty concerns.

Nilsson is a founding member of Hairy Who, a '60s group of Chicago artists fascinated by raunchy humor and low-brown expression. As an avid collector of "outsider art," she is included in LACMA's "Parallel Visions: Modern Artists and Outsider Art." Although the lighthearted, gentle humor of her art is often overshadowed by the brash adolescence of this genre, her solo exhibition gives this aspect of her watercolors its due.

■ *Ovsey Gallery, 170 S. La Brea Ave., (213) 935-1883, through Nov. 14. Closed Sundays and Mondays.*

MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY

523 West 24th Street, New York, New York 10011 Tel: 212-243-0200 Fax: 212-243-0047

ARTFORUM

Gladys Nilsson PHYLLIS KIND GALLERY

Gladys Nilsson is a founding member of the Hairy Who, the group of Chicago artists responsible back in the late 1960s for initiating the funky style now known as Chicago Imagism. For years the irreverent Hairy Who spirit of poking fun at the panoply of pretensions surrounding so-called high art has continued to inform the tone of her work, although it has never dominated the substance of her vision. Nilsson comments on contemporary American culture through insightful statements tossed off with sophisticated ease. As revealed in this group of recent watercolors, the key to her methods lies in the sensitive way she articulates the relationship between form and content.

The state of dynamic balance that Nilsson maintains between these elements is particularly striking in a diptych entitled *Léger Faire*, 1986. This painting is, as the title suggests, a takeoff on one of Fernand Léger's most popular themes—construction workers—as represented, for example, in his painting *Les Constructeurs*, 1950. In quoting Léger, however, Nilsson has stripped away the macho side of his sensibility so visible in his figures, which, whether male or female, are notably machinelike, their heaviness emphasized by the ubiquitous thick black outlines. What she retains is a certain simplified, decorative treatment of the figures, with their elongated torsos and sharp, simplified facial features that bring to mind the sleek proportions of animals or birds. They have a decidedly instinctive air about them that is in keeping with the antics depicted here. The male construction workers (all in the left panel) and the female construction workers (all in the right panel) are shown sitting or standing, precariously perched on the scaffold, some of them busily doing their job while others cast an admiring eye on members of the opposite sex across from them. The story that can be read into this quasi-narrative picture reveals one of Nilsson's major concerns—the ideas and feelings contemporary men and women have about and for each other—told with humor and enlivened by the pastel palette and the expansive structure of the composition. The repetition of certain colors and shapes reinforces the connections between figures already linked by desiring glances. Nilsson cleverly disrupts conventional expectations by depicting figures of various sizes inhabiting the same picture plane, thus treating the pictorial surface as a mobile space in which the rational rules of traditional one-point perspective no longer apply.

Another distinctive aspect of Nilsson's space is its seamlessness, which is apparent in *Making Strides*, *Forewarned*, and *Terry Towel*, all 1986, as well as in *Léger Faire*. She weaves her numerous figures into tapestrylike compositions in which they have the impact of collective icons. For example, it is difficult to think of a better (that is, truer) symbol of the women's liberation movement, of the agonies and ecstasies implicit in overturning the traditional roles men have assigned to women, than *Making Strides*. The actions of these figures—the big women asserting themselves to the men who are intruding upon them, and the little women applauding their sisters like an approving chorus strung across the bottom and top—speak louder than any words.

—Ronny Cohen

ARTS MAGAZINE

GLADYS NILSSON Phyllis Kind

By TIMOTHY COHRS

GLADYS NILSSON

Gladys Nilsson is one of the original Hairy Who artists who, exactly twenty years ago, began a steady and insidious infiltration of the corridors of thought in the American art world. Unlike the then-reigning Pop artists of the New York art scene, the Hairy Who artists turned their back on advertising, film, and television as sources ripe for plundering in the motherlode of popular culture. More often, they looked instead to lower rung sources, such as comic books, bathroom graffiti, raunchy humor of the locker room variety, naive art, and peppered it all with irrepressible puns (both visual and linguistic). Their importance, if doubted, was demonstrated earlier this decade when the East Village scene sprang into life and gallery after gallery was hung with work that was profoundly influenced by that handful of once Chicago-based artists. It seemed as if a whole new generation of art-school-trained artists had entered the Manhattan scene with the visual tenets of Gladys Nilsson, Jim Nutt, Art Green, Suellen Rocca, James Falconer, and Karl Wirsum, just as the previous generation had held those of Hofmann or Pollock. This is, of course, not to suggest that the current art school generation could name the original Hairy Who one by one, but that these young artists demonstrated an understanding of and an affinity for the work that the Hairy Who bombarded the art world with two decades ago.

In the twenty years since her debut, Nilsson has worked predominantly in the medium of watercolor. Her current show is entirely large-size watercolors,

and they demonstrate her mastery. A flowing, sinuous line is as often her subject as the friezelike grouping of humorously distorted figures or the brightly hued patterns that dot all of her current works. In the large diptych *Léger Faire*, the ostensible subject matter is the construction of two house frames being erected by two distinct swarms of carpenters—the left-hand group all male, the right-hand all female. Yet in fact, the incredibly complicated dotting of the picture plane by different-sized figures that all squirm and twist in different manners, creates such a strong, visual pattern that it overrides all else, allowing you to focus on only one of these figures at a time.

Nilsson's males are anatomically a curious breed. Usually they appear to be hairless and bulge about the middle to one degree or another, but all are equipped with oversized conical penises that look like oddly shaped pillows or stuffed jester's hats. These devices sag or rise under stimuli that appear to have more to do with compositional forces than the erotic. I particularly enjoyed the one in *Terry Towel* which is used as nothing more than a break in the bright pattern of a towel that swoops behind it.

Nilsson's women are another matter. Though they can be as caricatured and ridiculous as the overly genitaled males, they bear much more of the content's weight. That content is certainly nothing literary or literal, it is instead a sort of lyrical speculation on the fantasies and extremes of women's roles. For example, *The Swimming Hole* displays a large, central female lounging odalisque-like in the midst of a group of attentive and nude male bathers. I read this as a light-hearted comment, in curving line and subtle color, on a female fantasy of male adoration.

The single, most powerful statement to come through Nilsson's current body of work is her self-assured mastery of both medium and imagery. These are mature works, and as such they carry ongoing themes to a state of refinement and elegance that is hard to imagine when you consider the wackiness of her figures independently. (Phyllis Kind, *January 10-31*)



Gladys Nilsson, *The Swimming Hole*, 1986. Watercolor on paper, 40 1/2 x 59 7/8". Courtesy Phyllis Kind Gallery.

The Folsom Telegraph

Whimsical Artist Shows At Candy Store Gallery

Gladys Nilsson, who has been described as a whimsical artist painting in a delicate and feminine manner, will have a show at the Candy Store Art Gallery, 605 Sutter Street, Folsom beginning Sunday, January 7 and running through February 3.

The artist is best known for her watercolors but is now working in oils and acrylics too. Gallery proprietor Adeliza McHugh sees her as one of two major upcoming American female artists. The other is Maija Zack Peeples.

Others see Nilsson as important too as is demonstrated by her exhibitions at the New York Museum of Modern Art; Whitney Museum, New York; Art Institute of Chicago; San Francisco Art Institute; Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago and Corcoran Gallery, DuPont Center, Washington, D.C.

She also won the prestigious "Logan Medal," given by the Art Institute of Chicago, two years in a row, the first woman to receive it.

Nilsson, who is married to fellow artist Jim Nutt, sees her life as having few conflicts and being "an easy merging of family, friends and work." "I'm really not a complex person," she says. "My main concern with myself and my work is that I should enjoy doing it."

Born in Chicago, Illinois in 1940, she studied at the School of The Art Institute of Chicago. Critics have said her work reveals a gentle irony with control of both her subject matter and medium. Another critic also mentioned her control of the watercolor medium and described her paintings as being from "the kaleidoscopic world of the carnival." She is known for a free-spirited approach that tends towards fantasy, according to Mrs. McHugh. Whimsy also is an essential part of her work.



"APE" IS AMONG the Gladys Nilsson paintings which can be seen at the Candy Store Art Gallery in Folsom through February 3.

For those wishing to view the show, the Candy Store Gallery is open from 10:30 a.m. to 5 p.m. Tuesday through Sunday.

Art in America

Gladys Nilsson at Phyllis Kind

Seven years have passed since the six painters who called themselves The Hairy Who showed at the Hyde Park Art Center in Chicago, and it is pretty clear by now that they were, as a group, the most important artists to come to light in this city during the 1960s. They were the first of a number of local art combos that assumed sobriquets. After the fashion of rock ensembles, and made a point of exhibiting together: The Non-Plussed Some, The Artful Codgers, Chicago Antigua and The False Image were several others. Moreover, The Who turned their own affection for a cheerfully crude and febrile kind of funk imagery into a movement that continues to gather new Chicago adherents with every season, even though The Who themselves have gone their individual ways and, in general, moved on to cooler, more refined styles.

Gladys Nilsson, one of the original six, is a case in point. Her earliest show paintings, mostly watercolors, were crowded with warty, preposterous little humanoids that thrashed about bootlessly, in comic disarray. The composition and hard linear manner of these works brought George Grosz's early Berlin fantasies to mind, but unlike Grosz, Nilsson appeared amused rather than outraged by human foolishness, as she heightened the mood of burlesque—as did the rest of The Hairy Who—with misspellings and puns in her titles: *Stompin' at the Snake Pit*, *Blewboy Heeman*, etc.

Nilsson has lived in California since 1970, which may or may not be related to a gradual increase in the size and formality of her recent work. Certainly the raunchy old swagger—which is tempting to regard as a mark of her Chicago generation—is noticeably diminished now, and her imagery has grown less immediately recognizable.

She works in acrylic, on formats as large as six by seven feet, and continues to paint pullulating scenes. But it takes a few moments to make out the figures and landscape elements in them, for everything about them is more generalized than before, more subdued, more abstract—even in a psychological sense. The wit and fantasy are still evident, especially if you take the trouble to unravel the drolleries acted out by her characters (who now resemble anemones as much as people), and the titles are as kinky as ever (*Pear of Horces*, *Dipped Dick: Adam and Eve After Cranach*). But the palette is now more Parisian than pop, the line clean and surgical, with only a trace of its old stutter, and the patterns blandish rather than jostle.

In short, Nilsson has gone very arty of late; for an old Hairy Who, she is startlingly well-coiffed. And that is all to the good. If no longer salty, she is now wry—a profitable exchange, especially since she has developed such keen, even delicate formal sensibilities with the passage of time. She designs rather than paints her pictures, and she might be little more than a quiltmaker if it weren't for the uncommonly sure balance of color, drawing and overall organization with which she consistently endows her work. She is now in her early thirties and her last several shows, this one included, have revealed a sustained growth. The prognosis is good.

—Franz Schulze

Chicago Tribune

CHICAGO TRIBUNE, FRIDAY, MARCH 1, 1968

Evanston Artist Repeats as 'Best' in Institute Show

By EDWARD BARRY

IN A FEAT with few or no precedents, Gladys Nilsson, 1431 South boulevard, Evanston, has won the top award in the Art Institute's Chicago and vicinity show two years in a row.

In 1967, she took the Mr. and Mrs. Frank G. Logan Art Institute medal and prize of \$2,000. This year, in an advance jurying of the exhibition which opens March 30, she has been given the same award with a different money value — \$1,500. [The upcoming show is confined to prints, drawings, and watercolors; last year's included oil and acrylic painting.]

Miss Nilsson, 27, is a native Chicagoan and an alumna of the School of the Art Institute. She is married to James T. Nutt, who also is an artist and was represented in the opening exhibit of the Museum of Contemporary Art. Miss Nilsson exhibited with the "Hairy Who" group at the Hyde Park Art center two years ago and will show with the same artists at the San Francisco Art Institute in May.

The coming exhibition's Pauline Palmer prize, also of \$1,500, has been awarded to Francis J. Piatek, 3925 N. Troy st. Other winners of high awards are Melvin Theobald, 656 Oakdale av., the Mr. and Mrs. Frank G. Logan Art Institute medal and prize of \$1,000; George Woehrl, 1214 S. 15th av., Maywood, the Vieler award of \$1,000; Peter Holbrook, 125 W. Kinzie st.,



Francis J. Piatek's "16th Tube Drawing," winner of \$1,500.

the Emilie L. Wild prize of \$1,000; Lynne Cohen, Racine, Wis., the Mr. and Mrs. Frank G. Logan Art Institute medal and prize of \$500, and Carol A. Levy, 486 Deming pl., the Walter M. Campana prize of \$500.

Other entrants receiving awards are Robert Chew, Champaign, Ill., the Joseph N. Eisendrath prize of \$250; Abbott Pattison, 334 Woodland av., Winnetka, the William and Bertha Clasmann prize of \$200; Roland Ginzel, 2131 N. Hudson av., the Alumni Association of the School of the Art Institute prize of \$100, and David R. Smyth, 2044 N. Fremont st., the Robert Rice Jenkins memorial prize of \$100.

The jurors who selected the 86-item exhibit from nearly 2,000 submissions, and who awarded the prizes, were Robert Barnes, professor of painting at Indiana university; Eila Kokkinen, assistant curator for drawings at the

Museum of Modern Art, New York City, and Harold Joachim, curator of prints and drawings at the Art Institute of Chicago.

Art Notes

First prize of \$300 in the "New Horizons in Painting" show will be awarded to Barbara Aubin at a reception opening the exhibit at 3 p. m. Sunday in the gallery of the Equitable building, 401 N. Michigan av. Second prize, \$200, will go to John Morehouse, and the third award, \$100, to Carolyn Hoyle. Claire Miller, Robert Kaiser, and Beverly Waltner will receive honorable mentions.

The judges were Virgil Burnett of the University of Chicago's department of art; Dennis Adrian, assistant curator of prints and drawings at the Art Institute; and Julian Stanczak, a staff member at the Cleveland Art institute.

The exhibit limited to artists living within 150 miles of Chicago, is sponsored by the North Shore Art league under the chairmanship of Donald O. Keller. It remains thru March 31.



(Photos Courtesy of the Art Institute)

"Pink Skies at Nite: Saylor's Delite," a watercolor by Gladys Nilsson, won a \$1,500 prize.

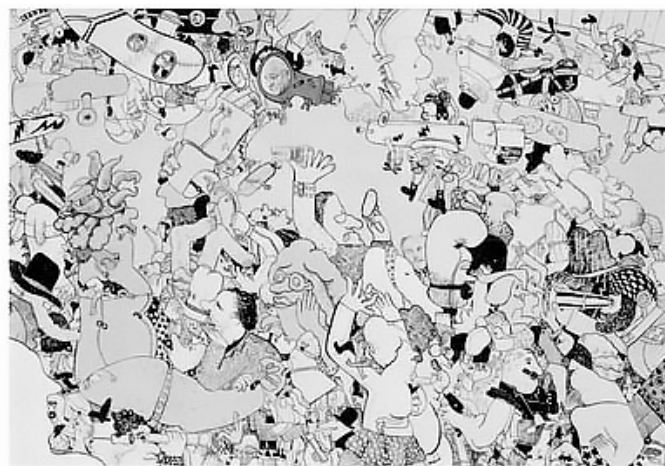
ARTFORUM

Chicago VARIOUS LOCATIONS

“The 70th Annual Exhibition of Painting and Sculpture by Artists of Chicago and Vicinity” was on view at the Art Institute of Chicago during March. The 75 pieces in the show covered the work of artists in this region in breadth if not in depth and it should be said at the outset that the show contains the highest percentage of good pieces of any of these annuals in recent years. Big omnibus exhibitions of this sort are a questionable way of evaluating a particular segment of work, but both tradition and the considerable amount of prize money (thought by some to be anomalous and anachronistic in itself) work against a change.

The exhibition this year achieved an unexpected notoriety with the injection of the issue of censorship. The jury, composed of Lawrence Alloway, Walter Hopps and James Speyer, accepted a painting entitled *Events* by Leanne Shreves and the jury further awarded the painting one of the substantial prizes. Although their decision on the prize was accepted, the painting was not shown by the museum because of its nature. Without having seen the work it is impossible to comment upon it or its merits, but the issue of censorship is not difficult to evaluate. Whatever prerogative supposedly sanctions it is a shibboleth as false as it is untenable and it should not exist. The action will undoubtedly be rationalized, it will not be justified.

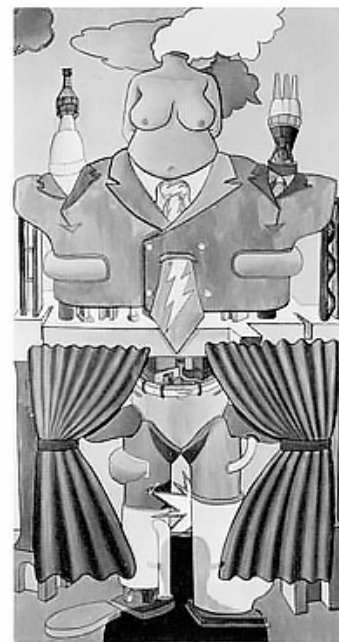
In the show’s installation, James Speyer, Curator of 20th Century Art at the Art Institute has placed the works so that the figurative confronts the abstract. The emergence of a healthy expression in abstract art, here, is something comparatively new; the figurative is a more indigenous component. In the present show the abstract (i.e., non-objective) is represented in both painting and sculpture—or whatever term is suitable to the varied manifestations of three-dimensional form. Gary Bower’s painting, *Seventy Seven* and Tom Milo’s



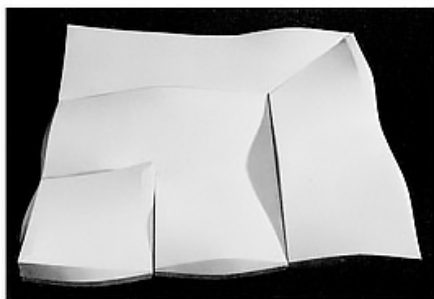
Gladys Nilsson, *Very Worldly*, acrylic on plexiglass, collage, 1967. (70th Annual, Chicago Art Institute.)



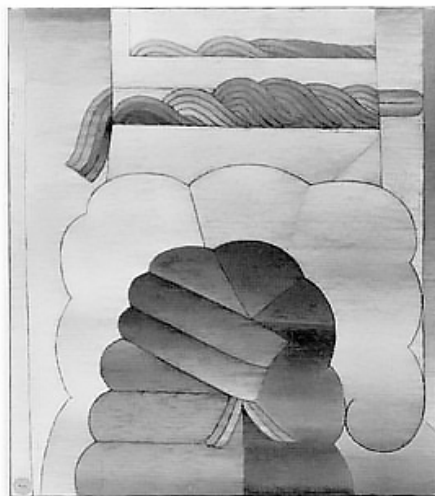
Jerry Garrett, *The Flower Vendor*, mm, 1966. (70th Annual, Chicago Art Institute.)



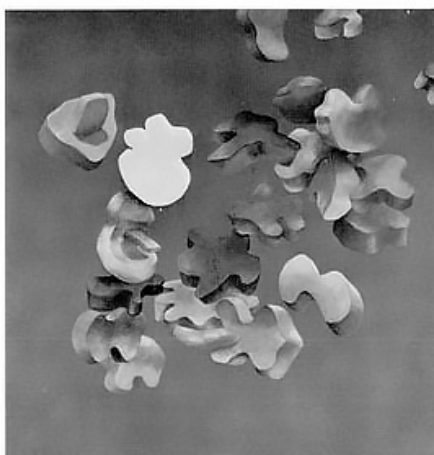
Art Green, *Impinging Disaster*, o/c. (Hyde Park Art Center.)



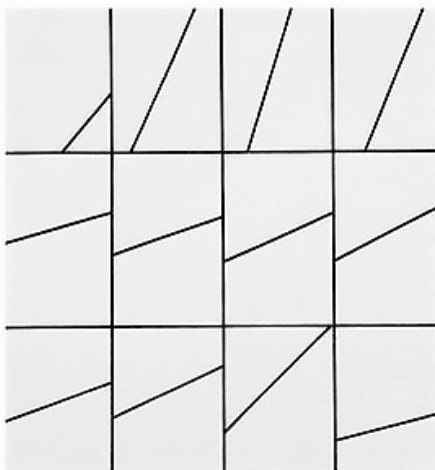
Richard Goldwach, *untitled*, o/c, 1967. (70th Annual, Chicago Art Institute.)



Miyoko Ito, *Aurora*, o/c, 1967. (70th Annual, Chicago Art Institute.)



Jack Powell, *untitled*, acrylic, 1966. (70th Annual, Chicago Art Institute.)



Gary Bower, *Seventy-Seven*, acrylic, 1966. (70th Annual, Chicago Art Institute.)

untitled painting both display a mastery of the formal idiom, limited, precise, restrained; Curtis Barnes's *Gallic Green* with its touch of chiaroscuro breaks the strict formalist discipline and the introduction of such an illusionistic element heightens the surface tension. John Paskiewicz's *Box Kit Up And Down* has almost the specificity of a graphic designer's commission—the rectangles of color projected from the flat canvas hung on the wall to the cube set in front of it; the extension from one dimension into another. The abstract tendency, though somewhat modified, characterizes another

group of works in the show such as Francis Piatak's *Ninth Tube Painting* and Jordan Davies's untitled painting with its interlacing bands of color—illusionistic in the former in the representation of rounded surfaces, coloristic in the latter. Jack Powell's painting with its floating slices makes use of the conventional ideas of form and manner of rendering, though its sweet pastel colors relate it to other, less timely, expressions. One of the very handsome paintings, Ray Siemanowski's *Cardboard Landscape*, epitomizes certain qualities expressed in the show by many others, e.g., the

impatience of so many of today's artists with traditional devices, stylistic as well as medium; content as well as overall concept. This excludes among other things any richness of surface texture or any possible exploitation of the medium and it eliminates nuances of tone and color. In fact one impression gained from the show is of the cacophonous colors, bright, hard, sometimes involved in unremitting optical effects. Emphasis upon the optical exclusively and for its own sake is minimal here.

In marked contrast with this are several paintings, e.g., Miyoko Ito's *Aurora* and Tom Kapsalis's *Artist's House* that demonstrate the fascination which the more traditional qualities of the medium, its application and subtle control of nuance in color and tone for evocative effects still have for some artists. Seeing such paintings as Ito's with its lyrical grace and quiet power, hung alongside others so emphatically different reaffirms the fact that style must be personal and individual, at least for some artists.

Stephen Urry's steel sculpture *Blat* arching through space achieves an effect almost like drawing; Olaf Borge's and William Cowan's sculptures, both untitled, are local expressions of minimal form. Richard Goldwach's rippling floor panels are environmental in concept, though not large in actual dimension. Displayed under fluorescent light they become a poetic dreamscape, a somewhat unexpected quality in the abstract formalist concept.

The more figurative modes of painting and sculpture have, as in the past, had a pervasive appeal for many Chicago artists. Several examples demonstrate the staying power of some artists, e.g., Gertrude Aber-

crombie's painting *The Magician*, visionary and dream-like and Cosmo Campoli's sculpture *Birth* which is more universally symbolic.

Popular imagery—almost the whole range of it from all possible sources appears to be the inspiration for a number of young artists: David Hickman's *Sara's World*, Jerry Garrett's *The Flower Vendor*, in mixed media, Norbert Leinen's *We Three*, Roy Schnackenburg's construction, *Lincoln Park*, or Peter Holbrook's somewhat more literal *The Perfumed Garden*. These, indicative of a characteristic found in a number of others, all seem to be pitched in a huckster's intensity, unvarying, unremitting, the hard sell. Such terms are not necessarily pejorative but they indicate something of the air which attests to the content and the consistency of a common style. Frank Gaard's *A Clear Shift*, cut-up images coloring book in style, in plastic envelopes, suspended within the wood frame is a deft expression of the fragmented image which by its presentation is transformed into a new image.

Several pieces in the Chicago Show are by five artists who are currently exhibiting as the "Hairy Who" group at the Hyde Park Art Center. The interest in imagery drawn from all of the mass media rendered in five distinct styles can be viewed as an extension of the oft-mentioned concern with the figurative but it has converged with forms of a more topical nature and this should be read as a local expression of Pop art.

This is the second annual show of the Hairy Who group and its recurrence has of course caused much curiosity about the title. It seems to be evident that its arcane meaning—if there is one—will die with the artists involved. Of course the Dadaists took inordinate delight in obfuscation and Hairy Whoism must be traced to that illegitimate parentage. This year's show, which includes paintings by Art Green, Gladys Nilsson, Jim Nutt, Suelen Rocca and Karl Wirsum is even "hairier" than the first; it is also by any criterion, sparkling with a good humored vitality and is without qualification excellent. With all of the various promotional devices and press coverage, it is possible to fail to consider the works themselves, or to give them the proper consideration.

The announcement poster was an outlandish, exquisite corpse—done by all five artists. In true Dada spirit, their delight in perversity made it all but unreadable. Other exquisite corpses were scattered throughout the 32-page Hairy Who comic book. Though each art-

ist contributed several pages (as well as designing a button for distribution at the vernissage) all of these contributions, both group and individual, demonstrate the unadulterated lampooning of nearly everything from traditional media and styles to exhibition display and exhibition catalogs.

As indicated in the review of the Chicago Show these are not the only artists in Chicago who are doing fine work, but the fact that they are a cohesive group makes them unique, especially in a city where such groups have seldom coalesced. Except for some overlaps in style (more in medium than in content or manner of presentation) the common ingredient, and this is not all-pervasive, is their unadulterated elan. Common to all, it is not constricting and each artist succeeds in his individual expression of an irreverent caricature—a cool celebration of all or at least a great deal that is banal and trivial. Both subject and title in individual pieces range from the bizarre and absurd to the "punny" (both verbal and visual) and the funny and outrageous. If slapstick films of the silent screen gave vent to a particular humor certainly this is a present day manifestation of the same.

Karl Wirsum's paintings are often horrendous and elegant in their intricate patterning. His one man show was reviewed here in April and many of the same pieces are included here.

Gladys Nilsson's paintings on plexiglass are more fanciful, more Learian in their tradition of burlesque, and, citing antecedents suggestive of Ubu Roi and company. Though not sheer fantasy they "take off" on the unbelievable juxtapositions and incongruities of our world and with a slight development toward caricature are peopled by a duck-billed, elephant-snouted comic chorus line.

Rocca's paintings extend and elaborate the fuzzy, purposefully hesitant linear movement. The squiggly line, pictographic style and candy-box colors are synthesized into a parody of the gauche and the gaudy. This tendency to parody is accentuated by the somewhat painterly application of oil to canvas.

L'Art Brut, discovered by Dubuffet and others, ranges from the exotic and the esoteric to the trite and the commonplace. As source material it has interested the entire group but it seems especially meaningful in Jim Nutt's work. This is not only true of the primary or major image in a piece but also the tiny images tattooed over the surface. There is a sensitive feeling for the pat-

tern and its interaction with the idea—its expression of the idea—and a fine feeling for color which is generally bright but with occasional overtones of subtle tones. Painted on plexiglass they transform and celebrate the trivial and seem to be meant for the walls of a penny arcade, a super-doooper penny arcade.

Of the five artists, Art Green seems to give expression to less of the generally acknowledged H. W. components than the others. Mass media images are less apparent and they seem close to De Chirico's enigmas. Although such a comparison is justified it must not be overemphasized since Green's is a consistent and personal style. "Marvelous" juxtapositions of images and constructions, these negate any feeling of nostalgia in the use of contemporary motifs painted in bright, almost fluorescent colors. They are fantastic constructions, strange, stage machinery from which the curtain has suddenly been drawn.

—WHITNEY HALSTEAD

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Chicago Daily News

She's One of the Hairy Who's

By Franz Schulze

TWO YEARS ago Gladys Nilsson was 24 years old and a virtually unknown quantity in the Chicago art scene. Today, she is rapidly coming to be considered one of the brightest and most accomplished artists of the younger—or any other—local generation. A household word she is not; but she has gained some notice in the past year or so, and for emphatically noticeable work.

The commonest way of identifying her lately has been to call her “one of the Hairy Who crowd,” which associates her with that remarkable and bizarrely-titled exhibition which so resoundingly climaxed the Hyde Park Art Center's 1965-66 season.

Hairy Who featured six very young Chicago painters in an ensemble of bright, nasty, vigorous work which in mood and handling was about as close to the classical concept of beauty as gum behind the ear. And about as appetizing. It was a blend of pop and dada, if category be sought, but a grubby, runny-nosed, sleeve-in-the-soup sort that reminded you how utterly and hopelessly soigne the whole New York pop scene is by contrast.

These six Chicagoans — Art Green, Suellen Rocca, Karl Wirsum, James Falconer, James Nutt, and Miss Nilsson—usually got around to saying something in their work about the human figure, and the thought was invariably less than reverent and less than assuring.

One artist of the six managed, oddly enough, to convey a measure of restraint and elegance in her work. This was Gladys Nilsson. She is currently featured in two complementary one-man shows at the Dell Gallery, 620 N. Michigan, and the Kendall College Gallery, Lincoln at Orrington, Evanston.

It is not that Miss Nilsson's subjects are significantly less scabrous than those of the other artists of Hairy Who: she can lash the sardonic whip just as gleefully, and turn out a species of humanity just as coarse. But her manner of painting is curiously polished and delicate. Her small picture formats and the attenuation of her medium—watercolor—have something to do with this, but the quality is just as much a result of her technique, which consists of light, soupy washes in warm pastel colors, with a minimum overlay of line. What she paints, then, are groups of people, sometimes whole figures, sometimes only faces, crowded together as if the picture frame had closed in on them. They are shaped and even colored like children's balloons—soft, pulpy, foolish people, who occasionally metamorphose into ducks, alligators and elephants, and always rather ludicrously.



Gladys Nilsson's water color, "Walkers."

INSTEAD OF the broadax, she uses the stiletto. Her little folk are never possessed either of virtues or of noteworthy vices—mostly just foibles, so that the ludicrous is mixed with a kind of arch, detached whimsy. Miss Nilsson's faint air of superiority is the key factor that differentiates her paintings in temper from the irascible, outraged, but vulnerable resentment of George Grosz. Otherwise the two have much in common.

The principal reason for admiring Miss Nilsson, however, is less her attitude, which one can take or leave alone, and more the formal authority of these jewel-like little watercolors. They are beautifully stitched together, calmly and keenly, and they project a rightness in the relationship of their parts which suggests they may last longer than many a noisier piece of Hairy Whoism. In one sense, her remarks on the seaminess of the world are actually more effective, because her wee small voice contrasts so chillingly with the unlovely message she recites.

ARTFORUM

Chicago VARIOUS VENUES, CHICAGO

According to the six artists in the exhibition at the Hyde Park Art Center, they are not a “group” nor is there a program. One must insist that they are a combination, at least, and in accepting their assertions of individuality draw attention to a certain attitude they share. HAIRY WHO! is the title this combo found for their show and it may serve as a key to the characteristics which they have in common. The extent and degree of similar qualities is demonstrated in the catalog of the show, which is a handsome comic book. Usually relevant information, such as title, size, medium and price do not clutter its pages, each of which is the work of one of the six artists, whose styles, for the most part, needed little adaptation for the purpose. It is a joint achievement that expresses individual images in the simplified manner of comic strips and it is as fine as many of the pieces in the show.

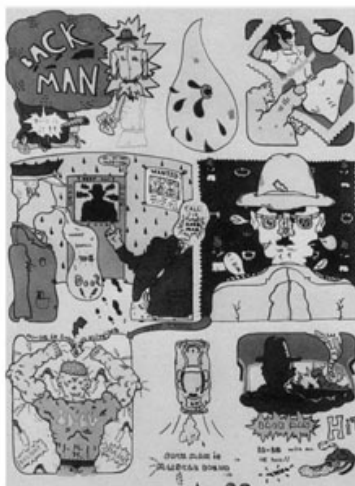
All of the artists were in the “Phalanx” exhibition last December and several were reviewed here in March. The 60 pieces in this show allow for further evaluation and it is evident that original ideas are being generated and that the means to give them form are developing. Common ground for all is an attitude of irreverent detachment, yet they are obviously much involved with the material. Their statements are oblique, often expressed in pun-like images accompanied by word-play in the titles. As the comic book catalog suggests, much of it is a commentary on mass



James Falconer, "Slep Portrait," watercolor, 7x9". Hairy Who Show, Hyde Park Art Center



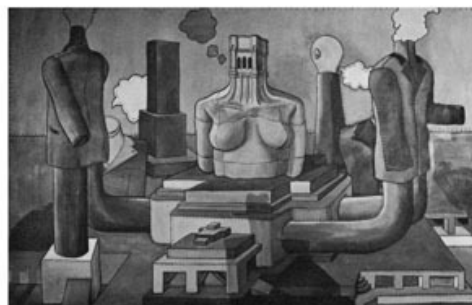
Gladys Nilsson, "Duck Troops," watercolor, 10x14". Hairy Who Show, Hyde Park Art Center.



James Nutt, "Backman," acrylic on plexiglass, 12x16". Hairy Who Show, Hyde Park Art Center.



Suellen Rocca, "Hairy What Game," pen and ink, 9x11". Hairy Who Show, Hyde Park Art Center.



Art Green, "Confusing Departure," o/c, 48x78". Hairy Who Show, Hyde Park Art Center.



Karl Wirsum, page from the comic book catalog.
Hairy Who Show, Hyde Park Art Center.

media, in some instances a frank and discerning appreciation of it. It relates to the broad trend in which artists have turned to this heretofore largely-ignored area for source material.

James Falconner, whose work has developed within the last year, is closer to direct satire than the others and his work is a mixture of the scornful and the comic. Both his oils and watercolors are crude with a force which gives them their power and which is also their weakness. Their harshness contrasts with Suellen Rocca's drawings and oils. Both her drawings and paintings are linear, pictographic, serial groupings that are blurred and ill-defined as a TV screen. The greater clarity in the ink drawings plays against the wavering line and gives them more effectiveness than the blurred oils.

Gladys Nilsson's watercolors are technically accomplished and authoritative, a virtuoso display of the medium. Her subjects border upon the absurd; the wild, erotic imagery, however, is controlled and disciplined. At first they seem suggestive of Grosz but their tone is comic and burlesque (one

is entitled "Burly-Q") rather than biting and satirical and their affinity is with Jarry's Ubu.

Marshall McLuhan's premise that radio, TV, movies, the press, advertising, all of the mass media, are "extensions of man" takes on new meaning in reference to today's art and to some of these artists in particular. Our sloganized environment has been transformed in Art Green's fantasies with their cryptic wisdom. Few paintings seem so remote and yet so involved with the absurd and unbelievable puzzles of our everyday world as "Undeniable Logician" or "Confusing Departure." The extensions of man are made both more incredible and more acceptable.

Comic strips are characterized by a direct, graphic treatment and are involved with a story content. James Nutt's paintings wittily satirize this and the abstract power of Karl Wirsum's paintings is an intensification of this graphic style. Comic strips too include the dialogue and many of these works, essentially linear, include letters, words, whole phrases or the title itself (e.g. Falconner's anagrammatic "Slep Portrait," Green's use of ready-made phrases such as "Occupational Hazards"). The puns and word play in Nutt's parody "Back Man" parallels Duchamp's interest in these devices (e.g. Duchamp's "Fresh Widow" as a substitute for French Window). Readymade images are transformed by a sharp precision in Wirsum's work and both his and Nutt's have as a starting point the manufactured folklore inherent in the comics or in the other mass produced materials of our culture. HAIRY WHO was a unique exhibition.

—Whitney Halstead

Art in America

CHICAGO POPCYCLE

It's mad, it's monstrous, it's how a group of midwestern individualists rejected the Paris, New York or West Coast mold to form a school that is distinctly its own

Franz Schulze



The WHO in this case: six Chicago pop artists. Shown here is the cover of the comic-book catalogue they used for their "Hairy Who" exhibition.

Since the late 1940s an expressive strain—one that periodically appears, dies away, reappears in different form and expires again—has run through Chicago painting. Properly speaking, it is not a style but a preoccupation and an order of values, close to the esthetic of surrealism or expressionism but of a character more rude and hermetic than the "classical" varieties found in New York and Europe. Now it is back again, suddenly emerging in group shows by a cluster of young local painters. To call them pop artists is to reveal something about their work but to conceal something else. It would be fairer, at the very least, to amend this to read Chicago pop, and since a

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unique Chicago factor appears to be involved, some brief historical notes on the last twenty years of Chicago art may be in order.

It was in the middle 1950s that certain shared attitudes were first noted among the generation of Chicago ex-G.I.'s, who, upon returning from World War II, had entered the School of the Art Institute. "Monster Roster" was the name later affixed to them, a bit of journalese that sought color at the cost of accuracy. None of that group, which included Leon Golub, George Cohen, H. C. Westermann, Seymour Kosofsky, June Leaf and Evelyn Stat-singer, painted monsters, in the sense of hideosities and freaks, so much as a variety of stark or mysterious heads and figures, dark fantasies, irrational and pre-rational images and myth symbols, whose sources lay more

in ancient, primitive and psychotic art than in modern European painting.

The distinction is important to the fate of the group. Several of the "monster" artists appeared in the 1959 "New Images of Man" show at the Museum of Modern Art, one of the first exhibitions organized by the museum's then new curator, Chicago-trained Peter Selz. The Chicagoans, indeed the show as a whole, encountered a chilly reception in New York, where a prevailing formalist viewpoint inherited from Paris precluded acceptance of the insistent atavistic content, static composition and dun coloring that characterized most of the Chicagoans' works. Any hope for a "Chicago alternative" to the New York school vanished; the "Monsters," embarrassed by their label, went their individual ways, each seeking fulfillment on a personal rather than communal basis. (Most of them have done rather well for themselves.)

Since that time, many Chicago observers have shied away from attributing common or unique qualities to the young painters and sculptors who have matured here. Behind this may lie the fear of being branded provincial (a perpetual worry in this city), for historically, Chicago painters are uneasy, self-doubting and prone to an ambivalence toward New York that ranges from belligerent rejection to slavish mimicry. There is, and nearly always has been, an identity problem among painters here.

Nevertheless, whenever inter-

esting new groups of artists have appeared in postwar Chicago, they have always had several things in common—training, for instance. Usually the artists have been graduates of the School of the Art Institute, where most of them, over and over again, have sought out the same two teachers—Paul Wieg-hardt, German-born and Paris-schooled, extraordinarily devoted to his students, and the American Kathleen Blackshear, whose ideographic style betrays a fundamentally surrealist sensibility. Furthermore, the work of the majority of good young Chicago artists had been at least tinged, if not saturated, with surrealism, qualified at times by overtones of either dada or expressionism. The private fancy, the obsessive or magical motif, the haunted narrative or the formal *double entendre* have dominated subject matter, and in turn subject matter has tended to dominate form. In the middle fifties Irving Petlin, Robert Barnes and Robert Post initiated a highly evocative kind of imagery that was more colorful and abstract than the painting of the earlier Chicago generation, but at the same time dreamier and more dependent on ambiguities of content and structure. Though basically mindful of pictorial architecture, Kestutis Zapkus invariably built his abstractions of the early 1960s out of a complex seine of associative symbols. In the past several years a more unadulterated narrative fantasy has returned anew in the figure paintings by Ray Reshoft and the tumultuous drawings of



Gladys Nilsson: *Duck Troops*, watercolor, 1966. Dell Gallery, Chicago.



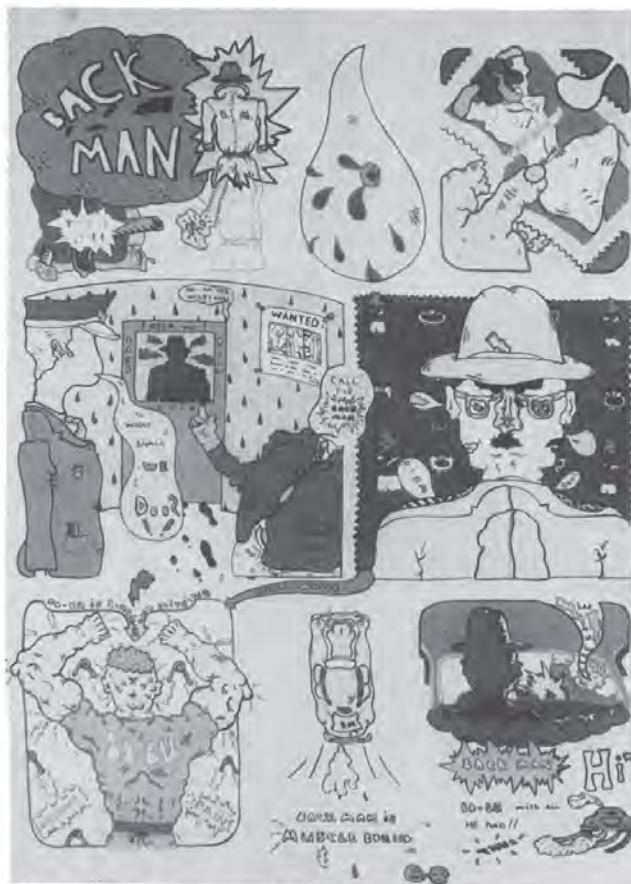
James Falconer: *Morbid Sunshine*, oil, 1966. Collection of the artist.

Irene Siegel, Georgia Jannes and Mary McCarty.

As to the current group, until about two years ago pop art had been pretty well ignored both by local artists and local galleries. Whenever pop art *did* turn up, it was usually little more than a rude version of New York models. Thus, last season's first "Phalanx 3" group show produced a group of young artists who looked as if they had been memorizing Peter Saul and William Copley. Their subsequent showings, however, have revealed something else: a gradual but distinct articulation and refinement of manner suggesting that these painters are something more than imitators and are, indeed, worth a studious look.

Late last season Don Baum—

himself a Chicago surrealist sculptor of considerable power—staged "Hairy Who," an exhibition at the Hyde Park Art Center which featured six Chicagoans still in their twenties: James Falconer, Art Green, Gladys Nilsson, James Nutt, Suellen Rocca and Karl Wirsum. The marked stylistic kinship among the six made it possible for them to publish a show catalogue that took the form of a comic book; its episodes were conceived and drawn by each of the exhibitors. Such a device, not to mention the pop content of their work would hardly distinguish them from many American artists currently caught up in the esthetic of banality; but to a man, this Chicago group seeks out an exceptionally base and regressive kind of popular im-



James Nutt: *Back Man*, acrylic on plexiglas, 1966. Dell Gallery, Chicago.

agery. Its members derive their content and much of their form, not from the average newspaper comic strip or TV commercial, but from wrestling magazines, truss ads and hair-straightener come-ons, schoolboy dirty books (in Chicago, they are called "eight-pagers"), cheap novelty house mailers, the walls of the public latrine. The styles are mostly brutish and closely akin to the spastic drawing of illiterates and junior-high-school students.

In the works of Rocca, Nilsson and Nutt, crumpled human figures have the shape of ash heaps and the consistency of cysts; they are given features only if some mutative mischief can be done them. Rocca compulsively sows endless picture-fields with miniature creatures and objects (evoking the pages of a pulpy trade catalogue); elsewhere, he limns the episode of dog-faced "Poodle Woman" lost in the steaming desert (her armpits graphically disclose the effects of her ordeal). Nilsson's anti-heroine is "Gee Enn the Aquarell Woman"—fat and

freckled, with an elephantine nose—the protagonist of a totally incomprehensible story. Nutt's people are even more assiduously varicose, and Falconer's are the most abrasively expressionistic of a raucous lot; both young men have clearly studied their share of graffiti and have a vigorous taste for puns and misspelling ("Morbid Sunshine by a Miner Artist"). Wirsum's variations on the theme of a broken balloon approach a posterish sort of abstraction, but they never stray too far from their true source, which is all the shoddy printing ever done. Green faintly recalls de Chirico and Magritte, but the crassness he shares with all his colleagues is unquestionably stronger than any reference to museum painting.

This is not pop art, then, so much as sub-pop, the conscious reinterpretation of the unconscious and unregenerate iconography of the lower classes and early adolescent cultures. Comparatively speaking, pop art in New York and on the West Coast appears to be derived



Art Green: *Occupational Hazards*, ballpoint pen on paper, 1965. Collection of the artist.



Karl Wirsum: *Son of Sol Moscot*, acrylic on canvas, 1966. Dell Gallery, Chicago.

more often from the standards and values of the middle and upper classes, which to Chicago eyes would account for its crisp, well-tailored elegance and its ready sociability.

Chicago sub-pop, on the other hand, is private and inner-directed, caring less for clarity of communication than for intensity and directness of feeling—a reminder all over again of the perennial Chicago indifference, if not hostility, to formalism in painting. A persistent local view tends to regard New York pop as slick, steely and handsomely non-committal—"objective." This "subjective" Chicago pop, because of its concern for story and feeling, takes a cue less from New York pop than from surrealism, especially of the marginal, primitive, idio-

syncratic kind that stands outside the mainstream of modernist tradition. Several of these young Chicagoans insist they never knew of Peter Saul before their own styles developed and, indeed, one is impressed by a certain general innocence of art history and art politics among them. They all stress the autobiographical aspect of their imagery, contending that it is neither violent, nihilistic, scabrous, nor even slumming, but rather nostalgic and endearing, echoing the neighborhood candy store and hours of childhood solitude. And they like to laugh at it, because they think it's funny. Their wit has a coarse and crinkled edge, but it is wit, nonetheless.

The quality of painting, so far, has been inconsistent, and

each artist has managed on at least one exhibition occasion to look gratuitously crude and not a little affected. But there have been other times, especially at the "Hairy Who," show, when their paintings jelled more or less communally and seemed the most original and exciting to appear on the Chicago scene in years. At their best, they have displayed an ingeniously ferocious personality in their work, auguring a weird and fantastic new species of pop art or possibly a gamier kind of commercialized surrealism.

Despite a fair number of excellent and durable galleries, and the Art Institute's program in contemporary art, Chicago artists have been able over the years to view only a slight amount of good vanguard art

while it was still fresh enough to be considered vanguard. Either they have seen it here when it was already growing safe, soft and stale, or they have been forced to look at it and read about it in the journals, an insufficient way in itself to grasp what is going on. Hence the quantity of mediocre Chicago art cast in old New York and Parisian molds. Hence, likewise, the abundance of talented young local artists who in the past two decades have formed their own styles by drawing on and emphasizing internal and idiosyncratic states of mind. Fantasy grows out of alienation, and alienation from the mainstream has a long and interesting history in Chicago art, a history that apparently is still being written.



Suellen Rocca: *Curley Head*, oil, 1966. Collection of the artist.