

## NEW YORK

## Gladys Nilsson

GARTH GREENAN GALLERY

To my mind, Gladys Nilsson is the reigning queen of weird-ass figuration and has been for more than fifty years. She was a founding member of the Hairy Who, a group of six Chicago artists who showed together in the mid- to late 1960s and borrowed equally from high modernism and the sordid ranks of populist art to create irreverent images and objects. Their work seemed designed to challenge the tyranny of good taste and decorum, especially as defined by their contemporaries in New York and across Europe.

While many of her colleagues borrowed significantly from straight porn, underground comics, carny culture, and other grungy sources—spawning an edgy, anxious strain of art bristling with aggressive energy—Nilsson's watercolors and mixed-media collages are full of playful femmes of all shapes and sizes. Notably, none of her subjects are pinups or glamour girls, yet all are libertines of one stripe or another who radiate creativity and insane levels of joy. Her lively protagonists strut and parade about, as if they were denizens of some sensualized, acid-tinged realm as envisioned by Antoni Gaudí or Anna Zemánková.

In her exhibition at Garth Greenan Gallery—featuring twenty-six shimmering watercolors made between 2021 and 2022—female voluptuaries presided over lushly beautiful settings where time seemed to stand still. Poised somewhere on the edge of the known world, Nilsson's bevy of bathers, dancers, dryads, acrobats, contortionists, and beaus share their DNA with Matisse's wild bacchantes, as well as with those rare innocents who live light-years away from the din of urbanism and grimy industrialization. The artist's adventures in paradise, however, come with a couple of catches. Lyrical though they may be, her sybarites are extremely distorted, their cartoonish bodies an array of mismatched proportions and physical deformations that situate them well outside the spectrum of conventional feminine beauty. Their torsos are huge, their breasts pendulous, their arms and legs ridiculously elongated. And yet they aren't the least bit perturbed, as each one is quite comfortable in her own zaf-tig fabulousness.

The celebrants created during 2021 collectively dominated the exhibition and were readily discernible in all their splendid glory. In *Balanced*, 2021, we easily apprehended the contours of a robust, animated bather with tiny red-gloved hands who playfully leaps above a watery horizon. But the characters Nilsson invented in 2022 are much more fugitive and don't give themselves over to the viewer all at once. Their bodies conflate with elements of the landscape, fold in and out of places unexpectedly, and have a tendency to disappear into wildly intricate, puzzle-like compositions.

It was up to us to look for order where, at first glance, there appeared to be none; to extricate multicolored figures from the visual cacophony Nilsson devises in these pictures; to make clear distinctions about where these bodies begin or end; and, by tracing their contours, to restore them to the fullness of their forms. The task was virtually impossible in *Jumpers*, 2022, where legs and tree trunks and ribboned streamers are a wild tangle of reds, blues, oranges, yellows, pinks, and greens. Spectacular disarray ruled the day, even in the relatively tranquil environs depicted in *A Stretch Too Far*, 2021, in which a bather reaches languidly across a diptych filled with perhaps a dozen other subjects hidden in the water and flora along a shore.

Examining Nilsson's art was a durational experience that started off like a game, but ultimately drew us into a meditation on the relevance of her protean beings. The boundless sense of optimism that percolated in the '60s, a cultural backdrop for her bouncy happy babes, was greatly tempered here. Bathers, in their idylls, are anachronisms that today may poetically represent a form of resistance—not unlike those who inhabit the late works of Cézanne, or those produced by Renoir in the last years of his life. Both artists found new life in figures that embodied sentiments at odds with the momentum of the modern world. It's precisely because Nilsson's subjects don't fit the picture anymore that they have accrued the power to push back against the clamorous pace of our treacherous present.

—Jan Avgikos



Gladys Nilsson,  
*Jumpers*, 2022,  
watercolor, gouache,  
and pencil on paper,  
24 × 18".

Jan Avgikos, "Reviews: Gladys Nilsson at Garth Greenan Gallery." *Artforum* (February 2023).

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**PARKER GALLERY**