

# Frieze

## ‘The Older I Get, the Bigger I Want These Women to Be!’

Just ahead of her 80th birthday, an interview with Gladys Nilsson: pioneering painter and highlight of the *Chicago Tribute* section



Gladys Nilsson, *Tester*, 2019. Acrylic on canvas, 1.2 x 1.2 metres. Courtesy: the artist and Garth Greenan Gallery, New York

**Matthew McLean** The works coming in the Chicago Tribute section of the Frieze Online Viewing Room are from the last couple of years. How would you characterise your work in this period? Scale seems to be a new interest - in pictures like *Gleefully Askew* (2019).

**Gladys Nilsson** In the past, I had always said to myself when I would walk past big paintings in museums ‘I really have to paint big’. In 1972, Jim [Nutt, an artist and Nilsson’s partner] was in the Venice Biennale and we went to Europe for the first time. When we were in the Uffizi in we came around the corner and there was Botticelli’s *Primavera* on one wall and *The Birth of Venus* on another. I said out loud ‘My God they’re so small’, and at the same time Jim said: ‘My God they’re so big’. In art history books, we’d really never look at the dimensions listed: we would just be looking at the image. Hence I’d always imagine those paintings being gigantic.

I mean gigantic! And Jim thought they were these tiny little gems. It was just funny.

Anyway, after working some small things in 2017 or so, I realized that if I had to paint something big then it better be now, because physically it’s demanding. For *Gleefully Askew* I had to go up a ladder to paint the top, and get down really low to paint the bottom. This would be far more difficult when I’m 90. So I don’t have too many more big paintings left in me.

When I was in the gallery showing all my new works in the show you mentioned I saw all the figures - and that means mainly, the women - are much larger than the spaces they were allotted. Like *Tidy Up!* (2018). If she unfolded, or straightened up, she’d be bigger than the canvas. That’s something I’m playing with now, and enjoying. The older I get, the bigger I want these women to be!

**Matthew McLean** Are you expressing a position on gender role in these super-sized women?

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**Gladys Nilsson** I'm first generation American. Both my parents at separate times emigrated over from Sweden, so it was a European family. By that I mean, in older families, the men ruled the roost - the women were there to make life comfortable and get the dirty work done. (The men did dirty work too, outside the home). I can picture the men at the table and the women in the kitchen. Maybe, in my older years, that's what I've been thinking about: all the older women in my family, the aunts and grandmas of my teenage years. What that way of life was like, and what it cost them.

**Matthew McLean** Is that gendered perspective a recent entry into the work? After seeing the Botticelli in Florence, you did a series remagining Venus in ways that might be read as a feminist statement.

**Gladys Nilsson** It was many years later. Every once in a while, I have to have themes and subjects - one sub-ject leads to another for whatever reason. I felt like I didn't have anything to paint so I'll just paint The Birth of Venus? So the next day I started out. It wasn't good enough to have one. I thought well, Venus could be a man rising from the sea. Or Venus got older, she got wrinkles and people ran from her rather than adored her. It was really about some kind of play. I've never been one for a soapbox. My mind isn't never quite that structured. It was just a great deal of fun. Which is fairly obvious in all my work: that I do have fun when I'm doing it. When painting, I think: 'Is it fun? Yes? Then keep doing it.'

**Matthew McLean** I've often wondered about class identity and experience in relation to your work - in relation to the whole Hairy Who group, actually. A painting like *Rented Bathing Suits* (1965) which was on loan in the UK last year, seems to me to about people who are enjoying a moment of leisure that is very rare for them

**Gladys Nilsson** I've said a lot of times that my work is coming from the 'blue collar' background, where it's a long hard day of sweaty work, and then you eat dinner, watch TV go to bed. And then do it again. There's a lot to be said about that, the ability to continue on.

My work has always been about small things that happen in the day rather than earth shattering events in the world. My usual routine is I go out every day: to the bank and the grocery store and then library and eat lunch and then go to my studio. And every day, someone might make some comment - say 'I'm really admiring that sweater of yours', which makes me feel good. Little teeny, tiny human exchanges. Since isolation, I cannot wait to get more of these back into my days, since I'm only going out twice a week now. So instead, I have to talk to myself, I talk to the TV, I talk to my work, to my paintbrush. But nothing ever answers back...

**Matthew McLean** Do you have figures or poses from life in mind when you're painting a figure, or are they always pure invention?

**Gladys Nilsson** I have from day one watched people. I'm never bored standing in line, or waiting at the airport, or sitting on a bus. And I've used the things that I see - I've always been collecting visuals that go along with those little dialogues I mention. I watch the way the students work, how they are approaching the canvas, what their arm is doing. And, sometimes, if I'm working something out I'll swing my arm, or get my finger all screwy, and observe it. My body parts don't look real, but they're based in reality. They have a semblance of correctness in some weird way.

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**Matthew McLean** Let's talk a bit about the context of Chicago. Lynne Warren wrote in an essay last year that the city was unusual for producing so many women artists in the 1960s. Was this something you were conscious of at the time - i.e. that half of the Hairy Who were women?

**Gladys Nilsson** She's right, but no, we didn't realize at the time how unusual that was. It was a pretty even division in Hairy Who, and the other groups that showed up at Hyde Park were pretty much the same. When we were young, we were thinking about being artists. There wasn't the feeling that there were all these men artists that are really big and that we weren't allowed. There wasn't this division. It wasn't about being good enough to hang next to a man. Your work was either good or it wasn't good.

**Matthew McLean** Warren attributes this phenomenon in part to the unusual number of women who had taught on the faculty of the School of the Art Institute of Chicago (SAIC), like Helen Gardner and Kathleen Blackshear. Could you talk about some of the teachers you had as a student, and how the teaching influenced you?

**Gladys Nilsson** I didn't think about that at all, but yes, there were several women on the faculty. I had Kathleen Blackshear as my art historian though, apart from her, and maybe an anatomy instructor, basically all my instructors were men. The most important teachers for me were Kathleen and Whitney Halstead, the art historian and later a very good friend of Jim's and mine. Ray Yoshida was on the faculty when I was a student but I wasn't in the age group he was teaching. I loved the way Whitney taught art history. He showed a lot of visuals, as did Blackshear. You would be inundated. And you were told how these things were made, where they were located, how they might fit into an art historical bent - but you were allowed to make up your own opinion on if it was good and bad. For me, that meant whether I liked something. Whenever I've looked at art, in class or in museums, I don't know if I'd ever thought: 'This is really good'. I think: 'Boy do I like this'. And maybe afterwards, I try to work out why I liked it. That's what really art history did for me. Gosh I really loved it.

**Matthew McLean** Can I ask a bit about the day to day of your practice - say, how long a painting takes you?

**Gladys Nilsson** Well it varies, something like *Gleefully Askew* takes longer than others. I have a quick hand. The older I get, the more I find I know what I want to do and I know how to do it. It takes me less time than it did 40 years ago. But I'm always willing to put in the time that it takes to get to that level. It's hard to impart to my students that you should never worry about having to redo something to make it better. In acrylic you can re-draw, it's more forgiving. It's extremely hard to go back and make change in a watercolour - the only choice you might have in watercolour is to go darker, or add more pigment, which then affects the feel of the surface of the paper. In 1993 I started to introduce gouache, which is opaque watercolour. Before I was working with transparency, and I had a very good effect at layering, so then I had to practice again to know what my colours, my brushes, my hand, my paper could do. In a sense of a piano player constantly playing scales, you have to put in that kind of work.

**Matthew McLean** When did you move from oils to watercolour initially, and why?

**Gladys Nilsson** When I was pregnant. Acrylic wasn't a material that was introduced in our area. I thought, well: watercolour is obviously water, and soluble rather than needing turpentine - which would be toxic for a

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new-born skin. And we took to each other, this medium and I. As I grew more into watercolour I discovered that all kinds of things were interesting. Like, you could buy four manufacturers' Naples Yellow, and they'd all be slightly different. Today, I have more paint than any person should even think about having - because I love colour. And everyone's 300-pound cold press paper is different. I have one or two pieces or really rough paper where the pits are exaggerated. One of the things I did find out myself early on was that when it became too easy, I got easily bored. I have to throw myself a loop. Changing the kind of paper, or going from something small and something big, horizontal or vertical: everything gives you a new challenge. That's how one thing led to another. And then if you haven't done then for a while, it's something new to revisit.

**Matthew McLean** You're coming up to 80 years old this year, is that correct?

**Gladys Nilsson** This Frieze would've opened on my 80th birthday. So I did a painting called *Even Bigger Birthday Gladys* (2020) for the occasion. In the picture I'm wearing a birthday cake hat, with eight candles: one for each decade. When I turned 70 I did a watercolour that I gave to myself to celebrate. I wanted to make sure there were 70 candles in that one. But it's a very densely populated composition. When I was more than halfway done I suddenly thought to myself: 'I don't know how many candles I have, I better count before I finish'. Well, I lost count at 98... So now in the future, if people counted all the candles they'll think: 'Woah, she was so old when she created this!' Anyway, it was going to be celebratory, my birthday on the fair's opening day. Instead I'll have to parade around in my studio, in a tiara or something.

**Matthew McLean** I had originally hoped to have you and Suellen Rocca in a roundtable conversation about women Chicago Imagists, but she suddenly passed away, and I wanted to ask you if you think about mortality - there this idea of 'late style' that emerges artists get older. But the more I looked, the more it occurred to me that there is no death in your paintings.

**Gladys Nilsson** At some point I guess some composers start to compose funeral dirges. That's for sure not me. When my mum turned 70, she had her ears pierced. And it was the single most cool thing she did. I know how old I am, but I don't know how old I am, you know? I don't feel as old as I am supposed to feel. My body certainly tries to tell me. I've got hearing aids and wrinkles and cataracts. My joints hurt. My waist-line, as we've been speaking, has grown at least 3 inches. But I still don't think of myself in those terms. In my mind, I'm running through the meadow and so on.

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