

# Frieze

## Gladys Nilsson's Metamorphic Women

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



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

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 Blackshear, Whitney Halstead and Ray

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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 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.

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