

# The New York Times

## Thumbing the Nose, At Artistic Propriety

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.

Review of *Gladys Nilsson and Jim Nutt: Works on Paper*, at the University Art Gallery, State University at Stony Brook. March/April 1993.

Phyllis Braff, "Gladys Nilsson and Jim Nutt: Works on Paper." *The New York Times* (April 7, 1996), accessed online.