ARTFORUM

GIDDILY TOWARD OBLIVION: GLADYS NILSSON PAINTS THE HUMAN COMEDY

"To lament time's march or enjoy the moment? Nilsson's maximalist dreamworlds offer the possibility of both"

By Jeremy Lybarger

Gladys Nilsson, *To of Them*, 1972, acrylic on canvas in embroidery hoop frame, 14 × 14".

THE FIRST THING you notice in Gladys Nilsson's work is the people. Or are they animals? Mutants, maybe. They crowd nearly every inch of the frame, a hopped-up parade of oversize carousers and their miniature consorts. Everyone is bulbous, stringy, or malformed. Flesh has gone dermatologically haywire. There are snouts where you'd expect noses. Gender is often ambiguous—or beside the point—with getups ranging from church lady to dance-hall tart to BDSM munchkin. Occasionally, in the thick of it all, penises lurk with modest ambition. Coming upon one of her paintings is like plunging into a party full of strangers

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already three drinks deep.

Nilsson admits to suffering from horror vacui—a fear of empty space, which in her case reads less like a neurotic affliction than like compulsive conviviality. When she's contemplating a work in progress, she takes the bus from her suburban Chicago home to a nearby mall to people-watch. She has described herself as a collector of gestures and postures, which she then adapts into her figures' sinuous contortions (helped by tentacular limbs and sideways pelvises). Fittingly, Nilsson also draws inspiration from Sears, that temple of middle-class retail, whose catalogues she counts as among her formative influences.

Since the early 1960s, her drawings, watercolors, acrylics, and collages have run like scenic byways along the whooshing turnpike of contemporary art. Not Pop, not Funk, not surreal or Conceptual, and certainly not Minimal, Nilsson's work is practically an advertisement for postwar Chicago's alternative tradition. As a member of the Hairy Who—a sextet whose grotesque, scatological imagery and mischievous exhibitions gripped the city in the late '60s—she found success early and concocted a style that, for all its art-historical echoes, is unmistakably her own. Despite having received a solo show at New York's Whitney Museum of American Art in 1973, the Anonymous Was a Woman Award in 2024, and a run of major late-career commissions, she is still something of a wild card. "I have been waiting a long time to have people catch up with me as an individual," she told the New York Times in 2020.

Kurt Fishback, *Gladys Nilsson*, 1984, gelatin silver print, 18 7⁄8 × 14 3⁄4″.

With "Gleefully Askew," Nilsson's retrospective at the Crocker Art Museum in Sacramento, opening July 19, that time may finally have arrived. As the title implies, the show trumpets the artist's idiosyncrasy, which feels ever more at odds with the cultural moment. Now eighty-six, she doesn't talk theory or politics. She resists social media. Feminism, the fogged lens through which critics have often viewed her work, is seemingly no more urgent to her than food or fashion—or Star Trek, for that matter, which has inspired several drawings and paintings. Her work is spirited, even downright giddy. And as she's aged, her figures have grayed and sagged in tandem. Nilsson's depiction of bodies past their prime conjures not the pitiless naturalism of Joan Semmel or Alice Neel, but something friskier, more delighted. Her world is a Saturday morning cartoon crossed with a smutty joke.

When I met Nilsson this spring, I asked if she ever experiences the self-doubt or self-criticism that is most artists' daily bread. "No," she answered immediately. There's something both startling and seductive about such forthrightness. Cynics among us might discount Nilsson's work as visual mousse: light and sugary. But her gamboling merrymakers, hammy showgirls, and blithe flaneurs insist otherwise. As protagonists in a ribald exploration of human sociality that has spanned more than a half century, they lampoon everything from beauty fascism to housework. The crowd, the group, the pair are Nilsson's most basic subjects. The individual is there, but always in relation to others. That, in a nutshell, is the story of life—anyone's life. Nilsson's art is serious, even when it looks like it's having too much fun to admit it.

NILSSON WAS BORN DURING a freak Chicago blizzard in May 1940, the only child of Swedish immigrants who were too busy making a living to fuss with anything like art. Her mother was a waitress who could balance six dinner plates up her arms; her father worked in an appliance factory. Money was tight, but each summer the family scrounged a humble vacation out of coins saved in empty cans of orange-juice concentrate.

Gladys Nilsson, *Rented Bathing Suits*, 1965, pen and ink on paper, 17 × 19 1/2″.

One of Nilsson's earliest creative memories is of making clothes for her paper dolls; this taste for fashion would resurface in later works such as Rented Bathing Suits, 1965, a drawing of beachgoers in striped swimwear, and The Pink Suit, 1965, and Pink Suit #2, 1966, watercolors in which a headless figure models the namesake garment in a kind of levitating conniption.

Nilsson enrolled at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago (SAIC) in 1958. The faculty at that time included local visionaries Whitney Halstead and Kathleen Blackshear, who urged their students to look beyond the Western canon. They organized trips to the nearby Field Museum of Natural History so their pupils could examine folk and ethnographic objects. The hypnotic motifs and stylized figures in these collections lit a fuse for Nilsson and her peers, seeding a fascination with non-Western art that has continued throughout her career. In the late 1960s and early '70s, for example, Nilsson completed a series of silver ink drawings on black paper that nod to Indigenous Australian bark paintings. Bestiaries of iconographic forms and mismatched patterns, the pieces nonetheless retain the antic buzz of the Hairy Who.

At SAIC, she met fellow art student Jim Nutt. They married after a six-month courtship, and Nilsson became pregnant shortly thereafter. She then made what would become the most consequential decision of her career: switching from oil paint to watercolor. She'd seen the damage that turpentine can inflict on sensitive skin and wanted to spare her newborn son, Claude.

At the same time, she was determined that motherhood not supplant painting, as it did for some of her classmates. "The wife automatically stopped painting. She never did anything again," Nilsson recalled in a 2008 interview with the Smithsonian Archives of American Art. "But it never occurred to me that that's what I would do." A novice with watercolor, she taught herself using cheap paints and bad paper, often working on both sides to save money.

Gladys Nilsson, *Being Beamed*, 1984, watercolor on paper, 29 3⁄8 × 42″.

She likens these initial fumbling attempts to early Beatles records: rough but catchy. In Night Walking, 1964, for instance, her tonal virtuosity is just beginning to percolate. An odd couple—one a goblin squeezed into an improbable trench-coat onesie, a fedora, and high heels—promenades down a steep incline while other strollers come and go. The paint is deftly mottled but its handling lacks the prowess of her later work (see, for example, Being Beamed, 1984, a fantasia of extraterrestrial teleportation in which the watercolor is sumptuous but perfectly controlled). What's evident from the start, though, is the mix of goofiness and genial weirdness that would become her trademark.

To varying degrees, this was also the fingerprint of the Hairy Who. Comprising classmates Nilsson, Nutt, James Falconer, Suellen Rocca, Art Green, and Karl Wirsum, the Who held their first exhibition at Chicago's Hyde Park Art Center in 1966, ushering a new mode of dank, bawdy rudeness into the city's milieu. The group's funhouse palettes and repertoire of sweaty, pustulant goons tapped into the nation's nauseous psyche. Although their imagery wasn't overtly political, their visual touchstones—tattoos, underground comics, vernacular signs, folk art—were dredged from grubbier corners of the American id that had grown more pungent in the era of the Vietnam War and sex, drugs, and rock 'n' roll. The critic Franz Schulze memorably poeticized the group's raw material as including:

> Memories of baseball trading cards, bubble gum orgies, the secret sight of one's parent's arm pits and underwear up close, one's own mucous, tire pumps lying out in the rain . . . broken balloons, misspelled words scrawled on the walls under railroad viaducts, the drawings found in the margins of elementary school textbooks.

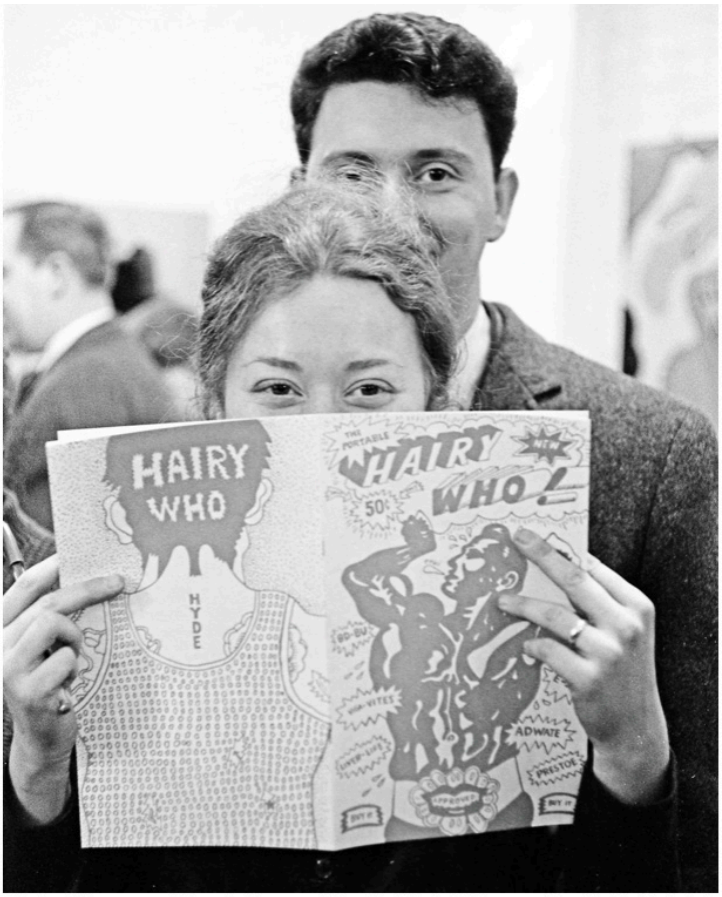
Implicit in Schulze's remark is what distinguished the Hairy Who from their Pop counterparts on the East Coast. Those artists were ironic and aloof, treating advertising and mass-media imagery as expressions of a broader fug of celebrity and consumerism. Capitalist tactics—repetition, decontextualization, estrangement—were put in service of their literal-minded appropriations. The Who, by contrast, sincerely loved what others considered trash and recognized the emotion in it. A strain of soured nostalgia runs through their work: an affection for the clothes, toys, and hairdos of their childhoods, now tinged with the creeping disillusionment of the 1960s. Unlike the coolly impassive Pop artists, the Who weren't afraid to get personal, or to let their art echo the anxious, kinky, maladjusted yammering in their own heads.

Nilsson's watercolors complemented the work of the Hairy Who while also being slightly off-key; imagine the same hectic ragtime played on a calliope instead of a piano. She was the only committed watercolorist in the bunch, and her depiction of bodies carries more a sense of bemusement than the bloodshot mojo and rancid heebie-jeebies of Nutt or Wirsum. Lowbrow sources such as Sunday funnies, B movies, and advertisements are present but are more diffuse, rarely coalescing into obvious quotation. She avoids the isolated portrait in favor of mob scenes.

Like Nutt and Wirsum, however, she experimented with reverse painting on Plexiglas, a technique that pays homage to pinball machines. (At least two major pinball manufacturers were then headquartered in Chicago; the machines' vivid, cartoony backglasses and zigzag panels directly influenced the Imagists.) The Trogens, 1967, is an example of Nilsson's approach to reverse painting. A discombobulating inversion of the Trojan-horse myth, the work explores shifting scales through a profusion of human and animal figures. Tiny hangers-on are tucked into pockets and cavort in crevices. Anatomies misbehave. So does gravity. The right half of the image is an architectonic jumble of patterns and bold lines, hard to parse but visually compelling.

By 1969, the Hairy Who had staged six exhibitions: three in Chicago, and one each in San Francisco, New York, and Washington, DC. They had generated the kind of press (and scorn) that makes young artists lightheaded, and introduced a quirky exhibition model that later Imagist groups, such as the False Image—comprising Roger Brown, Eleanor Dube, Phil Hanson, and Christina Ramberg—would follow. (That quartet made work as distinctive as the Hairy Who's, though narratively more enigmatic and usually more sober in palette. Like the Who, they debuted at the Hyde Park Art Center with an exhibition whose ephemera included decals and postcards.) Around this time, the Hairy Who decided, amicably, that it was time to disband and for its members to focus on solo careers. Nilsson's was already at a high simmer. In 1967 and 1968, she had won the top prize at the Art Institute of Chicago's annual showcase of local talent, and she'd been included in the "1967 Annual Exhibition of Contemporary American Painting" at the Whitney. When Sacramento State College offered Nutt a teaching job in 1969, the couple headed west.

SACRAMENTO IN THE LATE '60S was a natural base for Nilsson—a short drive from Folsom, where Adeliza McHugh's Candy Store Gallery was a hive of Funk and so-called Nut art, and just upwind of the Bay Area counterculture. Artists such as Robert Arneson, Roy de Forest, David Gilhooly, and Peter Saul were pushing a humorous, sometimes phantasmagoric style that jibed with Nilsson's own, although this predominantly male roster portended the culture shock that awaited her in Sacramento, where mothballed gender roles prevailed. At house parties, for instance, Nilsson would find the wives clustered in the kitchen while the men talked shop in another room.



Gladys Nilsson and Dennis Rocca at the first Hairy Who opening, Hyde Park Art Center, Chicago, 1966.

Such divisions shaped the critical reception of her work, with feminine and delicate being recurring adjectives. “I don’t think of work as being masculine or feminine,” Nilsson once said, yet the rise of second-wave feminism encouraged blatantly gendered readings of her matriarchal comedies. As the curator Francesca Wilmott—who organized the Crocker retrospective—notes in her catalogue essay for the show, the critic John Fitz Gibbon labeled Nilsson’s watercolors “less agonized and less driven” than those of her male contemporaries, while the aforementioned Schulze appraised them as “daintily understated.” This was also the moment of Linda Nochlin’s “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?,” the barnstorming 1971 essay that spurned “daintiness, delicacy and preciousness . . . as earmarks of a feminine style,” deploying precisely the language used to defang Nilsson.

For her 1973 solo show at the Whitney, Nilsson subverted these readings with six small acrylic paintings framed in embroidery hoops from a craft store: The gesture doubled down on the artist’s supposed delicacy. Interspersed with larger canvases, these hooped paintings evoked the hokey Americana and language of needlework samplers (think HOME SWEET HOMEand BLESS THIS HOUSE), although the images themselves contain some of Nilsson’s most decorative weirdness: squirming tubers, phallic gewgaws, polymorphous paisleys, elements in vivid contrast to whatever “women’s work” was supposed to be. The slapstick titles—Crackned Horsez, To of Them, Ape Island, all 1972—further stymied any straightforwardly polemical takeaway.

Nilsson sharpened this approach throughout the ’80s and early ’90s. Chic.con.co, a watercolor from 1986, presents an all-female construction crew in shortalls and knee-high boots—a kind of Folies Bergère with scaffolding. In Dish Jockey, an etching from 1993, a harried woman in a bandanna (shades of Rosie the Riveter) scrubs dishes while an ensemble of Tinkerbell-like housekeepers complete other chores nearby. Another etching, Maximysing, 1993, ups the ante: A four-armed woman irons clothes, signs a slip of paper, and prepares dinner simultaneously, her knockabout expression like that of someone who just downed a shot of strychnine. These vignettes could be seen as acerbic parables about inequities in labor, or they could simply be caricatures of domestic drudgery à la I Love Lucy. Nilsson’s work usually resists the more straight-faced interpretation.

Gladys Nilsson, *Dipped Dick . . . Adam and Eve after Cranach* , 1971, diptych, acrylic on canvas, 85 1⁄2 × 49 1⁄2″.

But humor, too, can be a liability. As late as 2000, some critics charged Nilsson with the grievous misdemeanor of having fun, as in this musing from Philadelphia Inquirer critic Victoria Donohoe: "What are we to make of the fact that Nilsson displays no satirical concerns or comments on issues that can be applied on a more universal level? . . . Indeed, the entertaining quality of her work overpowers whatever commentary the artist may have had in mind." Nilsson, an incorrigible Midwesterner, had a history of downplaying her depth. In 1973, she told the Folsom Telegraph, "I'm really not a complex person. My main concern with myself and my work is that I should enjoy doing it."

The false dichotomy between entertainment and "serious" art is a persistent tension in much of Nilsson's work. Nilsson, who possesses an encyclopedic knowledge of art history, has revamped inherited visual lineages throughout her career. The Scolding, 1965, a claustrophobic portrait of jaundiced and blotchy figures watching a contretemps, has some of the unsettling atmosphere of James Ensor's 1890 canvas The Intrigue, in which a clutch of masked figures presses in on the viewer. Nilsson's Evening Street Scene, 1964, a bustling urban tableau, along with Two Ladies and Starry Stage Ladies, both 1967, whose focal points are women mid-strut, recall certain prints from George Grosz's 1922–23 Ecce Homo portfolio, not in tone but in their teeming rakishness. Other works allude to Max Beckmann, Paul Klee, and Pontormo, all of whom Nilsson has acknowledged as influences.

Gladys Nilsson, *Maximysing*, 1993, etching, 6 3⁄4 × 6″.

In 1972, she and Nutt traveled by train throughout Europe, on a grand tour of museums that lasted about six weeks and gave her plenty of face time with the old masters. This she channeled into exuberant riffs, such as Dipped Dick . . . Adam and Eve After Cranach, 1971, an acrylic diptych modeled on Lucas Cranach the Elder's 1526 painting of the titular couple. Nilsson's version shares little with its source beyond Adam and Eve themselves, here recast as doughy, beigy silhouettes striking poses amid an almost psychedelic soup of parti-color fronds, blobs, and amoebas. What delights Nilsson's eye isn't so much the two leading stars of original sin but the Technicolor paradise around them: the Bible as decor.

Later works remix art-historical references more subtly but with like-minded abandon. A Girl in the Arbor, a suite of thirteen watercolor collages from 2013, incorporates cuttings from art books and Vogue magazine. The juxtaposition of glossy and matte papers satisfied the papyrophile in Nilsson while adding a chewy subtext for viewers. The girl in the arbor emerges as a surrogate for generations of nameless women depicted by men out in the overblown boondocks—see Sandro Botticelli's Primavera, ca. 1480; Jean-Honoré Fragonard's The Swing, 1767, etc. Cue the hoary specter of the male gaze, which Nilsson both invites and interrupts with her collaged fragments of manicured hands, classical statuary, and misfit eyeballs. At times her figures verge on being Cubist, scrambling our sense of the composition, suggesting that she's less a solitary subject than a composite in dialogue with art history and popular culture.

Gladys Nilsson, *A Girl in the Arbor #4*, 2013, mixed media on paper, 41 1/2 × 29 3/4". From the suite *A Girl in the Arbor*, 2013.

In 1976, Nilsson and Nutt returned to Chicago. “I don’t want to sit under a tree for the rest of my life,” she later said, explaining why they ditched California. They bought a house in the suburbs, and in 1990 Nilsson began teaching at her alma mater, SAIC (she retired in 2023). She now works from a home studio on the third floor. A few potted cacti grapple in the window; one wall is plastered with family photos and vacation snaps, including a vintage glamour portrait of Nilsson nuzzling her late cat Rosemary. Although she has produced a few larger paintings in this space—for example Big Birthday Gladys, 2010, a sublime forty-by-sixty-inch watercolor, which she made as a seventieth-birthday gift for herself—she’s constrained by what can be coaxed up the narrow staircase.

A trio of recent site-specific wall works has unleashed her inner muralist. These wall drawings—at the Colby College Museum of Art in Waterville, Maine, in 2024; the Art Institute of Chicago, in 2025; and Houston’s Menil Collection, in 2025—were all temporary, like frolicsome mirages. Each harked back to Nilsson’s preoccupations with multiplicity and shifting scale, and each featured women unashamed of their hangdog breasts. In the Art Institute drawing, a woman savors a chunk of carrot cake while lounging topless amid twenty-one other figures performing semi-aerobic choreography across the wall. In the Menil work, the central character is an artist brandishing a bouquet of colored pencils, surrounded by a seraphic tumble of monochrome extras that are her handiwork. The wall drawings also contain erasure marks, vestiges of the artist’s false starts and corrections. She is present in the very materiality of the work, another supernumerary in the fleeting processional.

Gladys Nilsson, *Big Birthday Gladys*, 2010, watercolor, gouache, and collage on paper, 40 × 60″.

The ephemerality of these drawings makes for a poignant message: The good times are slipping away. This may be the denouement of all of Nilsson's multitudinous and swarming work. Even as you're amused by her panoplies, some reptilian inner crank reminds you that you're alone—outside the frame, excluded from the revelry. You don't belong, however much you'd like to believe otherwise. But you can't look away either. It's the same dampening effect that comes from witnessing other people's holidays or scrolling their Instagram feeds.

Although Nilsson would likely disagree, her work affirms that all of us are drifting toward oblivion, with the best days of our lives like so much confetti in the wind. In her hands, this truth is giddy rather than gutting. The psychological fizz in her art—its profundity, finally—stems from just such an age-old dilemma: whether to lament time's march or simply enjoy the moment. Her maximalist dreamworlds offer the possibility of both. Have your cake and choke on it, too.

Jeremy Lybarger is a writer and editor in Chicago. He is working on a book about the late artist Roger Brown.