



# Gleefully Askew

## A Gladys Nilsson Retrospective

By Francesca Wilmott, PhD

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**W**OMEN TOWER, TEETER, ZIGZAG, AND DANCE across Gladys Nilsson's paintings. Limbs stretch, bodies bulge, and everyday life tips slightly off kilter. For more than six decades, Nilsson has transformed the ordinary into the delightfully absurd, creating a body of work that is at once mischievous, exacting, and profoundly observant. As a member of Chicago's Hairy Who in the 1960s, Nilsson made watercolors that earned her a reputation as the most "feminine" member of the group—a characterization that she has challenged and spoofed throughout her career. Unbound by a region, artistic medium, or social decorum dictating how women can and should behave, Nilsson's raucously off-beat work is now celebrated in a long-overdue survey, *Gleefully Askew: A Gladys Nilsson Retrospective*, featuring approximately 115 watercolors, paintings, drawings, and prints drawn from major private and public collections across the United States.

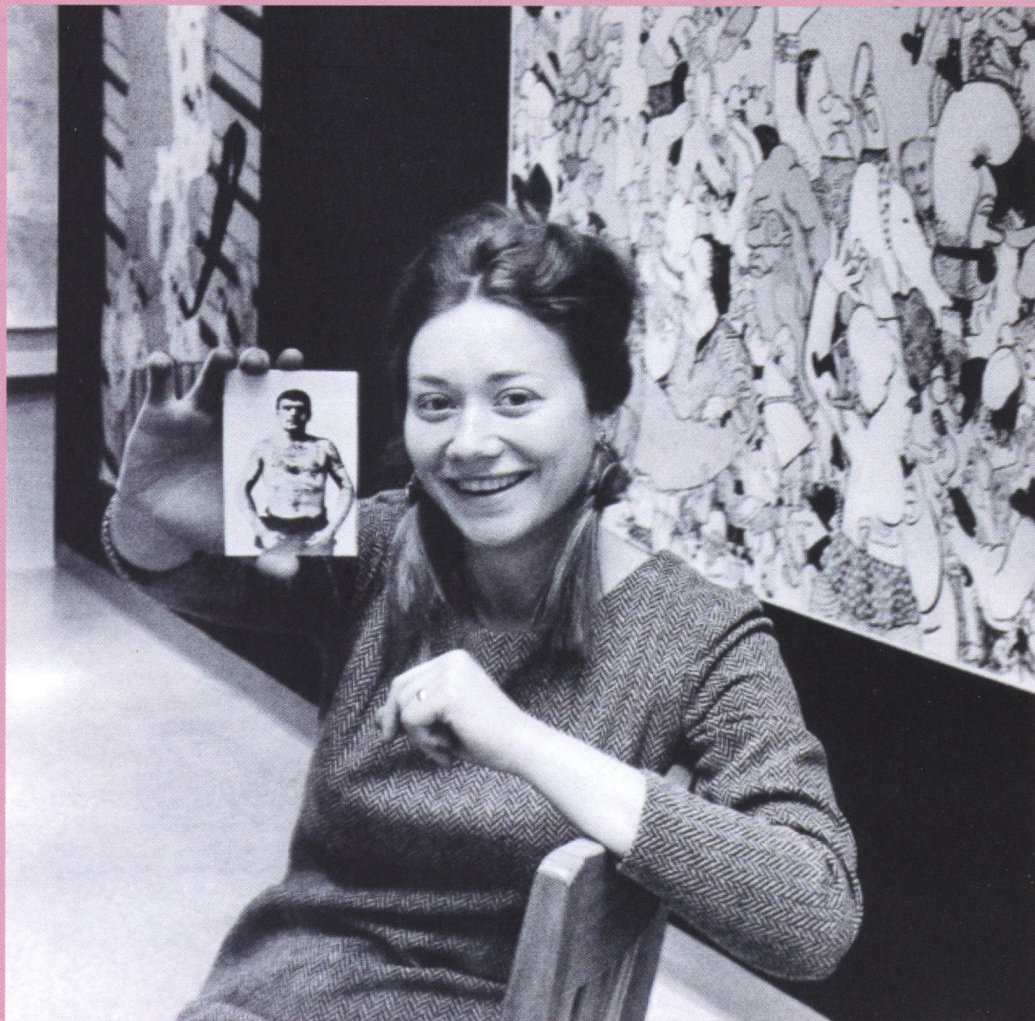
Born to a working-class family on Chicago's North Side in 1940, Nilsson has long been recognized as a "Chicago artist." Though she is best known for her association with the Hairy Who, her career began several years earlier, around the time she graduated from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago (SAIC) in 1962. While pregnant with her son, she embraced watercolor as her primary medium, a practical decision meant to avoid the toxicity of turpentine when using oil paint. Critics, however, quickly connected the delicate nature of watercolor to Nilsson's gender. Even before her dense compositions focused on unruly female characters, Nilsson's work challenged gendered expectations. In 1964, she completed her first major artwork, a larger-than-life painting titled *Gigantica* (1964, [fig. 2]), featuring a gargantuan red-haired woman with hairy tree-trunk legs firmly planted in a forest inhabited by miniature figures. *Gigantica*, like the women who appear throughout Nilsson's paintings, was not a self-portrait but instead led a life parallel to her own.



← Fig. 1: Gladys Nilsson (American, born 1940), *Ladies Dance*, 1975. Watercolor on paper, 14 x 11 1/2 in. Crocker Art Museum, The Jane K. Witkin Collection, gift of B.E. Witkin, 1981.209.

↑ Fig. 2: Gladys Nilsson in front of *Gigantica* (1964), 2020. Courtesy of Garth Greenan Gallery, New York and Matthew Marks Gallery. Photo by Jamie M. Stukenberg Photography.

→ Gladys Nilsson holding up a photograph that was part of the wall label in the 1967 *Hairy Who* exhibition at HPAC. She sits in front of her painting *Very Worldly* (1967) at the 70th Annual Exhibition of Artists of Chicago and Vicinity, The Art Institute of Chicago, 1967. Photo courtesy of the Artist, Garth Greenan Gallery, New York, and Parker Gallery, Los Angeles.



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In 1966, Nilsson banded together with five other figurative painters who had recently graduated from SAIC to form the Hairy Who: Art Green, Jim Falconer, Suellen Rocca, Karl Wirsum, and Nilsson's husband, Jim Nutt. Along with their bawdy humor and love of word play, these artists embraced a formally rigorous, yet unorthodox approach to painting, inspired by comic book imagery, popular culture, and the vernacular objects they encountered at the Field Museum of Natural History and in flea markets. They exhibited together six times before going their separate ways in 1969.

In August 1968, Nilsson, Nutt, and their young son, Claude, relocated to Sacramento, where Nutt had accepted a full-time teaching position at Sacramento State College (now California State University, Sacramento). During their nearly eight years in California, Nilsson established herself nationally and internationally as an independent artist. She reflected that Sacramento offered her and Nutt a chance to focus on their individual art careers, allowing them "to step back and reevaluate ourselves . . . focusing on ourselves as individual artists rather than artists in the group." Nilsson experimented with new artistic media during this period, including acrylic paintings in embroidery hoops, which she presented in her 1973 exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York. She also established her longstanding relationship

→ [Opposite page] Gladys Nilsson (American, born 1940), *Waterplay*, 2023. Colored pencil, watercolor, gouache, graphite, and crayon on paper, 30 x 22 1/2 in. Courtesy of the Artist, Garth Greenan Gallery, New York and Parker Gallery, Los Angeles. Photo: Paul Salvesson.



➤ Gladys Nilsson (American, born 1940), *Crackned Horsez*, 1972. Acrylic on canvas in embroidery hoop frame, 14 in. (diam.). Private collection.



➔ [Opposite page] Fig. 3: Gladys Nilsson (American, born 1940), *Gleefully Askew*, 2019. Acrylic on canvas, 84 x 112 in. Private Collection, New York, Courtesy of AWG Art Advisory. Photo courtesy of the Artist, Garth Greenan Gallery, New York, and Parker Gallery, Los Angeles.

with the Crocker Art Museum, one that grew to include participation in solo exhibitions in 1969 and 1996, and group exhibitions in 1972, 1976, 1981, 2010, and 2022. Today, with 30 works in the Museum's holdings, the Crocker boasts one of the largest public collections of Nilsson's art in the world.

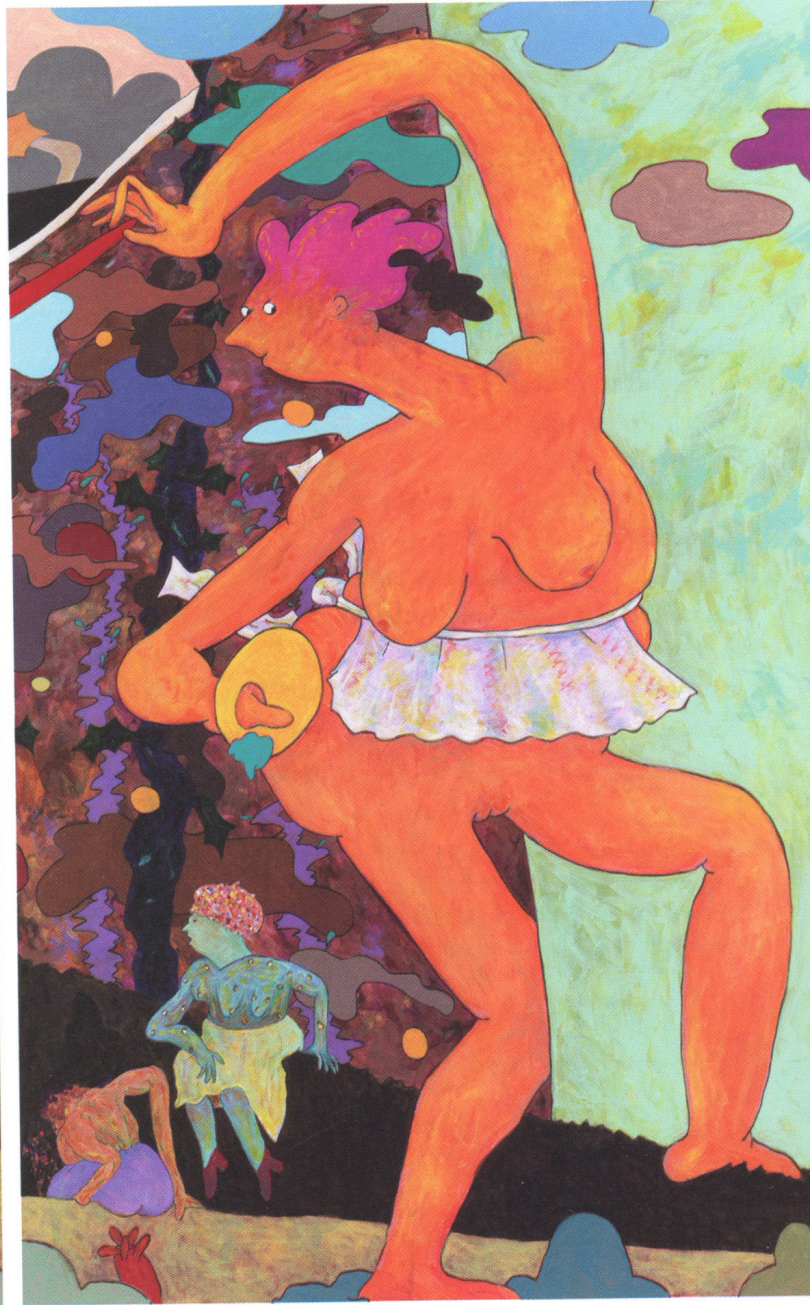
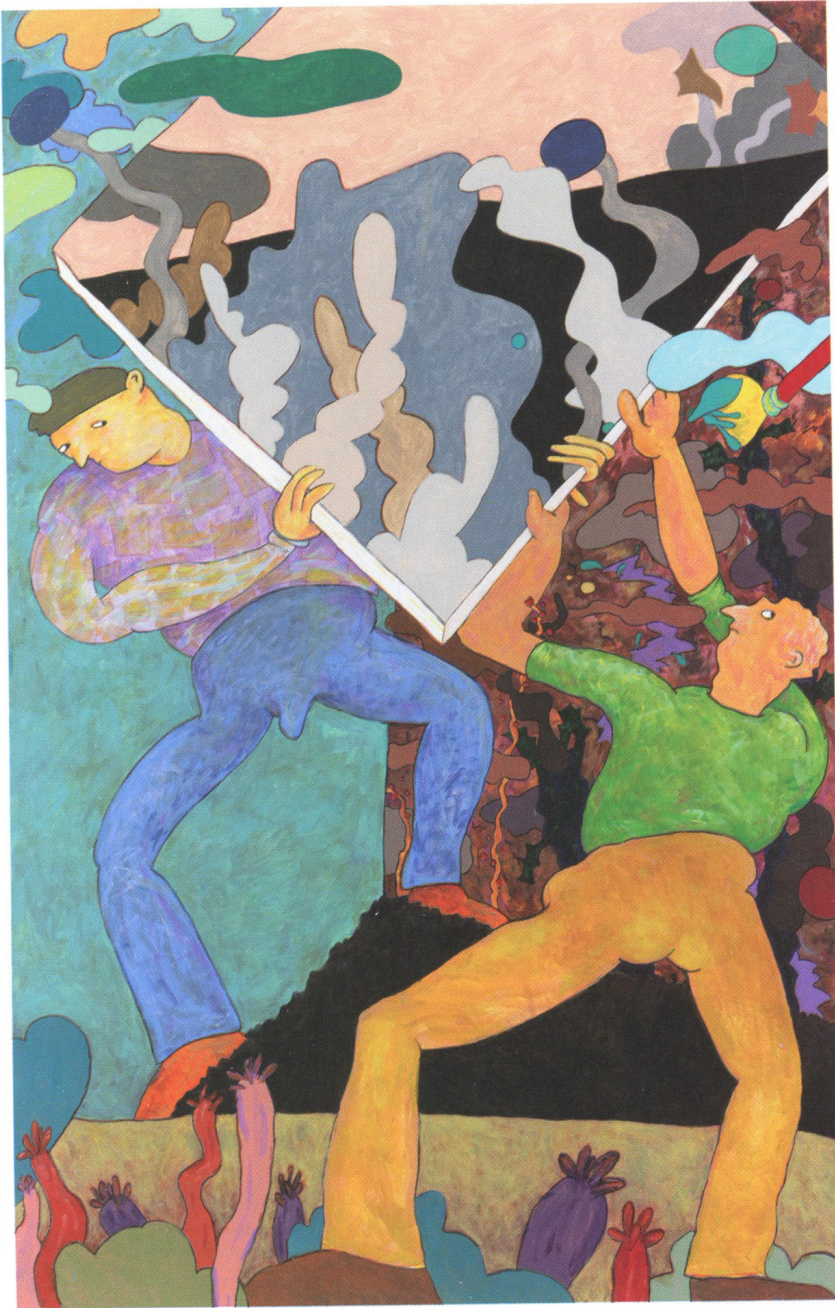
After returning to Chicago in 1976, Nilsson continued to explore new formal terrain, yet she always returned to her first love of watercolor. Veils of sheer cloth—first explored in works like *Ladies Dance* (1975) [fig. 1], inspired by her 1972 encounter with Botticelli's paintings in Italy—showcased Nilsson's virtuosity with watercolor. By the mid-1980s, these translucent washes gave way to saturated color and laser-like light in works such as *Being Beamed* (1984), which defined a new body of work befitting of a decade known for its decadence.

Nilsson assumed a teaching position at SAIC in 1990. Her course load limited her travel during the school year, and thus she began looking closer to home for inspiration, finding it in the kitchen, shopping mall, and golf club. She channeled her wry observations of

domestic life into numerous print editions and experimental collages. In her *Sum Daze* etching suite (1993), Nilsson's energetic linework captures women immersed in household tasks. In *Dish Jockey* (1993)

[fig. 4], a bandanaed woman holds court over a kitchen sink, washing a stack of soapy dishes with one hand, while returning dishware to a cabinet with the other. *Dish Jockey* reflects the gender divisions Nilsson witnessed in her family at a young age. "You know, the men sat over here and did this, and the women were in the kitchen, bustling . . . A lot of my work is about women doing things," she remembers.

With age, Nilsson's painting approach and scale has grown bolder, much like her ladies themselves. "The older I get, the bigger I want these women to be!" she has remarked. In her self-portraits *Big Birthday Gladys* (2010) [fig. 5] and *Even Bigger Birthday Gladys* (2020), completed for her 70th and 80th birthdays, respectively, Nilsson exuberantly presides over elaborate festivities. In *Gleefully Askew* (2019) [fig. 3], one of Nilsson's largest diptychs, a fuchsia-haired giantess joyfully zigzags across the canvas. In just the past two



→ Fig. 4: Gladys Nilsson (American, born 1940), *Dish Jockey*, from *Sum Daze*, 1993. Etching, 6 3/4 x 5 in. Edition: 28/40. Published by Big Cat Press, Chicago. Crocker Art Museum, gift of the Artist in honor of Adeliza McHugh and The Candy Store, 1995.10.7.

years, Nilsson completed three new monumental wall murals: at the Colby College Museum of Art in Waterville, Maine; the Art Institute of Chicago; and the Menil Drawing Institute in Houston.

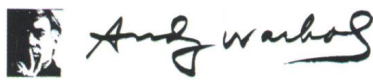
Nilsson, who turns 86 shortly before her Crocker retrospective opens, continues to actively work in her Chicago studio, creating surprising new works that revisit familiar themes with even greater aplomb and mischievousness. “I have mental notes,” she told curator Francesca Wilmott in a recent interview, “a mental file cabinet that’s just filled with things that are yet to be explored.”

*Gleefully Askew: A Gladys Nilsson Retrospective* debuts one of Nilsson’s most recent paintings, *Loded* (2025), a diptych made in response to Charles Christian Nahl’s painting *Sunday Morning in the Mines* (1872), which is in the Crocker’s collection. A new artist’s video, produced and directed by the Sacramento creative studio Direct Message, will be presented in the exhibition’s Reading Room, with furniture generously lent by Scout Living. Organized by the Crocker, the retrospective will travel to the Madison Museum of Contemporary Art from May 6 through September 26, 2027. The show is accompanied by a lushly illustrated, 256-page catalogue, published by Hirmer. The book features essays by Jo Applin, Kendall DeBoer, Robert Storr, Cécile Whiting, and exhibition curator Francesca Wilmott, along with artist responses by Suzanne Adan, Mike Henderson, KAWS, Robert Lostutter, Jim Nutt, Catalina Schliebener Muñoz, Howardena Pindell, and Christina Quarles. ♦



28/40 "Dish Jockey" Nilsson - 93

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The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts



→ Fig. 5: Gladys Nilsson (American, born 1940), *Big Birthday Gladys*, 2010. Watercolor, gouache, and collage on paper, 40 x 60 in. Collection of Gladys Nilsson. Photo: P.D. Young.