

GLADYS NILSSON with Robert R. Shane

“A big belly laugh is as interesting as a twitter behind the hands.”



Portrait of Gladys Nilsson, pencil on paper by Phong H. Bui.

Star Trek and opera are among the many sources that have informed Gladys Nilsson’s hilariously irreverent paintings and collages since her time as a Hairy Who? (1966–1969) member. Erotic and grotesque characters engaged in humorous plots and subplots populate her densely packed, carnivalesque scenes in acrylic or watercolor. In 1973 the Whitney Museum of American Art held a solo exhibition of her work.

I sat down with Nilsson on the occasion of her New York exhibition *Honk! Fifty Years of Painting* held jointly at Matthew Marks Gallery, exhibiting work from 1963–1980, and Garth Greenan Gallery, showing new paintings from 2018–2019.

In her home studio in Chicago’s suburbs, amid flat files of her work, endless stacks of art history books, and a handful of paintings in progress, Nilsson spoke—and laughed—about her time as a student at The School of the Art Institute of Chicago, where she now teaches; comedy, which she considers “a very high art form,” and the mischievousness of the vibrantly aging female protagonists in her latest paintings.

Robert R. Shane (Rail): Thank you Gladys Nilsson for welcoming me into your studio—

Gladys Nilsson: My pleasure—

Rail: And to talk about your work and your two concurrent exhibitions in New York at Garth Greenan Gallery and Matthew Marks Gallery. In terms of your process, do you have a backstory for your characters when you are creating them? I’m thinking of *Tidy Up!* (2018) in particular. [*Laughter*]

Nilsson: Well, what else are you going to do when you have a tall, skinny canvas and you need to bend over? That was a challenge, shape and canvas-wise. The idea of shifting and changing the sizes of the canvases came up and I wanted to paint a really big figure, but I didn’t want to paint a big figure where the feet and the head would be contained within, so that’s why she started to get bent over, and then why? what was she doing? “Oh, I know—she could be pulling the canvas up!” And I worked really hard to try and make the feeling like that is the canvas that she’s pulling up. You can see behind there, like she’s sweeping things up under the rug, that classic comment.

“Gladys Nilsson with Robert R. Shane.” *The Brooklyn Rail* (March 2020), accessed online).

Rail: Yes, and that's what's so funny because the canvas becomes an extension of the landscape so it's like she's pulling up the floor, and then there's that hard floor beneath it. It's such a surprise!

Nilsson: Oh, I'm so glad you get that feeling from it because I was really worried, I thought "are people going to get this?" Then I thought, well, what difference does it make if *you* get it! I like to present myself with something different to solve, and I've always been that way. I like to try new things, even though they might seem old to somebody else. It's the way of doing things, and so on. I'm having a great deal of fun with the paint.



Gladys Nilsson, *Gigantica und der Messerschmitts*, 1965. Acrylic on panel in artist's frame, 13 1/4 x 17 1/4 inches. © Gladys Nilsson, Courtesy Garth Greenan Gallery and Matthew Marks Gallery.

Rail: To get back again to the kind of stories for the characters—

Nilsson: What are they doing and do I have a tale? Well, some of them do and some of them are just... the necessity to shift and change postures, and manipulate the body, like for instance with that one [points to a painting in progress on her easel], see how the twist and turn that's taking place? Because her fanny is hanging over the area and she's twisted and her front part is coming forward, that's just kind of like turning it. My whole life has been spent watching other people and observing. And when I mention collecting postures and attitudes, it is a very real thing because I'm constantly intrigued by the interactions that take place before my eyes, and it would be something about the way somebody [*exhales loudly*] snorts at somebody else, and the attitudes that I really like—I use them all, whether they're singularly placed or an interaction.

Some of them come based off of seeing a particular incident, and then I elaborate on it, explore on my own and make up the story. For instance, back in '68 we moved out to California and I started watching *Star Trek*, the original. It was near the end of its run on TV, but I watched the show on reruns and I became so enamored. I loved the actors, and I loved what they were trying to do with their little wagon-train to the stars, as Gene Roddenberry would describe it. But what they were presenting wasn't enough, so I started to invent my own characters and plot lines. I had several years of *Star Trek*-based content, where the characters who occupied my rectangles would be wearing the same kind of clothes that they did and their haircuts were the same, and pointed ears for Vulcans and so on. So I would weave through things that would make no sense to anybody else but they did to me, and I was just having fun with it. Because I do tend to work in *one-thing-flows-into-another-thing-flows-into-another-thing*. And I tend to do a series of things.

I was asked to make a poster for the drama department's production of Clare Boothe Luce's play *The Women* at Columbia College, Chicago, which I agreed to do only if I could come to rehearsals—which I did, from call backs and second readings. I loved it, it was so fun to see all the women trying for roles, and then the whole process of putting on the play, so much so that it instigated a group of watercolors (1982–83) and a gallery show devoted to them. And I loved the storyline, I loved the interaction, I loved watching all of these women dealing with one another.

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Then, sometimes you get in a lull as to what to do if you are using figurative elements that aren't portraiture or something like that. One time I woke up in the middle of the night [Laughs] and snapped my fingers and said "Oh, I know—it's *The Birth of Venus!*" Because we had been to Italy a few years before in 1972 and had seen that and the *Primavera*, which are just—my god, Botticelli—these two paintings were just glorious. And I did a whole group of watercolors based on *The Birth of Venus* where I divided the painting into three parts, into three small watercolors, depicting it as realistically as I possibly could, which of course made absolutely no sense. I had the zephyrs, I had Venus, and I had the people cloaking Venus. And then I took off from there and did a whole series where Venus took on many guises: she bent over, she got old, she changed genders, there was a man that was Venus, and then there was a woman who was leering at him, it was just all kinds of things like that.



Gladys Nilsson, *Oopsy*, 2018. Acrylic on canvas, 40 x 60 inches. © Gladys Nilsson, Courtesy Garth Greenan Gallery and Matthew Marks Gallery.

[Laughs] So it doesn't take much to make me invent something that's happening, and there are times when things are very specific, but at other times, it's more about twisting and pulling the body.

Rail: It's refreshing to see the range of bodies you portray, particularly in the new work, and that they might have a paunch, they might have features that commercially would be unflattering.

Nilsson: That only a mother could love!

Rail: And certainly would not appear in *Vogue*. But your figures are uninhibited and unashamed.

Nilsson: Well, they're very secure in themselves, and—I've mentioned this, a lot of people ask about the figures of the people—the men just seem to be the same; the women are the ones who are changing, because I'm a woman and I'm changing, and they seem to be aging right along with me! I noticed that I would start to have a compulsion to put gray and white in the hair [Laughs] and I go, "Oh, okay, that's too bad," and things are...as you age, your whole physiognomy changes and it's about that, too!

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I'm exploring what natural forces take over. Plus, they are uninhibited, and I always thought that when I reach a certain age, if I wanted to wear bedroom slippers somewhere I goddamn well would wear bedroom slippers somewhere, you know, like the old ladies that wear red hats and go on tours together, and have purple dresses on. [Laughter] Which is something—I haven't done that group yet, but I am reflecting on aging and how you have interest, and you are interesting, no matter what age level you are at. Our whole society is so youth-oriented that I'm sure that once a person hits twenty, it's like "Well, it's all downhill from now on." But the characters are very, "If you don't like the way I look, then don't look." And I rather enjoy that.

Rail: Ann Goldstein wrote of the Hairy Who that [it] embodied "a youthful fearlessness as it disobeyed authority and social norms through corporeal images that emote and mock and ooze and misbehave" and I think I see kind of maybe instead of a youthful fearlessness maybe an older fearlessness now—

Nilsson: [Laughs] Yes!

Rail: Which is very defiant in an ageist society, to present older and exuberant—

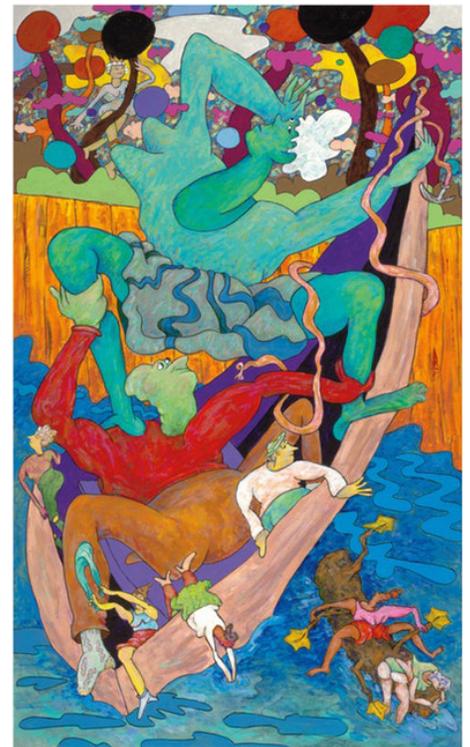
Nilsson: I pay a lot of attention to a lot of people—a lot of women—and how they present themselves and what the older woman looks like today versus what the older woman looked like when I was a teenager. Older women then were more like the grannies that would sit in a chair and give you cookies [Laughs] that kind of thing, rather than the granny that's in a jogging-suit out just having fun because she wants to. I keep coming back to when my mom turned 70, she had her ears pierced, which was the single defiant thing that she did because her mom would never let her pierce her ears, and my dad was not about to let her pierce her ears, and I was so proud of her for that one little act, that I think about things like that a lot: if you feel like it, why shouldn't you? If it's within reason, of course—because they're all within reason. [Laughter]

Rail: Looking at this one, *Boating* (2018), I see another white-haired figure—we were talking about aging—and they are figures also of desire, and they're erotic figures and, for me, that's also part of the defiance of the work. There are voyeurs, male voyeurs, throughout the exhibition looking up at—

Nilsson: Oh my work is all about voyeurism—

Rail: Yup. [Laughter]

Nilsson: I mean they're not actually doing anything, they might be thinking about stuff and sometimes, if you look at some movies that are a lot more sensual when you don't actually see people doing something, they become a different level of eroticism rather than if you're just hardcore porn—well, who needs that?



Gladys Nilsson, *Boating*, 2018. Acrylic on canvas, 60 x 36 inches. © Gladys Nilsson, Courtesy Garth Greenan Gallery and Matthew Marks Gallery.

"Gladys Nilsson with Robert R. Shane." *The Brooklyn Rail* (March 2020), accessed online).

It's the hint. Fully-clothed with a little hat and saucy is sometimes a lot more interesting than naked.
[Laughter]

Rail: Is the erotic connected to humor at all for you in the work?

Nilsson: Oh sure, because sometimes things are funny. No, I like humor. As I said, humor and comedy are high art forms to me, and I revere people who have made it work in film. Preston Sturges is a zenith director that just is so many things, so important.

Rail: Now we're looking at *Plain Air* (2018) and the white-haired painter, blue skin, is holding up her thumb to measure the landscape that she's sketching in the distance, her bloomers are showing, she doesn't mind. The collage has been relegated to this small canvas by her legs—containing art historical pieces. How has your relationship to art history changed over the years?

Nilsson: Oh, I love art history; I am continually looking back. And I think that kind of puzzles a lot of people, like, if I'm talking to students I might make references to things that are old—not to what's going on now. I admit to being very lax in being aware of what's going on now. I'd much rather look back, and I think just because of the solidity of things, you can get a lot more than you think you might get, a student can really gain a lot by looking at things, by really looking at things that might be centuries old.

I loved art history—I took about five years worth in four years—I was always taking art history, not to do anything with it other than to just absorb. I just kept wanting more and more and those were focuses and I just loved sitting in the dark and having all of these images bombard me. I would just continuously be like, “oh my god I'm enthralled.”

So this one amused me because I know few people who actually have done *plein air* painting, and the idea of *plein air* painting, well when you're painting a big watercolor, I can't imagine going out and trying to paint it on there. I've seen photos of John Marin with an easel painting his watercolors and thinking, “no that's not going to work for Gladys,” and so on and so forth, and I get the idea well sure you know *plein air* and playing with it because it's spelled different and I like the fact that in this piece she's out, supposedly painting nature but she's really interested in her shoe—which happens to be a very nice shoe—I worked very hard to give her good footwear, at least on one shoe.

But she has a little canvas where she does have some art history in there, a couple of figures collaged and then one painted figure, and I really like that.

There was one instance when we were travelling somewhere, and I went through European galleries and I thought, “Oh that fish looks very familiar.” [Laughs] It was one of the things I had cut out and used in a collage. I was like, “ooh, I know that fish.”

Rail: It's always struck me when I've read you talking about art school you always come back to art history—Whitney Halstead and Kathleen Blackshear—even more so than talking about studio influences.

Nilsson: Oh I did, I did what they wanted me to do in the studio classes—if it was a still life, if it was a

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model—I had no real sense of where I wanted to go in terms of formulating a sense of direction. And when I was in art school you really weren't *allowed* to formulate a sense of direction. In my drawing class at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, I really focus on, "this is the class where if you want to explore something you can," because I never had that opportunity.

And it wasn't until I was in my last semester of school that I kind of found a thread—and I was severely chastised by my painting teacher that you don't paint anything personal. [Laughter] And I fumbled around a few years after where I found the thread of where I wanted to go, and it included, obviously, playing with the figures and the ideas of things other than realism.

But art history: Now, I'm getting a little old and I'm getting tired in museums a lot sooner than I used to, but I can't get enough. I'm always afraid that if I don't turn that corner, I'm going to miss the one thing that makes life meaningful. And I get very enthused to go home and paint or draw—or do whatever form I'm doing at the time. So for me it's a very positive experience to continually be absorbing all of this stuff that's gone on.

Rail: Looking at *Gleefully Askew* (2019), the main character is very mischievous, like so many in the exhibition at Garth Greenan. There's the large orange figure, she nearly takes up the height of the canvas, she's bending her arm over her head, and splashing her blue paint without care into the next panel, where two art handlers are trying to carry away a rather colorless painting, and they're somewhat nervous. And she wears only a small apron, but she has that sly look. I actually thought of *Fox in Socks*—the Dr. Seuss character—that sort of mischievousness.

Nilsson: Yeah, I was really pleased with how mischievous she came out. I mean, sometimes sly looks are a little more successful than others. And I worked very hard on that apron too, I'll tell ya, I tried to get it just perfect. Because when you're painting of course you have to have protection. And I have an apron that I wear when I paint and I have studio shoes when I was painting so that I wouldn't drip on my good shoes, so on and so forth. And I think she, well she finally does get one moon painted up there with the color that she's doing.

Rail: Even the space is mischievous—that knee goes behind that other plane, where we don't expect—so it tricks us as to where she is in space.

Nilsson: Well I kind of tweak that kind of reality, and have for many, many years, and it amuses me to see how slyly I can do it. You noticed it right away, but sometimes an observer might not notice that you're really encompassing, like: "Where are they? Are they inside? Are they outside?" and I just like to kind of push and pull that kind of thing—and what is she looking at? I don't know, but it's making sparks from down below.

I played with this, once it got set up, I knew I wanted to have it be this kind of unevenness. It wasn't like, "Oh my god I didn't measure," you know that's very purposeful, and I thought I could have it so that the canvases were butt up against one another to make it really into one big canvas and it just, it looked so bad. But the minute the separation was there it did make perfect sense with it, which is why it was "gleefully askew."

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Rail: You're referring to the way the—

Nilsson: The way they don't line up. They don't match—

Rail: Right, the canvas depicted in the background, which spans across both panels, doesn't match up at the break in your diptych, and neither does the orange figure's paintbrush, and so it's almost like in Cézanne when you look at a still life and two ends of the table don't meet up with one another—

Nilsson: You know, your bringing that up reminds me of something an art historian said, like going all the way back: there's a particular still life that the Art Institute of Chicago has up that has three different levels of the back of a table. The art historians made it perfectly clear that that was purposeful because that was what that part of the painting *needed to have*—that the artist could have painted it straight-across and there are some still lifes where the ends of the table aren't that far off. But I've never forgotten that aspect of it—*that's what that needed, right there*. You form a dialogue and you form a relationship with the work that you're dealing with and it tells you what it needs to have done. At least for me I have a big dialogue with what I'm working on and I talk to it and it talks back to me and we go on and on and round and round. But I love that kind of thing, and then what you were talking about the Cézanne I mean it just...what fun, really. And fun is very good, and it's very important.

Rail: The narratives get very complex. I think of both your love of *Star Trek* and opera, the way they have the main plot and then the subplot in the background.

Nilsson: Yeah, you have your supernumeraries that carry the spears on stage, and the subplots too, thinking of Preston Sturges's films, where you have your main thrust of the scene, but if you've seen the film enough and you really start to dive into it, you become aware of the fact that way in the background there's something else being set up. And you start paying attention to that and you realize that there is a lot more there than what meets the eye. And I think I've always played with that kind of inclusion. The more stuff, the happier I am.

I just, never in my life would paint with these [points to the painter's palette the character in *Gleefully Askew* holds with her thumb sticking through the hole] but there's something so amusing because you go back into art history and you see people with their little thumbs through there and they're painting.

Rail: It's funny too because you talked about the apron in the studio literally providing some protection—but she's nude otherwise.

Nilsson: I know. [Laughter] Every once in a while I read these little weird blurbs in the paper, or on a TV chat show or something, where there are some people who actually vacuum in the nude—and I don't know if that kind of like “Oh no” as long as you don't cook in the nude! My women like to have certain kinds of adornment—and with her the only chance of adornment that she's going to have is an apron. Sometimes she might have shoes and socks on, or a hat, or a necklace, or a blouse and that's all. But here, she was ready to go and she just needed an apron. Doesn't cover much [Laughs]

Rail: Interesting reversal of art history, too; instead of the female nude being painted the female nude is

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painting. [Laughter]

Nilsson: And the men are serving as easels.

Rail: The title work for your two concurrent exhibitions is *Honk!* (1964).

Nilsson: [Laughs] Just that small piece!

Rail: It's funny because it's so unassuming, but *Honk!* actually carries many of the themes in your current work, there at an early stage you were doing older bodies, and—

Nilsson: But they were more with fake beards hooked over their ears and so on. Yeah, there was a certain amount of that kind of thing. I didn't title the show and I couldn't figure out. I was like, "where did this title come from?" And then I looked, I hadn't seen some of the work for a long time, and hadn't remembered that that particular piece was called *Honk!*, and then I thought "Well, that does kind of fit, because if you're honking, you're telling people to get out of your way" and phrased like that, it's like "Yeah! Get outta my way! 'Cause I'm here!" [Laughter] "Hey you—look at this!" [Laughter] Or something like that.

Rail: It's loud, it could be inappropriate. You had mentioned snorts when you talked about observing people, and that's something you hear, it's not just about the visual.

Nilsson: Yeah, well hearing and seeing and smelling all go into the observational mode, although you kind of hope that smell is a positive, rather than a negative. Once I caught a cab to go somewhere—I can't remember where—but it was at night and it was in the city, and I was meeting somebody at a restaurant or something, and the cab driver was chatty and I said, "Oh, that's a beautiful scent." Then the cab driver said, "Yeah! I just picked up Oprah Winfrey and dropped her off, and that's her perfume!" And it lingered in the cab, and that was a very positive odor-reminiscence, because I've never forgotten that, not because I was in a cab that Oprah Winfrey had vacated, I didn't see her. It was smelling that smell, that I'm never going to forget that incident. [Laughter]

Rail: Smell gets so much to instinct. Duchamp dismissed painting as "olfactory masturbation," that painters just do it for the smell—but I think you really embrace the instinct and eroticism in your figures. They're sort of connected to the earth. A lot of the pieces—throughout your career—have been about the lower strata of the body.

Nilsson: That's probably to do with how I put humor on pedestal. Usually it's drama that people think is the higher level, but I think humor is really higher because it has a lot more substance, because if it's going to be good—like if you look at a comedy—it probably takes a lot more energy to make a really good comedy than it does to make a really good drama. And having said that, now every Shakespearian actor is going to bludgeon me, but I just regard the lower end of things—not the "lower" end of things but—I don't differentiate between "high" and "low"—and I like low. A big belly laugh is as interesting as a twitter behind the hands.

Rail: I was wondering about the relationship between the larger characters and smaller characters in your

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work. You've kind of played with hieratic scale throughout your career, there's a wolf piece at Matthew Marks Gallery—

Nilsson: *Lycanthropie Drawing* (1969).

Rail: It's so Mesopotamian in a way, with the one larger figure and the smaller subordinate ones bowing down to him. The recent work is almost kind of like *Gulliver's Travels* with the Lilliputian, the small figures around some of the larger central ones. Though the large figures seem unimpeded by what the smaller ones are doing, as in *Boating*. Their lives, the smaller figures', are in kind of a precarious state depending on what the larger figures might do.

Nilsson: They are, and I'm not quite sure if they realize how precarious their positions are. Maybe, I'm not sure. They probably floated from some place over there directly underneath. The more I look at this piece the odder it becomes to me because it's only this part that's in the water. So they could have floated from under there, and they're just, I don't know where they came from but they're, yeah, I know what you are saying. That's a really strange piece, boy I had fun doing that. I thought things were getting too serious and I thought I have to do something that's not quite as serious.



Gladys Nilsson, *Lycanthropie Drawing*, 1969. Ink on paper, 27 5/8 x 19 3/4 inches. © Gladys Nilsson, Courtesy Garth Greenan Gallery and Matthew Marks Gallery.

Rail: But there're sort of two classes of people—you have these large protagonists and these smaller supporting characters—and it's very different from most Western painting since the Renaissance where the scale is more naturalistic.

Nilsson: Well see, the Renaissance, because you always had the little donors and you did have the little people on the side, so you did have that kind of scale shift. And if you go back a little further you might have people in windows looking out, and I can recall seeing some paintings where a square thing, whatever, was being observed by people in windows and the people in windows' have heads that are so giant they're bigger than the people in the square, almost. I don't know that there's that kind of hierarchy going on—it's just that their size is different. I look upon them as being all equally important and I've often cited the tale of giving a lecture about my work at a university [*Laughs*] and showing things that interested me at a certain point I was like, "this is where my work comes from and this is what interests me." And one of the things I included is the specific slide of a Sears catalogue bathrobe ad that triggered in my memory. If you had the Sears catalogue as a kid

like my family did, and you turned to look through and you have the bathrobe that's this big and you think, "this is our bathrobe, but it also comes in this color and this size." I suddenly realized that not only was I thinking of high art with the little donors of the Renaissance painting, but it was also the Sears catalogue that impacted how I do things, from when I was a kid. So that little bathrobe in that color was equally as important as the big bathrobe in that color, it was just a different color.

But you know you think about, in nature, when you have, say, the rhinoceros or the elephant and they have little birds that pick and eat fleas? The big people are very reliant on those little people, and the

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same with the sharks that have those fish that are only about this big that attach themselves and they swim and eat garbage between the shark's teeth. You know what I mean? You have two aspects that are reliant on one another. Now I don't know what these big people are doing for these little people or actually vice versa in this particular picture, but they all have their meanings and their uses.

Rail: And throughout the exhibition, the smaller figures and larger ones certainly have that relationship like the rhinoceros and the bird.

Nilsson: And they're all very—they exist very well with each other.

Rail: And so what's next? You're continuing work in this series?

Nilsson: For as long as it wants me to. I've got all this paint, I just keep buying more paint, I find more colors. I like to mix colors, but I also have to have a lot of tubes of paint to mix it with. And, as you can see, I do have several blank canvases. I want to paint something larger again. Although I'm not quite sure if I would paint another diptych but I'd like to get into that size and I have to work into it because, as I said, that was really tiring. But if I present myself with it—I can't waste anything—I can't leave that just laying there. And I have a skinny, small skinny canvas which—thinking of stretching proportions—this is a weird shape, except I think I'm going to do somebody in a box or something. I'll be having a show in Los Angeles at the Parker Gallery opening up mid-May this year. So one of these, he would like to have something that's from 2020.

Rail: This has been a pleasure. Thank you for being so candid and sharing your story.

Nilsson: I'm delighted with talking to people. I'm very open, for the most part, about what I'm doing and how I do it.

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