

Gladys Nilsson: 'I was here'

The Hairy Who artist talks about aging, Olive Oyl, and why creative people don't retire.



Gladys Nilsson in her Wilmette studio
Credit: Kirk Williamson

By Erin Toale
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"Creative people don't retire," the radiant Gladys Nilsson giddily exclaims during our leisurely lunch in her eccentric, art-filled Wilmette home. She is adorned with a pin featuring the cartoon character Olive Oyl on a red backdrop; there is also a kinetic Olive Oyl sculpture on the coffee table. Between an extensive art collection and collected miscellany from her life and travels with her husband (fellow artist Jim Nutt), almost every surface in the house—especially the attic studio—lends the eye a bevy of composed curiosities to linger upon. "I like to have stuff to look at while I'm pondering," she muses.

Nilsson has searching eyes and is always mentally arranging her next composition. Not in a way that preoccupies or distracts her (her presence is warm and attentive), but one that makes it apparent that for her, art and life are seamless. A keen observer, she intentionally builds visual vocabularies via observing people in neutral environments: shopping at the mall (since she no longer drives, she takes the bus to Westfield Old Orchard), taking in the opera, wandering in Chicago's many civic gardens (looking for "anything and everything that strikes my fancy," she tells me). "I collect postures, in my mind, when somebody doesn't think that they're onstage, so to speak, when they're slumped or moving in a strange or exaggerated manner," she told the *New York Times* in 2020. Back in the studio, she transcribes and transposes these figures on top of each other to create lively figurative compositions full of color and curiosity. She says of these visual sojourns: "I always have a snapshot on my phone of what I left the studio with. Jim can't understand how I can go to the mall and still think about my painting. But for me, it's very easy to do."

This joyful artist is thriving in her 86th year. She skyrocketed onto the scene as a founding member of the Hairy Who alongside five other School of the Art Institute (SAIC) alumni (including Nutt) in their seminal 1966 Hyde Park Art Center show. However, Nilsson's small scale and medium of choice (watercolor) rendered her practice easily dismissed from the traditional art historical canon, explains Francesca Wilmott, curator of her touring retrospective "Gleefully Askew." In the exhibition text, she writes that critics "linked watercolor's delicacy to her gender, labeling Nilsson the most 'feminine' member of the Hairy Who—the nonconformist group of Chicago-based artists known for their bawdy humor, unexpected source material, and formally rigorous yet unorthodox approach to painting."



Gladys Nilsson, *Gleefully Askew*, 2019

Courtesy of AWG Art Advisory. Photo courtesy of the artist, Garth Greenan Gallery, New York, and Parker Gallery, Los Angeles

Nilsson echoes this experience, acknowledging in her NYT interview that watercolor (which she switched to while pregnant for safety) was considered a “minor medium.” Wilmott remedies this “narrow” interpretation of her work and “disentangles” Nilsson from her Hairy Who origins with this ambitious exhibition that opened at Sacramento’s Crocker Art Museum in July and will tour to the Madison Museum of Contemporary Art next year. The curator tells *Vogue*: “I wanted to assert her as an internationally important artist who can transcend all of these different categories that are often placed upon her work as a watercolorist, or for making purely feminine art. She is challenging and subverting a lot of those notions.”

Women are always at the center of Nilsson’s worlds; men accompany, enliven, assist, pursue, and otherwise worship these fantastic femmes from the recesses. Olive Oyl, Nilsson’s current muse and anatomy reference model, is an endless subject of fascination—both for her “rubberlike” limbs (the influence of which is apparent in Nilsson’s elongated figures) and for the ability to deploy her feminine wiles to manipulate men. Nilsson occasionally dispatches me images she takes of her television, watching her “Saturday morning cartoons,” with casually endearing text updates such as: “took this snap of the tv at the start of a Popeye cartoon . . . features OO, in all her magnificent glory, forever pitting Popeye against Bluto . . . ever the siren . . . G”

Nilsson is also a retired SAIC professor and lifelong art history enthusiast. Retired Museum of Contemporary Art curator and Imagist scholar Lynne Warren recalls: “Gladys had a very sharp memory of everything to do with the Hairy Who; I came to think of her as the historian of the group.” Her unique renderings—called Mannerist for their “bodily strangeness” by critic Walker Mimms—are influenced equally by pop culture (vintage animations, *Star Trek*) and art history (she frequently invokes the Dutch king of chaos Hieronymus Bosch’s orgiastic *The Garden of Earthly Delights*). Nilsson revels in collapsing high and low art; camp and classical influences; elements of beauty and horror. These juxtapositions enliven the compositions and inform their production. She is currently working in a hybrid painting/drawing process—a distinction she emphasizes: “They aren’t paintings or drawings, but a combo of both.”

Nilsson doesn’t shy from the monstrous feminine, and she embraces the inevitability of aging. As Wilmott writes, “Nilsson insists that her paintings are not autobiographical but, rather, that her women lead parallel lives to her own. Throughout her career, and especially since the 1990s, she has used aging—its indignities, humor, and absurdity—as artistic material.” These “inadvertent” surrogates remain glamorous and agile while evolving, much like the artist herself.



Gladys Nilsson, *Caked: a plein air romp with bakery goods*, 2025
Credit: Jonathan Mathias, the Art Institute of Chicago

Born in Chicago as the first-generation child of Swedish immigrants, Nilsson brings a blue-collar work ethic to her artistic practice that has recently manifested in grand experiments in scale: oscillating from intimate works on paper to giant wall drawings. “I’m reinventing myself as I age,” she reflected in the *NYT*. The midwestern legend calls Chicago “the middle of everywhere,” a city “not as big as some but bigger than most . . . easy to get elsewhere”—in other words, a bucolic environment for an artist in search of inspiration to wander.

Nilsson shared an anecdote about her Illinoisan upbringing in an interview with the Crocker: “My dad would get up really early in the morning, go to the [appliance] factory, come home, eat dinner, read the paper, go to bed, get up, go to the factory, and on and on and on. There was something to his coming home and sitting down after dinner and reading the paper that was a celebration of getting through the day. A lot of what I do celebrates small things that people have going on in their life.” Nilsson brings this same dedication and discipline to her studio routine, one that she clearly revels in. She is determined to make the most of the opportunities she’s worked so hard to attain, telling me: “If you don’t approach everything with that attitude, why bother?”

Discussing *Gleefully Askew*, the eponymous seven-foot-tall work in her retrospective, Nilsson told the *NYT*, “I always wanted to paint big, and I never got around to it. Now, dammit, I’m going to paint some big pieces!” Between 2024 and 2025, Nilsson completed large-scale, site-specific wall works at the Colby Museum of Art, the Art Institute of Chicago (AIC), and the Menil Drawing Institute. An energetic and active artist, many of her titles are verbs (Garth Greenan Gallery hosted the satisfying “Honk!” in 2020). She often paints these horizontal expanses from an office rolling chair, raising and lowering the height to reach different sections of the wall.

Megann Lawlor worked as Nilsson’s artist assistant on the AIC mural project, *Caked: a plein air romp with bakery goods*, which was created on the occasion of Gladys’s 85th birthday. Lawlor, a printmaker, recalls how painting “funny, floppy people” alongside the intuitive Nilsson taught her to trust and feel secure in her own “goofy tendencies.” She recalls, “One character has his butt crack showing because Gladys had recently noticed a museum visitor whose pants were riding a little too low. She validates the idea that artistic influence can come from anywhere. Her work feels incredibly honest. It never feels like she’s trying to force a message or smooth out the weird parts.” On AIC’s blog, Lawlor calls the mural “a playful tribute to [Nilsson’s] signature style, filled with romping characters, swirling colors, and cheeky nods to her favorite dessert: carrot cake.” This playfulness, scorned in formal art histories, is one of the defining characteristics of Nilsson’s oeuvre.

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In these tableaux of the everyday, women—mothers, aunties, grandmas, sisters, witches, gossips, fashionistas, caretakers—are lovingly rendered and celebrated in all their complexity. The layered intricacies and suggested relational dynamics betray the personal mythologies of a sharp-witted observer of the human condition. A moment that stuck with me following our studio visit is the assemblage of relics hanging from a large hook in the corner of Nilsson’s studio. It holds decades’ worth of lanyards with security badges from her many years in innumerable cultural institutions: the beaming smile unchanged in photo IDs spanning seven decades. She’s also saved a few paint-caked pairs of gloves. This personal administrative archive, Nilsson tells me with a laugh, serves as anthropological evidence—“a reminder that I was here.”



Gladys Nilsson, *Gigantica*, 1964
Courtesy of the artist, Garth Greenan Gallery, New York,
and Parker Gallery, Los Angeles