

At 86, Gladys Nilsson Is Still Feeling Gleeefully Askew

Sacramento's Crocker Art Museum is presenting a long-overdue retrospective of the octogenarian's joyful, kaleidoscopic oeuvre



COURTESY OF ARTIST, GARTH GREENAN GALLERY, NEW YORK, AND PARKER GALLERY, LOS ANGELES.

By Maxwell Rabb
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A riot of brightly colored distended bodies dances across Gladys Nilsson's watercolor diptych *Gleeefully Askew* (1997). The left panel features two wobbly, exaggerated men balancing a canvas, featuring the same whimsical, colorful blobs that populate the diptych. On the right panel, a naked orange woman with elongated

proportions dances around them, wielding a paintbrush with which she frenetically marks the zany mise en abyme. This fitting title doesn't merely describe the reveling figures within the painting; it captures the energy of the 86-year-old artist who composed it.

"I am gleefully askew! And you can ask anyone that knows me," Nilsson says to *Bazaar* on a recent video call from Sacramento, California. "I am gleefully askew because I am always ... up! I am not a dour person."

This lively presence connects all of Nilsson's flowing watercolor paintings on paper or canvas. She often refers to her paintings as "passages," as if the sets of cavorting figures collectively tell a cohesive story. In her retrospective at Sacramento's Crocker Art Museum, "Gleefully Askew," on view through November 29, more than 100 works created over the last 60 years illustrate this evolving chronicle. "It's all been one conversation that one character might have with another—one set of generations talking to another in various guises," she says.



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Gladys Nilsson at the Crocker Art Museum

“Though Gladys certainly knows how to paint a straight line, she finds delight and meaning in those unexpected ruptures and detours,” curator Francesca Wilmott says. “‘Gleefully Askew’ embodies her irrepressible spirit, which has guided her approach to living and painting from the start. At age 86, Gladys continues to find new ways to challenge and surprise herself.”

Art critics often refer to Nilsson, born in Chicago in 1940, as the most prominent woman of the Chicago Imagists, known as the Midwestern counterpart to New York’s pop-art movement. “The women always had to fight desperately for any attention,” she says. “In my generation, at that point, that was just the way it was, and if you wanted to fight for it, you fought for it, or if you wanted to not fight for it, you accepted what you knew would happen.” Around this time, she met her husband, fellow artist Jim Nutt, with whom she briefly moved to Sacramento from 1968 to 1976 before returning to Chicago.

Throughout her life, Nilsson has experimented with mediums, painting on plexiglass or threading embroidered frames for her acrylic paintings, but watercolor remains her medium of choice. She first discovered her love for the material by chance. In 1962, she became pregnant with her son and wanted to avoid the toxic material in turpentine-based paint. “Then I realized that what I was doing flowed a lot better,” she says. This flow surfaces in the joyful nature of her paintings of prismatic gatherings. *Beariling Along* (1970), one of the earliest paintings in the show, depicts a party of anthropomorphic bears with stretched limbs and a popping, dizzying color palette.



PD YOUNG

Gladys Nilsson's *Big Birthday Gladys* (2010)

Nilsson reveres her materials. Watercolor paints give her brushstrokes their dynamic, playful undercurrent, but the paper itself offers the perfect vessel in her eyes. “I like paper. I like everything about it,” she says, poetically waxing on about paper in a way few others would. “I like the density. I like the way the pigment sits on it and dives into it. I don’t even mind the way it smells when it gets wet.... I like the way the colored pencil manipulates itself on the paper when I move it around. I like the way my watercolor brushes feel loaded with pigment and moisture as I move them across the paper. I always return to paper because I use the phrase ‘I’m at one with it.’”

Over the years, Nilsson has developed a meticulous process where she draws her composition before covering it in watercolors or collaging found cut-out images onto her gouache and acrylic paintings. The scenes are increasingly dense. In *Loded* (2025), for instance, a frenetic park is packed with people flailing about or picnicking. The figures are rendered with watercolors and colored pencils, while the bottom of the canvas features a collage resembling stacked textile patterns. Jolly chaos is threaded through every corner of this multimedia painting. It’s no surprise that when asked about how she plans a painting, Nilsson responds bluntly: “It’s messy.”

“I don’t organize anything. I let it happen,” she says. “I have mental notes; I watch people. I will collect postures in all files into my head. And I know that somewhere along the line, I’m going to utilize something that I saw 10 years ago at the airport. The way one person is talking to another person and how they’re leaning in or how they’re avoiding someone.”



CHRISTOPHER BURKE

Gladys Nilsson's *Léger Faire* (1986–87)

“Gleefully Askew,” before all else, proves Nilsson’s undying love for her craft—for the materials, first, but more so for her whimsical look at the world. She renders people around her, soaking in every joy of life to transmute that into her frolicsome artworks. Her first watercolors of jubilant women in the 1970s and ’80s convey a magnetic feeling of freedom, continued in her exploratory collages of the ’90s. At the heart is a woman whose lust for life is uncontainable.

This long-overdue retrospective offers Nilsson a chance to mull over her life, to see the arc of her paintings. “Most of it I haven’t seen since it went out the door after I made it, so it’s quite exhilarating,” she says with glee. The octogenarian artist now also looks ahead to a solo show in New York with Garth Greenan Gallery, which she’s worked with since 2014. She explains how looking through six decades of work, she feels reinvigorated. “This show will stimulate a lot of cross currents,” she says. “It’ll be a very fertile period of time in my mind working toward the next thing.” The changes and turns in her kaleidoscopic oeuvre all come together, strung along by a common vitality that stretches over decades.

“All the figures are related to all the figures that I’ve done, except they’re done maybe slightly different, slightly this and that,” Nilsson says. “That’s the surprising bit. This show will have other examples of that. There are so many people that just don’t know what I’ve been about. And that’s what excites me.”