

OBSERVER

“It’s About Time”: At 86, Gladys Nilsson Gets Her First Major Retrospective

Her paintings celebrate life, time and older age, which is rare when done, as here, with such evident delight.



Gladys Nilsson with curator Francesca Wilmott and preparator Ido Agranov at the Crocker Art Museum, Sacramento, California, 2025. Photo: Phong Tran

By Mána Taylor
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Recently, the Crocker Art Museum in Sacramento opened “Gladys Nilsson: Gleeefully Askew,” the first full-career retrospective of the artist’s work: 60 years of watercolor, collage, drawing and oil painting.

In her home studio in Chicago, on a warm and pleasant day, Nilsson, who is 86 and has spent those six decades continuously making work, told Observer, “it’s about time.” In the room where we spoke was a painting by the late Chicago Imagist Christina Ramberg. And there were more treasures in the collection Nilsson says she and her husband, the painter Jim Nutt, fully agree on. Everything they buy, whether art or antique, coexists just as they do.

Serendipitously, Nilsson lived in Sacramento for nearly a decade while Nutt taught at Sacramento State University. They are the two surviving members of the original Hairy Who? but are also each known for their distinct and individual practices. More notably perhaps, Nilsson does not seem to have existed in the shadow of her husband. Since their time in Sacramento, the Crocker Museum has become home to one of the largest public collections of her work anywhere (followed by the Madison Museum of Contemporary Art in Wisconsin). To return to Sacramento, particularly in the context of a career retrospective, is a homecoming that took its time.

Sometimes wrongly called a movement, the Hairy Who? was a band of School of the Art Institute of Chicago graduates, among them Jim Falconer, Art Green, Suellen Rocca and Karl Wirsum, whose cartoon-bright, quirky and un-minimal works helped define Chicago art in the 1960s. Nilsson was both inspired and defined by these peers at the time, but has grown into herself beyond the restrictions of those origins. And while this is her first major retrospective, and it is long overdue, it is of note that her work has been championed before. For instance, in 1973, she became one of the first women to have a solo



Gladys Nilsson, *Léger Faire*, 1986-1987. Watercolor on paper, 60 x 40 in. (each). Collection of Eleanor Heyman Propp. Photo courtesy of the Artist, Garth Greenan Gallery, New York, and Parker Gallery, Los Angeles

exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art. Her work is in MoMA's collection, too. Additionally, Garth Greenan Gallery, which represents her, put together a retrospective, "Gladys Nilsson: Honk! Fifty Years of Painting," in 2020.

"A retrospective is by definition looking backward, but Gladys is always forward-facing," the curator of "Gleefully Askew" Francesca Wilmott told Observer. Wilmott first wrote about Nilsson's work nearly 20 years ago, in her doctoral dissertation, and has been dreaming up this show ever since. In one room, Wilmott pairs Nilsson's first paintings with her most recent ones, letting old and new re-animate each other. Of exhibiting her work at a large museum, Wilmott explained that she hopes to place Nilsson in an "international framework and dialogue." She continued, "What does it mean to have a geographic association to your name?" As Nilsson is placed within the Chicago-based Hairy Who? movement, Wilmott sees this as being "geographically marginalized," hoping to bring a more international audience to her work, and a universality. "It's time that her work is recognized not just as being part of the Hairy Who?."

That same forward-facingness shows up in Nilsson's relationship to materials, too—she sees "no hierarchy" between them. Watercolor, a medium too often dismissed as delicate or decorative, becomes, in Nilsson's hands, a challenge. She works on enormous sheets of Arches paper, making washes of pigment turn into surprising detail. Similarly on this large scale, she was recently commissioned to paint a wall mural at the Menil Drawing Institute, in Houston, Texas. Ephemeral by design, and meant to come down after its run on August 9, 2026, Nilsson treated the large wall as an invitation, a challenge. "I take a lot of things as a dare," she quipped.

Nilsson's work has evolved in medium and scale, but she has held on to the whimsical nature that has long defined it. Her work often consists of bold and large figures, which look elastic and lively. There is always an incredible amount of color, which seems to work cohesively together, creating surreal scenes in which the figures in her paintings can lounge near tall green trees and float over red, yellow or blue backgrounds in distinct vibrancy. Limbs undulate effortlessly to perform a celebration of life. Reflecting on the works encompassing the retrospective, Nilsson found herself startled by the scope of it. "I look around and I think, 'Oh, I did all this?'" she said, genuinely surprised to see 60 years laid out to survey. A painting from 1995, hanging in her own studio, briefly seemed to belong to someone else entirely, its figures camouflaged into the colors of the background were new to her, as if she were seeing them for the first time. In pairing decades side by side, Wilmott has in this way handed Nilsson's own works back to her as something new.

Nilsson also reflected on what she wants to continue exploring in her future works. She laughed that she has wanted to be able to paint singular portraits of people, but seemingly can't help herself from adding more figures to her scenes. "They're lonely," she added passionately.

Among the many incredible works in the show is a terrific painting titled *Cooking Up A Storm*, which was inspired by a time she spent in Colorado when she watched the wide expanse of sky turn from clear blue to cloudy. One cloud in the distance suddenly became many, and she vividly remembers a thunderstorm briskly passing by. In the painting, two women are literally "cooking up" a storm, paintbrushes and oven

mitts in hand, they are themselves painting the sky in cloudy grays (that Nilsson used from her own personal source material of the Colorado memory).



Gladys Nilsson, *Ladies Dance*, 1975. Watercolor on paper, 14 x 11 1/2 in. Courtesy Crocker Art Museum, The Jane K. Witkin Collection, gift of B.E. Witkin, 1981

Many paintings are a reflection of her own self-image. In *Big Birthday Gladys* (2010), she painted herself with a halo of white hair, and a decade later, she returned to the image in *Even Bigger Birthday Gladys* (2020), which she describes having gifted to herself. “As she aged, the women in her paintings have aged alongside her,” Wilmott said of this parallel. “The sagging and wrinkling bodies are drawn with humor, which define the exploratory stage in life she’s currently at.” Nilsson’s paintings celebrate life, time and older age, which feels rare especially when done with such evident delight.