

ARTS

The Perfectly Peculiar Art of Gladys Nilsson



Gladys Nilsson, c. 1966–67. Photo: Courtesy of the artist and the Crocker Art Museum, Sacramento.

By Grace Edquist
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It's not more than a few seconds after we meet that the artist Gladys Nilsson, 86, insists on helping me carry my suitcase over the threshold and into her home. Nilsson has lived in a handsome brick house with Craftsman-style interiors in the town of Wilmette, just north of Chicago, since 1976 with her husband, the artist Jim Nutt, 87. The two met in 1960 when they were both students at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago.

There is art everywhere—paintings and sculptures and masks, piles of papers and books, work made by the two of them or their friends, plus plenty of souvenirs from their decades of travel. “Stuff gets put down and it stays there and we ignore it,” Nilsson deadpans. Eclecticism suits them.

Nilsson and Nutt rose to fame in the late 1960s as two of the six members of the Hairy Who, a subset of the Chicago Imagists who jointly exhibited their funky, figurative artwork, which ranged in style from cartoonish and whimsical to irreverent and absurd. Though the group only showed together for a few years, their impact on the art world was great. They were seen as the “hot” counterpart to New York’s “cool” Pop movement.

I’ve come to visit Nilsson as she prepares for the largest show of her career: a retrospective, aptly titled “Gleefully Askew” (after a 2019 artwork of the same name), which opens July 19 at the Crocker Art Museum in Sacramento, after which it will travel to the Madison Museum of Contemporary Art in Wisconsin. The show includes more than 100 works made over the last 60 years, including watercolors, acrylic paintings, collages, and drawings. “It’s *big*,” she tells me, her blue eyes widening.

Nilsson’s stylized figures—brightly colored with wonky features and proportions, an atmosphere of merry chaos all around them—are the constants in all her work. She places them in situations that might seem mundane at first blush, perhaps a product of Nilsson’s fascination with everyday people-watching. But she infuses these scenes with micro-dramas. Her figures cavort, canoodle, frolic, make mischief.



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.

While Nilsson doesn't classify her characters as self-portraits, they are, of course, reflections of the person who made them—her wry humor, her perspective as a woman and a mother—and they have aged as she has. In planning for the Crocker show, “I was interested in looking at [the span of my work] because of how I’m using myself as a reference point for how the figures look, how the women have changed over the years,” Nilsson says. Where they were once sprightly, they now droop and sag a little.



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

“Gleefully Askew,” almost a decade in the making, is curated by Francesca Wilmott, who first discovered Nilsson’s work when she was a graduate student at SAIC. The setting of the Crocker is significant.

Nilsson exhibited there in 1969, during the eight years she and Nutt and their young son were living in Sacramento, brought out there by Nutt's teaching job at Sacramento State College (now California State University, Sacramento). "Her time here was transformative. It allowed her to disentangle from the Hairy Who identity and assert herself as an individual, independent artist," says Wilmott. "She was sending works from Sacramento to São Paulo, to Mexico City, to the Whitney, to Chicago for major exhibitions."

One of Wilmott's goals with this retrospective is to broaden our understanding of Nilsson beyond just her Chicago context. "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."

Nilsson, born in May of 1940, grew up on Chicago's North Side, the only child of working-class Swedish immigrants. From a young age she loved to draw and read. She liked *Black Beauty*, the Nancy Drew series, and the *Little Lulu* comic books, about "a feisty little girl in a red dress," as Nilsson describes her. She even gave the figure in her *Gigantica* paintings Lulu's ringlet hairstyle. (In an essay in the extensive "Gleefully Askew" catalog, published by Hirmer in August, Nutt calls Nilsson's first *Gigantica* painting, from 1964, "the most ambitious work she had ever attempted.")

Nilsson's father worked at a small-appliance manufacturer on Chicago's South Side, and her mother was a waitress. "My mom's idea was that a woman could be a beautician or a secretary," Nilsson says. "There was no way in hell I was going to do either." But her parents let her go to art school at SAIC, which still amazes her to this day.

SAIC was a fairly traditional school when she enrolled in 1958, and it took time for her to develop her own style. "You went to still life class, you went to model class, and you just did that very classical approach," she says.

A breakthrough came when she painted a scene from the lunchroom, based on a real-life encounter with a group of gossiping students she didn't care for. The feedback she got from a teacher was flummoxing. "He said that I had no business painting a painting like that in art school because it was too personal," Nilsson tells me. "And I thought, This is the first time I have ever done anything that was so satisfying"—the first time she had made a painting based on something she felt, rather than something she merely saw. (Decades later, when Nilsson returned to SAIC to teach watercolor and drawing classes, the first thing she'd tell her students was that their personal point of view was paramount.)

In 1962, she graduated and gave birth to her and Nutt's son, Claude. Crucially, it was when she was pregnant that Nilsson ditched oil paints (which used toxic turpentine) and embraced watercolor. Traditionally thought of as soft and feminine, the material gave Nilsson a whole new field to subvert. Watercolor, she tells me, is "totally different from all the other materials just because of the nature of what it is and how it's supposed to be used." She chose thick paper, which could absorb layer upon layer of pigment to achieve her desired degree of shading. "You can *attack*, depending on your surface." She also loved the contrast of transparency and opacity that watercolors offered.

Then, in 1966, Nilsson, Nutt, and fellow SAIC alumni Art Green, James Falconer, Suellen Rocca, and Karl Wirsum joined up for a group exhibition at the Hyde Park Art Center on Chicago's South Side. They called themselves the Hairy Who—a sort of inside joke spun out of Wirsum asking “Harry who?” when the group was discussing the Chicago art critic Harry Bouras.

The Hairy Who was more of a loose collective than an art movement. They were a group of zany-minded friends who wanted to have some fun with their art while also taking it seriously. Each member had their own style. Nilsson's work—inspired by the density of Max Beckmann's paintings, the magical realism of Paul Klee and Hieronymus Bosch, but also *Star Trek* and the *Popeye* character Olive Oyl—might have been called the most feminine of the bunch (though she wasn't the only woman, Rocca being the other), but she dealt with loud, bawdy content just as the others did.



Hoofers, 1963, ink on paper, 11 x 8 1/2 in. Courtesy of the artist, Garth Greenan Gallery, New York, and Parker Gallery, Los Angeles.

I asked Nilsson about possible headwinds she faced as a woman artist. “I found more that it would be the material I was working on,” she says. “Watercolor? So not serious. Paper? It’s not serious. Funny? Not serious. That whole kind of thing, rather than: Well, she’s a woman. Not serious.”

She thinks Chicago being a smaller art town had something to do with the scene's relative acceptance of women artists. She recalls visiting New York City in the early 1970s with the visionary dealer Phyllis Kind, who showed many of the Chicago Imagists, including Nilsson, at her galleries in Chicago and New York. Nilsson tagged along with Kind on some studio visits. "I was hearing them talk about all the bias because they were women," Nilsson says. This surprised her. "I was afraid to open my mouth and say, 'Oh, I don't know [that experience]. We weren't like that.'"

Nilsson's presentation at the Whitney Museum in New York in 1973 was pivotal, and not just because she was one of the first women to receive a solo show at the institution. She exhibited 11 medium- to large-sized acrylic paintings with six small acrylic paintings framed in readymade embroidery hoops—a selection that showed Nilsson was "eager to demonstrate her technical range," writes Wilmott in the catalog.



The Big Green Man, 1972, acrylic on canvas in artist's frame, 86 1/2 x 74 1/2 in. Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago. Gift of Dr. and Mrs. Peter W. Broido, 1985.29. Photo by Nathan Keay. Courtesy of the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago/Art Resource, New York.

Another big moment came in the 1990s, when Nilsson, then in her 50s, started experimenting with collages. Tapping into her skills with scissors, first developed while meticulously cutting out paper dolls as a child, Nilsson began using personal snapshots and old issues of *Vogue*, which she's been subscribing to "for what seems like a hundred years," she says. A few years later, she started adding clippings from art history books too.

Just like in her paintings and drawings, the figures in her collages have lopsided features and find themselves in surreal settings. They become psychological explorations, "this kind of Rorschach test," Wilmott says. They are also easier to wield and have been a lifeline when making larger works on paper or canvas—like after a 2013 hip-replacement surgery or during the pandemic—proved too difficult.

Nilsson takes me up to her studio on the home's third floor. Her large-scale painting *Big Birthday Gladys*, which she made in 2010 for her 70th birthday, is waiting for us. It has all the hallmarks of a Gladys Nilsson work: A multitude of lively characters, packed to the gills, haphazardly lighting candles and balancing cakes, their limbs akimbo. And as a lovely little intervention, Nilsson placed a tiny photograph of herself at age three on the bottom-right of the painting. Not to play favorites, she says, but this is probably the most satisfying artwork she's made. "It's the one that, of course, a lot of people want, but I say it's mine. I gave it to myself." Though she is parting with it temporarily as it goes to Crocker for the retrospective.



Big Birthday Gladys, 2010, watercolor, gouache, and collage on paper, 40 x 60 in. Collection of Gladys Nilsson.
Photo: PD Young.

Preparing for the show has made Nilsson realize the breadth of her career. “Anytime I start thinking about it, it’s like, *I did a whole bunch of stuff!* It’s not all the same thing. I had a lot of adventures, and I still am having new adventures with what I’m doing,” she says. Since 2014 she has shown with Garth Greenan Gallery in New York, and in the last two years, while in her 80s, she’s made three massive wall drawings for the Colby Museum of Art, the Art Institute of Chicago, and the Menil Drawing Institute. And the recognitions keep rolling in: In 2024 she received an Anonymous Was a Woman award.

“I think a lot of younger artists, and not just women artists, but many different artists see her as a trailblazer,” Wilmott says. She hasn’t let expectations of a woman artist from Chicago whose primary medium is watercolor dictate her practice, nor her life.

Nilsson acknowledges her talent—a product of innate creative drive, a sharp understanding of art history, and a willingness to experiment—but really it comes down to amusing herself. “I just have fun with it,” she says, “and, happily, somebody else might get the same out of it.”

“Gleefully Askew: A Gladys Nilsson Retrospective” is on view at the Crocker Art Museum in Sacramento, California, from July 19 to November 29, 2026.