

HYPERALLERGIC

Gladys Nilsson's Portraits of Everywoman

BY JOHN YAU NOVEMBER 23, 2014



A Girl in the Arbor #8 (2013)

There is something wonderfully incongruous and deeply disquieting about Gladys Nilsson's art, which is primarily done in the medium of watercolor. As she says in her conversation with Dan Nadel, which is included in the catalogue accompanying her most recent exhibition in New York (and her first) at Garth Greenan (October 23 – December 6, 2014):

I do like paper. I honed in on paper very early on in terms of material. I have done some canvas work, but that's few and far between. It's the paper stuff. I just love paper.

In another interview, with Richard Hull in *Bomb* 114 (Winter 2011), Nilsson talks about suspending her use of oils when her son, Claude, was born, and beginning to work in watercolor. Whatever the reason, she is a contemporary master of a medium we associate with the 19th century and English landscape artists.

However, what really grabbed my attention is a statement she made to Nadel that had to do with the strange and wonderful artist, John D. Graham (1886–1961), who was a mentor to Arshile Gorky, Willem de Kooning and Jackson Pollock. Here is Nilsson describing the Graham painting in the Rice Wing of The Art Institute of Chicago:

You come in one doorway and immediately to your left is a John Graham portrait of a woman maybe mildly cross-eyed. And it's everything you want in a Graham.

Later, she says:

With Graham, there is something going on in his people that's again like something behind the door. They're wonderful. They have an aspect to them that is not of this world and I love that.

Nilsson's description of Graham is an equally apt summation of her own work of the past fifty years. In a world that privileges the literal over the metaphorical, tends to be impressed by expensive production costs, hates the anarchic impulse of someone preferring to work alone, and seldom takes watercolor seriously, Nilsson is more than an anomaly. Through the medium of watercolor she has singlehandedly created a world based on close observation, but which is, as she says of Graham, "not of this world."

It is this conundrum that is one of the primal strengths of her work and what I suspect drives some viewers away, those who want things simply and clearly spelled out for them. They run away from confusion and contradiction because they might not want to acknowledge how much of that is in their own lives. Nilsson is having none of that. Her work is weird, funny, creepy, screwball, sexual, unabashed and impolite. On more than one occasion I felt as if I were looking at a bland family who secretly tore wings off insects and ate them for breakfast. The people Nilsson is looking at have no idea how embarrassing they are, which is what gives the work its special twist, but, more importantly, she is unfailingly sympathetic to them.

In *A Girl in the Arbor*, Nilsson's most recent series, which consists of thirteen works done on large sheets of paper (41 ½ x 29 ¾ inches), the artist uses watercolor, gouache, colored pencil and collage. It is difficult to combine these different materials, particularly the shiny printed images and the watercolor, but Nilsson pulls it off without a hitch. A single zaftig female dominates all the works in the series. She is situated in a space that is vertically divided by blue or green tree trunks, and between them, a background pattern of rounded, leaf-like shapes, which reminded me of the leaves in Claude Monet's water lilies. The floor is made up of collaged pages, whose torn-up texts seem to have to do with snakes. The collage elements function in myriad ways. In "Girl in Arbor #3" (2013), speckled eggs are the woman's breasts. She is seated on a chair, her oversized legs are spread a little far apart and the dress is a little high, so you can see the rolled tops of her stockings, which Nilsson indicates by collaging photos of a ring and bracelet around her lower thigh.

The collage lifts the work onto another level and could almost be seen as a critique of Willem de Kooning's "Women" paintings. In Nilsson's work, the eye begins wandering around, noticing this or that incongruity, the various dramas taking place elsewhere. In "Girl in Arbor #3," the right hand pokes through a hole in the chair's wooden back, suggesting that the woman is caught. Look closely at the other works in the series and you will notice other images of captivity.

At the same time, there is something weirdly cheerful about Nilsson's women, no matter the situation or what surrounds them. Through scale shifts and her use of collage, she is able to create multiple focal points and narratives, suggesting that there are a multitude of stories going on all the time, not just the one we are looking at or speculating about. But for all the dissonance, grotesqueness, and humor, what finally comes through is Nilsson's tenderness and affection for her subjects. They cannot help being who they are.