

Eye Contact: An Interview with Gladys Nilsson

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Gladys Nilsson, *Plant #16*, 2010, ink, graphite, and collage on paper, 11 3/4" x 11 3/4".

Gladys Nilsson was born in Chicago in 1940 and grew up visiting the Art Institute of Chicago, which she then attended from 1958 to 1962. In the mid- to late sixties, she was a member of the Hyde Park-based art group the Hairy Who and created exuberant figurative paintings using both acrylic on Plexiglas and vibrant watercolors on paper. While at SAIC, Nilsson studied with the art historian Whitney Halstead, who taught his students to look beyond Western art and also beyond traditional realms of art to more vernacular sources. Though Nilsson has periodically integrated cut-paper elements into her paintings since the sixties, she has recently begun to make heavily collaged works, in the series "Plant" (2010) and "A Walk . . ." (2014). But perhaps none of Nilsson's work exemplifies Halstead's directive better than the collages currently on view at Garth Greenan Gallery, in New York. The series, called "A Girl in the Arbor" (2013), comprises thirteen lush works, each of a woman sitting on a brown chair under a blue arbor and surrounded by greenery. The surface of each collage is littered with tiny cutouts, some of which compose and adorn the large female figure; many others seem oblivious to her and are engaged in their own affairs.

I met Nilsson the day before her show opened late last month, and we talked over the phone a few weeks later—she, in Chicago, where she still resides—about the intricacies in these collages, her experiences as a budding art student in the city, and the horror of trying on swimsuits.

You visited the Art Institute as a grade-school student and then as an art student, and you've said that in that time, it changed from a nineteenth- to a twentieth-century institution. What did you mean?

What I meant when it changed from being a nineteenth-century building into a twentieth-century is that the building had been modernized. Things were hung in new places, and some galleries were configured differently.

When I was in grade school, a friend and I—she and I drew cows—would walk around a bit in the museum, and I remembered a catwalk in the back, over a large area that no one ever went to, that had large plaster casts of building facades and statuary from other times and other places. It stuck in my mind because it was a very curious area. So when I went to school there, I spent a lot of time trying to figure out where this area was. But I couldn't find it. At first I thought I had imagined the place, until I discovered old pictures in the archives of the museum.

Do you recall looking at Seurat's painting at the institute?

Yeah, very much so. I wasn't necessarily crazy about it. I liked it, but it wasn't a favorite. But I found sitting and looking at it because it had a nice bench in front of it. That it was one of the most soothing things for me—not that I was in turmoil. It was just a very quiet experience, because Seurat has got a lot going on surfacewise. But then it's also an extremely static painting. I spent a lot of time looking at it, and it's probably the one painting that I remember most, aside from Jackson Pollock's *Blue Poles*, which is a whole other thing.

What's the issue with that?

There was a collection of abstract art that was hung in the large gallery, which was placed between the front and the back of the museum—you'd have to walk through it. And when it opened, I remember coming up the back, from the school, coming around a corner, and there was *Blue Poles*. It stopped me dead in my tracks. I'd never really spent any time with big Jackson Pollock paintings. Certainly through art history and survey courses I was familiar those kinds of paintings, but *Blue Poles* was very exciting. Somebody brought it up at my opening, considering that the arbor comprises slanting blue verticals. But *Blue Poles* doesn't have anything to do with my paintings—it was just the color I happened to use. Of course, I then thought, Well, that is interesting, that that one painting would resonate with me.

What was so exciting about that particular Pollock?

Most of them swirl and drip and so on, but that one has some other very specific things going on. When you get used to seeing what Pollock is known for and then you see his earlier paintings, from the 1930s—dismal Depression-era landscapes, street scenes that are not unlike a couple of the really dark and murky Charles Burchfield watercolors—well, I'm fascinated by that kind of shift. I'm thinking of Guston, too. There's an installation of four of his figurative paintings up in the museum now. I spend a lot of time going through the museum—every lunch period, one day a week. I like to go through the Guston room because he's using the same kind of palette he was using in his earlier abstract pieces, for the most part, but then suddenly the figure jumped into his work and they become so wonderfully goofy.

You've never put politics into your paintings, but when you were a student, you were a fan of German Expressionist paintings, of George Grosz and Otto Dix.

Very much. I have continued to like Grosz. Sometimes you like people when you're a student, and then you grow away from the work or you grow out of the work. But the Germans have always stayed with me—as has Egyptian art and early Italian painting.

Grosz painted a lot with watercolors, which is important to me—I need to have a bunch of watercolors that I like to look—but one of the things that really fascinates me is Grosz's use of ink pens. He'll make just the outline of a figure, and you can look through it at another figure walking around behind him—a kind of stacking of figures. And he's just ruthless in his depiction of the social mores of the time—the late twenties, thirties, going into the war. He's drawing disgusting people. It's a really hard-core depiction of life.

Do you approach any of your work with that attitude? Do you think of your figures in a kind of ruthless way?

Well, I'm not ruthless. You can look at a piece of mine and think that it's a benign exploration, but I like to think there's an edge underneath it all in terms of certain commentaries on relationships. I'm an everyday person. I think in terms of just surviving the day on a personal level, rather than the solving of world problems. I just can't do that. Other people can do that on a grand scale. For me, because I know how hard people work, celebrating little victories is as important as a peace treaty being signed. I'm not degrading peace treaties. I just mean that there's a lot to be said for the person who gets up and goes to work and does a job they don't want to do but it's how they're able to survive.

What little victories are being celebrated in this new group of works?

Oh, that's an interesting question. But I'm not sure how to answer it. Maybe it's too broad a statement for the feel of this work. There's a large person who is very content and happy, but there are all these other things going on that perhaps she's not privy to. That's a theme that's been constant in a lot of my work. Sometimes my people know exactly what's going on, and other times they're just going along and suddenly they realize that there are little corner pockets that have some awfully strange stuff going on. When I'm playing with collage, I'm thinking about contrast and juxtaposing odd things. And because of the size of these particular pieces, I was able to find some bigger figures in my history books that I could cut up and play with. I might have a Greek sculpture sitting next to a Renoir figure or something like that. And it's great when I can find a little bit that has the appropriate glance, look, direction. I love that.

So I'm interested in building relationships between contrasting images and making it work visually. I start out with the big figures, and then I boil it down to smaller and smaller figures—tiny people who are doing silly stuff. It's about getting the larger figures in place so that I can unleash these tiny people who are risqué and haughty.

When you say creating relationships, do you only mean formally? Or narratively, too?

Both, because they do have conversations with each other. In *Girl in Arbor # 11*—she has an Egyptian head, and there might even be a Cleopatra or two in the head itself—there's a Michelangelo figure, God or Moses or somebody of import, who's sitting with his chin in his hand and looking down. He had to be looking at something, so there's a little Renaissance guy, and they're making eye contact. The little Renaissance guy is surprised, like, Who's looking at me? And God is up there pondering, What have I created?

And though I knew he had to be looking at something, it had to be exactly the right something, and it took me a while to find the right something. It's very satisfying to find matching things going on. At the bottom of *Girl in The Arbor # 4*, on the lower left-hand side, there's an El Greco's big, and she has suddenly noticed this little guy, who may or may not be a Watteau figure. So aside from creating an image that's big and bold and energetic and comprising things that make sense, it's also about finding the right figure to stare at the right place.

Even still, how do you know what to include? How do you know, when you're cutting things out, that certain images will make sense?

I would go through the books I was trying to find one piece that physically fits, that matches the angularity and perspective. I'd cut out at least twenty little images and try them in that space. And either they work or they don't. Sometimes there's only one thing that works, and sometimes I'll have several things that work there, and I have to make a decision as to what to commit to the paper.

Is part of your aim with this series to comment on the idea of classical beauty and the way it's been depicted in both art history and popular culture?

If it is, it's unconscious. I'm not interested in classical beauty—or, I am interested in classical beauty, it's just that my idea of classical beauty might be completely different from someone else's. The woman in these collages is very happy with how she looks. She has a good sense of self-worth, self-beauty. She doesn't think there's anything wrong with her. Even though she might be made up by a lot of strange things—eggs on her boobs, two or three mouths—she doesn't hide.

But you're also using images from fashion magazines—clothing and makeup and jewelry—loaded imagery. Did you have something in mind beyond the fact that she likes the way she looks?

I've subscribed to *Vogue* for years and years, and I know how ridiculous all of it is, and I'm always amazed at how, if you don't weigh eighty pounds, you're useless. And if you're over the age of sixteen, you're useless as a model. It's the way modern society depicts women. I mean, I love to look at clothes, I love to think about fabric and, Oh my God, I would love that outfit—though of course it would look ridiculous on me, I weight three hundred pounds more than that little skinny twerp of a model. But in any case, I love it.

Certain now some of the fashion magazines have full-figured models, because they have realized that women who are beyond a certain size want to look nice, too, but their notion of what a full-figured woman looks like is ridiculous. I did a watercolor series back in the eighties on shopping for bathing suits—which is probably among the most demoralizing experiences a woman can have—and how she thinks she look one way, but then she'd look in the mirror and she'd look absolutely horrible. But it wouldn't make any difference to her because she found something that fit.

So I always knew that I would use the magazines for collages, but I just didn't know how. And then at some point, back in the early to midnineties, I just started cutting them up.

In a number of these works, zippers and jewelry are wrapped around their bodies in various places, and the women look fabulous, but, at the same time, the objects look constricting.

Being able to cut out something that encircles so precisely was often a test of my ability. But she likes to have adornments. She needs to have adornments. Sometimes her adornments are crippling. They create rhythms, like when the arcs are repetitions of the arcs of her body. Smaller ones, too, like the way the leaf areas circle around. Somebody at the opening mentioned the idea of bondage, but that's not how I think of them. They're adornments that have gone way beyond practicality.

You've said that the woman in the arbor series is the same woman in each painting. Is that right?

Yeah, except that she is going through a metamorphosis.

What kind of metamorphosis?

It's the same person going through time and experiencing different things, which we certainly do. You can't put your foot in the same river twice. You get up every day and the day is different—no two days are alike and even if you do the same things, they're always different. That's the kind of change that is going through in the work. She's in the arbor with her chair, but every day is different. That's what life is like.

You have snakes as a motif in a lot of the works—images of snakes or snakelike objects—and the foundations of the arbors are made up of pages pulled from a book on snakes.

I have a number of old books from library sales or ones my son has picked up that are too worn to be sold. One is this snake book, but it had no visuals for me to use. It only had the author's drawings, and I'm not going to use somebody else's drawings. I can use Goya, but not contemporary drawings. So when I had a big empty area where the floor of the arbor would be, I knew I needed to add something there. And I thought about the snake book and all the text in it. I tried very hard to not have it right-side up so you wouldn't be staring at it and suddenly reading about what the rattlesnake does. So I turned the pages askew and layered them, and they became like tile work. And that gave the surface a new texture. Contrast is important to what I'm doing.

Before we get into contrast, do the snakes relate analogously to the women?

No, no, it just happened. I've got a big wine book that I could have used instead, but somehow it was just the snakes. I suppose you could go all the way back to the Garden of Eden and Eve succumbing to the temptation of eating the forbidden fruit and all of that heavy-duty stuff. But no, it was just a happy accident.

I was thinking of the idea of transformation, of shedding one's skin and becoming someone different.

That works, too, I guess. Every time you go shopping for a new bathing suit, you try to transform yourself. Every time you put a new outfit on, it's like shedding one skin and putting on another to present yourself in a different way.

Back to the idea of contrast. I think the surfaces in the works are so interesting, because you've got shiny paper from the glossy magazines, and you use text pages in an architectural way. Then there's the translucence of watercolors, the heaviness of gouache and cartoony forms made from colored pencil. The surfaces have so many different textures that, even though they're quite flat, they feel sculptural.

The surfaces of my work have become more scumbled and active and, with this series, because it involves so many different surfaces, that kind of contrast became very important. When I first added gouache to my work, I was doing watercolors that had some pieces from cut-up *Vogues*, and having just those two materials—the watercolor and the glossy magazine pages—didn't work well in my mind. I added gouache to bridge the gap between the two surfaces. In this series, I've used pen and pencil and colored pencils and crayons and gouache and watercolor and ink and collage. Some of the art books I cut from have a dry, flat, 1930s feel to the paper, which contrasts with the hard, glossy feel of the magazines. The surfaces are very lush, and I would get lost in making them. It's extremely satisfying. And if you don't like it, who's going to like it?

They're so complex—so many tiny details and so much going on—and yet it's they're seamless.

You know, you've got your big image that grabs you right away, and then, that unfolds and lets you in a little at a time.

There was a family Jim and I knew in our neighborhood in Chicago in the sixties, and they went to one of the Hairy Who shows where I had Plexiglas paintings, and they bought one, a nice little piece. Some years later, the mother said to me, My daughter said that she loves watching past your painting, because every time she walks by it, she finds something in it that she didn't see before. And I thought, That's the greatest thing an artist can have somebody tell them—that there are new things continually going on in their work.

I was looking at my plant series at the opening and I thought, My God, that little piece I cut out is small! And I placed it in exactly the right spot! No piece is too small for me to try to fit in, and maybe nobody else will notice it until years after the fact, but I know it's there and I know that it makes the area richer for having been there.

It's like pointillism—a tiny dot that maybe somebody notices, or doesn't, but it makes the painting.

Exactly. And actually, there have been a lot of dots in my work over the past few years. Maybe all of that standing in front of the Seurat is what's coming back. In fact, I was working on a watercolor before you called, and I was thinking, I've got to put more dots in this, a few in the background, to activate it—and it's amazing what a dot can do.

Maybe Seurat's painting has been secretly driving your work all these years.

That could be. It's a very important painting, and, gosh, I look at it every Thursday.

Do you see something new every time you look at it?

I don't. I just walk past it and I remind myself of its existence. It's history, to me, in terms of my walking through the museum as a young art student. And the room is usually so crowded that I spend more time looking at the people who are looking at it. Which is where a lot of the content in my work comes from—observation and conversations people are having.

One time I had a layover between flights, in Houston or somewhere in Texas, and there were two groups of people waiting at the same gate. One group was the Bonne Bell makeup people, and the other was the Mary Kay makeup people—and they were totally different in appearance! The Mary Kay people looked like the kind of swank person who drives around in a big pink Cadillac. She had ladders of success for her sales people, so these men and women had pins in the shape of a ladder, with things hanging off of it. And the Bonne Bells were like runners or something—people who are interested in just sat and watch sports looking. I was reading a book, but the minute I spotted those two factions I put my book away and just sat and watched them, and it was a great deal of fun. And a lot of my work comes from just watching what people are doing—I'm kind of a voyeur.

Gladys Nilsson's work is on view at Garth Greenan Gallery through December 13.