

Gladys Nilsson's Bulging Watercolored Women Cannot Be Contained

BY PRISCILLA FRANK DECEMBER 10, 2014



A Girl in the Arbor #8 (2013)

For some reason, the medium of watercolor -- you know, when pigments are suspended in a water-soluble vehicle -- has, over time, attracted associations with art that is idyllic, naturalistic, traditional and -- let's be real -- a little bit boring. We'd suspect you'd rarely associate the slushy, translucent medium with the most radical crop of contemporary art.

Unless, of course, you're talking about Gladys Nilsson, the almighty queen of watercolor in all its weirdness. Nilsson yanks the artistic medium from its maudlin affiliations, using it to construct knotty, painted worlds that are as formally convoluted as they are thematically nasty. Her subjects are women, entangled and engorged, their fleshy bodies like magnets to the raggle-taggle debris surrounding them.

Nilsson was born in 1940 to Swedish parents, her father was a factory worker, her mother a waitress. She attended the School of the Art Institute of Chicago from 1958 to 1962, where she met her future husband, artist Jim Nutt. The two became founding members of the Chicago art movement dubbed the Hairy Who, known for its buzzing colors, sharp lines and inspiration from artistic vernacular outside of the Western canon.

Nilsson originally worked in oil paints, switching to watercolor and mixed media after the birth of her son to protect him from the chemicals. Aside from that, however, her artwork has communicated in a similar language throughout the past fifty years, one defined by balloonish forms, unapologetic colors and a fantastical interpretation of the banalities of everyday life.

"I'm an everyday person," she told the *Paris Review*. "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."

An exhibition of Nilsson's work is currently on view at Garth Greenan Gallery. The works on view mostly center around an anonymous girl in an ambiguous outdoor setting, squeezing her way in and out of girdles, bras and various accoutrements. "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."

The paintings combine the frenzied tempo of Dana Schutz with the collaged fever of Linder Sterling. Her protagonist, though consistent throughout the series, never looks the same way twice, constantly transforming and mutating through the small ups and downs of her days. The works are unlikely tributes to contemporary feminism and the wild potentials of domesticity.

"The woman in these collages is very happy with how she looks," Nilsson added. "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 of a lot of strange things -- eggs on her boobs, two or three mouths -- she doesn't hide."