

Art Monkey Wrench

Sundays in the Arbor with Gladys

BY DEVEN GOLDEN DECEMBER 22, 2014



A Girl in the Arbor #8, 2013, mixed media on paper, 29 3/4 x 41 1/2 inches

How happy I was to walk into Garth Greenan Gallery this past Saturday and find that the exhibition of large works on paper by Gladys Nilsson, which was supposed to have closed on December 6th, was still up. As Garth explained, “Roberta told me I should leave the show up until we closed for the holidays”. I had wanted to see the show all along, but family obligations limited my time for getting out and about over the fall season, and I had already missed a number of shows including, so I thought, this one. Thanks to a wise recommendation by Ms. Smith, and a bit of serendipity, I was granted a second chance. And because I do not believe that one stops thinking about an artist just because their show is over, I wanted to say a few words about the show and Nilsson.

I am from Chicago originally, a graduate of the School of the Art Institute, and so naturally very familiar with Chicago Imagism—a local and specific manifestation of Pop Art—and all of the subgroups named for a series of fantastic (in every meaning of the word) artist organized exhibitions at the Hyde Park Art Center in the 1960s. This included *The Non-Plussed Some*, *The False Image*, *Chicago Antigua*, *Marriage Chicago Style*, and the one that in 1966 started them all: *The Hairy Who*, which included Jim Nutt, Suellen Rocca, Jim Falconer, Art Green, Karl Wirsum, and Gladys Nilsson. Linking these artists together were a number of shared aesthetic proclivities: a taste for scatological and sexual humor, a rejection of pure abstraction in favor of imagery, a blue-collar inspired selection of source material—comic books, pin-ball machines, burlesque shows, professional wrestling, etc.—for inspiration, an omnipresent sense of horror vacui and, more than anything, a relentless formal inventiveness.

Thirty years ago, in 1984, I curated a mid-career retrospective of Nilsson’s work at Randolph Street Gallery, a not-for-profit in Chicago. She had already been showing for twenty years but had not been given a retrospective in her own home town. The reasons then, as now, for her being under appreciated related in small measure to her primarily using the medium of water-color on paper, albeit masterfully, and to a greater degree, as Rob Storr underlines in the catalog for the Greenan exhibition, being a woman. A woman and, one can add as well, Jim Nutt’s wife and a mother to boot. So, water-colorist, woman, artist’s wife, mother = 4 strikes. Archaic notions perhaps, but still overly prevalent and an undeniable drag on Nilsson’s career (and any other woman). Oh, and let’s not forget that she’s a Chicago artist who never lived in New York.

Nilsson has a certain import for me, because it was while curating *Gladys Nilsson: Greatest Hits from Chicago, Selected Works 1967–1984*, that I first became aware of how few works one actually holds in one’s mind when thinking of an artist’s oeuvre. Think about any artist, and perhaps you will pull up four, five, maybe seven works at most to represent that artist’s work. Pushed, you might come up with a few more representing different periods. A disservice to any artist, but especially when the artist is as pictorially inventive as Nilsson. Three decades later, walking into Garth Greenan Gallery, viewing Nilsson works from the past three years, this realization was once more brought home.

In the main room are thirteen large works from the *Girl in the Arbor* series, a mix of vertical and horizontal layouts comprised of water-color and collage. In the side rooms are smaller, essentially black and white works from the *Plant* series, comprised of ink, graphite and collage. They are all immediately recognizable as Nilsson’s work, yet far different than the work shown in her last New York solo exhibition only six years ago. The whimsical quality so much a part of her work is still evident, but something all together tougher has been added to the mix as well.

Perhaps it was motivated by the addition of the collage elements, whose density and resolution would contrast awkwardly with Nilsson’s previous application of water-color. In these works, however, the artist visually counter weights the collage by applying the colors in bolder ways, replacing her graduated modulations in a single form with solid colors.

This has the effect of intensifying the figure ground relationship as well. In earlier works, the cast of characters would often blend in with the landscape, figure and foliage treated in similar manner. No such confusion in these works. Nilsson’s heroine in each piece, along with her chair/throne, stands starkly apart from her surroundings, no matter how much they might weave around and over her. The character’s confidence, and Nilsson’s, is evident; partially dressed, boudoir askew, no matter – the tiny figures clamoring on every side do not even rise to the level of pests. Rob Storr in his essay refers to the central figure as a giant, and against the other tiny figures, one can see why. But I would note that the chair and foliage are in scale to Nilsson’s protagonist and suggest that it is not that she is so large, but that those around her are so small.

Nilsson has, when speaking to me at least, always shrugged off the way she was so often treated as somehow lesser to her male peers. Still, it can’t have been fun. Yet if the exuberant works in this exhibition are proof of anything, it’s that Gladys Nilsson continues to have the last laugh.