

ART IN REVIEW

Gladys Nilsson

By ROBERTA SMITH

It is always exhilarating when a respected artist saves the best for later in life. Such is the case with Gladys Nilsson, the deft and sardonic watercolorist of human entanglement and founding member of Chicago's rambunctious Hairy Who. Ms. Nilsson is now in her mid-70s, and her first solo New York gallery show in six years reveals that she is doing her strongest work yet.

Departing from her usual small size and refined technique, the 13 works of her "A Girl in the Arbor" series combine collage — heretofore a sideline — gouache and colored pencil with watercolor on large sheets of paper. They are worked up in a manner that is altogether looser, funnier and more aggressive than before. Instead of crowds of figures, they fix on one large woman on a wood chair against a screen of leaves, whose ease and louche contortions evoke George Grosz, long a Nilsson hero.



A Girl in the Arbor #7 (2013)

These figures are giantesses, festooned (or festering) with little bits of collage, often cut from Vogue magazine, that can include jewelry, watchbands (usually for hair), leering expressions and the odd appendage.

Images of works of art and architecture add to the chaos, while floorboards made of scraps of printed text imply a stage. The play might be called "Revenge of the Female Model: King Kong and Fay Ray Become One."

Smaller collages with graphite and ink are also wonderful, but bigger is bolder.