

Art in America

APRIL 2017



Vested Interest, 1987, watercolor on paper, 40 x 60 inches

Figures big and small inhabit the stunning watercolors Gladys Nilsson made in the late 1980s. It's unusual to see the medium deployed with the forceful colors and monumental scale of these works, ten of which, all about forty by sixty inches, were on view in this recent show. Each depicts a few central characters framed by planes of color and surrounded by dozens of smaller humanoids who perform routine activities of everyday life, albeit with absurd twists.

Nilsson was among the original members of the Hairy Who, a group of young graduates of the School of the Art Institute of Chicago who, in the mid-1960s, established themselves as id-and-laughter-fueled excavators of commercial culture. Nilsson was among the first female artists to be given a solo show at the Whitney Museum of American Art, in 1973. She and her Hairy Who peers have received steady exposure in New York for the last few years, with much attention paid to their iconic early experiments. It's refreshing to discover this suite of ambitious, mature works from a lesser-known period in Nilsson's career.

The Dicky (1986) portrays five women clad in diaphanous, one-shouldered tunics happily clutching at the dicky (a false shirtfront) worn by an otherwise bare-chested male who struggles to hold up the yellow-on-red polka-dot boxers that hardly contain his bulging phallus. A tiny purple woman hangs off the hem of those boxers, tugging them down while staring up between the man's giant legs. Her other hand grips the garter holding up his single remaining sock, while her two legs and bare bottom frame an even smaller figure seated on the ground behind her. In addition to the main group centered on the dicky, a horde of about three dozen small figures romp around the edges of the sheet. Along the top, fourteen naked pink women carry nine green Doric columns, while additional tiny figures saunter along the bottom, filling out the playfully orgiastic work.

Nilsson demonstrates a keen awareness of the sensual, as well as of the signifying possibilities of clothing. In *Vested Interest* (1987), six women take off their gym shorts and tank tops. A couple of them look up, eyes closed and mouths open, as if breathing heavily after a workout. The largest figure winks and sticks her tongue out while pulling her shirt down. Two tiny men caress her sneaker, and twelve additional little men are wedged into a gray triangle that extends along the bottom of the piece. Unlike the seminude athletes above, the males are fully clothed in suits and wide-brimmed hats. They resemble, perhaps, laborers of the 1940s—a time when Nilsson was a child—heading off to work. Meanwhile, the headband-wearing women in the painting's upper register evoke an entirely different era, place, and mood. Framed by bands of deep color and a few palm trees, they call to mind California in the 1980s.

The colored geometric shapes that form the backgrounds of Nilsson's watercolors were inspired by the aesthetics of German Expressionist film. Sometimes these abstract forms seem to tint the entire composition, like sheets of colored glass. Occasionally, they take on a more narrative role. In perhaps the most outré works, *chic.con.co* (1986) and the diptych *Léger Faire* (1986–87), they become elements in construction sites where all-female or all-male groups perform a sort of burlesque act. There are two forms of exuberance seen in Nilsson's watercolors: her evident joy in confronting the formal challenges of the unforgiving medium, and her playful imagining of narratives that cover a wide emotional range and animate an unruly fantasy world.

—Julian Kreimer