

ArtReview

Gladys Nilsson

by Ashton Cooper April 2017



The Dicky, 1986, watercolor on paper, 40 x 60 inches

In a standout painting here titled *The Dicky* (1986), five pantless female figures assist a beleaguered man in slipping a pumpkin-orange false shirt-front over his head. As is typical of Nilsson's style, wiggling limbs weave between each other pell-mell as swathes of color trifurcate the picture plane into three intertwined scenes. The effect is something like a classical frieze viewed through a kaleidoscope, not least because Nilsson's aqueous pools of richly hued watercolor seem to hum and swish-swash around on the page. (Her virtuosity with watercolor is a subject worth writing about on its own.)

What unites the 12 works on view—almost all large-scale watercolors, and all from the 1980s—is an abiding interest in monumentalizing the humdrum of everyday life, whether it's going to the beach, putting on a dicky or working construction.

When talking about her subject matter in recent interviews, Nilsson often emphasizes her fascination with human minutiae, such as watching everyday, small-scale occurrences and interactions unfold. For example, “watching people at the supermarket, bending over the frozen food section.” In these works, the trivial is front and center.

In her formal constructions, Nilsson transposes this observational imperative onto the viewer. It is nearly impossible to glance at one of these works and quickly grasp what it depicts. You have to really *look*: follow the twisty limbs back to the bodies that own them, decipher the looks exchanged in the background between minor characters and puzzle over what bearing one plane of color might have on the next.

I'd argue that *The Dicky* embodies many of the primary themes of this body of work. For one, it deftly illustrates Nilsson's playful attitude towards the body. Take the women's bodies. In the hands of any other artist, the depiction of a woman with a pokey boob jutting out akimbo from an Amazonian one-shouldered top and puffy little uncovered labia would be undignified or even grotesque, but Nilsson's bodies are entirely matter-of-fact. They are deeply liberated in their unconfined-ness. I can't stop picturing Nilsson staring gleefully at a big butt bent over a supermarket freezer. She paints moments when the body is ill-comported, un-tucked-in, up-in-the-air—but she does so affectionately.

Secondly, Nilsson has a deep sense of absurd, but without any cynicism. Rather than Sisyphus pushing a boulder up a hill, she has a guy trying on a dicky. (Is there a better illustration of the meaninglessness of the universe than a dicky?) Even the most boring daily routines are saturated with humor. As is the point of Camus's interpretation of the Sisyphus myth, life is pointless, but isn't it funny?

And third, Nilsson is floodlighting the ridiculousness of life under late capitalism, two of the products of which are the mall and the supermarket. In this exhibition, certain pieces address work (two paintings depict construction sites) while others address leisure (going to the mall, the beach, exercise class). Nilsson, who comes from a blue-collar Chicago family, has said she deals with “the celebration of making it through the day.” By depicting her characters with both jocularly and affection, the artist doesn't allow them to be cogs in a machine. She monumentalizes these supposedly small lives.