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She Painted With the Hairy Who. Now She's Going Big, at 79.

Gladys Nilsson, a bold watercolorist rooted in Chicago's surrealist '60s art group, on finally finding solo success.

BY JONATHAN GRIFFIN JANUARY 30, 2020



Gladys Nilsson, who turns 80 in May, at home in suburban Wilmette, Ill., in her attic studio. Photo: Alexa Viscius for *The New York Times*

In 1966, Gladys Nilsson and five other young artists organized an exhibition of their work in Chicago's Hyde Park Art Center, and overnight became the talk of the town. The group called themselves the Hairy Who.

Their art could be caustic, outré, vulgar and loud; psychedelic patterns and clashing colors abounded. It was bad taste and brilliant fun. Tattoos, graffiti, comic books, fanzines, games and toys, newspaper and magazine advertisements were all influences, as was the encyclopedic, global collection of the Art Institute of Chicago. Rooted in the Surrealist traditions of Chicago's art scene, it was unlike anything else in America at that time.

Ms. Nilsson's work stood somewhat apart from that of her peers, especially her watercolors of animalistic creatures which are rendered with extraordinary delicacy and subtlety. She also adopted a graphic technique borrowed from her husband, fellow Hairy Who member Jim Nutt, for painting in acrylic on the back of Plexiglas, as in "A Cold Mouth" (1968). Some of her earliest paintings are included alongside her most recent canvases in "Gladys Nilsson: Honk! Fifty Years of Painting," a two-venue survey opening Thursday, Jan. 30 at Garth Greenan Gallery and Matthew Marks Gallery.

In 1969, the Hairy Who amicably elected to disband. Along with other artists of the 1960s, they are now often lumped under the banner of Chicago Imagism. Ms. Nilsson has since chosen to follow her own idiosyncratic path. (Reviewing a gallery show in 2014, with work combining collage with gouache, colored pencil and watercolor on paper, Roberta Smith of *The New York Times* described the work as “altogether looser, funnier and more aggressive than before,” and “her strongest yet.”) With renewed interest in recent years in Imagism and in figure painting more broadly, Ms. Nilsson, 79, is enjoying a late uptick in attention, as demonstrated by this, her most extensive exhibition to date.

I first visited Ms. Nilsson and Mr. Nutt at home in suburban Wilmette, north of Chicago, three years ago. For this interview I reached Ms. Nilsson by video call (it was her first experience with FaceTime, and she was thrilled by the technology). The pair have lived in their art-filled home on a tree-lined, brick-cobbled street since 1976; she keeps her studio up a narrow set of stairs in the attic. Despite her now white shock of curly hair and wire-rimmed spectacles, Ms. Nilsson’s mischievous smile is still recognizable from photographs of her as a fresh-faced art school graduate at the Hyde Park Art Center, flushed with excitement. These are edited excerpts from the conversation.

You’ve been busy!

Unless I’m having an off day, I seem always to be ready to work. My usual is that I go up into the studio for anything from two to five hours in the afternoon. But if I’m finishing work on something, or I’m just starting something, and I need space, I’ll go to the mall. [Laughs.] I go out for lunch, go through the stores, fondle a little fabric, try on some shoes, do that kind of stuff. Clear my mind. But I always have a snapshot on my phone of what I left the studio with. Jim can’t understand how I can go to the mall and still think about my painting. But for me, it’s very easy to do. [Laughs.]

Your exhibition at Garth Greenan Gallery includes “Gleefully Askew” which is seven feet high — the largest painting you’ve ever made.

I’m reinventing myself as I age. I always wanted to paint big, and I never got around to it. Now, dammit, I’m going to paint some big pieces! It was the largest sized frame that could be carried up the stairs into my studio. That’s why it’s a diptych. My next birthday will be 80. I’m not too old to take on anything — although it was kind of hard to climb on the ladder. I figure I’ve got two or three more big pieces in me.

Where does the impulse to paint big come from?

Every time I’ve walked past really big paintings in a museum, like Rubens’ Marie de’ Medici series in the Louvre, I’ve thought, “Oh my God I want to paint big.” Moving paint around and making big motions with your arm is fun. It’s as much fun as going through the department store and seeing what the new fashions are. I like to paint really tiny things too. What could be better than to be able to paint something really tiny and to then paint something really big? It kind of shows that I can do everything!

Your technical prowess is so much a part of your paintings’ impact. Beyond the imagistic content, what hits me first is color, form, texture, pattern, painterly incident.

I really enjoy doing all of that, but when I look at work by somebody else it doesn’t have to have that. I do appreciate the technical prowess in things — like Charles Burchfield’s watercolors. But after I’ve appreciated it, I get lost in where they’re taking me on a visual level. Watercolor is my primary medium — because I enjoy how far I can take those subtleties. My fingers and my brain and my brushes just die in the pigment, I love it so much.

A lot has changed in your work over the past 50 or 60 years. What has stayed the same?

Well, obviously, the use of the figure. There’s a certain amount of pattern. The use of color — I love to play with color relationships in pleasant manners and in jarring manners. Using the figure in inventive scenarios, a certain kind of distortion.

I love to watch people. I collect postures, in my mind, when somebody doesn't think that they're onstage so to speak, when they're slumped or moving in a strange or exaggerated manner. It also comes from looking, say, at James Ensor's little etchings of people on the beach or "The Garden of Earthly Delights" by good old Hieronymus [Bosch], where there's some really weird stuff going on!

Are the female figures ever you?

Not really, unless I set out specifically to do a self-portrait, which is almost never. As I've aged, my women have aged. In that sense I'm following my physical shift through time. Hair has gotten grayer, things are drooping more, waistlines are expanding.

Tell me about your training at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago.

I felt like I was a holding pattern until I got out of school, in terms of following my personal thread. But then in my last semester, one day I walked into the lunchroom and several people I knew but didn't like were all sitting together at the same table. It was an overwhelming experience to see them there. I couldn't control myself. I went up to painting class and I did a painting that really went beyond painting the model. It was a group of people that had sharp tongues and looked weird; it was not what you were supposed to paint in art school. That was the start of figuring out that I could paint what I wanted to paint, rather than what I was told to paint.

Is there ever cruelty in your work now?

No. That was just that one instance. I love all the people in my paintings. I would take care of them, no matter what they look like or what they are doing. They might be misguided, they might be a little naughty, but they're nice. Because I'm nice.

Even the earliest paintings in this exhibition depict interactions between men and women. Was that a preoccupation of yours in the mid-60s?

No. I was happily married, and everybody in my paintings had to have a significant other. In the early work, there would be a lot of times when I would be counting how many men and how many women were in the pictures, so that everybody would have a mate.

I admire the way you make paintings that deal with relationships in a way that is not reducible to sex.

There is a lot of giggling in the work. They titter behind their hands. They peek in tantalizing ways. They are just being a little naughty rather than being lewd, or downright nasty, or pornographic.

You and Jim have a significant collection of work by self-taught artists, such as Martín Ramírez and Joseph Yoakum. What draws you to that kind of work?

The work that interests me is by people who have a need to explain or explore or put down what they have to get out. They aren't stopping because they don't have formal training. They're following their thread without worrying about it.

Do you regret that your recent success didn't come sooner?

Well, I've had success in being identified with the Hairy Who. But I have been waiting a long time to have people catch up with me as an individual. I'm old enough, certainly! As long as I can keep my energy level up, and keep working, I'm ready for whatever is going to unfold. And hopefully it will include airline tickets to go places! I used to have a joke with Jim, when I'd go out to run errands, I'd say, "Be sure to listen for the phone, in case the Louvre calls!"

What has your experience been of the way that the art market treats female artists? Your prices seem lower than those of male artists.

Well you have to remember — with the exception of the Plexiglas pieces — my works were in watercolor on paper, which has long been considered a minor medium.

What about being married to Jim, whose work has always been very sought after? Do you talk about the discrepancy in pricing?

No, no, no. I think that conversations like that could have the possibility of being very disruptive in an over-60-year marriage. I love Jim's work, and I'm so happy for the successes he's had. But he has the turn of being there with me in New York this time!