

**Winning Watercolors:** Rambunctious, biting and over-the-edge, Gladys Nilsson's watercolors are also benign, inviting and funny. Like whimsical illustrations for children's books, they pack an overdose of mini-narratives into a single scene. The main events they depict, such as a bow-legged woman serving a reheated piece of pizza, or a man peeking under a woman's skirt as she tries on a new hat, are not their main attractions. These everyday scenarios are just excuses for the artist to make room for the incidental details and touching subplots that give life its spice.

Watercolor is Nilsson's primary medium. Her 10 images at Ovsey Gallery contain a dazzling array of the diverse effects she draws from this simple, usually subsidiary medium. Sharp, sinuous contours, diaphanous veils, solid colors and touchable textures interweave in the jam-packed space of her art.

A typical watercolor by Nilsson consists of one to six figures—usually women but sometimes cowboys—who dominate the composition, and a dozen or two tiny characters caught up in their own little dramas. Like mischievous gnomes or eccentric elves, they run around the image, wreaking havoc on its consistency of scale, but rarely disturbing what's happening in the big picture.

The central figures in Nilsson's playful scenes are distorted but never demented. Their arms, legs, and necks bend and twist with the natural grace of an octopus's limbs. Their faces portray a rogue's gallery of malformations: Pinocchio noses, beady eyes, leering lips and expressions more suited to jack-o'-lanterns are the norm in their fantastic world. Nevertheless, Nilsson's characters are far from being evil grotesques. Endowed with a silly sort of dignity, they seem to be aware of their looks, but above such petty concerns.

Nilsson is a founding member of Hairy Who, a '60s group of Chicago artists fascinated by raunchy humor and low-brown expression. As an avid collector of "outsider art," she is included in LACMA's "Parallel Visions: Modern Artists and Outsider Art." Although the light-hearted, gentle humor of her art is often overshadowed by the brash adolescence of this genre, her solo exhibition gives this aspect of her watercolors its due.

■ *Ovsey Gallery, 170 S. La Brea Ave., (213) 935-1883, through Nov. 14. Closed Sundays and Mondays.*