

The Wonderfully Perplexing World of Gladys Nilsson

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by John Yau February 15, 2020



Gleefully Askew (2019), acrylic on canvas, 84 x 112 inches

Gladys Nilsson was one of six artists included in the first “Hairy Who” show, which opened at Hyde Park Art Center, Chicago, in 1966. The other artists in that groundbreaking exhibition were Jim Falconer, Art Green, Jim Nutt, Suellen Rocca, and Karl Wirsum. The show marked the emergence of an art scene independent of what was going in New York and the West Coast, which deepened the diversity of American art. While Nilsson painted on the back of Plexiglas, canvas, and panel early in her career, she became known for her watercolors, which she concentrated on when she became a mother; she has gone on to be recognized as a master in that medium.

Nilsson’s insouciant invented views of landscapes populated by people of different sizes, often interacting in ways that cannot quite be deciphered, are unlike anything else being done in art. Singular since the outset of her career, she has followed what she calls her “personal thread” for more than 50 years. The fact that she is not more widely celebrated is a comment on the art world’s narrow-mindedness, rather than on her nonconformity.

The distortions Nilsson wreaks upon her characters are more comic than expressionist: it is as if everybody is made of a rubbery root vegetable that can be stretched in any direction. Add to this her virtuosic command of color, shading, and multiple, complex spaces, and it should be clear that we are in the presence of a great artist whose medium is watercolor.

While this perspective on Nilsson is fixed in the mind of those who have followed her work, it is time to broaden our view of her achievements. This is because there is currently a two-gallery show of Nilsson’s paintings in New York, which includes a two-panel painting, “Gleefully Askew” (2019), that, at the age of 79, is the largest work the artist has done in any medium. (She is also the featured artist in Parker Gallery’s Frieze Los Angeles art fair booth this weekend.)

“Gleefully Askew” is one of the highlights of the most comprehensive exhibition of her paintings to date, Gladys Nilsson: Honk! Fifty Years of Painting, at Garth Greenan (January 30–March 14, 2020) and Matthew Marks (January 31–April 18, 2020). The more than 40 paintings at Matthew Marks were completed between 1963 and 1980, while the nine at Garth Greenan were done between 2017 and 2019.

As the nine recent paintings — which are the focus of this review — evidence, Nilsson is not an artist whose ambition and vision have turned inward as she has gotten older. The paintings — many of them quite large, especially for an artist known for her watercolors — are packed with formal intelligence, a continuous humming energy, graphic control, offbeat humor, and layers of tenderness. They come across as youthful and wise, a rare combination in any art. You get the welcome feeling that Nilsson, who will be 80 in a few months, is a serious, still-aspiring artist who has never rested on her laurels or taken herself too seriously; she never became pretentious or found it necessary to make lofty pronouncements. She has never lost her enthusiasm.

What this viewer got from the myriad poses in the paintings is that Nilsson sees everybody as idiosyncratic, vulnerable, up to something, and interesting. As she recently told art critic Jonathan Griffin in an interview in *The New York Times* (January 30, 2020):

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.

In the left panel of “Gleefully Askew,” two men are holding a painting at a sharp diagonal. The man on the far left, who is standing on an incline, guides the painting, while the man on the right, who is standing on lower ground, holds the painting’s bottom edge. Although his head faces the painting’s bottom edge, the pupil of his eye is set far back so that he appears to be looking at what is behind him, in the right panel.

The right panel shows a woman who is larger than the two men. She is naked, except for a mini-apron around her waist. In her right hand, she holds a rather small palette on which a dollop of green paint is about to slide off. Her left arm rises up and bends above her head; she holds a large paintbrush between thumb and index finger.

The handle of her red paintbrush extends across both panels, but it doesn’t align. Is this misalignment what the painting’s title refers to? Is she trying to complete the painting, which the two men are about to carry away? Who are the two smaller women seated below the artist, located in the space between her and the men towering over them in the other panel? Does the shift in scale between the seated women, the artist, and the two art handlers suggest that each set lives in a different but parallel world? If so, what is their relation to each other? What does it mean that a gray tubular form in the painting extends into the space above the top edge?

While many critics have pointed out that Nilsson is a narrative artist, it strikes me that her work is far too enigmatic for that definition to quite fit. It is like saying that John Ashbery is a narrative poet or Giorgio de Chirico is a storytelling painter. Besides the obvious formal divergences between Nilsson and de Chirico, it seems to me that her humor is what most differentiates them.

Nilsson possesses an idiosyncratic, gentle, self-mocking humor. You can see it in the horizontal painting and collage “Plain Air” (2018). In this work, a woman with blue skin stretches across the painting, leaning against a tree on the far right. She holds two pencils in her mouth and a drawing notebook in her left hand, while she seems to be measuring something with her thumb. If you see this figure as a surrogate for the artist, you might want to ponder a number of details, starting with her different-colored high-heeled shoes. Is the line drawing that she is holding of her shoes? While you scrutinize the details, you might want to pay attention to the way she painted the different fabrics, and her ability to convey texture visually.

Nilsson has taken the subtleties she learned in her mastery of watercolor and carried them over into her paintings without losing anything. Look at the blue skin tone and the colors that are mixed in, or the clothes she is wearing. Once you realize that a lot is going on in Nilsson’s works, you recognize there is even more to see. Nilsson’s generosity coincides with the pleasure of her puzzling, sweet-natured views. Don’t mistake that sweetness for softness, though. These paintings are as sharp and tough as nails.