

What to See Right Now in New York Art Galleries

Gladys Nilsson's "Honk! Fifty Years of Painting"

BY JILLIAN STEINHAUER FEBRUARY 26, 2020



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

If I had just one word to sum up the art of Gladys Nilsson, who's been painting for more than 50 years, it would be "exuberant." Her work contains relentless energy and, by extension, optimism. Abounding with wacky figures of different sizes cavorting and contorting in brightly colored scenes, her oeuvre feels like a celebration of being alive.

Ms. Nilsson got her start in the mid-1960s, when she and five fellow graduates of the School of the Art Institute of Chicago began exhibiting together as the Hairy Who. They were part of a larger movement, the Chicago Imagists, whose graphic, irreverent art drew on pop culture and reflected an absurdist sense of humor and an often unglamorous interest in the body.

In the past decade, the group started to receive its due outside its home city, but individual members remain underappreciated, especially (and not surprisingly) the women. Ms. Nilsson's current doubleheader, "Honk! Fifty Years of Painting," at Matthew Marks Gallery, which is showing work made from 1963 to 1980, and Garth Greenan Gallery, where recent paintings are on view, is the largest presentation of her art to date, accompanied by the publication of her most comprehensive catalog. It is in no way large enough and doesn't include any watercolors on paper, her primary medium. But it's a start.

The earliest pieces are mostly small, intensely colored and surreal, with faceless characters cast in enigmatic situations. By the end of the 1960s, Ms. Nilsson was painting backward on the reverse of Plexiglas, a line-driven technique that generated thrillingly chaotic images dominated by large, lumpy figures, usually in pairs, with smaller ones climbing on and around them. A standout, "Very Worldly" (1967), swirls with so much visual input your eyes hardly know where to land — a perfect representation of contemporary media overload, made 53 years ago.

In the 1970s Ms. Nilsson returned to canvas, and her creatures lost most of their features — just curvy human-animal hybrids (though some look like potatoes with arms and legs) frolicking in landscapes filled with tubular vegetation. These works, including the sublime two-panel "Dipped Dick: Adam and Eve After Cranach" (1971), are boldly pleasurable explorations of color, pattern and perspective.

The exhibition skips over several decades to the present day, when Ms. Nilsson has taken to painting outsize women who manage to be both bulbous and graceful as they observe the world around them. Whether sketching, posing, or studying, these giantesses do what they want. The protagonist of "Gleefully Askew" (2019) gives us a knowing stare while wearing only a ruffly mini apron and dabbing at a picture held aloft by two men.

This is a notable change from the blank-faced high-kicker of a 1964 painting or the caricatures of big-haired ladies on Plexiglas. The recent figures are in complete possession of their identities, with presences so large the frames can barely contain them. Women have long been prominent in Ms. Nilsson's art, but in their older age they've found a new kind of liberation.