

# GLADYS NILSSON

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Picture, if you will, the imagination of Gladys Nilsson. I like to envision it as a festive and teeming cornucopia, filled completely to the brim with an inexhaustible trove of playful figures who surge back and forth with gleeful abandon. It's undoubtedly a colorful and turbulent place as well, alive with energy, and packed with malleable characters who await their call to appearance in their chosen pictorial vignette. It's a site where fantasy and content come together, where sweet invention and flights of fancy get organized and set toward the path of demarcation onto paper. It's also one of the most wonderful (as in "full of wonder") places in contemporary art, and for some 30 years it has never failed to deliver its delightful staffage, its cast of especially groomed characters for the scenarios Nilsson so expertly spins.

You have to make just one leap of faith, one suspension of disbelief, and, like accessing the tales of J.R.R. Tolkien, the floodgates will open to a universe of fantasy and vision. You enter a dreamy dominion, a place where space and time become flexible, where fluid and rubbery figures earnestly enact gentle dramas of great poignancy and humor. But it is key that Nilsson's realm should never be seen as an escapist one, never as a substitute world that retreats from many of the issues

that define modern life. Rather, Nilsson creates a personal and parallel world wherein many of our core concerns—what it means to love, to nurture, to pose, to play, to create, and to be part of the never ending and infinitely absurd human comedy—receive their iconographic caress, dealt with in charged pictorial playlets that both entertain and inform. Gladys Nilsson's fertile imagination provide us with allegories of living, with vibrant scenarios wherein the dream helps reveal the truth.

The thousands and thousands and thousands of figures that have emerged from her brush over the years tug at our sleeves to tell us small but apt stories, making pointed and amusing observations about the many crises and delights within the pantheon of life. Gladys Nilsson's Scheherazadeness, her continual ability to construct tales well worth the telling, derives from her canny witnessing of the vagaries of life that surround her, and her penchant and skill in reframing the many stories she sees into the rubric of her artistic vision.

How Nilsson came to this, and how she developed her abilities, is itself a tale worth telling. Born and raised in Chicago, the only child of blue-collar Swedish immigrant parents, Gladys Nilsson remembers drawing

as a major method of entertaining herself as a child. Before her teen years she won a small scholarship to attend the School of the Art Institute of Chicago's (SAIC) after-school lecture/drawing classes, beginning her immersion into the very rich collection at the Art Institute of Chicago. This experience, and some timely encouragement from a high school art teacher, led Nilsson to decide to try to become an artist, and on graduating high school the SAIC was the only place to which she applied. The SAIC already had a long reputation of being a place where independently thinking artists could develop—its alumni then included people such as Ivan Albright, Thomas Hart Benton, Leon Golub, Red Grooms, Joan Mitchell, Georgia O'Keeffe, Claes Oldenburg, and Grant Wood—and there Nilsson was able to experiment with media and style, and specifically recalls being intrigued by James Ensor's biting satirical work, and the art of the German Expressionists.

Done just a year after her graduation, *Hoofers*, 1963, can be read as indicative of Nilsson's early work. Sprightly and aggressive, its chorus line of ample and bodacious dancers strut above a jazzy orchestra of masked men playing odd woodwind instruments. Jammed with incident, this small drawing already contains many of Nilsson's signature elements—figures are pressed right up against the picture plane, there is a sense of horror vacui, with Nilsson filling almost every square inch with activity, a feeling of an openness to whimsy, and the composition is completely driven by

the presence of the figure, with elements such as setting, space, or atmosphere playing subsidiary roles. An air of sinister humor pervades this piece, a quality of a bit of sub-bourgeois life seen and flayed, read to reveal the tawdry realms lying just beyond observation. The curious little gender-bending *Night Walking* of 1964 shows coat-and-tied Homburg-hatted faceless street dudes



*Hoofers*, 1963, pen and ink on paper, 11" x 8 1/2"

who suddenly sport kicking legs clad in tights and ending in high heels. A vibrant and scintillating work—and an early example of Nilsson's growing commitment to watercolor as her chosen medium—*Night Walking* has that certain special 1960s energy, that aura of Peter Max's work or the Beatles's *Yellow Submarine*, the kind of chromatically upbeat pop surrealist amiability that has so much come to define that period.

But *Night Walking's* funky strutters predate the Blue Meanies of *Yellow Submarine* by four years, and Peter Max was not yet a factor in Pop culture. In Chicago, Nilsson and—largely unknown to her—some of her local colleagues were developing their own special brand of irreverent cultural commentary, creating the foundations of the rather important regional art movement known as Chicago Imagism. With her husband Jim Nutt, whom she met while at the SAIC, and with artists Jim Falconer, Art Green, Suellen Rocca, and Karl Wirsum, Gladys Nilsson was a member of the Hairy Who, a group who showed their work in three celebrated exhibitions at Chicago's Hyde Park Art Center from 1966 to 1968, cited now as the first defining moments in what would constitute Imagism. Joined soon after by the likes of Roger Brown, Philip Hanson, Ed Paschke, Christina Ramberg, and Barbara Rossi, the Chicago Imagist movement represented an often caustic and aggressive assault on the dullness and tepidities of the status quo, paralleled in a political sense by the demonstrations that would surround the Democratic National Convention in Chicago in 1968.

Pungent and assertive, and much more open to the revelations of low and popular culture than to the pretensions of high culture, Imagism in the hands of artists such as Gladys Nilsson was an emboldened declaration of pictorial independence, an insistence on personal vision couched in vernacular terms.

This method was not without precedents; artists such as Richard Lindner and H. C. Westermann could be cited as exemplars for and influences on Nilsson, as could Max Beckmann, Hieronymus Bosch, Egyptian, Persian, and African art, Surrealism, and even the writings of Franz Kafka. From early days Nilsson and Nutt were also particularly intrigued by what is now usually described as 'Outsider' Art, seeing in the creations of talented but untrained (in the academic sense) hands the very visionary freedom and openness to imagery they themselves were pursuing, the willingness, and, in a sense, the permission, to trust in personal intuition to show the pictorial way.

In the summer of 1968 (curiously enough the very period the whole world was watching Chicago torn asunder by riots) Nilsson, Nutt, and their son Claude moved west to California, where Nutt had been hired to teach at Sacramento State College. Remaining there until returning to Chicago in 1976, Nilsson's years in California coincided with important professional and aesthetic advances in her career. It was from Sacramento that Nilsson sent work to one-person and group exhibitions at places such as the Whitney



*Svelt Bearsisters*, 1970, watercolor, 22 1/4" x 15 1/2"

Museum of American Art, the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago, the National Gallery of Canada, and the Sao Paulo Bienal. (Close geographical proximity to the San Francisco Funk artists of that peri-

od, who were themselves involved in a movement with interesting aesthetic connections to Chicago Imagism was, however, largely without effect on Nilsson.)

*Svelt Bearsisters*, 1970, is a particularly wonderful illustration of Nilsson's growth to full artistic maturity. A tapestry of amiable incident completely filled from edge to edge to edge to edge with charming and playful figures (I count 15, each one different, each adding certain energetic elements to the entire pictorial stew), this watercolor shows Nilsson in her developing labyrinthine glory; we almost literally leap into the complexities of this image, drawn at first by the three large figures who adopt Nilsson's signature variant of the so-called Egyptian Pose—legs in profile and seen from the side, torso and shoulders seen from the front, and head presented either in profile or from the front—with their feet firmly planted on the very bottom of the composition and their heads terminating just beneath its top. (More than 20 years later in, for example, the golf spoof *The Grannie Day*, 1991, Nilsson will still employ this basic compositional set-up and treatment of the figure.) The three larger players in *Svelt Bearsisters* are swarmed over and under and around and through by a cacophony of smaller creatures who fill every spatial crevice with organic incident, allowing our eye no rest or respite. Her watercolors almost always teem with these assemblages of vignettes, these background episodes that varyingly comment on or amplify or modify the activity of the larger figures. Nilsson's tiny figures are never simply marginalia, or



*The Grammie Day*, 1991, watercolor, 13" x 14 1/8"

just 'extras' who function tangential to her imagery, but instead are an ever-present chorus of witnesses and amenders, who regularly offer visual and narrative nourishment far beyond their minute size. The term "horror vacui," if defined as "fear of an empty space," is too restrictive or negative a spin on what happens in Nilsson's work. Her figural fecundity is not generated out of some desire simply to fill empty areas, or as a fear of pictorial absence, but out of an irrepressible love of incident, a Boschian passion to animate and intensify compositions with a dense carpeting of bodies, with flexible limbs and torsos bending and curving to her will. (Settings are usually reduced to a few zones of

color that act as an attractive backdrop; Nilsson's art is totally driven by figural concerns.) She provides a dizzying but satisfying visual feast, interweaving her characters in infinite variety into what finally can have a mesmerizing effect.

But not a chaotic one. *Tired Out and Resting*, 1977, done after her return to Chicago, has an iconic charm belying its very modest size. Amidst its 19 (!) figures is a meditation on artmaking, led by a sequence of wavy haired female dreamers (the artist herself) who conjure a world where bluish mustachioed men disport painter's brushes like substitute phalli, striding like Egyptian frieze figures now set amid gargantuan and all-encompassing women, two of whom display decidedly bigger brushes. The painting is a gentle dalliance and wistful meditation on art and the interplay between the sexes, and it provides the kind of aesthetic reverie so regularly encountered in Nilsson's oeuvre. In *Laying 12*, 1980, golf—a favorite pastime of Nilsson's, and



*Tired Out and Resting*, 1977, watercolor, 7 7/8" x 14 7/8"



*Laying 12*, 1980, watercolor, 22 1/4" x 30 3/4"

certainly an endeavor that provides a very broad slice of human comedy—receives its transmogrification into Nilsson-land. Its 31 (??!!) duffers flail along with grace and patience, pursuing their elusive quest in this warm-hearted paean to golf's tender absurdities. Nilsson's method of mutating the figure (mutating, however, is such a dark thought; surely these are figures whose anatomical possibilities instead have been magnificently extended and liberated, with exterior contours now more fully manifesting their interior spirit and nature) and her consummate command of her palette create totally palpable but topsy-turvy worlds. Her imaginative invention, her fulsome and indefatigable repertoire of figural incident, create a weaving of corporeal interlace that flows across her compositions with ease and linear beauty. The delicate liquid origins of her imagery in washes of watercolor has it retain an evanescent

quality, a sense of fragility and flexibility that gives these works even more the aura of a dream, of a world that would benefit from our attention and concern.

As the 1980s progressed, Nilsson certainly took her place as an artist of national stature, and she was an important element in the "Who Chicago?" exhibition that toured Great Britain from 1980 to 1981. A 1984 retrospective at Randolph Street Gallery in Chicago, and inclusion in the 1987 "The Chicago Imagist Print" exhibition at the David and Alfred Smart Museum at the University of Chicago were among the many important venues in which Nilsson appeared, and the 1980s also saw her function all over the country as a Visiting Artist *extraordinaire*, and to begin regularly to teach, most notably at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. Nilsson's developing reputation as one of America's premier watercolorists led to her inclusion in a plethora of "Works on Paper" exhibitions.

And, of course, she continued to grow as an artist, and to extend the range of her inquiry. The wonderfully complex *Masquerade*, 1991, summons a slippery symphony of courtship and deception. Things here are never quite what they seem, particularly so in Nilsson's male characters. (One grinning man in the background slyly offers a bouquet of flowers to one woman with one hand, while he tweaks another woman's breast with the other.) Courtship here is a mysterious dance, a ritualized drama of desire and dissembling, with woman's attention the desired prize. The major male

player in this painting shows Nilsson's growing interest in figures that are literally, as well as emotionally, two-faced. He sprouts a flower—like the nymph Chloris from Botticelli's *Primavera*, a painting whose poetic inventiveness has intrigued Nilsson since she saw it on a



*Masquerade*, 1991, watercolor, 22 1/16" x 14 15/16"

visit to Florence in 1972—from one side of his mouth, while on the other side his visage stays more deadpan. This fashion of fluid physiognomy is carried even further in *The Blue Couch*, 1992, a completely amazing painting dominated by a large nude woman who simultaneously functions as model, artist, maternal force, and object of desire. Her acolytes buzz around her in rapt adoration, taking a kind of emotional sustenance from her presence. Her double face, which provides us both profile and full-face views of this mega-odalisque, is a kinder and gentler variation of a device Picasso utilized, most notably in the 1930s. It multiplies potential meanings, making this painting's heroine both an active participant in her own world and, by staring out at us, a self-possessed and cognizant responder to our gaze and function as viewers.

This duality, this investigation into semblance and dissemblance, this imperfect but revelatory mirroring, has been a motivating factor in some of Nilsson's most recent work. A residency at Arizona State University in Tempe in 1992 provided Nilsson the opportunity to do some extensive experimenting with monotype (producing the *Strange Veldt* series), and this led to an intense resurgence in her interest in printmaking, most specifically in an ongoing sequence of etchings. The monotype process has also come to inform her new and particularly vibrant mixed media pieces, which take collaged photographs (largely culled from magazine advertising) and with watercolor additions, create small and precious diptychs with each side basically—but not



*The Blue Couch*, 1992, watercolor, 13" x 20 3/8"

precisely, and not slavishly—faithfully repeating the appearance of the other. The grinning visages of *Pastapasta*, 1993, leer out at us with great aplomb, the very boldness of their coy stare overwhelming the inventive-

ness of their construction. Having photographs of shoes become noses, images of gloves turn into necks, and photos of golf balls evolve into hat adornments, is more than transubstantiation run It raises a sense of the slip-



pages within appearances, and these works become like some Rorschach test of imperfect but playful twinning. Things drift back and forth between zones of recognition, and the slightly askew doubling of the image helps both to undermine and augment it.

Through a glass, obliquely. That's how Gladys Nilsson sees the world, and her work to date has been her personal transcription of the sweet scenarios she regularly discovers everywhere in the world surrounding her. Like some latter-day Pieter Brueghel or Jan Steen, Nilsson has been able to raise humanist genre painting back to the stature of high art. She is a storyteller who also sees in a fundamentally sibyllic way, eschewing realism for something more poetic, more visionary, and more idiosyncratic, beginning with the palpable world and ending in a universe totally of her own creation. To our surprise and delight and embarrassment that universe is filled with people just like us, filled with foibles and weaknesses and needs and desires. Nilsson titled one very small and poignant watercolor *Little Reflections*, 1992, and in its tiny but absorbing expanse is the best argument for her work one could ever imagine. Updating the centuries-old tradition of Vanitas imagery, the lead actress of this piece prisses and preens before a handmirror, adjusting her coiffure, adorning her bonnet, far far lost in the heady seas of self love. But instead of her face there's an impish sprite reflected in her mirror, and he holds out still



*Strange Veldt #3*, 1992, watercolor, monotype #7, 15" x 22 3/4"

another mirror, wherein yet one more face is displayed. Vanity gets turned inside out, its touchingly embarrassing quality of self-adulation revealed, and all this is done with affection and warmth, all recognized with even-handedness and light. This painting is a whisper in watercolor, a congealing of the macro- and microscopic, a serendipitous caressing of the human condition, and it tells us once again the special lesson of Gladys Nilsson—that knowledge is strewn all around us, and that the attempt to understand our humanity is a great and noble pilgrimage. It loses none of its value when it comes wrapped in a smile. ■

GLADYS NILSSON



PLATE 10  
*Night Walking*  
1964



PLATE 11  
*Svelt Bearsisters*  
1970



PLATE 25  
*Playing Threw*  
1987