

GALLERIES

Gladys Nilsson puts whimsy in details

By Lauren Viera
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Whatever opinions you have (or have yet to form) about the Hairy Who, that 1960s-rooted collective of quirky visual artists who earned their kooky name via eponymous shows at the Hyde Park Art Center, Gladys Nilsson is a legend in her own right.

Nearly 70 years old, Nilsson seems to be in her prime, if the current retrospective show at the Ukrainian Institute of Modern Art is any indication. Co-presented by the Illinois State Committee of the National Museum of Women in the Arts, the show spans her entire career, which began in 1966, yet includes a modest 24 works, primarily Nilsson's signature watercolor-on-paper, as well as a handful of forays into other media. And unlike other retrospective exhibits I've seen this year, this edited-down assemblage is just right.

It begins, for no apparent reason, with "Landed," a 2-year-old watercolor and gouache painting courtesy of Jean Albano Gallery, which has acted as Nilsson's prime representative for more than a decade. An upside-down woman is surrounded by trees, a river, boats, a cat; the flesh of the objects is painted blue, purple and orange. Figures are pillowy but full of emotion. There's so much going on at once, yet little vignettes act as entry points.

That's typical Nilsson. And while "Landed" isn't the best of this particular collection, it's a good enough place to start.

Every painting here is quintessential Nilsson and, by association, quintessential Hairy Who: colorful, whimsical, nonsensical, original.

But especially for those who, like this author, have a tendency to shy away from too much whimsy, Nilsson saves us with her technical prowess.

Watercolor, on which so many artists seem to rely for its unapologetic ambiguity, is kept neatly within the lines under Nilsson's charge, lending an organic scope of color to finite particulars.

This brilliant balance of buoyant jubilation and diminutive attention to detail is especially apparent in the newest painting in the room, "Big Birthday

Gladys," completed earlier this year in anticipation of the artist's May admittance into the septuagenarian club.

The massive work features Nilsson at its center, turquoise-stockinged gams and orange heels sprawled in front of her, a world of characters revolving around her. Her expression looks almost blasé, as if to say, "Yeah, I'm old. So what?" and all the hot polloi—a wee spectacled man (perhaps representing her husband, fellow Hairy Whoister Jim Nutt), a team of candle-bearing people and animals—is probably an accurate portrayal of a fraction of the lives she touches on a daily basis, as painter and teacher.

It's an admirable work for many reasons, but there's an Easter-egg treat for those who look closely enough at the bottom edge: There, caught in a black-and-white photograph collaged into the foreground, is a little girl of about 4. She's come a long way since then.

Gladys Nilsson: Works from 1966-2010 at Ukrainian Institute of Modern Art, 2320 W. Chicago Ave., 773-227-5522; uima-chicago.org. Through May 23.

'The Papercut Haggadah' at LUMA

Imagine copying by hand a religious text 55 pages long. Now, imagine copying that same religious text and illustrating it artistically. Now, imagine that your only tools are a scalpel and colored paper stock. Think about it: What might you ponder while working? And how much of your life would you devote to it?

Approximately 10 years is the answer, if you're self-taught paper-cutting artist Archie Granot and treat this arduous task with as much holy respect as you treat the words you're carving into the pages.

Commissioned in 1998 to create a three-dimensional artistic representation of the sanctified Haggadah, which retells the story of the Jews' exodus from Egypt, Israel-based Granot cut each page by hand, utilizing his self-taught knowledge of the traditional Jewish folk-art of paper-cutting.

The results are phenomenal. Marrying ancient Hebrew calligraphy with a modern design

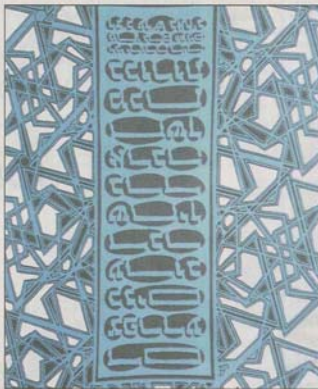


aesthetic. Granot treats each page of his "book" like a work of art. (All 55 are framed here and hung—unfortunately—in Loyola University Museum of Art's hallway annex.) Some pages are more ornate than others, detailed with layer upon colorful layer of paper, hand-cut script adorned with lines and shapes and patterns to dizzying effect.

Perhaps what's most striking about "The Papercut Haggadah" are the few little imperfections that wield themselves into the occasional pushpin-sized rectangles, or in the form of teeny, paper hangnails stubbornly clinging to the tip of a letter, as if to remind us: This is the work of a patient man, but no man is perfect.

"The Papercut Haggadah" at Loyola University Museum of Art, 620 N. Michigan Ave., 312-915-7600; luc.edu/luma. Through May 9.

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Myriad vignettes provide many entry points to Gladys Nilsson's typically colorful works, above. Left, Archie Granot married ancient Hebrew calligraphy with a modern design aesthetic to tell the story of the Jews' exodus from Egypt.