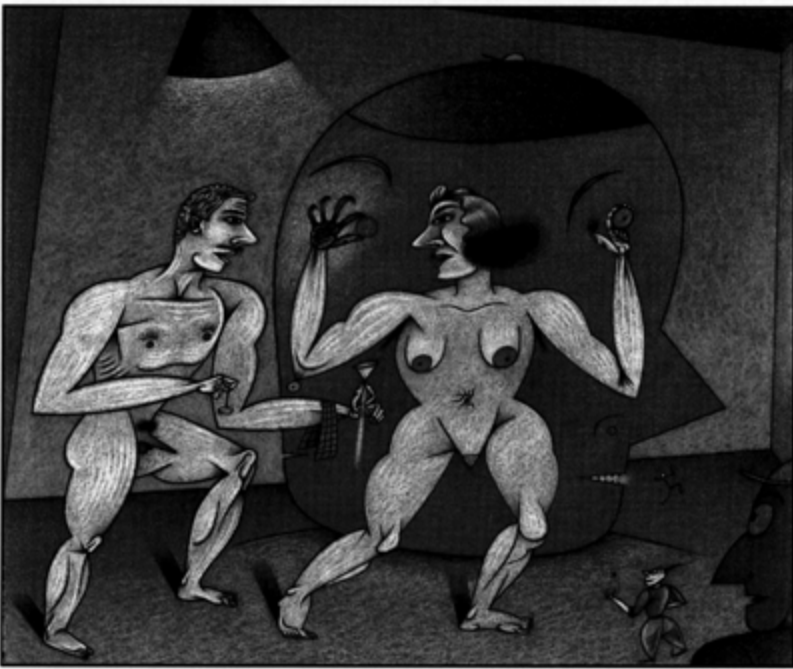


GLADYS NILSSON AND

GLADYS NILSSON



WORKS ON PAPER



JIM NUTT

March 9 – April 13, 1996

University Art Gallery
Staller Center for the Arts
State University of New York at Stony Brook

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I also want to thank the Phyllis Kind Gallery in Chicago, Illinois and Vaughn Kurtz, for their cooperation and assistance in getting the exhibition from Chicago to Stony Brook.

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Most of all, I wish to thank Gladys Nilsson and Jim Nutt for sharing their work with the Stony Brook community.

Rhonda Cooper
Director

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page 3 (bottom)

Cover: (top) GLADYS NILSSON
Me - Myself & I, 1995
Mixed media and watercolor on
paper, 12 x 18"

(bottom) JIM NUTT
I Remember When, 1986
Colored pencil on brown paper, 12½ x 14"

GLADYS NILSSON AND JIM NUTT: WORKS ON PAPER

In 1961 Gladys Nilsson and Jim Nutt married while students at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. They first came to regional and national prominence, if not notoriety, as members of the Hairy Who. Between 1966 and 1969 this informal group of six young Chicago painters staged four collaborative, exuberantly theatrical exhibitions in Chicago, San Francisco, and Washington, D.C. Individual interests and styles notwithstanding, the works of all six artists alluded to popular sources ranging from the comics to commercial advertising. They also favored distortion, strong bright color, wordplay, and a fascination with surface and graphic qualities. These characteristics identified the Hairy Who as delineators of punning imagery that alternated between the shocking and the playfully humorous.

Although Nilsson and Nutt may forever be wed art historically as members of the Hairy Who, they have each created a substantial body of work independent of this short-lived group, of trends in contemporary art that have come and gone, and, yes, of each other. Yet their association by marriage and their pairing in this, their first two-person exhibition in some twenty years, inevitably invites comparison of their efforts.

Working at home in separate studios, both acknowledge each other as sources of influence and admiration—in the same manner that they acknowledge the impact of other artists as diverse as Joan Miró and Joseph Yoakum. Humor, the more nonsensical the better, is one of this couple's strongest points of compatibility, artistically and personally. Their insistence on the mastery of their respective media is marked. So too is their devotion to making personalized, assertive imagery that emphasizes integrating formal and thematic concerns. Both savor working on an intimate scale and wield line and color with devilish flair. Continuing in this vein could readily yield a lengthy study of similarities and differences in the works of Nilsson and Nutt. As useful, even expected, an exercise as this might be, my preference now is sketching how they have each tested themselves in the works on paper that they have produced since the 1960s.

GLADYS NILSSON: "Subtle Dancing"

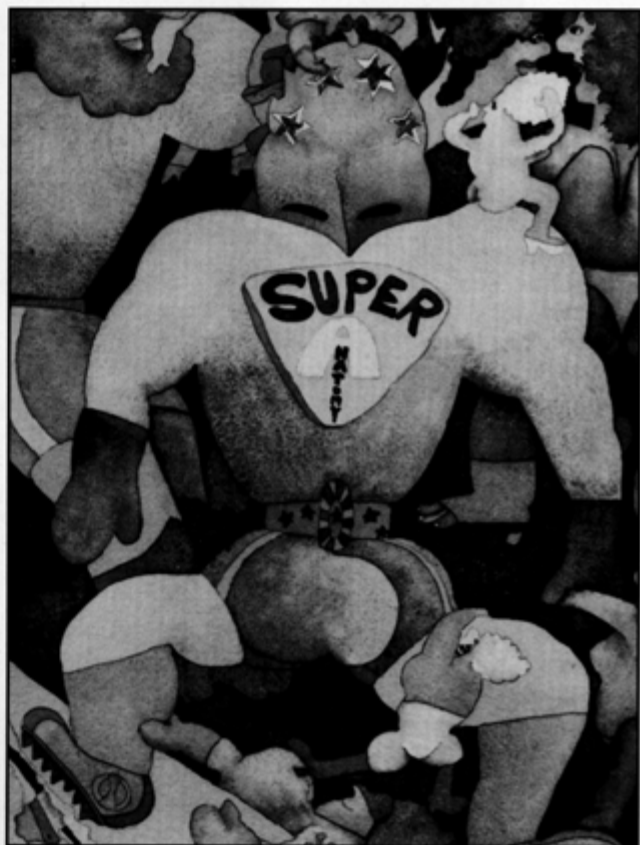
Gladys Nilsson is a highly inventive painter, a fact of artistic identity that can either be overlooked, denied, or confused by those who perceive watercolor as a traditional, even minor, medium or by those who associate working

on paper primarily with drawing. Both stereotypes are anathema to this artist, whose repertoire of materials has included acrylics, Plexiglas, and canvas but whose passion for watercolor and paper has taken precedence since 1962. Moreover, Nilsson "craves intimacy, a private moment, with a small piece of paper," again a preference that knowingly runs counter to the modern equation between ambitious painting and monumental scale.¹

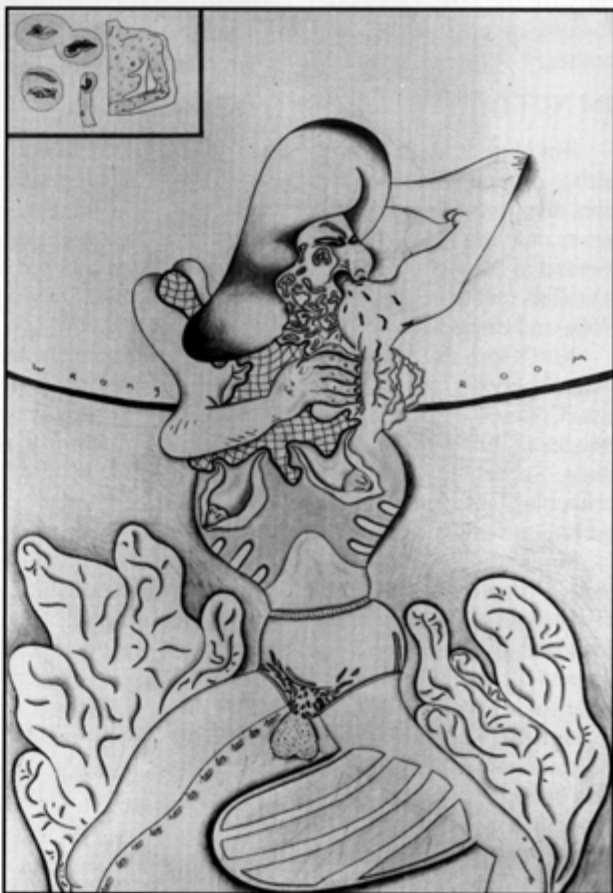
Asserting that small surfaces have afforded her "greater learning distance," Nilsson has consistently set challenges for herself. Drawing preliminarily in pencil or with a brush, limiting her palette in tone or color, working with papers of varying surfaces and sizes, orienting the sheet horizontally or vertically—these are among the ways in which she has avoided falling into easy patterns. Certain constants, however, have also assumed significance. Nilsson "watches her borders," whether in favoring a rectangle's sense of framing or in folding, creasing, and tearing each piece of paper from a larger sheet to achieve a particular size and edge. The concept of border also pertains to her use of zones of color to shift action and mood within a work. Compositionally, Nilsson proceeds from front to back laying in the bigger primary figures first, the smaller ancillary figures later. Enveloping all of this is her romance with transparent watercolor, a medium that she considers both "lovely" and "luscious" and that she associates with the modernist achievements of Emil Nolde, Paul Klee, and Georgia O'Keefe.

In discussing her watercolors, Nilsson cites their "quiet gamesmanship," a likely enough allusion to the subtlety with which she orchestrates formal considerations in building her images. For the artist, the concept applies instead to the emotional sensibility of the exchanges between her female and male figures as well as the conversation between a woman's inner and outer selves that has more recently occurred in both her watercolors and collages. Take your choice—telling glances, caressing gestures, inviting postures, and mirrored glimpses set the stage for the impression that "All of my people like each other."

This is altogether fortunate, since discerning who is playing with whom, let alone why and how, is no small challenge, given the "impossible" space and loosely serial fashion in which these



Gladys Nilsson
Super Dik, 1967
Watercolor on paper, 13 x 8½
Lent by Claude Nutt



Jim Nutt
Ethel in the Salads, 1968
Colored pencil and crayon on paper, 40 x 28½
Courtesy Phyllis Kind Gallery, Chicago, II

loosely serial fashion in which these characters assume various roles. Jaunty costumes, fashionably quirky accessories, and stylish "doos"—often reminiscent of those sported by Nilsson herself—provide alluring clues. Here are body builders "posing down" on and off stage; there are women trying on bathing suits or designer clothes, hoping for a "purfect phytt." How "Leger Faire" can a one-woman construction company be? The artist readily acknowledges that her observations of the day-to-day world trigger the features and adventures of her "people." She is also quick to point out that what all those little figures are doing is often more important, or at least more intriguing, than the activities of their larger counterparts.

Just as the forms of Nilsson's figures have changed over the years—from squatty and tubular in the 1960s to limpid and elongated into the 1980s—so too has her use of color, initially "crude" and direct, and increasingly subtle and nuanced since the 1970s. Being receptive to change has also led her on forays into different media that have helped revitalize her work in watercolor. The need to at least "play" at making art in the midst of major household renovations between 1992 and 1993, for example, brought Nilsson to collage, with which she had first experimented during the 1960s. Snippets from her twenty-year stash of *Vogue* magazines soon found their way onto small sketchbook pages.

The absurdities of life that so tickle Nilsson abound in the world of fashion, where exaggeration, idealization, and stereotypes co-exist with maddening aplomb. Her agenda as an artist, she maintains, has not included tackling "big and pressing issues," and she has preferred to characterize herself as an artist, not a woman artist, not a feminist artist. Nonetheless, both her cutting source and the images that she has built into these recent collages underscore her penchant for critiquing how women see themselves and how others see them in physical and emotional terms.

Mixing media in a single work—magazine paper, watercolor, even some toned paper and gouache for the first time—has also directed Nilsson's interest in "watching her borders" to new formal levels. Having usually alternated between painting watercolors and experimenting with another medium, she is working in two media concurrently for the first time. Nilsson is merrily, indeed deftly, extending the illusions of cut, drawn, and painted elements from one realm into another.

JIM NUTT: "Oh Hello! What's This I See?"

Jim Nutt is a highly inventive painter, a fact of artistic identity that neither diminishes the centrality of drawing in his paintings nor prepares one for the fact that he has produced far more drawings than paintings as independent works over the past three decades. Although not represented in this exhibition, Nutt's works on paper include ink drawings as well as etchings with preparatory ballpoint-pen drawings in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

Nutt's tool of choice, however, is the pencil, and he has given fair-ly equal play to the graphite and colored varieties in his finished drawings. Courses in drafting taken in high school introduced him to the nuances of line, tone, and weight that a pencil can achieve in skilled hands. Subsequent exposure to a rather daunting gamut of the fine, vernacular, and folk arts instilled in him an appreciation of drawing and line as agents for creating expressive form and mood.

Since the 1960s Nutt has developed his ideas for paintings through drawing. Having set for himself the challenge of navigating between the intuitive and the deliberate, he associates drawing with a meandering way of thinking that he finds liberating even as he uses it to marshal a composition: "For years now I've started with an eye rather than a large general shape....So I place the eye somewhere on the page that makes sense to me, and I have an idea—a happy eye, a sad eye, that sort of thing, and I try to draw its character. If I like it, if it's good enough to continue, I leave it there, and then I start to put down a nose that goes with that kind of eye....The image gets built in that manner; things get added or taken away. There is usually lots of erasure and a lot of drawing either disappears or gets hidden."

Technically, Nutt's cartoons for his paintings on Plexiglas in the late 1960s, *I'm Da Vicious Roomer* among them, are just that—full

scale templates placed under the Plexiglas for delineating and adjusting the image prior to painting it in reverse. Done up in harshly contrasting colors, the painting's semi-nude, semi-perforated female is a screamer. Rendered in pencil on tan kraft paper, her cartoon counterpart may be quieter, but her state of discomfiture, not to mention ours, is no less pointed—testimony to the artist's control of line for its graphic intensity.

After 1970, when Nutt shifted to painting on wood, metal, and canvas, comparisons between preparatory drawings and finished paintings reveal a much higher incidence of spontaneity and manipulation in the latter. After drawing a satisfactory arrangement of forms, he has often made a tracing to transfer the image to a prepared canvas. The forms and lines on canvas almost immediately develop different nuances, and while the preparatory drawing remains a point of reference, a painting's "character" soon takes over as he becomes involved with integrating color, pattern, and texture. Unlike the preparatory drawings of many artists, however, Nutt's establish major and subsidiary forms with such structural precision and conceptual confidence that they retain an uncanny life of their own.

Ultimately, however, such drawings are about a painter's formulation and resolution of compositional issues before putting brush to paint. Between 1973 and 1986 Nutt's desire to create images with "magnetic attraction" regularly found its fullest expression in drawing as a medium with an integrity and potential equal to those of painting. Crisp and biting in their linearity, the graphite drawings that preoccupied him during the mid-1970s so invoke the character of etchings that they flirt with fool-the-eye traditions, although this was not the artist's goal. Seduced by steely lines on pristine white paper, the viewer enters decidedly ambiguous yet often humorous scenarios. Have we encountered the actions and conversations of sprites or misfits? In these clearly interior, often stage-like spaces, are the figures internalizing or externalizing relationships between men and women, and just whose perception are we exploring—ours, the artist's or both?

Nutt turns up the heat on these questions in his numerous colored pencil drawings on toned papers that dominated his production between 1977 and 1986. Warm, even sensual in tone and stroke, these drawings are his most intimate works. Both his painted surfaces and graphite drawings are so meticulously gem-hard in their craftsmanship that the artist's hand can actually seem distanced in its presence. Shades of color here, highlights of white there, passages of toned paper left revealed, pencils manipulated for line and color alike—all of these elements provide more direct evidence of the artist at hand in these drawings. Unlike their earlier counterparts, the figures are far less caricaturish, more seasoned than disfigured, and appear in a trimmed cast of paired males and females who more directly engage each other in their "behavioral dialogue." By implication, Nutt has moved closer to his character actors and the reasons he has assembled them. And we move closer also, more persuaded by subtleties that Nutt is exploring "our most real and familiar world" from an empathetic vantage.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: Both Gladys Nilsson and Jim Nutt have used the word conversation to describe their working relationship with their paintings and drawings. Although hardly novel, the concept does capture the informal yet intense give and take that each values in the studio. Both would also maintain that they have tried to refrain from exchanging, comparing, or mingling their conversations. To answer a logical enough question, they have had no interest in collaborating on an art work. Yet one example in this exhibition—*Meating the Dogites*—contains a secret that few ever notice, much to the delight of the artists themselves.²

Lynda Roscoe Hartigan

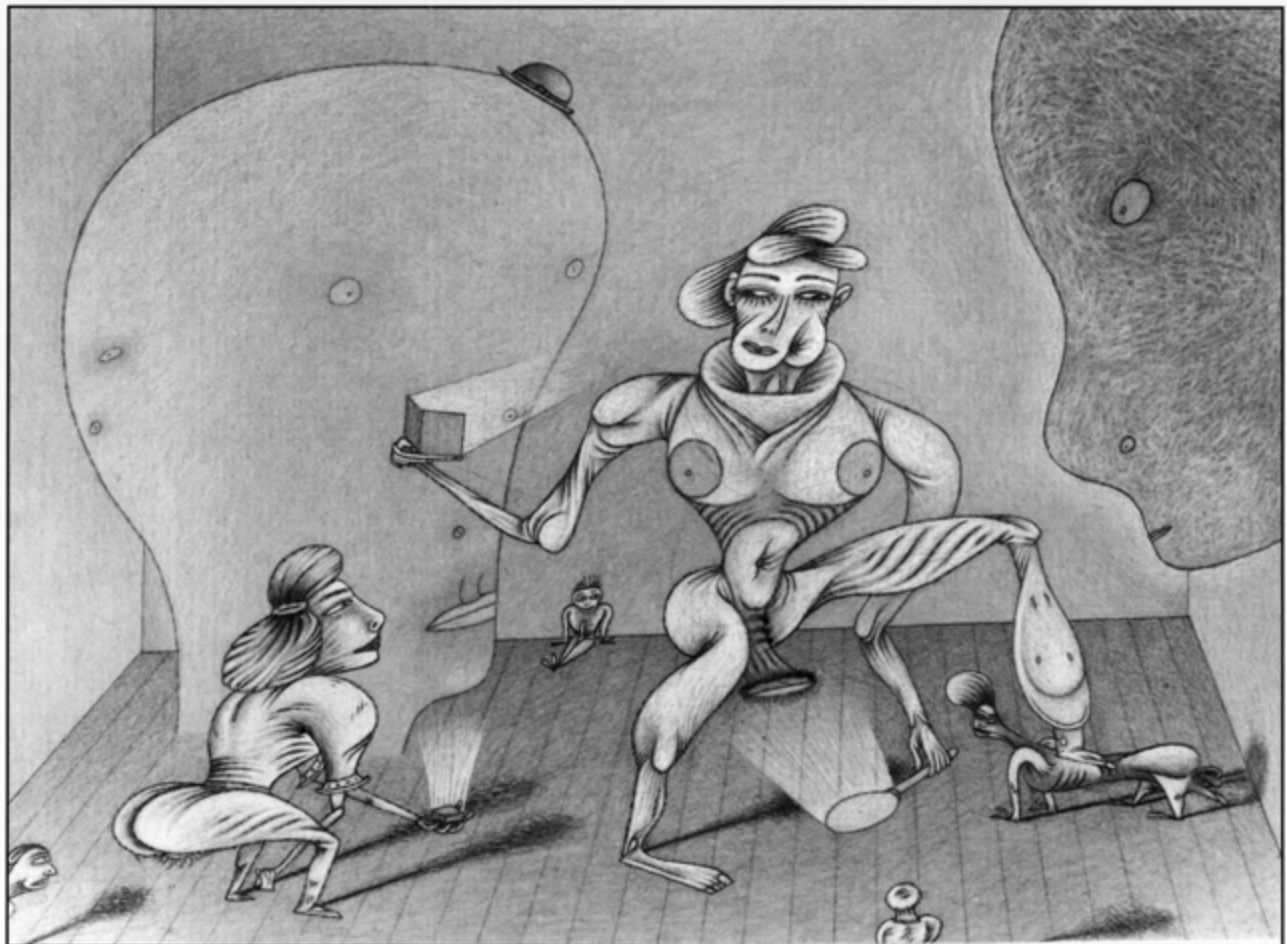
NOTES:

1. Quotations are derived from the author's interviews with Nilsson in January 1996 and with Nutt in December 1993.

2. The secret does not appear upside down or sideways in this publication.



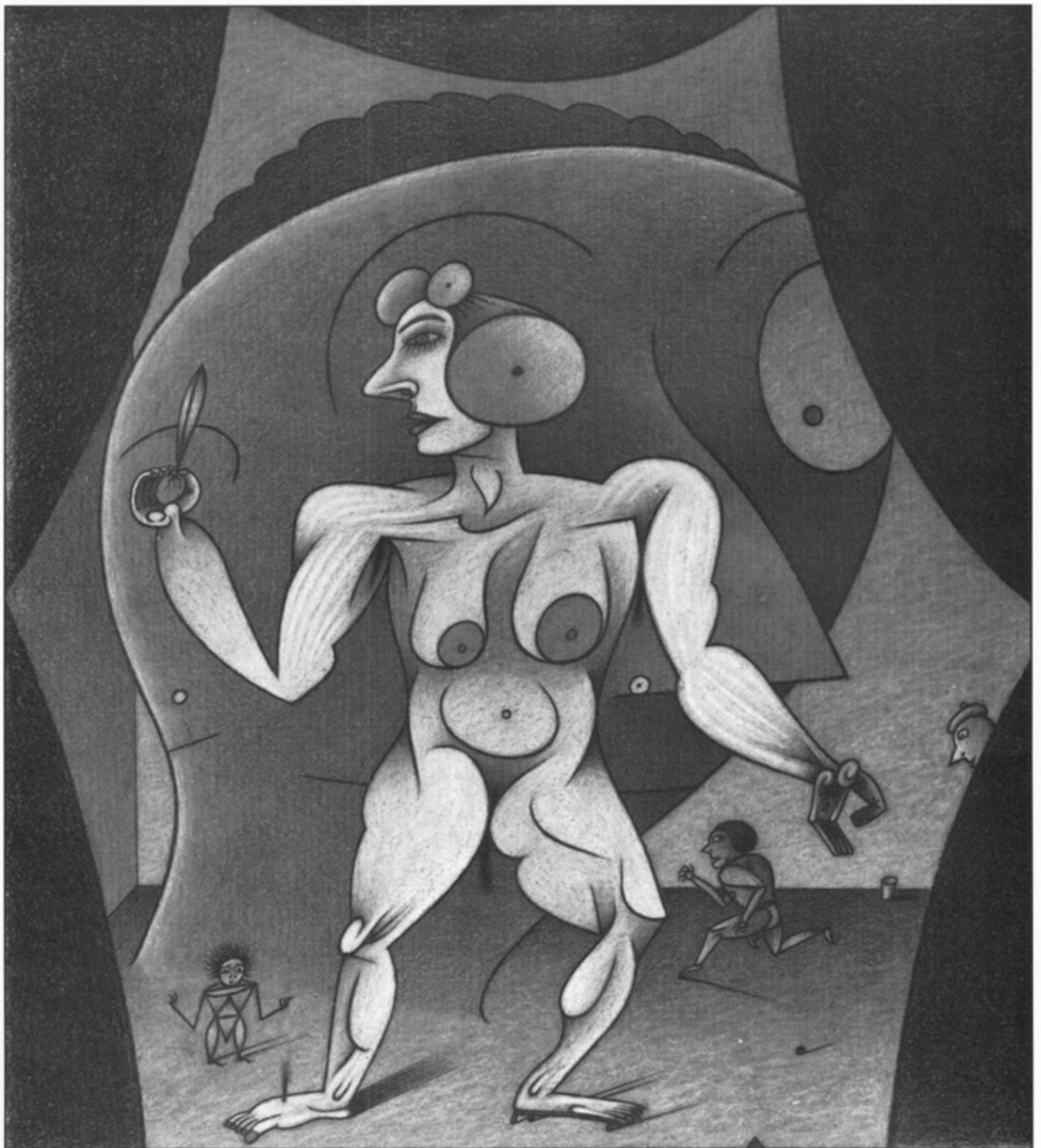
Gladys Nilsson
Meeting Again, 1979
Watercolor on paper, 25½ x 40"
Lent by the artist



Jim Nutt
This is Mine, 1978
Pencil and colored pencil on paper, 11¼ x 10½"
Courtesy Phyllis Kind Gallery, Chicago, IL



Gladys Nilsson
A Perfect Phytt, 1989
Watercolor on paper, 14½ x 10½"
Courtesy Phyllis Kind Gallery, Chicago, IL



Jim Nutt
Keep it!, 1983
Pencil and colored pencil on paper, 11¼ x 10½"
Courtesy Phyllis Kind Gallery, Chicago, IL

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