

GLADYS NILSSON

Dan Nadel, *Hairy Who?* 1966-1969, Artforum, February 2019, p. 164-167



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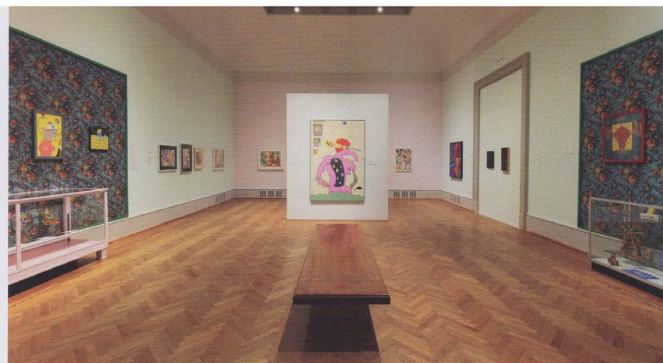
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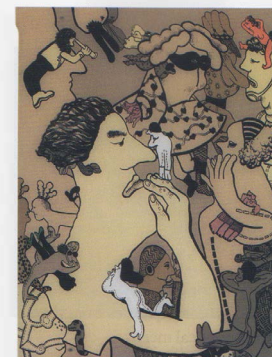
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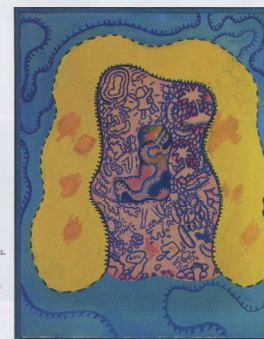




Left: View of "Hairy Who? 1966-1969," 2018-19. Center: Jim Nutt, *Mass E. Knows*, 1967. Below: Art Green, *Untitled*, 1968, silk screen on coated paper, 14 x 11". From the portfolio *Da Hairy Who Rises—For Ya Prince*, 1968.



Far left: Gladys Nilsson, *Big and Little Thinkers*, 1967, acrylic on Plexiglas, 24 x 18". Left: Karl Wirsum, *Baseball Girl*, 1964, acrylic on canvas, 39 x 31". Right: Sudlen Rocca, *Foot Smells*, ca. 1966, oil on canvas, artist's titling, 19 1/2 x 15 1/4".



## "Hairy Who?" 1966-1969"

ART INSTITUTE OF CHICAGO

Dan Nadel

**THE STORY GOES LIKE THIS:** In 1966, friends and recent School of the Art Institute of Chicago graduates Jim Falconer and Jim Nutt approached Ron Baum, director of the Hyde Park Art Center, about mounting a series of small group exhibitions featuring young artists. The first of these, "Hairy Who," comprising works by Falconer, Nutt, Art Green, Gladys Nilsson, Sudlen Rocca, and, at Baum's suggestion, Karl Wirsum, opened later that year. Swiftly embraced by local and national critics, the exhibition announced an open, nondogmatic mode of artmaking, materially polymorphous and engaged with, but not limited to, bodily distortions, wordplay, all-out fantasy, psychosexual desire, and graphic idolatry. It was both vulnerable and aggressive, and included some of the most profound investigations of consciousness and physicality of the past half century. The participating artists' shared sensibility was grounded in an education at SAIC that encouraged a matter-of-fact denial of high-low divides and a notion of art that insisted on equality between Western and non-Western cultures. That was mixed with a local appreciation for European Surrealism and for older peers such as H. C. Westermann and Peter Saul. "Hairy Who" (1966) was followed by five more shows by what

was now an exhibiting entity called "Hairy Who": in Chicago (1967 and 1968), San Francisco (1968), New York (1969), and Washington, DC (1969), each including new and previously exhibited artworks, and accompanied by its own self-published "comic book" containing images made specially for publication.

In the ensuing years, much of this history got muddled. The exhibiting group was often called a collective (it was not) or thought to be made up of psychodelic kooks (emphatically not), and Hairy Who itself was sometimes referred to as a movement (no again). The group was often lumped in with the 1967 "Funk" exhibition at the University Art Museum at the University of California, Berkeley, and was later brought under the unfortunate "Chicago Imagist" umbrella, an interpretation-limiting (but marketing-efficient) term that persists today despite having been left mostly unexplored, exclusions and all, since its coinage in 1972.

Essentially, the Hairy Who was relegated to a sidebar, never quite existing on its own terms. The Art Institute's recent project, organized by Thea Liberty Nichols, Mark Pascale, and Ann Goldstein, was a much-needed "just the facts" examination of the exhibitions, its aim to provide a baseline data set, a springboard for further scholarship. The original shows were summarized in three galleries, with a fourth room functioning as a catchall for additional paintings and a sculpture. The drawing and print galleries two floors below showcased the group's ephemera and each artist's drawing and printmaking activities.

The intensive research is the principal achievement of the exhibition and catalogue. Nichols's catalogue text, "Youth Will Havels Say," stands as the definitive account of the origins and development of the Hairy Who. Nichols also undertook the invaluable task of compiling a cross-referenced checklist of each show so that future scholars can track individual objects across time and cities. The exhibition landed at a crucial moment, providing their respective locations with a salve for young artists alienated

by Pop and Minimalism and offering permission to invent imagery and to mine the psychological and vernacular. The comic-book catalogues found their way into the hands of young people from Dallas to Ann Arbor to Nova Scotia, birthing oddball zines and underground comics along the way.

Little seen since these exhibitions and even more rarely examined in any depth, the artwork itself retains its raw power in part because of an equal concern for surface, material, and image. The renewed interest in it

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today is arguably related to both the surge in emotive graphic and figural painting by young(ish) artists and the critical equivalent of "vouching" for the work by older established painters, including Amy Sillman and Kerry James Marshall. Wirsum emerges as the most complex and inscrutable of the group. In 1966, his advanced sensibility clearly influenced those of his more inchoate peers. Wirsum's ecstatic faces and figures are seamlessly assembled from elaborate patterns and pictorial ideas, with roots in topographic maps, insectoid bodies, and storefront signage. Nutt's rarely exhibited graphite-and-colored-pencil drawings of 1968-69, with their intimations of John Graham and Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, foreshadow his turn to near-Flemish portraiture, a body of work that represents the most delicate yet probing approach to deformation and sexual exploration imaginable. Rocca seems a progenitor of many young graphic artists today, baring a coquettish sexuality in some of the largest paintings here—at almost heroic (for Chicago)

scale, festooned with glyphs of dancing couples, palm trees, hats, and other objects of midcentury desire. Thanks to his preoccupation with soft-serve cones, urban spaces, and scaffolding, Art Green emerges as the metaphysical architect of the group, and the one with the deepest roots in historical Surrealism and contemporary Pop—from Giorgio de Chirico's buildings to James Rosenquist's ice cream. Nilsson's litting fantasias on Plexi and paper, always on the verge of collapse, are self-contained narrative worlds, while Falconer's rubber-hose figure paintings, drawings, and collages evince the most direct connection to both Saul and what was then known as tribal art.

Though there were impresarios and a couple of critics in Chicago at the time (including the late Whitney Halsey), who reviewed some of the exhibitions for this magazine, and the late Dennis Adrian, whose essays offer the most compelling commentary on the city's art in the '60s and '70s), there was not a thoroughgoing exchange of ideas, and the artists themselves tended to speak obliquely, refusing to offer either theory or explanation for the work. Toss that in with the general historical confusion, and the task for any ambitious curator or historian is pretty clear. And it's here that the Art Institute stumbled.

**THE PRIMARY PROBLEM** was the installation strategy, specifically the effort to summarize each of the original exhibitions. From the start, these synopses were hobbled: The shows occurred in just a four-year span, with artworks often repeated in each, and the gallery space reserved for the retrospective couldn't have held all of them anyway. Object labels included the exhibition(s) and date(s) of presentation, and some excellent interpretive passages, but aside from short wall texts describing each, there were no visual cues to demarcate the years and displays. There is a notable difference between a 1966 and a 1969 Jim Nutt, but after one passed more than one hundred densely packed works by six artists, gauging any sense of continuity was impossible. The

Chicago and Washington, DC, exhibitions were known for their artist-determined hangs and immersive environments: linoleum-covered walls, furniture, cases filled with artifacts, and other odds and ends. But the 2018-19 reconstructions fell flat—neither faithful to the feel of the original nor a logical extrapolation—especially when compared to the photographs in the catalogue. You can't go home again, especially when home was a series of funky spaces customized by the artists a half century ago. To attempt half measures is pointless.

This is not a problem unique to "Hairy Who?" It is inherent to the recent focus on the exhibition as a medium unto itself and the urge to show muscums how artworks were first or most crucially exhibited. This is an essentially generous gesture, offering as much context as possible in order to best demonstrate the artist's intentions and/or how something might have been experienced in its first presentation. But this approach is better in book or film form, where a necessarily verbal story can be told in full. As Claire Bishop noted in the March 2014 issue of *Artforum*, "A dynamic exhibition history needs to present the show under discussion as a complex node of competing and contradictory forces while also paying close attention to the exhibition as a medium." Importantly, the Hairy Who exhibitions were influential less for their form as exhibitions than for the artworks they put on display. The same can be said for numerous venerated shows. This key difference, also elucidated by Bishop, is rarely noticed in the contemporary rush of rediscoveries, meta-histories, and over celebration of the curator. In my less freehearted moments, I wonder if the rage for re-creation is a product of some constellation of boredom with singular art objects, doubts about the relevancy of the subject, and a preference for neatly packaged "experiences" over scholarship.

Negative thoughts aside, there's some irony that it took the vogue for exhibition history to finally get the Hairy Who the attention it deserved, only to have that very exhibition-centric curatorial format be the show's

undoing. A more successful approach would have been to save the forensics for the catalogue and make the best possible installation of the works from all six shows. This would have privileged the artwork over a series of long-ago exhibitions and resulted in a stronger case for the individual artists.

The drawing-and-print sections suffered from a different kind of confusion. Falconer, Green, and Rocca are represented solely with Hairy Who-era works, while a wider array of objects and ephemera from the '60s to today by Nilsson, Nutt, and Wirsum was exhibited without any explicit rationale. And while the exhibition stretched to the present, it did not expand in any other way. One would hardly have known that the very same museum that contained this retrospective also incubated the contributing artists. All of them attended the School of the Art Institute and walked through the museum to attend classes, and all of them credit that as a formative experience. The AIC's collection of global art lives in the DNA of the Hairy Who. But rather than recognize and explore this relationship—rather than offer layers of meaning using the museum's own collection—the curators sealed the Hairy Who's work off in the very museum that played a decisive role in its creation. The catalogue partly remedies these omissions with a strong essay by Richard Hull exploring the Hairy Who's connections to sixteenth- and seventeenth-century painting and a concise summary by Pascale of the contemporary and historic art on view in Chicago in the early to mid-'60s. That the artwork and exhibitions made in the name of the Hairy Who continue to confound easy explanation and display while generating so many fruitful lines of inquiry is a testament to the group's enduring strength, and I'm grateful that it is finally receiving major institutional support. The question in the exhibition's title has been answered. Now it's time for more. [E]

DAN NADEL IS A WRITER AND CURATOR BASED IN NEW YORK. HIS BOOKS INCLUDE THE COLLECTED HARRY WHO PUBLICATIONS 1966-1969 (MARTIN MARKS, 2015) AND CHRIS MARTIN: PAINTINGS (SKIRA, 2018).