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Oral history interview with Gladys Nilsson, 2008 Aug. 9

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Gladys Nilsson on 2008 Aug. 9. The interview took place at Congress Hotel in Chicago, IL, and was conducted by Kathy Goncharov for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

This transcript has been lightly edited for readability by the Archives of American Art. The reader should bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

KATHY GONCHAROV: We're interviewing Gladys Nilsson in the lobby of the Congress Hotel [Chicago, IL].

So when were you born and where?

GLADYS NILSSON: Well, I was born in Chicago, May 6, 1940. And my mother is – was very fond of telling the story of going to the hospital in her fur coat because it was a blizzard.

MS. GONCHAROV: [Laughs.] Of course, being Chicago, yeah.

MS. NILSSON: [Laughs.] And I've never been able to – well, I haven't bothered tracking down, was there actually a blizzard the day I was born?

MS. GONCHAROV: And you stayed in Chicago since?

MS. NILSSON: Yeah, for the most part. I mean, there was the period of time for almost eight years when my husband, Jim Nutt and I, lived out in California between August '68 and January '76.

MS. GONCHAROV: Oh, okay. How was that in California? Where were you and what were you doing, and was that –

MS. NILSSON: Well, he had gotten a job offer to teach at what was then Sacramento State College. But now they've changed the name to absorb it into whatever the university system is. And if they paid your – they paid your way for moving there, if you stayed there for two years. And if you stayed there for one year, you'd have to pay half of the cost back. So we thought, hm, we could manage for two years.

And it was a very easy place to live. I mean, California is very laid back. And this was the first time that we had a steady job of, you know, more than just pick-up salary, health insurance. So we stayed out there long enough. We were there for probably about two years, and we decided that we wanted to change the house. We wanted to get a different living accommodation. The question was whether we would stay in California or move to the Bay Area or move back to the Chicago area. But we decided that we – we even stayed in the same neighborhood. We just bought a house a block away and taught – he taught on and off for that period of time, and then I taught on and off on a part-time basis there.

MS. GONCHAROV: At Sacramento State, too?

MS. NILSSON: Yeah, at Sac State. And it was very easy. And I think things in Chicago had gotten, well, during that time very hectic for us. And we really needed to step back and reevaluate ourselves as artists and all that kind of stuff and really spend some time focusing on ourselves as individual artists rather than artists in the group that we were with. And this happened at a very convenient time. And it was like a no-brainer.

MS. GONCHAROV: So this was right after the first Harry Who show?

MS. NILSSON: Right – no, right after the third Harry Who show, which we knew was going to be the last. I mean, it was pointless to keep having Harry Who shows. And it was a good period of time in California, because we really had a lot less distractions than we had living, you know, here in this area, the Chicago area. And it really did allow us to make some concrete decisions and jumps in terms of studio work, what we were doing. And it was very beneficial, very beneficial. But after a period of time, we realized that we didn't want to stay there anymore. [Laughs.] It was like, "Oh, oh, oh, I don't want to sit under a tree for the rest of my life," not that that's what we were doing.

But it was very curious to come from Chicago, with its radical climate change, and to move into a place that, if you want snow you had to get in the car and drive up to the Sierras or something like that. Winter, you know, was usually, you know, anywhere from 50 degrees and rain, as opposed to 23 below zero, when you know you've

conquered the world by taking the garbage out, that kind of thing. And everything that we were really interested in art-wise – we had a lot of friends still in this area. And we decided, well, I think we've solved a lot of problems, or whatever, and wanted to move back here.

So it took us probably about a year-and-a-half or so to do it, or a year. I had come back for a show at – whatever. Was visiting my parents and looked all up and down. We decided we wanted to relocate in the North Shore area, anywhere along the lake, any of the suburbs because the school system was so much better then. The Chicago school system – and I, you know, always had a small bit of guilt that one wasn't willing to go into the Chicago school system, since I'm a product of the Chicago school system, and conquer any negativity that there might be, you know, work hard for the schools.

It's a little different, you know, when you have a kid and you think, no, I want the best schools there are. And it was easier living, whatever. And it took us a long time, a couple of trips, before we found the house that would accommodate two artists, with studios and needs and be in a good school district, and so on. So we've lived in the house that we're in now since January, like 15th or 17th, 1976. [Laughs.]

MS. GONCHAROV: Okay. [Laughs.]

MS. NILSSON: And I still feel like we just moved there. But that's a long time to be under one roof. But California was good. But we just kept making more and more trips back to this area, and it became senseless for us to stay there.

MS. GONCHAROV: So let's go back to your early years. So you were born here, you went to public school.

MS. NILSSON: Yes.

MS. GONCHAROV: When did you decide you wanted to be an artist?

MS. NILSSON: I think I decided I wanted to be an artist the minute I had Crayolas in my hand. It was something that I had always wanted to do. I was always drawing and, you know, doing the creative little odds and ends with stuff. And when I got into high school – which I went to Lakeview High School, which was the high school that was used for the film *My Bodyguard* – and it was very fun to see that, long after the fact. I took art as a minor and took a lot of art classes and had one –

MS. GONCHAROV: This was in college?

MS. NILSSON: No, in high school.

MS. GONCHAROV: No, still in high school.

MS. NILSSON: Had one art teacher named Helen Wick that was very encouraging to me, to do. And it didn't occur to me that I shouldn't go to art school, the Art Institute [School of the Art Institute of Chicago], you know. While I was in grammar school, I and another girl that I was friends with, who also had somewhat of a talent for art, went to some of the junior school classes at the Art Institute that they had. We got these little scholarships, where we, you know, didn't have to pay for any of them, but we'd just come downtown and go. And that, I think, was – that was the turning point. I really wanted to be involved with that on more than just some little hobby kind of thing to occupy my time when I would come home from wherever I would be working. This was really something I wanted to do.

MS. GONCHAROV: So did you understand what it meant to be an artist, to be a fine artist, at that age? Or did you know artists?

MS. NILSSON: I'm not sure, in that sense, although certainly by the time I started going to the Art Institute, I knew exactly what it meant to be a, you know, quote-unquote, that fine art, being a fine art person. I knew that you could, number one, never make a living at it. [Laughs.] There were no – you know, oh, I'm going to make a million dollars by selling my first painting. I mean, any of that kind of foolishness that everybody that I knew that went there knew that they had to have a job, whether it was selling shoes or waiting table or anything like that, to make a living. Maybe you'd be lucky enough to sell a little piece or two if you were lucky enough to find a wall with somebody walking by. You know, it was hard.

But – well, as it is for anybody in the creative field. I mean, it's – you know, people have to buy bread to eat. But they don't have to go out and buy, you know, a manuscript or a piece of music or a painting or a poem or anything like that. You know, it's a real luxury item. Although, Joan Mondale once said that art is food for the soul. And that's sort of is very true and very important.

So I went to the Art Institute. I had graduated from high school in January. So that meant I had the semester, where I was just working in the – at a department store and didn't start until September on that, which was – "I

can't wait to get there."

MS. GONCHAROV: So who did you study with at the Art Institute?

MS. NILSSON: I had a variety of whatever faculty were there. It wasn't, you know, like, oh, I went there to, you know, take drawing from Douglas Craft. I happened to have Douglas Craft. And actually, he was our homeroom teacher, which I thought, oh, this is kind of strange. You had a homeroom. But he also taught drawing, and I took drawing from him. I had John Fabian for drawing. I had Tom Kapsalis for drawing. A number of other people whose names I've long since forgotten.

But the general survey classes that – they were mandatory for incoming students in art history were taught at that time by Katherine Blackshear, who had worked with Helen Gardner and one or two other people for putting together the book *Art Through the Ages*. And she was – Blackshear was quite an interesting-looking person. She would stride out in Fullerton Hall on the stage. She had – always wore – and we students would envision that she had many suits of the same kind of dark blue serge suit.

And she had a big pointer, because she might have to point at the screen, sensible shoes. And she always stood with her feet one – you know, her heels sort of together, but one slightly in front of the other, one hand behind her back, and had a lot of interesting, knowledgeable things, obviously, to say about art, although there were always kind of funny things that would come in. She came in one day to warn us all from standing too close to some of the big buildings because the cornices were starting to fall. [Laughs.]

MS. GONCHAROV: [Laughs.]

MS. NILSSON: Somewhere along the line, I discovered that I really liked art history. And I think maybe you had like, it was mandatory to take the survey classes for two years. But I ended up taking every art history class I could cram in. And I figure I probably had five years in four years time. But one of the faculty that was kind of – either he substituted for Blackshear once or twice, or had special classes that he was taking, because he was a young man at the time, Whitney Halstaff. And Whitney – Jim and I became very good friends with him after the fact, because Jim ended up running his projector in one or two classes, and so on and so forth.

But Whitney had a number of classes in art history that would be taught on a rotation basis, so you'd have to wait a year before you could take, you know, this art of the Belgian Congo, or Dada and surreal class and so on. And I even went to summer school to take some of his classes, which was very agonizing, because you'd sit in a little un-air-conditioned room in the basement of the school, kind of desperately trying not to fall asleep, which nobody could quite conquer.

But Whitney taught art history with the idea that you looked at a lot of art, and you really begin to make your own mind up about whether something – obviously, if something resonates with you, you'd have a reaction to it. But he exposed you to enormous amounts of visual material. And I just couldn't get enough of it.

And to this day, too, if I go to – you know, manage to go to CAA [College Art Association] conferences or something like that, I always will sit and try to look at a lot of stuff.

MS. GONCHAROV: So what artists were you most interested in at that time?

MS. NILSSON: At that time?

MS. GONCHAROV: In the art history classes, yeah.

MS. NILSSON: Well, Max Beckman, James Ensor were two that I really made a cerebral connection with. And that stayed. But it was more – and Katherine Blackshear had taught – the premise of the Helen Gardner book, was that you looked beyond Western art. And they were really encouraging, and Whitney was really encouraging, and looking to other cultures to find things, so that you would look at ethnographica and get the same kind of resonance within yourself that you would, looking at [Hans] Holbein or a [Oskar] Kokoschka or, you know, [Hans] Memling, or anything like that.

So there were a number of artists that – I mean, too many for me to even remember. But Beckman and Ensor, certainly, right off the bat were just – and then going back into, you know, Duccio, Giotto, and then work your way forward, certain things. And I became really fascinated by the use of space or lack of space in Beckman's pieces and Ensor, some treatments, also the same where you really have this distortion that goes on. And that is something that I filed away for my own use, as well as – and someone just – someone said to me when I was giving a talk on my work quite a few years back, you know, saying, "Oh, well, you also suffer from a horror vacui."

And I couldn't hear him, quite. And I said, "What? What?" He said, "Your horror of the vacuum." "Oh, yes, well,

that's true. I do. I do." I can't – you know, I think – Jim and I saw a show at the Guggenheim – probably back in like '63 or '4 – of Munch, who is another one that I dearly love. And some of the pieces that Munch had – that they had of Munch's in that show were these large, standing portraits of industrialists. So here were all these more-than-life-size men standing with very imposing postures in the middle of – I mean, there wasn't much else going around except maybe scumbled color or something.

And I was so taken with those that I would dearly love to do just some big, imposing portrait. That's it. [Laughs.] But the minute I might start to say, "Well, I'm going to really strip a lot of the things that I'm involved with and just have this big, standing figure," it doesn't work. Because in my mind, the figure has to interface with something else. So then another figure gets added. And that's not enough. And then another figure. And then before you knew it, you know, the whole piece of paper was filled with figures, anyway.

MS. GONCHAROV: So they emphasized in the art history classes non-Western, which is interesting. Did that have a lot to do with the rest of the Harry Who people? Because it's very different from other places.

MS. NILSSON: Well, I think that since we were – well, we are different from one another. But I think we all had the same kind of classes. And it was not like emphasizing non-Western art. It was telling you that you can look beyond Western art and find something that is important for you to do, not excluding Western art, but just looking beyond it.

And then even looking beyond the term "art," with quotation marks around it, and think of things like street signs or strange juxtapositions that the surrealists might have been enamored with. I mean, driving up to Detroit – it's been quite awhile. But you'd round a bend in the road, and here would be this big tire. Or thinking of some of the – you know, like the Brown Derby restaurant or the Oscar Mayer Weinermobile, I mean things there were sort of very incongruous.

MS. GONCHAROV: I'm from Detroit. I know all those. [Laughs.]

MS. NILSSON: Oh, yes, yes, yes. [Laughs.]

MS. GONCHAROV: So what non-Western art were you most interested in?

MS. NILSSON: Well, Whitney would have some problems that you would have to go and sit in front of things at the Field Museum, the Field Museum of Natural History, tribal things, African things. Oh, you could pick anything in the museum, but you had to sit there and do your drawing. You couldn't take a picture of it. You couldn't buy a postcard of it and take it home to your place. You had to sit there and do your drawing and examine it for certain properties – line, dot, mass, et cetera.

And so in any of the tribal arts, thinking of – well, Native American art, African, Oceanic, New Guinea, amass them all. Maybe it's incorrect to say "tribal art." But any of that kind of what used to be called primitive art, where it was made for a certain function, but it was made with a different kind of intent than, you know, stamping out a plastic spoon, which has its own function.

So there were a lot of mainly that kind of ethnographica – that I really am drawing towards. Non-Western art in terms of Asian art, I have certain appreciations for certain things. But the first department in any museum, you know, I would say, I'm going to go and see what the African art might have.

MS. GONCHAROV: What was your work like at that time?

MS. NILSSON: Oh, well, how far back are you going? [Laughs.]

MS. GONCHAROV: Well, in school.

MS. NILSSON: In school? Well, I was stumbling around –

MS. GONCHAROV: Well, actually, no. What did you do when you were a kid? What kind of drawings did you do as a kid?

MS. NILSSON: When I was a kid? Well, I suppose the obvious drawings – well, I liked paper dolls. I liked the, you know, cutting out and doing that. And then I would draw the clothes, draw my own clothes for them, and, you know, make up outfits for paper dolls. I remember once in grade school, I and my friend that also came down to the Art Institute classes, we had a project – because we were such good students and our grades were so good that we were excused from doing certain things.

And we did this big mural on brown paper of cows. I don't know what it was for. I have no idea. I just remember, well, we drew cows. So I think it was like any kid. I think being encouraged to automatically go towards representational things – I mean, I don't know the how and why of acquiring, learning, divesting oneself

of abstract art. I have no clue as to how that takes place. I've liked certain things –

MS. GONCHAROV: Have you ever tried it, abstract?

MS. NILSSON: Yeah. But it doesn't make any sense to me because it doesn't have the decisions that I make in terms of what I do. I couldn't make anything make any sense out of it. It was just all like old scribble. And that wasn't anything that I wanted to follow. So I was all – you know, based on, oh, can you draw a tree? Or can you do this, that, and the other thing?

And I fumbled around in school a lot. I always did whatever the faculty – if they had projects. I mean, I drew life – you know, models in life class and did all the things. But nothing ever made any sense to me. I had no direction, no personal direction.

And then somewhere along the line when I was in my last year, I – through the school years, there were, you know, people that you like and people that you are not quite sure about, people that maybe you don't like and so on. And you see them here, there, and everywhere. And there was one point when I walked into the lunchroom and all the people that I had weird reactions like that to were all seated at the same table, talking to each other. And I had up until that point no idea that they knew each other. And that was kind of like, "Whoa." That was – that little, tiny experience led me to do a painting in my painting class of all of these people. You know, they had masks on. They had sharp tongues. They were false people sitting around this table, a lot of atmosphere around it – and a good painting, but it was a very key moment in time. [Laughs.]

And from that point on, I decided that you could really have the personal entering into what you were doing. And I was never encouraged in any of the classes that I took to let the personal get into it. You always had to draw what was in front of you, or maybe think about the landscape outside, but draw the landscape or paint the landscape or paint the still life or paint the model or something, but not invent something.

And there was one critique when I got a lot of static [laughs] because this one faculty person said, "You have no business in doing something personal when you're in art school." [Laughs.] And I thought, well, "Uh." But that was sort of – that was the point, that little key – that key painting and that key vision of all these people that I really didn't care for, who all happen to know one another. I mean, it was overwhelming, the experience.

And that really led into taking in, digesting, and letting whatever my inner thoughts might be come out. And it was very strange because when you're in art history classes and you're looking at things like abstract painting or like the distortions that some artists might do, distortions of time and space like Beckman or the Surrealists and the Dadaists who were definitely playing with things in that manner. But you couldn't do it in art class.

Which is why in my class I'm encouraging – oh – you know, and I'm sure other people. There's a lot of time that has passed since, you know, the late '60s, early '60s. Well, I started in '58 to '62, that's right, so the early '60s in terms of how one might think about how you do art, what – how you invest your inner core in it.

And it took a long time for me to, even playing with those ideas, to really arrive at what one might say is the style that I do. But early pieces, say, mid- to late '60s, are simple, you know, blocking. I think I've gained certain lyrical [laughs] passages in drawing lines and, you know, shapes and things like that. It's all evolved into that. But at the beginning, they were very crude in terms of just simplicity. The use of color was more primary than it is now. I mean, the kind of color that I play with now, versus the kind of color that I didn't even have to play with then. I mean, it's just worlds of difference.

MS. GONCHAROV: What kind of painting were you doing? Were you oil painting?

MS. NILSSON: Yeah, oil painting in class, yeah. And then, you know, I had met Jim in art school. We got married. And not too long before I was graduating, he was still in. He was a transfer student, so he was kind of here and there. I was pregnant and had the – was thinking about being clean. You know, we have this tender little baby skin. And there were a couple of kids that I knew in class that had developed horrible allergies to oil paint and turpentine and that. I mean, terrible, where you'd think their flesh was rotting off themselves. They had to wear big rubber gloves. And they still were – and that kind of freaked me out, thinking about – ooh. I didn't have a problem with it, but I didn't want to have stuff like that.

So I began experimenting with watercolor, thinking that that's, you know, the optimal in cleanliness if I'm going to have a medium. Acrylic wasn't –

MS. GONCHAROV: Did you study watercolor in school?

MS. NILSSON: No, no, I didn't.

MS. GONCHAROV: So you taught yourself?

MS. NILSSON: It was – so strict – strictly – that's why it took me a long time. It's not an easy medium.

MS. GONCHAROV: No, it certainly isn't.

MS. NILSSON: And some people really, you know, can jump into it. And other people have to learn how to make it do what they want to make it do.

In any case, acrylic hadn't been invented yet. Or it was just coming into – because I remember Jim and went somewhere. I can't remember if we went back into a classroom after – like at some point in the early '60s, when Shiva - was it Shiva? Or acrylic – but in any case, acrylic paints. So I did kind of start fooling around with that. But it was mainly painting in oil paint at that time, which I could never master. There are certain rules that you should follow for reasons, physical reasons that I couldn't – you know, I was always wanting to paint lean over fat and mix it all up and do all kinds of stuff. But I was just, ah-ah-ah-ah, just paint, you know.

But watercolor really solved the problem of having a new baby because it never occurred to me that I should stop working. I mean, all these things that happened to a lot of other women in art school that – well, and I can remember when Jim and told some of our neighborhood cronies, where we lived on North and Wells, you know, the "Oh, having a baby." "Oh, she'll never paint again." "What do you mean I'm never going to paint again?" Because they had, you know, husbands and wives that met in art school, and then when the children started coming, the wife automatically stopped painting. She never did anything again. But it never occurred to me that that's what I would do. I mean, my kid would be in the playpen, and if I painted, you know, "Mommy's painting now," you know? That kind of thing.

Never occurred to me that I couldn't read, either – you know, couldn't continue reading big books because, you know, I wouldn't have any time to. I would sit with Claude in his little bouncer thing, and I'd be reading Thomas Mann aloud to him because - [They laugh.] But no, as far as painting was concerned, it never occurred to me that I couldn't continue being an artist. I mean, looking back on myself, it was unbelievable focus that I must have had.

First off, my parents really didn't want me to go to art school. And there was no way I was not going to go to art school.

MS. GONCHAROV: What did they want you to do?

MS. NILSSON: Well, I come from a blue-collar background. And my mom was always telling me, "You could become a hairdresser or a waitress, because people always have to eat, and somebody will always want to go eat outside the house. And a woman will always want to have her hair done sometime." And those were the two things. Maybe I could be a secretary, but it was, you know, waiting a table or being a hairdresser. And there was no way I was going to do, you know, those things.

But after I started, you know, fooling around, allowing myself X amount of time to play with watercolor – and I had, you know, cheap, student-grade paint, cheap, student-grade brushes, cheap, student-grade papers. But when it became apparent that there was something that was happening with me – I mean, it clicked. And however it is that a stone carver finds that he or she is supposed to carve stone, or a welder or a painter, whatever, you know, that happened with me. And Jim was really encouraging that I start to buy good materials, you know. Money was not around that much, but I had, you know, started to get good watercolors, good brushes, and good papers. And that makes an enormous amount of difference, too.

And the more and more I worked with it, the more and more I felt my way through how to make it do what I needed to have it do. And it's been that way ever since, although I've had little adventures with other mediums every now and then when I need to take some inexplicable break from this.

MS. GONCHAROV: Ah, like what?

MS. NILSSON: Oh, well, I've done, you know, little periods of time where I have gone back to painting on canvas, with acrylic – can handle it a little better than I used to be able to. There was about a two-and-a-half year period in '70 – '71, '2, and then '3 where I still – but I still was doing some watercolors, but mainly doing some canvas work, then back to watercolors. And then in '80, I did some acrylic paint. And then in the early '90s, I did some more acrylic work, but with some collage entering into it. And collage is something that I will fall back on every now and then.

When I would be traveling around to places, I started taking my little camera with and taking snapshots of places that I was at. And I'd always have doubles made, and I'd send things to my mom. Because I would do a lot of – I mean, even if it did it a couple of times a year, that was a lot – visiting artists' things. And I always wanted to let her see where I was, what I was doing. So I'd have all of these snapshots. Well, I've got huge amounts of snapshots.

Somewhere along the line, I started to incorporate them with a few watercolors, the snapshots, cutting them up, putting them in, having a little fun. And then I started – I did a whole period of time in '03 where I was just using these snapshots themselves and then collaging onto them and altering whatever the reality is that is in the snapshot. And this past summer, I've gone back to, you know spending a couple of months just doing that.

You know, you have the plaza where the group of four or five buildings by the Leaning Tower of Pisa. And then other things might, you know – that kind of alteration, but just fun. And sometimes, you have to have fun. I have fun doing my watercolors, but this is fun of a different sort.

MS. GONCHAROV: So these snapshots are places? And you put figures into the place?

MS. NILSSON: They are – I put figures or alter – you know, put windows or whatever. They are just the little four-five-six snapshots that I'm cutting up. And I subscribed to *Vogue* magazine for years; God knows why. It's so outrageous. And that's my collage material, is from *Vogue*.

MS. GONCHAROV: Oh. [Laughs.]

MS. NILSSON: [Laughs.] Very specific. Jim said, "Well, how do you know the paper is archival that they use?" I said, "Well, you know, I don't." So I spent one morning calling *Vogue* magazine. I mean, literally, I thought, "Well, you know, he's got a very valid point," because I like to be, you know, archivally correct if I possibly can, use good materials, you know, neutral pH, nonacid, this and that. So I spent a morning going from one department to another, being seriously referred to these departments, until I ended up in the printing department. And I spoke with a man, and I told – I explained, you know, I was very candid, saying that I was an artist and I was using *Vogue* as my means of – for paper collage. And the question had come up, you know, on archivalness.

So he said that – and I have it written down somewhere, what the stock was, which was a neutral pH, acid-free paper stock, you know, blah-blah-blah, and I wrote it all down. "And so you don't have anything to worry about." And I thanked him for the time. And that took a couple of hours for me to, you know, wander my way through. So I said, "Oh, Jim, it's just absolutely so archival." And he said, "Yeah, but what about the ink?" And I said, "Oh, God." So I rationalized that, if the paper was archival, they're not going to use crappy ink. [Laughs.]

MS. GONCHAROV: [Laughs.]

MS. NILSSON: Anyway, that's – I allow myself to have little adventures like that.

MS. GONCHAROV: Okay. So you've talked a lot about Jim. I mean, have you two influenced each other a lot?

MS. NILSSON: Well, we would always answer yes on that without – you know, a lot of people think, well, if they're two artists that are married or living together, that you're constantly having critiques and dialogs about your work. And we never have, ever. I mean, I know he likes my work. He knows I like his work. And the only commentary one might make is, "Oh, I really like this line," or "Oh, your new painting looks – oh, I'm just so happy to see it. It's just so beautiful, you know, coming along." And he might – that's me to him. And then he might, you know, stand in front of a watercolor and look and look and look and look and then point to some miniscule little figure and say, "What's she doing?" Or, "he doing?" Or, "Is this me?" or, you know, something like that. Or, you know, I'm not quite sure. He has one particular color that I use sometimes that he does not like. [Laughs.] And whenever he sees it, he says, "Oh, that color," or something like that.

MS. GONCHAROV: What color is it?

MS. NILSSON: I'm not going to say. [Laughs.]

MS. GONCHAROV: [Laughs.]

MS. NILSSON: But we – in terms of influences, it has happened, because we might each see a certain shape or form that you then take in, digest, and it comes out your shape or form. I mean, that has happened with certain lines and so on. And as I've watched Jim – he's been working for quite a few years now on these nonspecific portraits of women, just the head and shoulders, a bit of a shoulder. And I think they're so beautiful, obviously. And there's a resonance with me about them that takes me back to some of those Munch paintings that the industrialist, single paintings, and any single image in a painting or drawing. And I find myself now being interested in doing less people and more singular – not loners, but lonely – exploring one image more consistently.

But we've always had studios in the house. When we were in California, we had a garage that – it's very easy to have a garage and go out and paint without having to worry about 23 below zero. So Jim would have that as his studio. And then I'd always – we've always had places where there would be the extra bedroom. So I would

have that.

When we moved to this house – I've forgotten who – it's a three-story house with large, open space on the third floor – finished, but open. It would refer to on the realtor's description as either a ballroom or a gymnasium, both of which were a little too grandiose.

MS. GONCHAROV: But it sounds very big.

MS. NILSSON: One big open – with a high ceiling in the center, as it came up over the eaves, and then two small rooms. One is the – still remains storage, and the other one is like the office, where the computer and files and stuff like that are.

So Jim worked in that, the big space upstairs, because he seemed to require more space around him and more divorced from the street noises. And I've always been involved with doing things other than painting while I'm painting – laundry, cooking, stirring the pot – I mean, you know, so that access and running back and forth – I learned very early on from trying to work with a toddler around that I'm very good at not being distracted, or distractions don't impact me the way they do with Jim.

But he's always wanted to have a studio space outside the house. And we never could quite swing it, or nothing right would come up, and so on. But a year and a half ago, we did get a space in the next suburb, nice, big finished space that he moved into last year for his studio. And then I moved up to the big third-floor space. And for both of us, then suddenly finding ourselves – he has to get up, get out of the house, and go to work. I have to climb that last flight of stairs. And it's amazing what one more floor does in terms of being divorced from the street. It just amazed me how separate the feeling was. And I rather like that. But still, it took a long period of adjustment.

The down side for me is that he's not working in the house, so that I'm never up seeing what he's doing as it's going along. And since his method of work is slower than mine, because of a variety of reasons, the changes that one might see over a period, a long period of time, are very intriguing to me as to how his decision making goes on.

I mean, with me, since I'm working with paper, there's a lot more immediacy. Sometimes, things take, you know, longer because I might be working on something big, or the color isn't right and I have to put another wash over it to alter that. But it happens and it's, you know, it's there, whereas with him, it's more – just takes longer.

MS. GONCHAROV: Have you ever collaborated?

MS. NILSSON: Yes, we have, actually. There's a couple of oddities that do exist, where we have collaborated. And collaboration, for us, is more the idea of the exquisite corpse, that this Surrealist might work on, where you cover the part – you know, the person adding to the drawing doesn't see what the other person has. We do have one painting that is like that, and it's very stupid and very silly. But, you know, there is that. Then we do have a couple of sheets of paper where I might have started a drawing, covered it up, and it would appear on his table. And then he'd add to it, and it would appear on my table – over a long period of time. It was a bit of silliness. We've done a few of those things.

And then I was working on one watercolor, a small watercolor in blue tones. And he would say, "Oh, that's pretty nice." And I said, "Well, do you want to put something on it?" So he took one little corner, you know, did a little lozenge with a little obviously Jim Nutt torso in it. And I just, you know, finished painting it. And we never told anybody that, you know, there was this addition. The method in how I was drawing my figures and how he drew his figures was just enormous differences. So it's so obvious to me, but nobody ever picked up on it. And I think I might have finally, you know, let a few people in.

MS. GONCHAROV: Is that something you still own or –

MS. NILSSON: Oh, yeah. No, it was something – because of the nature of what it was, it was one of the pieces that I held back myself.

MS. GONCHAROV: You held back, yes.

MS. NILSSON: And then there was – well, Printworks Gallery, where I have my prints represented by in the River North area, every so often Bob [Herbert] and Sid [Sidney Block] would have a theme show. And they did have a show where they had collaborations. So Jim and I did – he did a drawing that was a little more substantial on a drawing that I had started, but it was my responsibility to paint it, watercolor because he couldn't take more time away from the studio for that. So that one, we still have that, too.

It's kind of curious. [Laughs.] And there have been, you know, a couple of very small, odd things. Well, for instance, you know, Ruth Horowitz had an 80th birthday or 85th or – the Hyde Park Arts Center had a birthday party for her. So they had requested the enormous amounts of artists over the years that had, you know, ties with the art center and then, you know, with Ruth, if they would do a birthday card or a little piece of a certain size. So we did collaborate on a birthday card together for her.

MS. GONCHAROV: Oh, that was very nice.

MS. NILSSON: But not that much. And it is strange, because in some of the – you know, like it might be a mystery novel or something that I read, where there are two people that are writing it. And that's always mystified me. And maybe one person does all the research and has rough drafts, and then the other person, you know, finesses around them.

There are one or two groups of artists – like I had a kid in one of my classes, my drawing class at SAIC [School of the Art Institute of Chicago], that has ended up with – in collaboration with another young man. And they do pieces, where they're both painting on it. I've never understood how one can do that. You have to allow free rein over – and maybe the reason why we've done little exquisite corpses is that you do not allow free rein. [They laugh.] How dare you think that you were going to erase that mark that I made?

MS. GONCHAROV: [Laughs.]

MS. NILSSON: But that's all, in terms of collaboration.

MS. GONCHAROV: So your family, you have one son?

MS. NILSSON: We have one son.

MS. GONCHAROV: Is he an artist?

MS. NILSSON: Well, he drifts in and out with large format photography. He's kind of at loose ends at the moment, even though he's old enough that he should be figuring out how to tie up loose ends. But I have a feeling that – you know, because it ends up that Jim and I are reasonably successful well-known people – especially here in the Chicago area – that for someone trying to enter into the arts with parents that are – it's hard. You know, happily, he arrived at photography, which neither of us do, so he could kind of fumble around. People – he did take a couple of classes at SAIC, like a drawing class or this and that. And he just did sort of muck about over there. And I think that whatever faculty he might have had were expecting entirely too much of him because his last name was Nutt. And that got to be very uncomfortable for him. But he fell into some photography classes and that clicked.

MS. GONCHAROV: Yeah. So anyway, going back to your work, so you have a child, you're working at home.

MS. NILSSON: Right.

MS. GONCHAROV: And how was that influencing your imagery? I know that you do mainly women, and there are lots of domestic activities in them.

MS. NILSSON: I'm not sure. I think that – well, everything influences me.

MS. GONCHAROV: Of course.

MS. NILSSON: And everything is grist for whatever is going on. But I don't know if it – I mean, certainly, needing a clean material to work with – that was the big – that was the sole thing.

So that – but I don't think it did. I don't know that it – I mean, I didn't find imagery floating in that was a child's imagery. I do – as the years have gone on, I really am focusing a lot on women. I've always had women in the work. But they always had male counterparts. And I went through a long period of time in the recent past where I had eliminated men from my work entirely, for whatever reason, I don't know. The older I'm getting, the more I'm thinking back on my childhood, which was very divided in those days. You know, the men sat over here and did this, and the women were in the kitchen, bustling, you know. And it was very, very divided. Your gender was one or the other. You had very specific roles to play.

And I would find myself thinking a lot about the interactions and observations that I might have made with the women in the family – you know, my grandma and my aunties and her aunties and cousins and all of that, where there were just women doing things. And a lot of my work is about women doing things. But men are sort of slowly creeping back into it.

Last year, it's been – last – a year ago, May, my mom died. And that impacted on me enormously. She had

been in a care facility where my auntie lives, because it was easier for all concerned. My dad had died, say, eight years ago or so. So she came from where they were at to stay with my aunt. And she had been having diminished capacities, which one didn't quite realize how bad it was; one never does. So she had to go into a facility to stay. And time goes on. And she did pass away.

And that really knocked me for a loop because my dad had died, as I said, about eight years ago. Both were immigrants from Sweden at different times. My mom when she was – she was like 14 or so, and my dad – he was 17 when he came over the first time. And then he had to go back because of whatever reason. And then he came back in his mid-20s permanently here.

And as I'm going through my mom's stuff – and I had, you know, became the owner of these huge boxes of photographs that no one else wanted. And I've always thought, "Well, I can do something with them. I can either have them or look at them." And I realize, you know, there are so many people where, unless you write things down, unless you know specifically who these people are, you don't have a clue.

And I went through a period of time, even though I had an auntie and cousins and so on, feeling like, I don't know who I am. And it thoroughly confused me. And I was going on Ellis Island website. I had to sign in to become a member of Ellis Island, you know, to try to find out more specific things about my parents, find when they came over on the boat. I mean, I knew the – and it's really fascinating. If you know what the name of your distant relative is and the year – or you can even go within a six-year period period – you can go on this website, and you can find.

So I knew where they – my mom came over with my grandma and her three siblings. She was 14. There was a boy younger and a girl younger and then a boy older than she was. So there was four. This little woman came over. My grandpa had come over here like a year or two earlier to make a home for his family.

And it started me thinking, in going through all these huge lists of immigrants – and of course, the country is made up of immigrants – and how these people came over here. They couldn't speak English. You just got on this boat. And you sailed away from everything that you ever knew. And you came into this unknown quantity. And you landed in this place, Ellis Island. And you were shoveled through – probably because of the enormous amounts of immigrants that were coming over – rudely. You got shoved and pushed here and there. And then you landed on shore. You couldn't speak English. And then you arrive at someplace where you end up living. I mean, I just became fascinated by that.

And in the meantime I'm having to work for my first show in New York for more than 20 years, at Luise Ross Gallery. And I couldn't get away from this immigration –

MS. GONCHAROV: That was your first show in New York?

MS. NILSSON: For more than 20 years.

MS. GONCHAROV: Oh, oh, oh.

MS. NILSSON: Yeah, yeah. No, they had – the last show I had prior to this one was in '87, the Phyllis Kind Gallery. So I mean, there was a long period of time when no one knew I was still alive.

But in any case, I started really thinking about this immigration process. And I did – well, I came home from my mom's funeral. And of course, I have to work in the studio. And it's like I'm, you know, totally drained. The first piece I did which ended up going to the show, you know, really shows how drained I was. But I started to, you know, fool around with water voyages and the adventure of it all. If you just – you know, your mind wanders. And you think about all of these people. And even going back into, you know, centuries ago, when they're braving the ocean in boats that are smaller than this room we're sitting in.

I mean, think about it. It just boggles the mind. So I really started playing with that kind of thing, which shows you, okay, you know, that's how my mind works and where my subject matter comes from and how it just, you know, keeps stepping into various directions – probably digresses from what you had asked me, but I – you know.

MS. GONCHAROV: Oh, no, no. It's very interesting.

[END MD01 TR01.]

MS. GONCHAROV: So what did your father do? And did your mother have a job, too? Or she was a homemaker?

MS. NILSSON: Well, as I said, they were a blue-collar. My dad worked at Sunbeam manufacturing company on the South Side for probably longer than they were married, once they had settled in Chicago. And my mom ended up being in various places, various dining rooms and restaurants, being – she was a waitress her – I

mean, entire life. And they had a little place that they would go to in northern Michigan – up, not the Detroit side, but the Upper Peninsula, the UP.

Well, the first couple of years when they would vacation out of town, always going back to things, I think, that were more familiar. Like, my dad came from a small, remote island in Sweden. And I think he was always trying to get back to that. So we would always go to these remote places to fish. In Minnesota – there were a lot of Swedes up in Minnesota, and we went there for awhile. But that was too far to drive. So they ended up in – around Iron Mountain, Crystal Falls, in that area for years. I mean, that was where they would go.

And then once his – he retired from Sunbeam, they ended up buying a little cabin or a little place up there, and would go there for four or five months out of the year. And then after a period of time when she retired, they made the decision to move up there. Or rather, he made the decision to move up there, and she had to move up there.

MS. GONCHAROV: Of course.

MS. NILSSON: Which, of course, that was the way. The men make the decisions, and the women follow. In any case, so they lived up there in a series of little places, ended up in a little, tiny retirement place, when he died and it became obvious that she couldn't be up there by herself.

MS. GONCHAROV: So why didn't they want you to go to art school?

MS. NILSSON: Because it wasn't any way to make a living. You couldn't make a living at it. And actually, my poor mom – she was constantly – the phrase she would use when she would be talking to me is, "Why doesn't he get a job?" meaning my husband.

MS. GONCHAROV: Oh, oh.

MS. NILSSON: And I'm saying, well, he's got a job. I mean, he would have whatever part-time job and then painting. Well, you know, you just can't make a living. And because of the blue-collar stock, people that had gone through the Depression, when you don't have any money, earning a living is a real – well, it's important now. I mean, certainly, you know, everyone knows that. But coming from where they did, where I did, and so on, it was – even more emphasis was on it.

And it wasn't until – okay, we're out to California. "He's got a job, Mom. He's teaching." "Oh, well, oh, he's still painting." I mean, it was no way to make a living. It was no way to earn money, being in the creative field. This was not work – period. Even teaching art was not work. You had to go – God knows what you had to go – probably go to the steel mills, or do something that's dirty and manly. But doing art was no way to make a living.

And I think we had moved back from California. We had this big house on the North Shore, which ain't a cheap place to live. Somewhere along after we'd lived there for 10 years or so, I realized she had stopped asking me, "When is he going to get a job?" [Laughs.]

MS. GONCHAROV: [Laughs.]

MS. NILSSON: I mean, surely, she must have realized that we were making a living. By that time, I mean, we were making a living. We have always been very fortunate. And even in the early days, when one might be in a sales lull, the other one's sales might pick up. I mean, we've been really fortunate. And we have had little pick-up, you know, teaching jobs and little gigs here and there and so on and so forth. But boy, going into the arts is no way to make a living.

MS. GONCHAROV: Yeah. Of course not. So how did you pay for school?

MS. NILSSON: Well, back in those days, [they laugh] I remember, it was on the – I think we referred to it as the quarterly system. And there were three semesters in the year. I mean, it's all become very fuzzy as to exactly what it was. But the reason I was saying that there were three in the year, however the year was divided up, was because I was on – I had a little scholarship of some sort. But I was paying $120 a quarter. So it was $360 a year for my tuition, $360 a year. And now I think SAIC is up to like, you know, 25,000, 26,000 [dollars]. I mean, good God. [Laughs.] But still, I mean, back, you know, in 1958 – and I did have some sort of little assistance through the school.

MS. GONCHAROV: And you had jobs?

MS. NILSSON: I think I was paid – yeah. I worked at Charles A. Stevens, a defunct department store. And I probably was paying for that myself. But it was cheaper. They didn't stop me from going. But they never encouraged me to go, which always, you know, thinking back, probably – you know, you should always

encourage your children when they're following a dream, you know? I mean, you really should – when you're young, that's the time to follow a dream. Of course, when you're older, you should have enough money to follow a dream. But I was never encouraged to, and that really wasn't very nice.

MS. GONCHAROV: But you managed.

MS. NILSSON: I managed, yeah. Oh, it never occurred to me that I shouldn't do that. That's what I wanted to do and I forged ahead. I mean, it's amazing that I'm sitting here talking to you. [Laughs.]

MS. GONCHAROV: [Laughs.]

MS. NILSSON: No, it really is, you know?

MS. GONCHAROV: So you're teaching now, too?

MS. NILSSON: Well, I've just had one class that I teach. The school really has an enormous supply of part-time faculty. Very few are full-time. I couldn't even tell you what the proportions are. But the part-time are enormous. And it does bring in more opportunities for different points of view, which is – certainly, you know, the broader amount of ideas that any person can be exposed to, the more they get out of it.

So I went back. I got offered a job in '90. I think one of the faculty had to take a leave or do something. I got offered a watercolor class. But it was teaching at night, Wednesday, Thursday night from six to nine. And I decided I would take it because it would mean a little extra money that I could allow myself to do something frivolous with, you know.

And they had set it up when I was hired that however your pay periods were arranged, I could get in on the health insurance. And we went through – after we had ceased our relationship with Sac State [Sacramento State University] and moved back here, we were insuring ourselves. And that was – I mean, each year, the premiums would kill us – another $1000. So that by the time '90 came along, the opportunity to be involved with somebody else's health plan was like, oh, my God, it was great. So we've maintained that, not changed anything because I think, you know, even if you're at the appropriate age, if you're employed you can continue on with that, should you so choose. And I haven't decided when I'm going to retire yet. [They laugh.]

I used to think, well, I would just retire when I was 65. And that came and went. And now I'm thinking about 70. And who knows? Because they keep on. As long as you're functioning and as long as you want to do it, you know, having someone that's still teaching there that's 75 or 80 still brings the students a point of view that doesn't exist anymore from what their life experience has been. And that's good.

So it really up to you. I mean, unless, as I said, you just cease functioning altogether and you are told you are no longer needed. [Laughs.]

MS. GONCHAROV: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

MS. NILSSON: But I wanted to get away from teaching – not teaching watercolor, but teaching at night because it just got too hard.

MS. GONCHAROV: It's a long way, yeah. Yeah.

MS. NILSSON: And so on and so forth. So the only class that was available for me during the day was a drawing class. But we kind of worked it so that it's a multi-medium drawing class, works on paper, which is about as broad a description as you can get. And I like it. So I've been – well, involved with that, then, for the last 18 years.

MS. GONCHAROV: Right. And you show here regularly. How did your professional career start after school? When did you start showing and when did you feel like you really had your work down?

MS. NILSSON: Well, I was acquiring that sense of direction in technical proficiency for a couple of years. I mean, I was a slow starter. I mean, nowadays, it's like, you know, you talk to, you know, a freshman student, and, "Oh, I've already had my show at the Louvre. And I'm so professional." Well, things can be jump-started.

Back in those days, for someone who was not with a gallery – and I think there were only like three galleries, or four maybe, at most, there – there was no place to show. So artists always had to band together and find a space and make the walls and get their organization and do this, that, and the other thing, which Jim and I did become involved with in about '63, '3 or '4. And this was through Whitney, who had become a friend, rather than a faculty person, at that time. And he had – he knew Don Baum, who was involved as a director, you know, the exhibitions director of Hyde Park Art Center. And Don was always looking for, you know, new ideas, fresh things, that he would mix in with the old things, you know, whatever.

So you know, Whitney said, "Well, you know, you ought to come and look at this work." So Don came, and he had a show that he, you know, put both of us in in '63 or '4. Well, I had two little watercolors in, and they sold, ah, which was just amazing. Immediately turned around and bought more materials. But we did begin a relationship of exhibition at the Hyde Park Arts Center, becoming involved with whatever thematic shows that Don would, you know, have a lot of, as well as some of the large, you know, shows, where maybe 120 artists might find a space at IIT [Illinois Institute of Technology, Chicago]. Or there were a couple of them that we were involved with at that point.

And somewhere along the line, the thought was, Jim and another friend, or he and I, we'd sit around. And of all the artists that we'd know, they would start making groupings of artists that might be interesting together, with the idea that Don's theme shows were, you know, maybe 30-40 artists with one work apiece. But if you have less artists, you could have more than one work. But you really weren't ready to be responsible for the entire space yourself. You were nowhere near being mature enough to do that.

So that was where some of the ideas for some of the shows down in the mid-'60s that started to happen at the Arts Center, where there were four or five or six artists with more work, focused.

MS. GONCHAROV: And that would be you and Jim and –

MS. NILSSON: Right, which is where the "Hairy Who?" stemmed out of.

MS. GONCHAROV: Yeah, I was going to say. And then who else? Like Karl Wirsum and –

MS. NILSSON: Karl Wirsum, Art Green, Suellen Rocca, myself, Jim Falconer. So that was how that occurred. And we had huge, totally unexpected, the success that happened. I mean, you have no idea how bowled over we were by that.

MS. GONCHAROV: What happened? I mean, it was press. There were sales?

MS. NILSSON: There was press. There was sales. There was excitement. I mean, shows down there were always very well attended, because it was a party. And everyone loved to go to openings and have a party at the Hyde Park Arts Center. I mean, it was just the most fun possible. But there did seem to be something different about this, that here was a very specific group of artists, where everything else had been pared away. It was only these artists and their ideas, visual ideas, their sculptural ideas, depending on whoever might have been working on something else.

But it just seemed like, oh, my God. And that first show – we did get coverage in the national magazines. [Laughs.] We got –

MS. GONCHAROV: Which ones?

MS. NILSSON: Well, let's see. I think it was *Artforum*, maybe *Art in America*, I'm not sure. Whitney had written a big article about it. I think maybe [Franz] Schultz had – I can't remember. I'd have to go home and look in my archives of stuff. But there – and there were people. We had gotten letters from London, artists that had read about it, wanted a "Hairy Who?"comic book. So I was the secretary. Self-, you know, imposed. Jim and I always kept very good records. And, well, he didn't keep records; we had the stuff.

But in any case, I have notes, you know, at home in a folder from some people from London that had, you know, heard about it through the magazines, through whatever, and had wanted to buy "Hairy Who?" comic books. And there were things from other places, you know, in the country and so on. And it was just, for a young artist that had – you know, we were just beginning to feel like, well, you know, this is kind of cool. And there are some people who might like my work. And, you know, maybe you're just beginning to have a few people that know your work, a little bit of recognition – to suddenly have this thing happen.

So we did it again the next year, and it was even bigger. Then we did it again the next year, which was '68, and it was the biggest ever and it was just phenomenal – phenomenal. Unbelievable. [Laughs.]

MS. GONCHAROV: Did the museums buy at that point?

MS. NILSSON: Oh, no. Hell, no. Museums are not supportive of local artists. I can't remember whether – when museums were buying, they weren't buying work. They were – and still it occurs now. They find somebody else to buy something –

MS. GONCHAROV: To buy for them, yeah.

MS. NILSSON: Or maybe they, you know, go through and massage a collector to get something. Although Dennis Adrian was working in the print and drawing department. And he started somewhere along the line – it

wasn't that early – but somewhere along the line in there of acquiring prints by images for the museum. And that was really it. I mean, maybe now there are museums that are buying work. But, you know, museums are always poor. And they want to have things donated.

MS. GONCHAROV: Of course, of course.

MS. NILSSON: But no, they – not at that point, although there were certainly some museum people that were attracted to us and which – you know, happened along the line.

MS. GONCHAROV: And then you started showing commercially after that? Or you went to California, but –

MS. NILSSON: Yeah, yeah. Well, we went to California. Then in '69, we came back for something, or maybe – yeah, it was in '69 we came back and approached Phyllis Kind, who had approached us prior to our leaving and we said, "Well, you know, we'll think about it," and so on. And then we had decided that, you know, there was all of this support that we had been getting and reputation and notoriety and so on, that it's silly to just turn around and walk away from it without, you know, trying to bolster what had gone on.

So we did approach her. She did – at that point, she had – Ted Halkin and Neil Balito were two artists that we really liked. So we felt good about trying to get connected with this space. So we started to have a series of shows over the years with her. And then she acquired her New York space, actually probably not that far – because we were talking to her when we were in California. And she was talking about getting a space in New York. So I'm not quite sure of – the early '70s, she had acquired the first space she had. Now she has relocated to –

MS. GONCHAROV: But she kept the Chicago one?

MS. NILSSON: She kept the – yeah, the Chicago one was opened, but she was spending less and less time here. And then finally, no time, except maybe she'd come in every once in awhile. And then I think she lost interest in Chicago entirely, maybe wanting to be a big New York dealer. And Chicago was too local, or I don't know, whatever reason. So she decided to close it. That was in the mid- to late-'90s, like that. And then I immediately went with Jean Albano Gallery in the River North area, which is where two of the catalogues – well, actually, three of the catalogues, except the one – there's one big one that is really nice. Well, they're all nice. But the one big one that's in there was my 60th birthday present, to myself and from Jim.

MS. GONCHAROV: Oh. Oh.

MS. NILSSON: That he said, "Well, you're going to be 60 now. What do you want?" And I said, "Well, you know what I'd really like? I'd like a nice catalogue." So that's what we did.

MS. GONCHAROV: But you've had books done about you, right? There's at least one book.

MS. NILSSON: Well, there is one that John Natsoulas Gallery did in '94. I had an exhibition with him, and he publishes. And I had an exhibition with him in '94, and it was sort of like a – I gave him works that spanned a long period of time. And he published a hardbound book. These are all softbound. But John did a hardbound book.

MS. GONCHAROV: Oh, okay.

MS. NILSSON: But, no, I haven't had any – you know, Jean decided somewhere along the line to publish. She wasn't doing catalogues when Jim and I did this one here, which is my 60th birthday present.

MS. GONCHAROV: Okay, that's what I'm missing.

MS. NILSSON: She wasn't doing publications. And a lot of galleries, you know, start doing them. And these are –

MS. GONCHAROV: Fantastic.

MS. NILSSON: This one is the last one I did with Jean. And that is kind of like an overview. Then there is this little thing. I had a show at a gallery. But Jim and I did that ourselves. And, you know, very specific, you know, where they laser cut to follow the edges of the paper when it's deckled. And they just – oh, it's just beautiful. And Jean's are nice, but there's a world of difference between them. But she is starting to publish. And it's important to – not all the time.

MS. GONCHAROV: Yeah, yeah.

MS. NILSSON: But it's important to – you know, you have something.

MS. GONCHAROV: Yeah. Oh, no, this is wonderful. Yeah, looking at the colors, they seem very Renaissance, early Renaissance colors.

MS. NILSSON: Yeah.

MS. GONCHAROV: Is that an influence?

MS. NILSSON: Yeah. I'm trying to think of –

MS. GONCHAROV: The pinks and the blue and the golds.

MS. NILSSON: This little one here had early pieces, although it probably – well, that's about as early as we had in the show, which is 82, which is beginning to get into colors. But it still is – doesn't have as full a use of what might be going on.

MS. GONCHAROV: So which – this is the most recent?

MS. NILSSON: Well, this one is, but only because it has some recent – like, that was the last, you know, from '07. But this one has like 25 years worth of various works in there. And this comes – Jim and I had gone to the opera, have been opera subscribers over at Lyric [Opera of Chicago] for a few years now. And I'm getting very much into – or back into, if I had drifts away from – that kind of performance. I've always liked performance. And I've found myself really liking opera a lot.

MS. GONCHAROV: Yeah. Right.

MS. NILSSON: Oh, I can't wait for the season. I take the train in, and I walk past the Lyric, and it's like [gasping], beginning to chomp at the bit for the –

MS. GONCHAROV: [Laughs.]

MS. NILSSON: I think our first tickets for this season are in October, and I hope I can wait that long. [Laughs.]

MS. GONCHAROV: And what is it? What are you going to see first?

MS. NILSSON: Oh, it's either *Butterfly* [*Madama Butterfly*]. And they're doing *Porgy and Bess*, which doesn't thrill me a lot. But you know, still it will be going on live. They have a speckled year this year. They're bringing back a few, you know, older things that we've already seen. I mean, I've talked to some people that are, you know, subscribe – "Well, I've been subscribing for, you know, 40 years, and I'm getting tired of seeing the same thing over and over again." You know, thus far it hasn't set in quite yet.

MS. GONCHAROV: Yeah, yeah, yeah. So you love it. All the women are big.

MS. NILSSON: They're – yes. Big, important.

MS. GONCHAROV: Big and important.

MS. NILSSON: And then the men are the supporting players when they're in there. Although early on, I mean, they had – they were the same sizes as the women. And every person had, you know, either an alter ego or a mate. And there are a few pieces that I had where I'm counting, you know, how many women do I have in there? Then I have to have that many men so that everyone can be happy, you know. [Laughs.]

MS. GONCHAROV: [Laughs.] So when did you start making them big?

MS. NILSSON: Well, right away.

MS. GONCHAROV: Right away, okay.

MS. NILSSON: And that probably comes from, you know, a lot of those, you know, big, important – you know, like Max Beckman, the figures in there are enormous. And then those Munchs that have big things.

MS. GONCHAROV: Big figures.

MS. NILSSON: But then there was one point where, you know, I'd play a lot with scale change, which happens when you're looking at, you know, Renaissance painting or Medieval painting or whatever, where you have the main figures, and then you have the little donors that gave the money to the artist for the painting. They're little tiny people. And then also, though, when I was little, the Sears catalog is very important in coming out. And you'd have the big bathrobe. But then also, you'd have the little bathrobe because it comes in these other colors. So I finally realized somewhere along the line that that had a big impact, as well the, you know, high art.

That this low art form of the catalog had an impact in my playing with scale change.

MS. GONCHAROV: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. NILSSON: So I mean, it all figures in.

MS. GONCHAROV: So, but, I mean, there's also the feminist aspect, too, that the women are these strong, dominant –

MS. NILSSON: Oh, yeah, yeah. Right. They're strong. They have to be strong to do what they do.

MS. GONCHAROV: To do what they do, right.

MS. NILSSON: I mean, I was in the dentist office. I have had, you know, to go in and have some work done. And he was asking me, "Well, how did your extraction go?" meaning I had to go to the oral surgeon. And I said, "Well, it went okay, actually." He said, "Oh, that's good, that's good. You know, I had a guy in here the other day. And it was terrible. He was just hollering and screaming. You know, men aren't really very good at this," which is the old adage, you know, that when he'd get sick, it's like, oh, my God, he's got pneumonia. When you get sick, you're getting out of your deathbed to boil an egg or something, you know?

MS. GONCHAROV: [Laughs.]

MS. NILSSON: Women are strong. They have to be in order to do what they do. And that's why they could step into the factories and make the airplanes and all that stuff that Rosie the Riveter – they were strong. They had to step in, and they did it without even thinking about it. [Laughs.]

MS. GONCHAROV: So were you involved in any of the feminist activities?

MS. NILSSON: No, I wasn't. I wasn't. I think when it first was starting, I was out in California, not that, you know, they didn't have feminists out there. But I just wasn't. I mean, certainly if you look at the lot of the things that I've been involved with over the years, you would think, "Oh, she's, you know, such a feminist." But I was never involved with any of it. It didn't seem to make any sense that that's what I wanted to pour my energy into, although I understood perfectly, I mean, why the Guerilla Girls are existing, why there would be counts of how many women were in the Whitney Biennial and how many women art dealers there were, how many artists that were women that were in this gallery or that gallery.

And I think it was because that, all of the professional things that I'd been involved with here in Chicago, in galleries and shows and that, there have always been men and women involved equally.

MS. GONCHAROV: Hm.

MS. NILSSON: The important thing is whether you were a good artist, whether your art was good, not that, you know, you wore a skirt or you wore pants. So it was – it wasn't quite what I was fighting, if that makes any sense.

MS. GONCHAROV: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. NILSSON: And I understand it totally, because I have been to New York. And I know what kind of divisions there are. But for myself personally, what I would be more fighting – not fighting against, but what I would hear, the impact would be they are nice, but they're small, because you had to do big art and I was doing small art. So that was –

MS. GONCHAROV: But then a lot of people were doing small art here, weren't they?

MS. NILSSON: Yeah, although there were people that were doing big art.

MS. GONCHAROV: But not like the New York scale.

MS. NILSSON: Not like the New York scale. But still, they would be small. And if there – you'd point out, "Well, you know, there was this Paul Klee show at the, you know, Guggenheim," small works. Oh, then, they'd be nice, but they'd be on paper. And we all know paper is a minor medium. Paper? What good is that? If the big guys do paper work, "Oh, brilliant, paper work." And then they'd be, they're nice, but they're watercolor. And that's a minor medium, goes hand in hand with minor paper.

MS. GONCHAROV: Yeah. It's also considered a feminine kind of –

MS. NILSSON: Yeah, used to be back, you know –

MS. GONCHAROV: Yeah, they're like the copyist watercolors.

MS. NILSSON: Right, right, although we won't get into John Marin standing on the cliff painting [inaudible].

MS. GONCHAROV: No, of course not.

MS. NILSSON: But no, it was, yeah.

MS. GONCHAROV: But, I mean, it was perceived as.

MS. NILSSON: More feminine involvement. And then I would get, "Well, they're nice. But they're funny." Well, that was true because I was working with a whole bunch of forbidden things that didn't even impact on the fact that they were done by a woman. But it was, I think, strictly because all of the shows at the Hyde Park Arts Center had a lot of women in them, you know? My art dealer was a woman. She had men and women in her gallery. You had good art. And it just – I didn't have the same kind of crunch, although I knew about it. But I couldn't expend the energy to go out and do something because I didn't have it. [Laughs.] The time I had had to be focused on what I was doing, not going out and doing it, although, you know, I greatly admired that. I mean, it's a very necessary thing that happens.

I mean, when I was working at Charles A. Stevens, it was a woman that was working there that was the new office manager, just under the manager. [Laughs.] And she was a woman, and he was a man. And the differences in their pay were enormous, when I realized how much work she was doing. And of course, he had gone through all that and had gotten to the point where he could sit in an office and maybe, you know, look at some things. So it's unfair to say, you know, she was doing everything and he wasn't doing anything, because he had done everything before he got to that point.

But I mean, we all knew. I mean, I watched my mom, you know, with trays, serving businessmen. I knew what was going on, but I was just never a part of that. Number one, I was never asked. [Laughs.] Probably because my work was so funny, I didn't have enough anger, angst.

MS. GONCHAROV: Yeah. So where does the humor come from?

MS. NILSSON: I'm a very positive person. My glass is always half full instead of half empty. I always have been able to see the humor in a lot of situations. I like comedies. I think it takes a lot more structure and ambition to make a good comedy than to make a drama – probably unfairly said, for all the drama people. But I think that comedy is a very high art. I think it's been given, you know, a bad trait or something. I don't know. I just have a sense of humor. I like to laugh.

MS. GONCHAROV: And there's all the popular culture influence, too.

MS. NILSSON: Oh, yeah, yeah.

MS. GONCHAROV: I mean, what movies or television or plays or what have influenced –

MS. NILSSON: Oh, well, yeah. I always like to have media on. I have TV on when I work. Well, at night – I can't have it on in the daytime before the four o'clock news comes on.

MS. GONCHAROV: Why not?

MS. NILSSON: It's a little rule. Because I just don't. [Laughs.]

MS. GONCHAROV: I would think if you're into humor, I think there's an awful lot on daytime TV that's useful. [Laughs.]

MS. NILSSON: Oh, I know, I know. Yes, that's true. But you know, one just has certain rules. I mean, I can have the TV set turned on if there's a DVD plugged into it. You know, I have a nice big TV – well, not huge, but enough – TV and a DVD player up in my new studio and have operas and things that I get out of the library and so on that I plug in.

But I, you know, have series that I like that provide background noise or exchanges that one doesn't have out your own door. You can sort of get privy to, you know, someone else's door. Movies are a variety of things. Jim and I currently have been doing Netflix this past year, and that's worked out really well. And we've gotten just a variety of, you know, things going from film noir to Japanese art films to, hopefully, higher comedies. Both of us really sort of like the same kind of thing, except that I like to have a little bit more blood and thunder every once in awhile, and he isn't about to sit down and watch Nicholas Cage saving an airplane, or something like that.

MS. GONCHAROV: [Laughs.]

MS. NILSSON: [Laughs.] But I do. I have my little guilty pleasures. Like some of the dance programs on TV – and I just finished watching, taped the finale of *So You Think You Can Dance*, which I was watching this past year and became fascinated by that whole process. I like to dance. For some reason or another, I don't really enjoy going and seeing dance performed in front of me. But if it's in short verse and it's popular dance, I really like it. And I've tried to explain that to Jim a lot. And he says, "Why don't you want to go to the ballets?" I don't know. For whatever reason, it doesn't appeal. Well, I'm sure if I went to the ballet, it would be the same as how I got into the opera. Now I can't get enough of opera. It would be the same thing.

So there are bits and pieces like that. Preston Sturgis is a favorite director, which, you know – and, you know, just stuff.

MS. GONCHAROV: Yeah. Yeah, because you can see it in the work.

MS. NILSSON: Yeah. Yeah.

MS. GONCHAROV: There are stages of –

MS. NILSSON: And sometimes it's a little more obvious than it is at other times. But –

MS. GONCHAROV: How about comics? Did you look at comics when you were a kid?

MS. NILSSON: Oh, yeah. Yeah. *Little Lulu* was my favorite.

MS. GONCHAROV: Oh, really? Oh, okay.

MS. NILSSON: Yes. I love *Little Lulu*. I mean, I read all the other ones, too. But for whatever reason, I love Little Lulu. She was so interesting. And then thinking of, you know, when you read the dailies in the papers, you know, going from *Mary Worth* to *Terry and the Pirates* to *Little Nancy*. Actually, *Little Nancy*, that Ernie Bushmiller – I think that's his name – is really good.

MS. GONCHAROV: Yeah.

MS. NILSSON: Thinking of looking at some of the comics for things other than just a little explosion of humor in your day, and going back to some of the early comics like – I think everyone always cites *Krazy Kat*. That was a visual experience that, you know, is really beyond the little charge of humor it was talking about. But I did read the comics.

MS. GONCHAROV: And what other kind of – what books did you read as a kid?

MS. NILSSON: As a kid?

MS. GONCHAROV: Um-hm.

MS. NILSSON: Oh, well, whatever there was that were available. You know, Nancy Drew mysteries and, you know, *The Black Stallion*, read all of those, *The Wizard of Oz* , just, you know, whatever kids had to read. I really like to read a lot. And there would be times when, you know, the classic – you know, Mom would have to chase me out of the house in the summer because I'd be reading. I mean, I played outside a lot, too. But if I had settled in with a book, you know, I'm reading. I didn't want to go outside. And I still do like to read a lot. I always have a little book of one sort or another I'm working through.

MS. GONCHAROV: So what are you interested in now?

MS. NILSSON: Well, I mentioned Thomas Mann. I went through a big period of time when I was reading a lot of Thomas Mann and Joseph Conrad. Those were two that I really liked a lot. And then as I got older, I decided I needed something a little more frivolous. And when I'm traveling, I just have all of these really awful airport kind of books that you read and throw away, because they just mildly entertain you and they take you away from where you are at the moment.

I like mysteries. And I have a whole series of mystery writers that, you know, I like a lot that I am constantly – I'm at my library every day. I love going to the library. Read a current magazine.

MS. GONCHAROV: Oh, so the public library?

MS. NILSSON: Oh, yeah, yeah.

MS. GONCHAROV: Oh, it's close to you?

MS. NILSSON: No, we have a very good public library in Womat that I go to. It's part of my rounds. I have to check –

MS. GONCHAROV: You do it every day?

MS. NILSSON: Just about every day, yeah.

MS. GONCHAROV: Really.

MS. NILSSON: And I got dropped off – I play golf in the summer. Got dropped off from somebody, you know, in from the golf course. And she says, "Gladys, I've dropped you off at the public library before. What do you do in there?" And I just looked at her and I said, "Read."

MS. GONCHAROV: [Laughs.]

MS. NILSSON: [Laughs.] "Oh." Well, you know, I look for books to take out. I go through periodicals, you know, because we do get *Art in America*, but we don't get *Art News* or *Artforum*. And I, you know, see what's new there. And I look for CDs to check out, because they have a decent-enough CD collection. They have DVDs there. So it's like I can find a lot to entertain me at my local library. [Laughs.]

MS. GONCHAROV: [Laughs.]

MS. NILSSON: And, you know – but my reading is checkered now. And sometimes there are some romance writers that I say, "Well, I could read this, and it's okay." My premise is that reading anything is good for you. And I think somebody said that about kids. I don't care what they read as long as they read. And that's true.

MS. GONCHAROV: But I mean, obviously, these things come into the work.

MS. NILSSON: Oh, yeah, oh, yeah.

MS. GONCHAROV: That creeps in – yeah, of course.

MS. NILSSON: I mean, anything, anything. I mean, I could sit at the – well, sitting in the lobby when you were over there and I was over there, and just watching the dynamics. It never bothers me to get at a train station or an airport early enough to sit, because sooner or later I know there's going to be some little, you know, dialog that I'm going to be witness to that will end up in my work. And it does. I mean, things that I have – I've got a few scenarios circling around in my head that I saw, you know, waiting for a plane change at the Dallas airport, say, 15 years ago. I haven't quite figured out how to use it yet, but it's still there. You know, it all comes into it. So whatever I'm exposed to is there.

MS. GONCHAROV: So it's all kind of stage-like.

MS. NILSSON: Oh, yeah, yeah.

MS. GONCHAROV: You set your stage.

MS. NILSSON: Yeah. I'm sitting here and – because I have glasses on, it sort of gives you this little – you know, you're hidden. You aren't. But you are. I mean, emotionally, you feel like you are. And it all plays off. I'm a voyeur. [Laughs.]

MS. GONCHAROV: Uh-huh, yeah, I can see. [Laughs.]

MS. NILSSON: With work filled with voyeurs.

MS. GONCHAROV: Yeah, I was just going to say, there are many voyeurs doing all kinds of strange things.

MS. NILSSON: I mean, there is sort of secret titillation that you're like, ooh.

MS. GONCHAROV: Yeah, yeah.

MS. NILSSON: Which is why Jim often says, "What is he doing?"

MS. GONCHAROV: [Laughs.] Yeah.

MS. NILSSON: "What is she doing?"

MS. GONCHAROV: "What is she doing?" Yeah. [Laughs.] Yeah, there are some very – well, I was going to say "whimsical," but not really. I mean, there's whimsical with an edge.

MS. NILSSON: There is – yeah, yeah. There on the surface, but there's a lot more going on under the surface.

MS. GONCHAROV: Yeah. [Laughs.]

MS. NILSSON: But – yeah.

MS. GONCHAROV: Yeah. Obviously. And they are very funny. So what other influences can you think of?

MS. NILSSON: Gee. Haven't I cited plenty?

MS. GONCHAROV: I think probably yes. [Laughs.]

MS. NILSSON: [Laughs.] I mean, gosh. You have popular media. You have high culture. You have other arts. Literature, non-literature writing – just it all comes in.

MS. GONCHAROV: Yeah, yeah, uh-huh, yeah.

MS. NILSSON: Observations of the dialog of humanity passing in front of you on a daily basis – it's all there.

MS. GONCHAROV: And travel. Do you travel a lot?

MS. NILSSON: I like to. I really do. I like to have in mind going someplace, you know, getting ready, figuring out, what am I going to wear? How to economically pack into one bag so that you don't have to pay now the extra they're charging for, you know, all that stuff. I do like to travel. I would be happy going on a trip many times a year.

MS. GONCHAROV: Do you work while you travel?

MS. NILSSON: I used to, because I used to travel a lot by myself, because, you know, you're invited on a visiting artist thing, you don't bring your old man with you or your kid or something. And I wouldn't have the need to be entertained all the time, at night. So I have little travel watercolor things and small pieces of paper and I can sit in the hotel and do little things. And sometimes, those little things get turned into big works by reincorporating them in a larger scale.

The last several trips that I – we've been on, we've gone together, which was a novelty, because we never travel together. Jim didn't like to travel, doesn't like to travel. I would get less and less into trying to do some work, although I found that I need to take things with me. Otherwise, I have a very uncomfortable feeling. And there have been times in the past when I've left my gear at home. And I'd have to find an art store and get something. And I've learned, uh, you know, you're never going to use it, or you may or may not – but if it's there, it's there.

MS. GONCHAROV: But if it's there, you can have it there, yeah. Have any of those travels – I mean, you're looking at art, too, when you're out. I mean, do you travel to Europe a lot and look at –

MS. NILSSON: Oh, I'd like to. You know, a lot over the – the last trip we took, we were in London last October. Covent Garden was doing the *Ring Cycle* [*The Ring of the Nibelung*,Richard Wagner]. So my favorite city and my favorite opera was a no-brainer, although the exchange rate was quite painful. It was two to one at that point.

MS. GONCHAROV: Still is.

MS. NILSSON: Yeah. The only thing I can say is, well, I bought my Ring tickets the year before at older money, which was a good thing.

MS. GONCHAROV: Right.

MS. NILSSON: So, yeah. I'm always looking at art. Very, very seldom is it a non-art business trip of one sort or another.

MS. GONCHAROV: And you go to the museums and look at –

MS. NILSSON: Go to the museums; go to galleries, you know, whatever it is. If it's a university situation, where you're doing a visiting artist thing, someone is usually in charge of you. And I outline, you know, "Hey, you have to take me to some art." You're looking at student art, maybe, but you know, I mean, there are galleries in town. Is there an art center? What is there for you to show me?

MS. GONCHAROV: Well, when you're in London and you go to the National Gallery, what do you go to look at

first?

MS. NILSSON: Oh, what do I go to look at first? Well, probably the most logical thing is to – well, first make a lunch reservation. [Laughs.]

MS. GONCHAROV: [Laughs.]

MS. NILSSON: Go to the bathroom.

MS. GONCHAROV: Yeah, yeah, yeah, of course.

MS. NILSSON: And start off at the early work and then work my way through. My favorite painting in the National Gallery is Stubbs's portrait of – I think the correct name is *Whistle Jack* [*Whistlejacket*, 1762], which is the big rearing horse.

MS. GONCHAROV: Um-hm, yeah, yeah.

MS. NILSSON: I love that painting. I love Stubbs' work. Just atypical.

MS. GONCHAROV: Yeah, wouldn't have guessed that.

MS. NILSSON: You'd never see it, but that painting knocks me out. And the thing that I like best – well, one of the things I like best about it is that the way the National is set up – it's obviously hanging at the far end, you know, with Constables and Turners and all of that. And it's centered right in the doorway, the hallway, so that you can stand anywhere, if there isn't six million people between you, and see that horse. It just thrills the hell out of me.

MS. GONCHAROV: That's very theatrical, too.

MS. NILSSON: It is. And what I didn't realize was that that commission – and there's another – there are two other paintings that – ones are stallions and one is mares and maybe a few foals – that are painted in the same manner, where it's just the horses on the color field. That the commission that the gentry, the gent had, was to do this portrait and then portraits of stallions and portraits of mares. But that it was two artists involved. It was Stubbs doing the horses, and then there was another artist, who was, I think, was a lesser artist, that was supposed to do the landscape.

So obviously, Stubbs got his work, you know, done first. And when the patron looked at it, he said, that was enough. He didn't need anymore. Which I think is fabulous. I mean, it's a great piece. But I think part of its greatness is that it exists on this color field without having a landscape.

MS. GONCHAROV: With the single large figure.

MS. NILSSON: I mean, it would be great if it had landscape in there. But I thought, wow, in that day and age, I mean, which was obviously not this century.

MS. GONCHAROV: Yeah.

MS. NILSSON: To have a patron have that kind of forethought or something, to say, no, that's enough. I don't need anymore. So that always enters in at the National. And there are lots of bits and pieces that are there, obviously, you know, people you've never heard of that – whose work is fabulous and so on. And I like the portrait gallery, but I like the earlier – the early stuff. You go up and you get the Tudors and so on.

MS. GONCHAROV: The Flemish and the –

MS. NILSSON: I don't much care for – as you wind your way down through, you know, British history, you know, seeing – you know, maybe a few things are there. There is this one twentieth century kind of glassed-in wing, where they have maybe – well, there's a lot of Bloomsbury Group and maybe actors from the '40s and then on up, that I'm fascinated with. Because a lot of times, then, you'd actually know who the people are because you've seen them in film or you've seen them being interviewed on television or something like that.

So that those places – I like the Tate. Like the Tate Modern. I like the way the Tate Modern, which the Modern in New York did for a couple of shows early on when they reopened was, how they mixed things together so that you don't have the logical chronology that you do. Tate Britain will give you juxtapositions to think about.

And I like the Royal Academy, depending on what show is there. I like to go there. I like everything about London. [Laughs.] I love it. I love it. I could go there many times a year and not exhaust anything. We go to New York, you know, a couple of times. Although we can go a couple of years without going there, and then go

there a couple of times a year. And of all the New York museums, I think the Met is the one I like because it offers me everything that I want to see.

MS. GONCHAROV: What do you go to first at the Met?

MS. NILSSON: Well, it depends if there's an exhibition on, and you get there – I always get there early – then you immediately go to the special exhibition, rather than to try to fight, you know, to see little Leonardo [da Vinci] drawings or the van Gogh drawings, or anything. You really need to go there first. And then it's just – if I know – they do seem to have a lot of shows going on. And I have to, you know, think about, well, okay. And then just try to hit everything. But I always look at everything. I mean, I even – I love the fashion department. I mean, I have seen some extraordinary shows down in the fashion –

MS. GONCHAROV: Oh, I can see that having a lot of influence on your work.

MS. NILSSON: Oh, my God, yeah. So there isn't anything that I don't go, you know, to look at.

MS. GONCHAROV: And as you said, you look at *Vogue*.

MS. NILSSON: I do, yeah. Yeah.

MS. GONCHAROV: [Laughs.]

MS. NILSSON: The Neue Galerie [New York, New York] is nice, that little jewel-like boutique – you know, great place to eat.

MS. GONCHAROV: It is very good.

MS. NILSSON: Oh, wonderful, if you can get in. But then, Jim and I usually – we eat early, and then we eat early, and then we eat early. [Laughs.]

MS. GONCHAROV: [Laughs.]

MS. NILSSON: So we can usually – you know, I would never even think of being in New York and trying to eat lunch at one o'clock. I mean, you'd never get in anyplace.

MS. GONCHAROV: That's true. [Laughs.]

Let's see. What else? I've forgotten something. Oh, I read somewhere you did a CD cover.

MS. NILSSON: I'm sorry?

MS. GONCHAROV: You did a CD cover, I think I read somewhere.

MS. NILSSON: Oh, I didn't do a cover. What happened was, through this fellow in New York that publishes – he's sort of involved with a lot of things – Dan Nadel, who publishes a thick magazine. It's more like a book, but they refer to it as a magazine – once or twice a year whenever he can get funding and get groups of things. It's called *The Ganzfeld*. And he did about three years ago or so – three or four, something like that – had a big article on the Harry Who in there. So he published a lot of ephemera that we all supplied him with, and some reproductions of work.

And a couple of the things that he used of mine were from the 1967 Harry Who comic book that were drawings, more drawings, not paintings. And he also was doing a book on a local band, although they've certainly long since expanded out of local, called Wilco. And Wilco's couple of albums prior to now – it was called *The Ghost Album*. And they were looking for something that they felt would go with it. So it's the CD that has an egg in straw or something, and might have a couple of variations on that. But inside, they had the little booklet that has all of the lyrics of the tunes in it. And they used two or three of my drawings that they had seen in this, you know, from the '67 comic book.

So that was very bizarre, because here I was, you know, like 60, mid-60s woman, likes rock and roll, but you know. You don't call anything rock and roll anymore. Amongst all the other things I like that was – had this little group involvement with this rock band. [Laughs.]

MS. GONCHAROV: [Laughs.]

MS. NILSSON: And they gave a concert, one of a series of things that did over the years, at the Auditorium Theater. And I had two nights. And Dan Naydell said, you know, "well, would you like to go to the Wilco concert? It's here in town." I said, "Oh, it's a rock concert? I don't think so." He said, "Well, you know, I mean,

the boys would like to meet you." And I'm thinking, well, you know, I should probably go. "The boys" would like to meet me. [Laughs.]

MS. GONCHAROV: [Laughs.]

MS. NILSSON: So I said, "Well." He said, "I've got two tickets I can set aside for you." Well, I couldn't find anybody to go with me. [Laughs.]

MS. GONCHAROV: [Laughs.]

MS. NILSSON: So, you know, goddamn it, I want to go. So Dan said, "Well, I'm going. We can meet and you can be with me, you know, so you don't have to feel you're there alone." So he told me when to show up, which was, of course, more towards the end of the – any performance has the, you know, warm-up band.

MS. GONCHAROV: Right, right, right.

MS. NILSSON: You know, the warm-up band – so we met in the lobby and went to the seats. They were very good seats. And that was the first and only rock concert I have ever been to. [They laugh.] Had no idea what to expect.

And before going, you know, I'd heard, "Well, you'd better get earplugs." And I said, "I'm going to a concert. Do I need earplugs?" [Goncharov laughs.] "Trust me. You're going to need earplugs. The little wax ones you can buy at Walgreen's would work really good." So I bought some wax earplugs at Walgreen's. And I'm rolling them around, shoving them in my ears. And they wouldn't stay in.

MS. GONCHAROV: [Laughs.]

MS. NILSSON: And I said, "Well, I'll just go without them." "No. You've got to trust me." And this was my son speaking. "Trust me, Mom. You really have to have earplugs if you're going to go to a rock concert." So somewhere along the line, because of airplane noise and travel, Jim had gotten Bose headphones that screen out all superfluous noise. [Laughs.] So I can't get these damn earplugs to stay in. I'll just grab my Bose headphones.

MS. GONCHAROV: [Laughs.]

MS. NILSSON: So there I am, in the middle of this field of screaming people, wearing earphones that – and actually, it was really good because it screened out all of the electronic – the noise that – you know, when they crank those puppies up, it's just noise. And you can't hear the music. Sounds weird, but – you know, and I thought, "Oh, I'm actually hearing music and voices and singing, and this is really nice," without the other stuff, because I kept – you know, I'd try it. Oh, God.

MS. GONCHAROV: [Laughs.]

MS. NILSSON: Well, they came out on stage, and after we'd gotten our seats. And we're sitting in – you know, my host and I are chatting. And they come out on stage. And everything is "Yay." Well, everyone stands up. And I stayed seated. No one else – you know. So I stood up. Well, you don't sit down at a rock concert. You're on your feet. And you're waving your arms. And it was like, oh, my God. It was the weirdest experience.

So then, you know, the concert was over. It was fun. And he says, "Well, you know, would you like to go backstage and meet the boys? Because I've got passes for us." He said, "I'm going back there. You know, I'm sure they would like you to." Well, I said, "Oh, I don't think so." He goes, "Well, if you're really sure." So I thought, well, yeah, they'd used my drawings. I'll go through there.

Well, they were so polite and so nice. [Laughs.] And I had timed it, because this was a Friday night. And I said, "Well, do you have any idea how long the concert is going to be?" And he said, "Well, they usually" – you know. So I had enough time that I came across the street to the hotel where the cabs were lined up and took a cab over to Union Station and caught the last train home at 12:35.

MS. GONCHAROV: [Laughs.]

MS. NILSSON: And it was – people that have heard, you know, about this experience – I mean, first of all, they think that, oh, you did an album cover. Well, I didn't do an album cover for a rock band. Oh, there is another album cover which reminded me about – you know, but this involvement. And when young people found out about it, it really is very disconcerting for them.

In fact, the place where we play golf, the caddies that might be there year after year after year after year – I remember walking along. And one of the, you know, mid-teen, to older-teen caddies who was caddying for this

other girl I was playing with, said to me, “Mrs. Nutt,” because I’m Mrs. Nutt over there, “Could I ask you something?” And I said, “Yeah, sure. Yeah. Go ahead.” He said, “Well, there’s this rumor going around.” And I’m thinking to myself, “Rumor? There’s a rumor going around about me?” “That you did something for Wilco?” [Laughs.]

MS. GONCHAROV: [Laughs.]

MS. NILSSON: And I said, “Oh, yes, I did.” “Well, that is so cool.” [Laughs.]

MS. GONCHAROV: [Laughs.]

MS. NILSSON: But I had forgotten about one of the – some obscure record company or music company, early music, way back – I mean in the mid-60s had – there was somebody that had an involvement with them – and there were a group of some Chicago artists that did album covers for classical music.

MS. GONCHAROV: Oh.

MS. NILSSON: And I think I still have mine somewhere at home. I think I did – I don’t know whether it was Bach or Mozart. I can’t remember what. I mean, it’s something that was typical of the time for, like, say ’66 or so. But Wilco, I didn’t do anything other than they saw something of mine that they thought was applicable. And it was. And it was fun. [Laughs.]

MS. GONCHAROV: [Laughs.] I’ll bet.

MS. NILSSON: I have this image of myself being in this field of everybody, you know, from, say, 30 on down. And here’s me, with my Bose headphones on, screening out the music.

MS. GONCHAROV: [Laughs.]

MS. NILSSON: Anyway.

MS. GONCHAROV: Gee, the noise. We’re getting pretty noisy here.

MS. NILSSON: Yeah. Well, we’ve been lucky to have this by ourselves for so long.

MS. GONCHAROV: Yeah, yeah, yeah, it’s true. Want to take a break?

MS. NILSSON: Yes. I would love a break.

MS. GONCHAROV: Yeah, me, too. Okay.

[END OF INTERVIEW.]

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