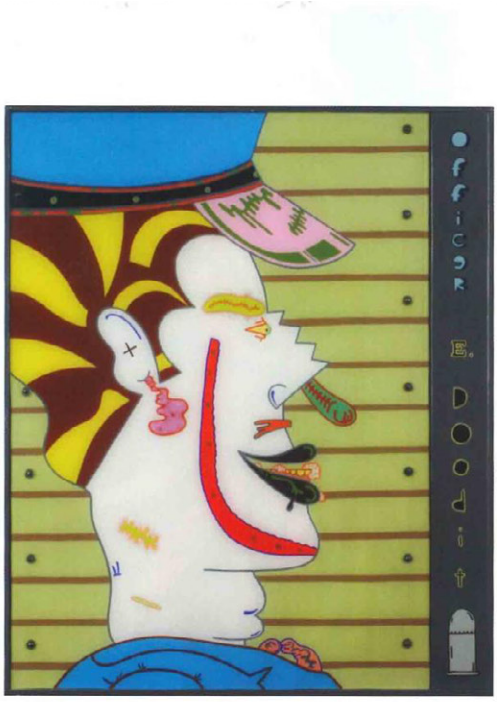
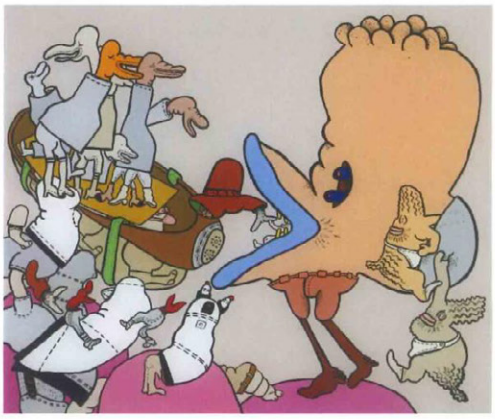
GLADYS NILSSON
Ellen Mara De Wachter, How Chicago! Imagists 1960s and 70s,
The World of Interiors, April 2019, p. 235



EXHIBITION diary



How Chicago! Imagists 1960s and 70s GOLDSMITHS CCA St James's, New Cross, London SE14

When it was first exhibited, the Chicago Imagists' work elicited strong reactions from some critics, with Frank Pannier of the *New Art Examiner* likening their exuberant style to 'visual gonorrhoea'. But many younger artists in the city were thrilled by its energy, including Kerry James Marshall and Jeff Koons, who when he saw it thought: 'This is what it must be like to mainline a drug!'

Some three decades after their last significant presentation in Britain, the Imagists are back with this Hayward Gallery Touring exhibition of key works by 14 artists. Consisting of overlapping groups who showed under names such as Hairy Who, The False Image and Nonplussed Some, the Imagists were active from the mid-1960s through the 1970s, and many continue to work today. Most of them studied at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago at a time when important art movements were flourishing on both coasts: Minimal, Conceptual and Pop art in New York, and Light and Space in Los Angeles. In America's second city, the Imagists gave birth to an eye-popping expressive realism influenced by the molten landscapes of Surrealism, Dada's artful pranks and Art Brut's anti-cultural positions. Also steeped in the vernacular, they drew inspiration from comics, commercial art and the marginal cultures of freak shows and strip clubs. Jim Nutt's technique of painting on Plexiglas was inspired by shop windows and pinball machines. It was the perfect vehicle for exquisitely grotesque portraits, such as *Officer Doodit* (1968), which is hilariously irreverent and replete with scabs, scars and secretions.

Visual humour and wordplay were vital ingredients to the Imagists: their first exhibition, *Hairy Who* (1966), gained its title after a misunderstanding when Karl Wirsum arrived late to a conversation about the art critic Harry Bouras and exclaimed: 'Harry who? Who is this guy?' According to Gladys Nilsson, 'everyone burst out laughing', they changed an 'r' for an 'i', and the rest is history. Later, *Marriage Chicago Style* (1970) was announced with a photograph of six artists wearing wedding outfits and ice skates – a joke about their union being on thin ice. Imagist installations broke with convention, featuring flowery wallpaper, display cases filled with thrift-store treasures and labels stuck to the wall with pre-chewed gum. Paintings often took sculptural form, as with Wirsum's *Ice Pick Nick Fisherman* (1979), a pair of marionettes stabbed in the back with ice picks.

Feminism is implicit in much of the Imagists' work, and in the group's composition: unlike many avant-garde scenes, women were central from the outset. Christina Ramberg's paintings of truncated female bodies bound by undergarments were inspired by memories of seeing her mother's transformations through clothing and make-up. They provide a powerful critique of the objectification of women. Gladys Nilsson worked with delicate colours to plumb the depths of her unconscious; *A Cold Mouth* (1968) depicts a strange dance of seduction between creatures sheathed in soft robotic casings. Like so many of the Imagists' works, it shows where the mind's eye can wander when it is let off the leash. HOW CHICAGO! IMAGISTS 1960s AND 70s runs 16 March-26 May, Wed, Fri-Sun 11-6, Thurs 11-9, touring to De La Warr Pavilion, Bexhill-on-Sea, 15 June-8 Sept ■ ELLEN MARA DE WACHTER *is the author of 'Co-Art: Artists on Creative Collaboration' (Phaidon)*

Clockwise from top left: Jim Nutt, *Officer Doodit*, 1968, acrylic on Plexiglas, enamel on wood, brass hardware, 62.5 × 53.5 × 3.5cm; Karl Wirsum, *Ice Pick Nick Fisherman*, 1979, acrylic on wood, 55.9cm high; Gladys Nilsson, *A Cold Mouth*, 1968, acrylic on Plexiglas, 30.5 × 35.5cm

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CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: ROGER BROWN STUDY COLLECTION, THE SCHOOL OF ART INSTITUTE OF CHICAGO; THE ELMHURST COLLEGE ART COLLECTION, COURTESY GARTH GREENAN GALLERY, NEW YORK