

# The New York Times

## Jim Nutt's Art Remains a Mystery. Even to Him.

In his first show of new work in over a decade, he has been occupied with a single subject: a portrait of a woman, in which he finds endless variation and human emotion.

By Max Lakin

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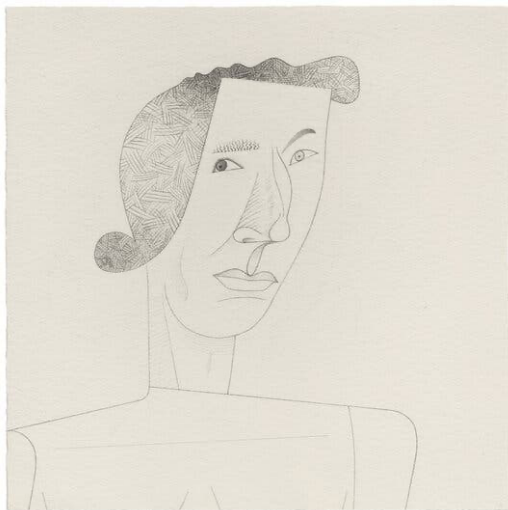
Jim Nutt in his studio in Wilmette, Ill., with an unfinished painting of a woman he has been working on for seven years. "Some of them are really a struggle," he said of his portraits, in a rare interview. Credit: Nathan Keay for The New York Times

They look at you from behind inscrutable eyes, aloof and moderately annoyed, jawlines jutting like ice floes. The faces are at once classically familiar and deeply strange, like Northern Renaissance portraiture pushed through a Cubist sieve, Hans Memling's "[Portrait of Barbara van Vlaenderbergh](#)" worked over with a tire iron.

The artist Jim Nutt has been making a version of this imagined portrait for the last 40 years, a mode that has dominated his practice. It is in fact his entire practice, the only variable being whether he's working in paint or pencil, an extended inquiry into form that has yet to be exhausted. They reappear again across 19 graphite drawings on view at [David Nolan Gallery](#), the first show of new work by Nutt in New York in over a decade, though time rarely enters into his pictures. His women never age, never seem to dislodge from a midcentury stylistic amber: all wearing smart up-dos, all clad in demure clothing.

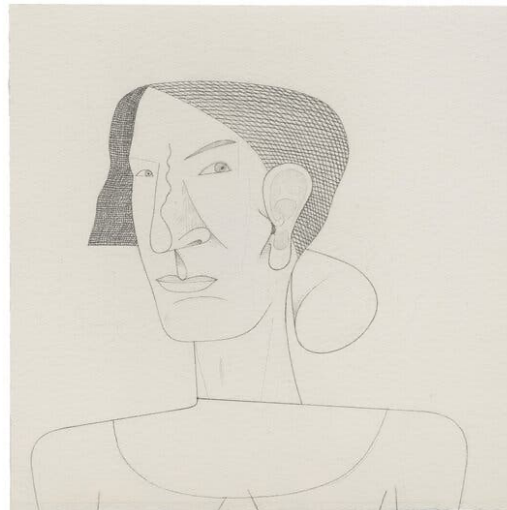
"Quite often I really want to paint in a different world than the previous painting, even though it slowly morphs back into the same world," Nutt said this summer while sitting in his studio in Wilmette, a suburb of Chicago. "It's like, I'm not going to eat any more tomatoes, I'm going to have a tangerine. Both are round."

Nutt, 84, can be both elliptical and impenetrable. He is happy to talk at length about the chemical bonding qualities of acrylic paint and the glassiness of cold-pressed paper, but shies away from things like his own thinking. Both socially and conversationally hermetic, he rarely gives interviews; it's suggested to me, more than once, that this one is very possibly the last he'll allow because he is so allergic to talking about himself.



An untitled work from Nutt's new show of graphite drawings at David Nolan Gallery. The author writes, "Eyes are pinpoints floating inside slits, entire hemispheres of a face appear in revolt, shifting upward like a tectonic plate." Nutt's portraits are like ethnographic studies.

Credit: Jim Nutt and David Nolan Gallery



In this untitled work from 2022, "Nutt maps through suggestion what is evanescent about a face, its muscles constantly shifting under the skin."

Credit: Jim Nutt and David Nolan Gallery

Still, Nutt is not self-serious. He arranges himself on a canary-yellow exercise ball from which he barely stirs for three hours. His ringtone is an obnoxious duck quack. The walls of his studio — in a modest single-story brick building on a residential block — are empty, save for some yellowed newspaper clippings (film reviews, an ad depicting Miró's "The Hunter"), and a photograph of the artist Gladys Nilsson, to whom Nutt has been married since 1961.

The only inducement to slacking off is a square of artificial turf and a mirror propped up in front to practice his golf swing. Nutt has played golf since he was in the fourth grade. In its exactingness, golf would seem to be a good analog for the kind of pictures Nutt makes, though he disagrees: "It's usually really simple."

Nutt works alone and seldom entertains visitors. Even Nilsson rarely sees the goings-on inside. "I had no idea he was working on a whole suite of drawings," she told me. "I would ask him, 'What are you doing?' And he would mumble, 'Nothing.' So it was a shock to me. The little snot was sitting over there drawing all this time."

Like Philip Guston's Klansmen or Jasper Johns's flags or Giorgio Morandi's bottles, Nutt's women sustain his attention, though from where they arrive remains a mystery, possibly even to him. The portraits locate an essential piece of human identity, though Nutt is less inclined to represent a face in any realistic way but rather our expectation of it, and what happens when that expectation is upended. He finds questions about their meaning laughable and will, in fact, laugh loudly at them, nervously and a few decibels too high.

The painter Carroll Dunham, who has admired Nutt's work since he first saw it in the 1970s, told me, "I don't think he's hiding anything. It's kind of a lovely thing to encounter, particularly if you've spent much time in American art history graduate programs. It's refreshing not to have to listen to a speech about somebody's intentions. There's nothing there except the pictures."



“Untitled,” 2023. Nutt’s economy is so precise that figures materialize in three or four marks, even as they appear imposingly sturdy.  
Credit: Jim Nutt and David Nolan Gallery



“I never saw the drawings as lesser things, they’re so intense and completely realized, they’re as vivid to me as paintings,” Carroll Dunham said of Jim Nutt’s process.  
Credit: Jim Nutt and David Nolan Gallery

Nutt is most immediately associated with a generation of Chicago artists, which he clarifies is “different from considering yourself one.” He was born in Pittsfield, Mass. and enrolled at Washington University of St. Louis to study architecture. A figure drawing requirement permanently shifted his interest, and he restarted in Chicago, at the School of the Art Institute. By his own admission, he was not a good student, frequently drifting out of classes to roam the museum’s collection upstairs.

“I was constantly poking around, hoping there would be something new up. You know, another haystack, that wasn’t going to do it,” he said, referring to the more than two dozen paintings Monet dedicated to stacks of wheat in Giverny (the Art Institute owns six).

In 1966, Nutt and Nilsson, along with Art Green, James Falconer, Suellen Rocca, and Karl Wirsum, all freshly out of SAIC, began showing their ribald work at the Hyde Park Art Center. After Wirsum asked “Harry who? Who is this guy?” about the local critic Harry Bouras, they called themselves the Hairy Who. The Hairy Who, and Nutt’s work in particular, followed in impolite fashion, collapsing Old Master work and comic books, consumer advertisements and pin-up magazines, into luridly colored and rudely psychosexual compositions. There was a preoccupation with the unlovelier aspects of the body — a gonzo perversity tempered by a good-natured surrealism — (“[Why did HE doo it?](#)” from 1967 a comic panel construction of cheerful grotesquerie, mocks our nagging need for explanation.



“Sally Slips Bye-Bye” (1972). Nutt was a member of the Hairy Who, Chicago artists influenced by the aesthetics of comic books, advertisements, cinema, folk art and Surrealism. This later work captures Nutt’s love of line and stylized figure—and wit.  
Credit: The Art Institute of Chicago and David Nolan Gallery

The Hairy Who occupy a large part of Chicago art history, but in practice they existed for six shows over four years. Nutt remembers that time fondly, but also bristles at the misconception that it was a cohesive movement. Mark Pascale, who curated the 2018 Art Institute exhibition “Hairy Who? 1966-1969.,” said that in the '60s, “Chicago was still a backwater in terms of art.” He recalled Nutt telling him, “We didn’t meet to destroy the art world, we really were just trying to eke out a career for ourselves.”

Since then, Nutt has had near-constant institutional recognition. In 1972 Nutt’s work was included in the Venice Biennale. He can recall, in spectacular detail, which European cities he and Nilsson visited and what art they saw there, but when asked about being in one of the world’s pre-eminent art expositions, he looks as if he’s been asked how he feels about reduced-fat yogurt. He does allow that, “it was a really strange group” (the pavilion, curated by Walter Hopps, also included Sam Gilliam, Richard Estes, Keith Sonnier, and Diane Arbus).

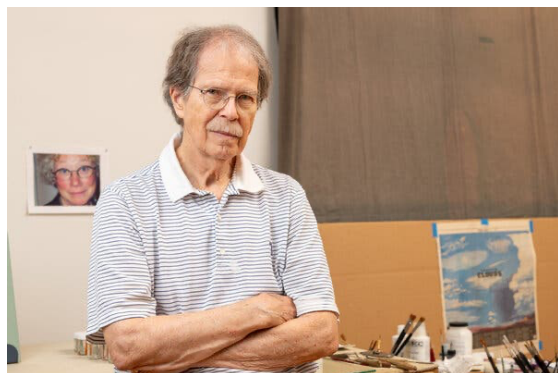
“I never really understood the art world to begin with, I just sort of muddled along,” Nutt said. “Wilmette is not a hub of artists. I’m not unhappy in my studio, but over the last 30 years in Chicago the only openings I went to were the few friends that were still exhibiting, which was not much. And when I did go to openings there were a number of people that were really very difficult to be in the room with. So I just bypassed all of that.”

To Nutt, Chicago was a matter of circumstance — he had a new wife and a young son and little money. But remaining in Chicago in the '60s seems like a deliberate refusal of joining up. “He and Gladys found something here that was life sustaining, and part of that probably was that he wasn’t being paid attention to that much,” Pascale said. “If he was in New York, likely, he would have been bothered all the time.”

“Jim was the first person who I knew was really serious, who thought a lot of the art historical stuff he just didn’t care about,” Dunham said. “I remember asking him, ‘What do you think of Robert Ryman?’ who was a painter I was very passionate about, and he basically seemed to think it was all quite silly. But now I see Jim much more as an artist like Ryman than I ever would have imagined, where repetitiveness isn’t that.”

Nutt’s practice has been one of gradual refinement, jettisoning parts he’s lost use for. His forms have focused, from deliberately messy to phlegmatically planar figures, and his economy now is so precise that many figures materialize in as few as three or four marks, even as they appear imposingly sturdy, like Venetian busts.

He maps through suggestion what is evanescent about a face, its muscles constantly shifting under the skin, rearranging into studies of human emotion: Consternation, irritation, fear, suspicion.



Nutt in his studio this summer. On the wall is a photo of his wife, and fellow artist, Gladys Nilsson. “I had no idea he was working on a whole suite of drawings,” she said. “I would ask him, ‘What are you doing?’ And he would mumble, ‘Nothing.’ So it was a shock to me.”  
Credit: Nathan Keay for The New York Times

Nutt makes deformity attractive. Eyes are pinpoints floating inside slits, entire hemispheres of a face appear in revolt, shifting upward like a tectonic plate. And yet with their sealed lips and tight chignons swept back in a neat beaver’s tail, Nutt’s portraits are like ethnographic studies of a particular kind of woman: taciturn, alluring in her androgyny, the people at the openings he’s never attended. “All these women are very satisfied with who they are,” Nilsson said. “There isn’t anybody in there that’s shy or frightened or second-guessing how they look.”

“They’re rather spare,” Nutt said. “But the gist is I keep trying all different sorts of things, and I’m not quite sure why or how I got there.” The drawings retain the traces of Nutt’s erasures, hinting at a satisfaction just out of reach. “I work ‘em to death,” Nutt said. “Some of them really are a struggle. In one sense I like the drawings, and then I’m not quite sure. That’s been the way with just about everything.”

Nutt dislikes drawing on canvas except with charcoal, which he also dislikes, but for a different reason. He primes his canvases with gesso, making it not unlike a heavyweight paper. To illustrate this point, Nutt retrieves a blank primed canvas from a flat file. Sitting next to it is a painting, staring out from the drawer, unblinking. Nutt doesn't work on drawings and paintings simultaneously, switching when he becomes fed up with one or the other. About 25 years ago, the paintings began taking longer; eventually a full year to complete. He has been working on this one for the last seven.

Perfectionism to the point of incapacitation may sound extreme, except what appear as limitations in practice flower in endless permutation. "I never saw the drawings as lesser things, they're so intense and completely realized, they're as vivid to me as paintings," Dunham told me. "I think about Jim's work quite often. I get a lot of comfort out of knowing he's doing it, whatever he feels about it. He may get a lot of discomfort out of it."

In 2003 Nutt said, "I rather liked the idea of being contemporary and modern. But, when I tried to do something modern, I just had no idea, no justification. Not only could I not rationalize it, it just felt terrible." In many ways everything about Nutt's work is thoroughly unmodern — paint and graphite and portraiture are centuries old. And yet his insistence is contemporary. His fixation on a single image also is a kind of refusal: of the constant demand for novelty, the endless churn of commercial production, of faddishness. It says we already have everything we need. As the title of his show puts it: Shouldn't we be more careful?