

Derek Eller Gallery is pleased to present a solo exhibition of paintings and drawings by Chicago artist Karl Wirsum. This will be his first New York show of recent work in over 25 years.

Wirsum first came to prominence in the mid-1960s as a founding member of the Hairy Who. His paintings and drawings combine psychologically heated and mordantly humorous imagery influenced by comic books, popular icons, Chicago blues, Japanese prints, and Mesoamerican pottery. His singular style has influenced generations of artists, and he continues to innovate today.

For Wirsum, drawing is as important as painting. The drawings, in fact, germinate the whole of his work. Through repeated drafts, sometimes spaced over the course of several years, he perfects the lines and colors of compositions before initiating a painting. His meticulously constructed figurative works forgo painterliness in favor of precise layers of acrylic. The flatness of the surfaces teamed with the vibrant color gives the work a feverish, pulsating quality, and activates the abstract underpinnings of his figurative work. He writes, "The flat color seems to clarify and accentuate the shapes and forms in a more abstract way, independent of what the shapes represent."

The paintings' cryptic content and ambivalent atmosphere oscillates between ominous and playful. Taffy Pull Tilt-a-Whirl, for example, features two figures, one of which appears to be stripping the flesh off of the other. In Eye Adjustment, a skeletal arm holding a knife reaches from outside the frame to 'adjust the eye' of an unsavory green character. Wirsum writes that, "Like Seurat's frozen-moment depiction of Sunday afternoon in the park, I select out from a particular arena of narrative action, leaving the viewer free to conjure up what may have come before...[and] the future unresolved, with no definitive "The End.""

Wirsum's painted wood frames add to the narrative, they act as barriers between the outer world and his inner world. Wirsum communicates his idiosyncratic vision through enigmatic characters and a visual language that is as captivating as it is hermetic. To experience the paintings and drawings of Karl Wirsum, is to enter into a world surfeit with humor, strangeness, mystery, and joy.

Karl Wirsum was born in 1939 in Chicago, where continues to live and work. His work was recently featured in Sinister Pop at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Chicago Imagists at the Madison Museum of Contemporary Art, Madison; Made in Chicago: The Koffler Collection at the Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D. C.; Chicago Imagists: 1966-1973 at Thomas Dane Gallery, London; Seeing is a Kind of Thinking: A Jim Nutt Companion at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago; and Looking Back: The Fifth White Columns Annual,

organized by Bob Nickas at White Columns, New York. This is Wirsum's second solo exhibition at Derek Eller Gallery.

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