

# HYPERALLERGIC

Sensitive to Art & its Discontents

Sensitive to Art & its Discontents

## The World According to Wirsum

by [John Yau](#) on November 10, 2013



Installation view, "Karl Wirsum" at Derek Eller Gallery (all images courtesy of Derek Eller Gallery)

Do you ever wonder how stupid the New York art world can be? Well, if you don't have enough proof, here is another example to add to your cache. [Karl Wirsum](#) at Derek Eller (October 12–November 16) is the artist's first exhibition of recent work in New York since 1988. Just think about how many other artists have risen like giant rockets over the Manhattan skyline in the past twenty-five years, only to have their reputation fizzle out a short time later, and you get an inkling of the ever-widening gap between news-grabbing, market driven art and the ninety-nine percent where you might actually encounter something real. All you need to do is look for yourself, but that's like telling some people they don't need to hire a home decorator.

Wirsum is one of the six artists who were included in the first, historic [Hairy Who](#) exhibition in Chicago in 1966 (the others were Art Green, James Falconer, Suellen Rocca, Jim Nutt, and Gladys Nilsson). Although their work is very different from each other, it was the opposite of painterly. These and other artists associated with Chicago Imagism didn't need to reject painterliness because they were never interested in it. Moreover, in contrast to those who believe that no one could invent new shapes, especially after Pablo Picasso, Wirsum proves that long-held view wrong.

This is one reason why Wirsum has been so influential for younger artists, particularly those who employ a graphic approach to painting. While there are those who still cling to the mantra that painting is dead — and who seem not to have settled in Chicago, except perhaps in academic institutions and museums — such a death knell wasn't sounded in the world of comic books and other related art forms. You never hear people shouting that you can't do anything new after Isadore Freleng, Basil Wolverton, Harvey Kurtzman or R. Crumb,

Wirsum's cast of demented cartoon characters are a meticulous combination of fluid contour lines and flat areas of candy colors, such as bubblegum pink, lime green, lemon yellow, robin's egg blue, chocolate brown and licorice black. The self-contained, highly confident characters one encounters in the paintings are the result of numerous sketches and colored pencil drawings, some of which are included in this exhibition. In addition, Wirsum paints the frames a single, usually bright color.



Karl Wirsum, "Your Call Cannonball" (2011)

Some of Wirsum's characters have something inexplicable being done to them. Others are extremely vain, brimming with pride about who they are and the way they look. Still others seem possessed by a manic energy, a sense that there is a mission to accomplish. Ignited by a mordant humor about the human capacity for vanity and mindlessness, Wirsum is a true heir of Honoré Daumier and William Hogarth, someone who elevates his perceptions into the realm of art.

Despite the juicy but rigid style of Wirsum's unmistakable characters, they run a surprising gamut when it comes to emotions and predicaments. You might even find yourself empathizing with a big-mouthed beast you wouldn't want to find sitting in your apartment, the stout, tailed figure in "Your Call Cannonball" (2011). He is the counterpart of the boy who will gladly accept being the butt of other boys' mean, humiliating intentions if that is the only way he can be accepted. So he sits with his wide-rimmed maw open, waiting for a tiny, flying red sphere to drop in, like a basketball. As with a number of the works in the exhibition, we don't see who has started it all, perhaps because — in this case — real monstrosity cannot be pictured.

Other of Wirsum's characters are seamless combinations of cyborg, human and lizard. The buxom, muscle bound, gray-skinned, red-haired figure in "Left in the Dust" (2012), decked out in a matching dress and high-heeled shoes, is a good example. Typical of Wirsum's subversiveness, she is running from right to left, which in the world of comic book narratives, might mean she is going backward in time. The stylized cloud of dust she is chasing extends in from off the left edge of canvas. This acknowledgment of something going on outside the painting's physical boundary, which interacts somehow with the character we see, adds the dimension of time and contingency to the recent paintings. They also add a note of mystery. We cannot quite decipher what is going on.



Karl Wirsum, "Fat Snowball's Chance" (2013)

One of the things about Wirsum's graphic style is that it is often impossible to tell whether or not a series of lines might be read as a fold of skin, a tattoo or a possible machine part. This is certainly true of the figure in "Left in the Dust." By bending the razor-sharp clarity of his lines to achieve the maximum ambiguity, the artist is able to extend the breadth of his inventiveness. It seems to me that the sources of the work aren't confined to any one area of experience. They might come from observation, invention or, as the title "Fat Snowball's Chance" (2013) suggests, from a cliché. In his penchant for puns and the lingua franca of the streets, Wirsum shares something with fellow artists, Nutt and Green.



Karl Wirsum, "Toot Toot Tutu Toodle-oo" (2013)

The emergence of Wirsum and other artists of the *Hairy Who* group runs counter to the narrative that claims that Minimalism and Pop were the logical next step after Abstract Expressionism. For one thing, Wirsum and cohort (most notably, Art Green, Gladys Nilsson and Jim Nutt) couldn't have cared less about Abstract Expressionism, at least in their work. They were into drawing and the figure — this was what they wanted to reclaim and reinvent for themselves.

Local culture (Chicago blues, pinball machines), local art (Seurat's "Le Grand Jatte" and the Field Museum) and local self-taught artists (from Henry Darger to the African American Joseph Yoakum) provided a fertile ground for Wirsum and his peers. They didn't have to look to New York. Wirsum's matchless work reminds us that there have been many art worlds in motion for a long time, and that nothing is central unless you believe that money is the only measure. And if you do, I am sure you can find your perfect counterpart in Wirsum's hall of frantic, foolish fiends

[Karl Wirsum](#) is on view at *Derek Eller Gallery* (615 West 27th Street, Chelsea, Manhattan) through November 16.