

THE BIG DIG: KARL WIRSUM • SKETCHBOOK 1966



DATELINE, CHICAGO, 1966

Karl Wirsum joins Jim Nutt, Gladys Nilsson, Suellen Rocca, Art Green, and Jim Falconer for an exhibition at the Hyde Park Art Center (HPAC) under the group moniker Hairy Who. In the span of one sketchbook, by means of an image diary, we are transported from six weeks before that landmark show to three months in its wake. Ideas hatched and probed in the home studio/laboratory – secret experiments of the notorious Dr. Worse-Some. By that time, Wirsum had established himself as an artist to watch. He'd graduated from the School of the Art Institute in 1961, and two years later, age 22, he mounted an ambitious solo debut at the short-lived Sedgwick Street Gallery in Old Town. In a curatorial nod to classic Surrealist installations, the gallery's rooms were painted black and each work was illuminated dramatically by a little lamp above it. Richard Wetzel, who co-directed the space, recalls the show: "It included paintings and a number of drawings in various media. Among the paintings were several that featured double portraits of women, some of them Siamese twins. The one that excited me most presaged his later work; it portrayed a strangely distorted woman facing us with a bicycle horn attached to her waist. When you squeezed its bulb, she coughed. The title was: 'I Had Tubercular Leprosy...PLEASE?' The show flier reproduced a drawing of a stylized horse vomiting an array of geometric shapes and objects. Its title was: 'The Horse, He's Sick.'"



Opening reception for *Hairy Who* at the Hyde Park Art Center, Chicago, February 25, 1966 (photo by Bill Arsenault)



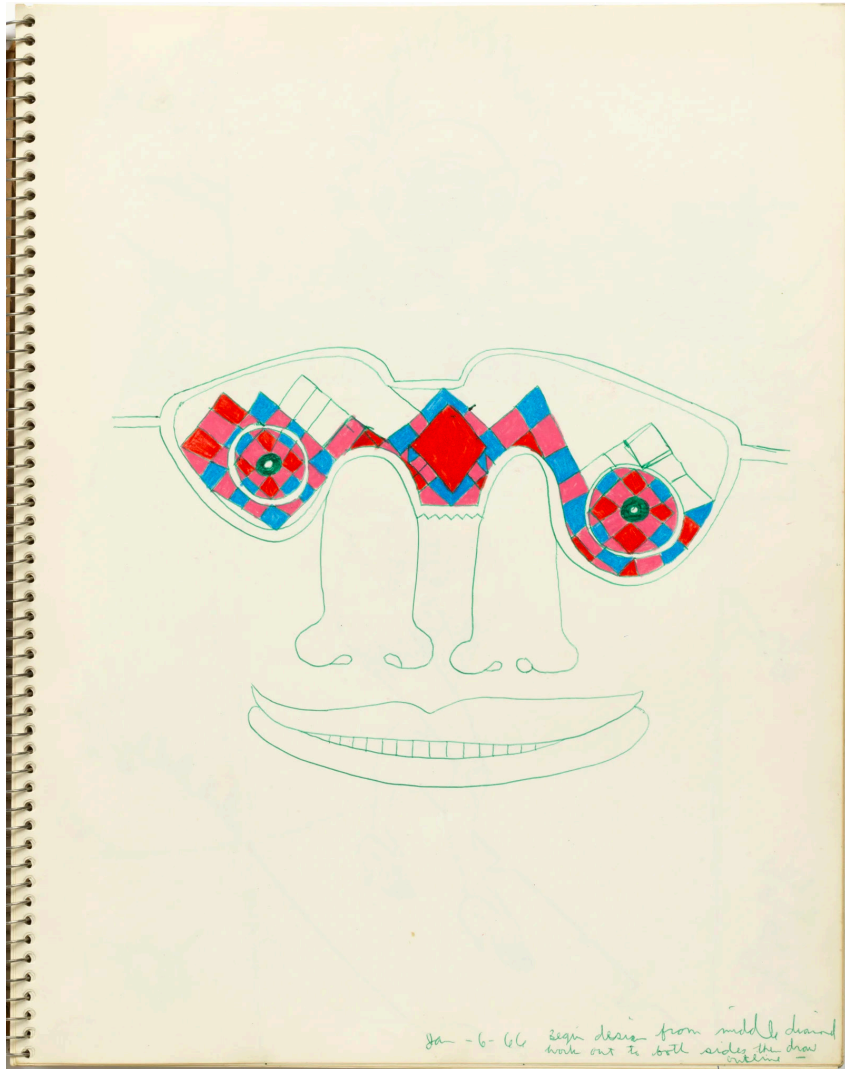
Karl Wirsum is presented with the Higher Culturalization for Everyone Award (a plastic gorilla) from Richard Wetzel in front of Sedgwick Street Gallery, Chicago, on the occasion of Wirsum's one-person exhibition, 1963 (photo by Bill Arsenault)

At Sedgwick Street Gallery, Wirsum also participated in group exhibitions alongside future Imagists Wetzel and Ed Paschke. He had paintings in *Eye On Chicago* and *The Sunken City Rises* (both in 1964), independently produced round-ups at Illinois Institute of Technology that also included Nutt and Nilsson. Wirsum's classic portrait of blues singer Howlin' Wolf, "No Dogs Aloud," was included in the Animal segment of Don Baum's *Three Kingdoms: Animal, Mineral, Vegetable* at HPAC. People were already paying attention to this irreverent young painter. By the end of 1965, Baum had agreed to the first of a series of smaller group exhibitions, suggesting they add Wirsum to the original quintet proposed by Nutt and Falconer. Hairy Who was slated to open February 25, 1966. It would take Wirsum and his new comrades to a whole other level of local visibility and now stands as one of the landmark events in Chicago art history. But in the months leading up to this exhibition, Wirsum was busy up in Wrigleyville, working on drawings and paintings. He had established a personal working methodology centered on sketchbooks – drawing in them on a daily basis, he moved between several, often trying out variations on a single image in two or three places simultaneously. And luckily for posterity he dated all of them. This leaves us an unusually precise map of his activities, especially the development of particular images. Some of the drawings were quite finished in and of themselves. Miraculous compositions, he began removing them from the sketchbooks to sell or exhibit at an early stage, a process that has continued for the last five decades.



Ray Siemanowski, Karl Wirsum and Lorri Gunn at *Hairy Who* reception, HPAC (photo by Bill Arsenaunt)

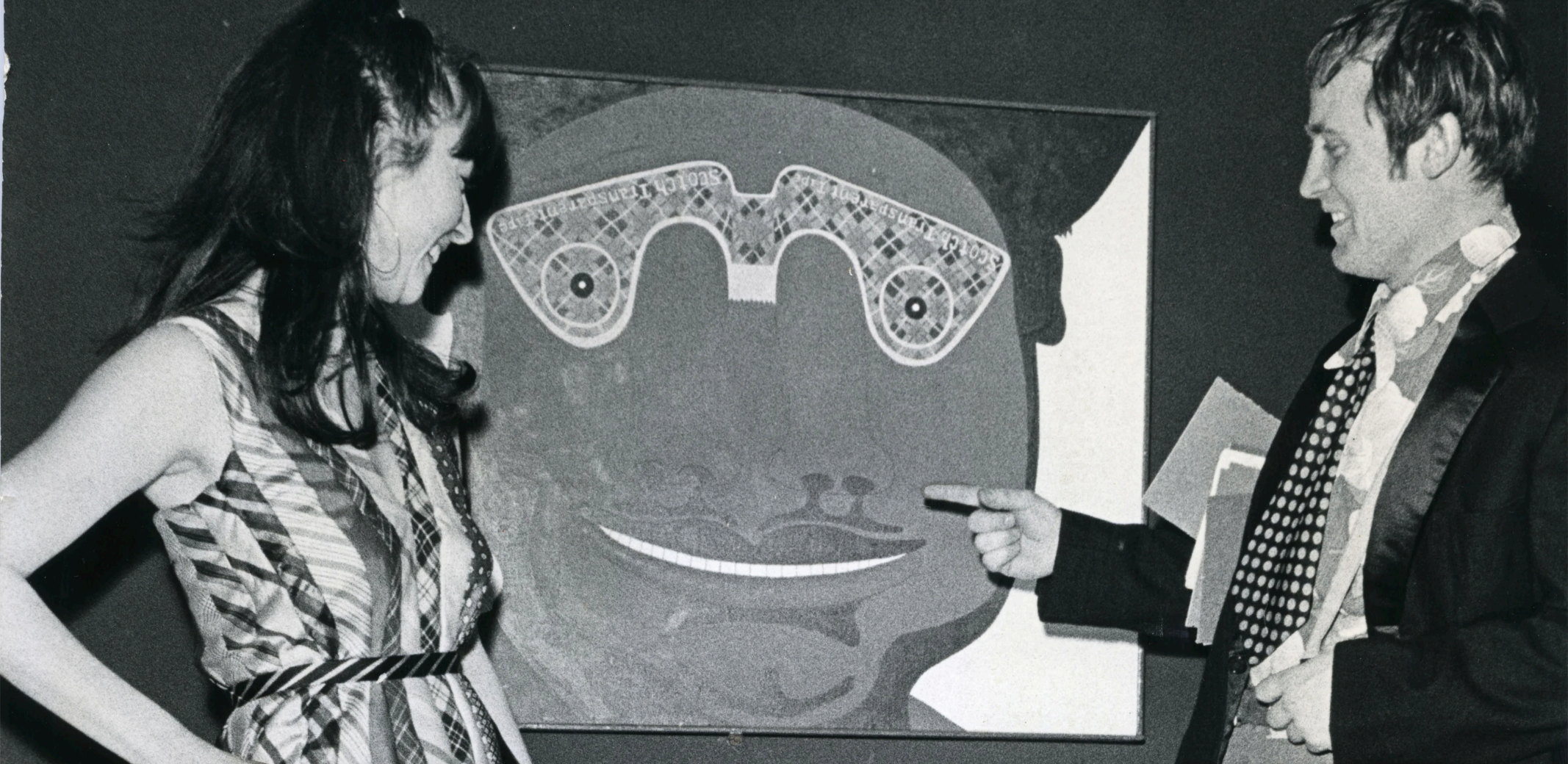
In this beautiful sketchbook, we find a number of now-iconic Wirsum images. There are drawings for "Drink Hearingade Made with Your Earplug in mind," which was reverse-painted on glass, a material the limitations of which were revealed when the inevitable happened and Wirsum and his girlfriend Lorri Gunn knocked the piece over and shattered it. (In a nod to Duchamp, the artist fixed it with a screw and piece of painted wood, as he'd seen shop owners do with broken windows; Wirsum began reverse-painting on Plexiglas instead.) The phrase makes its way into "Hearing Ade Quiz," a Wirsum page in the first *Hairy Who* comic book, and other sketches for his spread in that publication - Siamese twins, a dog face reminiscent of a Pacific Northwest Native American mask (or totem), and a girl with a comb - are refined into final shape. What is interesting but confusing at first is that some drawings appear to be sketches for paintings that are in the first *Hairy Who* exhibition. How, logically, could there be a drawing on January 6 for "Son of Sol Moscot," which appears in the show six weeks later, moreover given that the painting was completed in 1965? Or "First Quarter of Moon Dog," a sketch for which appears on January 10? Or several images related to "Spawning a Yawn with a Yellow Awning On" that were made after the *Hairy Who* show was already hanging? It turns out that what had always seemed like a unidirectional process leading from sketches through variations to a final image and a painting was in fact more complex, recursive even, involving the gradual evolution of an image, a related painting, then more sketches, perhaps another painting, and so on.



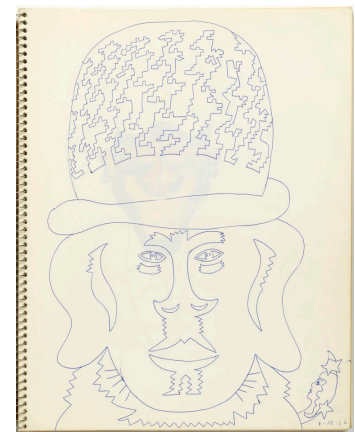
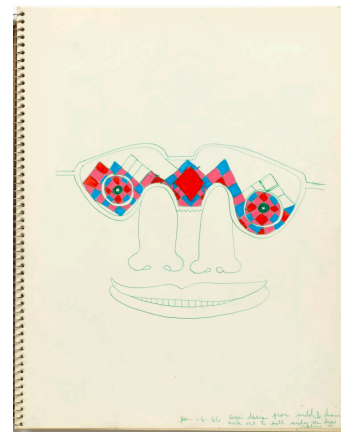
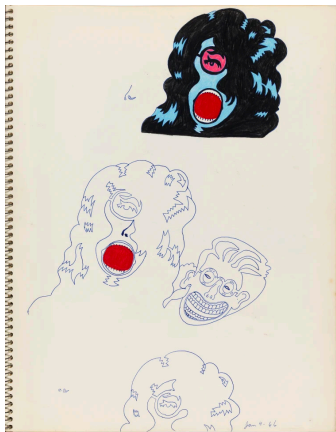
Untitled, January 6, 1966, colored pencil and ball-point pen on sketchbook, 14 x 11 inches

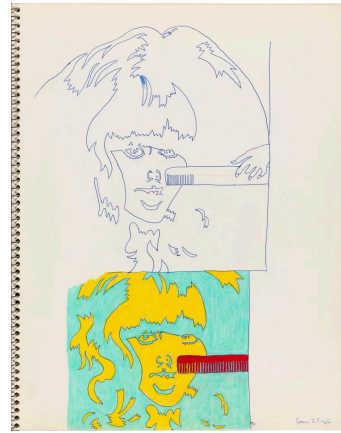


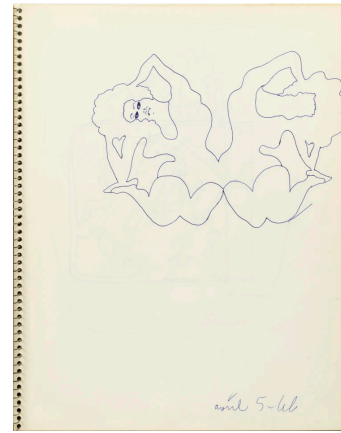
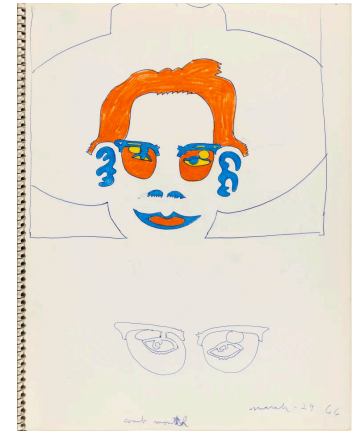
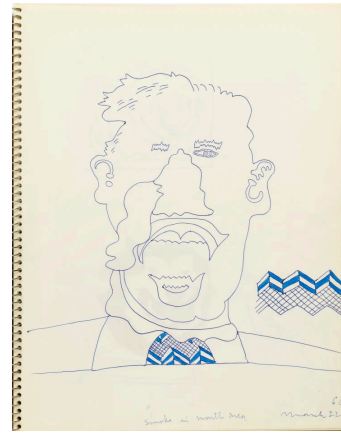
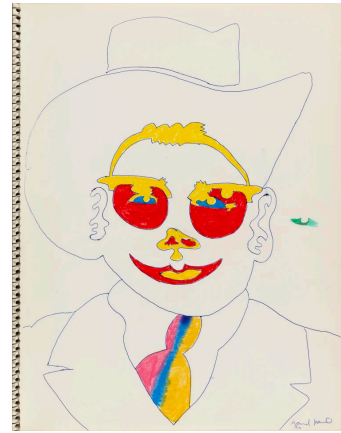
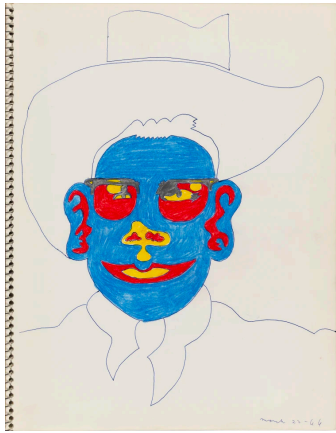
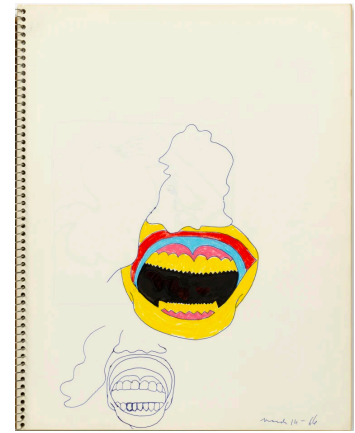
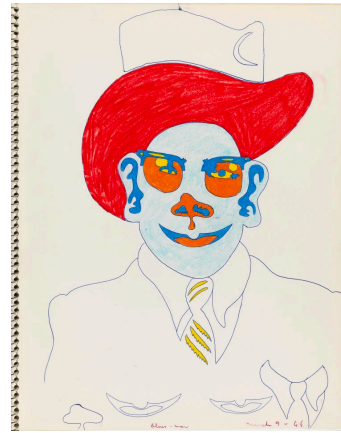
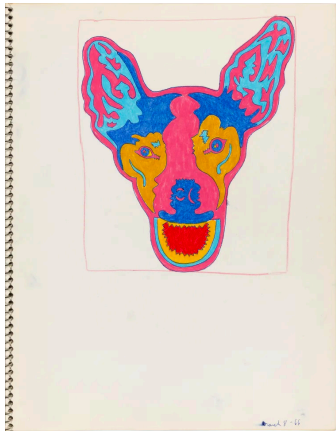
Son of Sol Moscot, 1965, private collection (photo by Robert Chase Heishman)

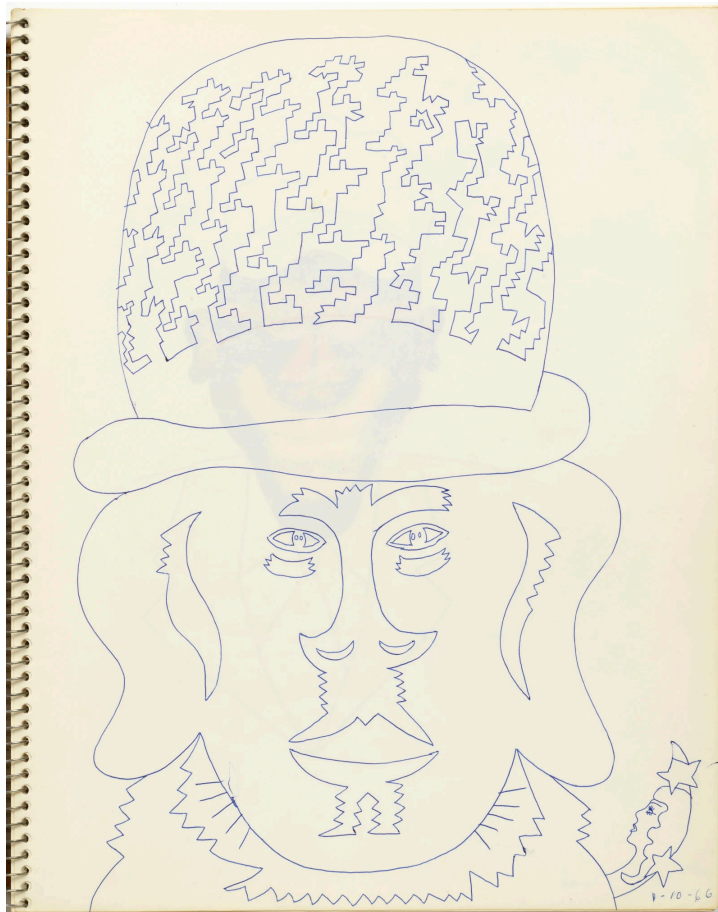
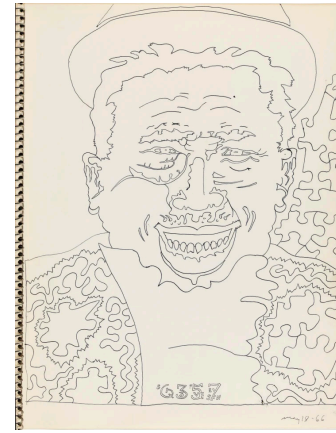


PLATES









Untitled, January 10, 1966, ball-point pen on sketchbook paper, 14 x 11 inches



First Quarter of Moon Dog, 1966, oil on canvas, 38 1/2 x 25 1/2 inches. Collection of the Madison Museum of Contemporary Art. Gift of the Raymond K. Yoshida Living Trust and Kohler Foundation, Inc.



Wirsum spread in *The Portable Hairy Who!* comic (bottom panel, right page by Suellen Rocca), signed for artist Dominick Di Meo on the night of the opening

Q/A WITH KARL WIRSUM

BY JOHN CORBETT AND JIM DEMPSEY

John Corbett: Was work in a sketchbook always part of your practice?

Karl Wirsum: Yes. The sketchbooks are about how I experience life.

JC: Do you remember when it started?

KW: When I was child in grade school, I always had a sketch book around.

JC: Did you think about your sketchbooks as repositories of finished drawings or strictly as points along the way to paintings?

KW: The sketchbooks are how I refine the drawings for finished paintings or drawings. They are not the finished product.

JC: Do you remember when you started dating your sketchbook drawings so exactly?

KW: I began dating them in the 60s and 70s because Picasso did but then stopped because I had too many sketches to date. Recently I started dating them again.

JC: Were the sketchbook drawings primarily about the transformation of an image? It seems like there's a lot of experimentation with how one image can morph into another.

KW: That is a fairly accurate description. Other experiences and ideas come into play and help me make the transformations for myself.

JC: You clearly moved back and forth between different sketchbooks at the same time. Was this done systematically or according to which sketchbook came to hand? What was the effect of shuttling between different sketchbooks?

KW: It was so I could see the images at the same time as I sketched a new image from them.

Jim Dempsey: Was there a moment when you knew you were ready to jump from a sketch to a painting?

KW: My mind would be seeing different images and be in different places. but once it was focused on one place I knew it was ready to be a painting.

JC: We've noticed that there were drawings related to several of the paintings that were part of the first Hairy Who show that crop up in this sketchbook after the show has opened. This suggests that you were working on the same image later, maybe with additional paintings in mind. Is that right? Did you sometimes work backwards from paintings to sketches, or did they always terminate in a painting?

KW: I never worked backwards always from sketches or drawings to paintings but I would sometimes work on a series of related paintings from my sketchbook drawings. But I would reverse (change) focus on a new painting. A sketch often used more than one idea and so I would use those ideas for different paintings.

[interview taken and transcribed late June, 2020, by Ruby Wirsum]



The Odd Awning Awed, 1966, acrylic on canvas, 33 x 29 inches



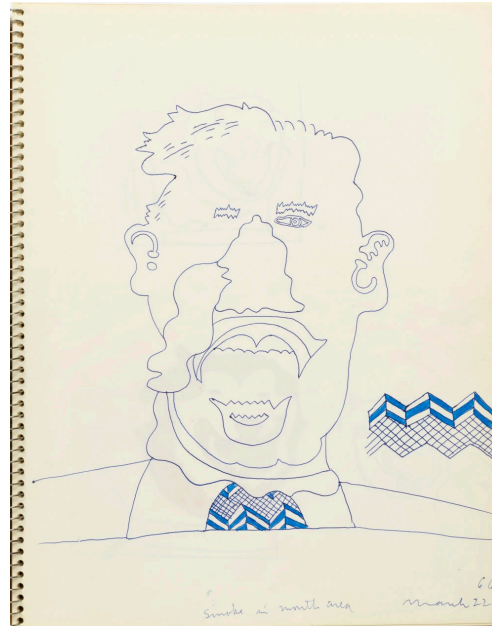
Awful Awning, 1966, oil on canvas, 29 7/8 x 27 7/8 inches, Smart Museum of Art University of Chicago



Spawning a Yawn with a Yellow Awning On, 1966, private collection



Untitled, April 27, 1966, colored pencil and ball-point pen on sketchbook paper, 14 x 11 inches



Untitled, March 22, 1966, colored pencil and ball-point pen on sketchbook paper, 14 x 11 inches



Time magazine, 1967



Untitled, January 5, 1966, colored pencil, graphite, and ball-point pen on sketchbook paper, 14 x 11 inches



Drink Hear Ing Ade, 1966, acrylic on glass, decals, tape, and painted wood frame, 11 x 9 1/4 x 1 3/4 inches, private collection (photo by Jeremy Lawson, courtesy of the Frances Young Tang Teaching Museum and Art Gallery at Skidmore College)



Karl Wirsum, Drink Hearingade Made with Your Earplug in mind, 1966, acrylic on glass, tape measure, decals, metal hardware, and painted wood frame, 22 x 20 1/2 x 3/4 inches, private collection (photo by Jeremy Lawson, courtesy of the Frances Young Tang Teaching Museum and Art Gallery at Skidmore College)

