HYPERALLERGIC

Transfigured: An Interview with Karl Wirsum

by Nicole Rudick on October 10, 2015

Karl Wirsum, (left to right) "China Clown, Jimmy Jones Brother Jack, Jimmy Jones Junior, Tree Son" (c. 1973-1974), acrylic, wood, fabric, leather, soldering pen, papier-mâché, and light fixtures, dimensions variable (all images courtesy of Derek Eller Gallery, New York) (click to enlarge)

It's tempting to characterize Karl Wirsum's recent spate of exhibitions in the city as his New York moment. He was included as a foundational artist in *What Nerve!: Alternative Figures in American Art, 1960 to the Present* at Matthew Marks Gallery this summer, where the little-known publications produced in the sixties by the Hairy Who, of which Wirsum was part, were given a sizable chunk of exhibition real estate as well as their own monograph. His current solo outing at Derek Eller Gallery, of paintings and three-dimensional work produced in the

’70s, marks only his third New York show since 1988, a rare opportunity for those on the East Coast to see an array of his art.

But Wirsum, who was born in Chicago in 1939 and still lives there, isn’t an artist who seeks out big-city moments, and to approach his work in that way is to fundamentally misunderstand both the artist and the terms under which his work is created. He describes his temporary move to California in the early ’70s, for example, as an escape; Chicago, he recalls, had gotten “too pizzazzy.” Art, for Wirsum, is an end in itself.

He and I met in Eller’s office, in the midst of his exhibition there, for a long conversation about art school, the importance of drawing, and the shift in his work that occurred in 1970. Wirsum is considered and modest in his speech, forming a rather curious contrast to his boldly graphic interpretations, by turns fluid and geometric, of the human form, often writ in electrifying color.

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Nicole Rudick: *What was it like studying with Whitney Halstead at the Art Institute?*

Karl Wirsum: The big influence was Kathleen Blackshear. She gave slide lectures introducing the history of art, but what she focused in on was non-Western art, because we had the Field Museum, which has a lot of ethnographic material. She reinforced the importance of African art, New Guinea art, Egyptian art, and so on and showed, for instance, the influence on Picasso. It was she who strongly directed me to these alternative venues of approach. She retired and Whitney was like her assistant in the department. He, too, navigated us toward these alternative approaches — Surrealism, Dada, all this earlier modern stuff that diverged from the status-quo.

Whitney’s influence went beyond the classroom. We became good friends. He was very supportive after my graduation and took photographs of my work. Perhaps more importantly, he showed some of these slides to Don Baum,

who then invited me to participate in group shows at the Hyde Park Art Center, which led eventually to me being included in the Hairy Who exhibitions.

NR: *You'd grown up in Chicago. Were you already aware of the Field Museum's collection?*

KW: Sure, my parents used to take me there. And as a kid, I went to the Art Institute — they had a Saturday class. When I was four, I fractured my skull. My mother was doing wash in the basement of our house, and I was talking to her over the banister and I lost my balance and hit the cement floor. I was in the hospital for about a month. My father was a machinist, but he also did a lot of drawing and made murals in my bedroom. He was very artistically inclined. Every day, when I was in the hospital, he'd bring me a story, a kind of elfin story, illustrated in the manner of a daily comic strip. It inspired me to do some of my own sketches. One of the doctors noticed that I had a certain ability and suggested that when I got to be six, I go to the Art Institute, which offered a free program on Saturdays to people of various ages. We'd do sketches of live, costumed models and look at slides on a particular theme from art history. In the week that followed, we'd bring in a painting or drawing based on that theme, which were displayed at the back of the auditorium. It was a kind of precursor to the history of art classes I took later.

NR: *Did your father aspire to be an artist?*

KW: He was an immigrant and when he first came over from Germany in the '20s he took a commercial art class. He and my mother were killed when I was nine, so I never did inquire as to what navigated him out of wanting to be an artist. My assumption is that he felt he knew he could get into the machinery work, where he'd be able to earn more income.

NR: *What did you do after they were killed?*

KW: I stayed with their best friends — they opened their doors. I stayed with them till I was ready to go to the Art Institute, so through high school. Then I moved out to a YMCA.

NR: *How did the classes with Blackshear and Halstead affect what you wanted to do with your art?*

KW: It brought in all these influences — like Indian and Japanese art — which I wasn't aware of, even though I went to the Field Museum. When I had started at the Institute, I'd wanted to be a comic-book artist with EC Comics. But when it was pointed out that Japanese woodblock prints were like comics — accessible to the common person — I thought there was possibility there. So I diverged into painting and printmaking and things like that.

Karl Wirsum, "Magnet Hands" (1972), crayon and ink on chipboard, 84 x 72 inches

NR: *Were you reading* Mad *magazine?*

KW: I loved the original ones, where Harvey Kurtzman orchestrated the other artists and story lines. I liked his art as well. It had a Japanese quality to it, like his classic stories in*Frontline Combat*, where he had a very raw style with brushwork that I noticed later in Japanese prints — that kind of fluid, almost calligraphic quality, very reductive. Some of the other artists, like Jack Davis, were more reality based, even though they were stylized.

NR: *How did you meet the artist Joseph Yoakum?*

KW: I was the first of our group to see his work. I was walking down North Avenue, which was more of a hipster area, an artistic community. There was a gallery and in the window they had some [of Yoakum's] drawings — landscapes, ballpoint pen, and ink — and I thought, Whoa! Lorri [Gunn] and I went in and got a few pieces, and I told Jim [Nutt] and Gladys [Nilsson] about it and they scoped out the place, too. Chris Ramberg, Phil Hanson, Ray Yoshida, and a number of other people visited him regularly and talked with him. Even though I only went to his little place once, what struck me was that he lived only two blocks away from where I grew up with my foster family after my parents' deaths.

NR: *What appealed to you about his work?*

KW: The inventiveness in the way he dealt with the forms and the mountain ranges and the unusual things he added, like Art Linkletter's log cabin, and weird juxtapositions, the way he talked about the areas he drew. And he had *National Geographic* magazines, which I thought he used as a reference point — I noted that when I went to his space. When I was a kid, my parents had a *National Geographic* subscription, and they bound all the issues in these leather covers at the end of the year. So I felt a connection to him in that way.

And I liked the way he approached art — that it was from an inspirational point, not as a way of gaining fame or fortune. That always appealed to me about these so-called Outsider artists — they had a compulsion to make art. I could connect up with that.

NR: *What about Jean Dubuffet? He had been a figure in the city in the 1950s.*

KW: He was also one of the first to draw attention to art that was not schooled, and seeing his collection when it was in Paris was an influence.

NR: *You saw his art brut collection?*

KW: Yes, in 1968. We went to Europe with Mimi Gross and Red Grooms, because he was in the Venice Biennale that year, and then Lorri and I went on to see the collection and travel. We had to write ahead of time to get into the space, because it wasn't an open museum.

Karl Wirsum, "Alien Dating Service Portrait" (1977), acrylic on acetate, 12.25 x 9 inches

NR: *Did Dubuffet's own art figure into what you were thinking about?*

KW: Dubuffet's approach to art did influence me. His use of multiple materials — his plaster work, the collages with butterflies, the use of tile grout to give his two-dimensional work a more relief-like dynamic. His use of materials influenced me. That's also what I like about Picasso, that he arbitrarily took materials and made them into some kind of creation.

My painting “Baseball Girl” (1964) was accompanied by a number of drawings, and the owner of “Baseball Girl,” Ruth Horowitz, had eight or nine of these drawings, and Dubuffet was very interested in her collection. He was briefly in Chicago and stopped by and saw these drawings and was enthused by them. And she gave him one of my drawings. It was a kind of stamp of approval from Dubuffet.

A few years later, I did a Screamin’ Jay Hawkins painting — it’s a piece that has been associated with me a lot. I didn’t make it for any commercial purpose, but there was a record company that was reintroducing Screamin’ Jay and bringing out some of his old hits and I knew a guy who had become an art director for this record company. He knew my painting and said that he’d like to use it for the cover. It needed final approval from Screamin’ Jay himself, and he said he dug the cover. That’s another stamp of approval I hold dear. Those moments help me move forward when I get overwhelmed by too many different things.

NR: *Between graduating the Art Institute in 1961 and becoming part of the Hairy Who in 1966, how did you feel you fit into the artistic landscape?*

KW: Ed Paschke graduated with me — we had quite a friendship — and were outliers from the main approach at the school at the time, which was Abstract Expressionism. Our more contextual-based art didn’t quite mesh with what was going on, so I didn’t really feel like I was in the landscape of the larger art world. I wasn’t thinking about being in shows. My model was thinking about the artist in the cold-water flat, where recognition didn’t arrive until you were under the ground.

There was a faction in Chicago that wasn’t into Abstract Expressionism or nonobjective art. It wasn’t that I was against abstraction, but that the people in my age group in Chicago who got more recognition were those who were following the way of de Kooning and that kind of work. Even though he had figurative things in his paintings, he had a more active, painterly approach. I didn’t want to be part of the active-painting school where paint was vigorously

and emotionally applied. I preferred the more controlled application of paint as seen in the work of Kandinsky and Klee, for example, as well as the abstract work of older Chicago artists Miyoko Ito and Evelyn Statsinger. I was interested in precision.

NR: *What did you think of Pop in the 1960s?*

KW: I liked Oldenburg, the large-scale soft sculptures. I didn't like the straight appropriation. When I initially saw Lichtenstein's work, the aspect of taking a single panel from a comic strip and blowing it up onto a canvas surface appealed to me. And I liked some of his sculptural pieces that had an Art Deco aspect to them. But for the most part, they were staying too close to the initial point of inspiration. I liked things that were more inventive.

NR: *What led you away from being a comics artist?*

KW: I saw all these other options — that I could utilize paint, that I could do three-dimensional pieces, all within the graphic mode. And also, unless I was doing a one-panel comic with no narrative component, like what's in *The New Yorker*, I wasn't able to reproduce the characters I had created. Each time, from panel to panel, they'd get a little bit off. If I were doing Dick Tracy, for example, he'd look different each time I drew him. So I decided I couldn't do that. I saw that it was not for me.

NR: *That makes me think of a comic from one of the Hairy Who publications — a spread of twelve panels in which the colors stay the same but the face is different in each panel. I think that's about as narrative as you get.*

KW: Yeah, in a way. It had a little poem — "It took me 27 years to get this cute all up in here in my Maxwell St. suit." It was based on a place called Riverview, an amusement park, and they had a freak show that had awnings over the tents. I got really obsessed with these awning patterns. I had also found a fabric ring that someone had thrown away that contained samples of different awning patterns,

and then, going to Mardi Gras, we stopped at an army store and I found a hat made out of awning material. This all combined in my work. I did several paintings of people wearing awning suits. The Hairy Who comics — the first ones anyway — acted as a kind of catalogue of the work that was in the show, commenting or referencing on the work, so that spread alluded to the awning-themed paintings shown in the first Hairy Who exhibition.

Karl Wirsum, "A Long Way from Foam #1" (c. 1976-1977), ink and marker on styrofoam, 9.5 x 6 x 7 inches

NR: *Early in 1970, you began making three-dimensional objects and using untraditional materials, and your figuration became more geometric. What prompted this shift?*

KW: I also went from painting torsos and heads to doing a total figuration. I think it had to do with someone like Picasso, who went from two to three dimensions — I always admired that. And also my exposure to things like New Guinea masks and that kind of three-dimensional work. By that time, I also had more space to work in. I had a storefront studio and then an attic in one of the apartments we

lived in. When we moved to California, I had a big studio space there, too — that's where I did a lot of my puppetry. In general, those larger spaces offered me a chance to do different kinds of work, to follow Picasso's example of approaching art from many different areas.

Karl Wirsum, "A Long Way from Foam #5" (c. 1976-1977), marker, acrylic, and ink on styrofoam, 10 x 5.75 x 6.75 inches (click to enlarge)

NR: *Your figures also become very symmetrical around this time.*

KW: That had to do with wanting them to feel like icons, to go beyond the everyday. I didn't think of them as casual images, like a Mary Cassatt painting of a baby being nursed by its mother, but more like a stylized, early medieval painting of the Virgin Mary and Child, something more spiritual. Like this one, "Harry Kari's Arms Exchange" (1976), which has symmetrical figuration. It has to do with a very famous broadcaster, Harry Caray, who arrived in Chicago in the early seventies at the same time these Japanese soldiers, the two figures

represented on either side, had been found to be hiding out in the jungles after the war. Caray had been in California and got fired and came back to the Midwest and then got a job with the White Sox as an announcer. When I did this piece, it was a commentary on the connection between the Japanese being found and Harry Caray coming back and our family coming back to Chicago from California. It had a larger presence to it — those solders hanging out for all that time brought them beyond the fact of just being soldiers, and Harry Caray, the grand personality, was bigger than the normal broadcaster in terms of his fame.

NR: *But your coming back to Chicago is wrapped up in this, so do you also think of the figures as symbols? Do you work in symbols?*

KW: Not really. I make these associations and I don't think about exactly what they may represent. The phenomena of them coming out of the jungles interested me and I wanted to picture it. It was like my version of a news photo. I did some paintings earlier that were views of policemen in front of lineups, so they have the formality of the police mug shot — the front view and the side view and the bars in the back that indicate height. The soldiers are like that, taken from a frontal position — like a formalized police photo or news photo.

NR: *So you're really thinking in terms of form.*

KW: It's definitely form. Just look at the physiognomy. I mentioned medieval works with Christ and the torso view — they're often elaborate and a little strange. They made reference to anatomy but it's not photographically rendered. That's what I do — think about what part of the body it is and how I can make some association to it but bring a strong abstraction. I also think about Mesoamerican work, the ravens and all these bird forms on ceramics. They're very stylized.

Karl Wirsum, "Harry Kari's Arms Exchange" (1976), acrylic on acetate, 29.875 x 65.625 inches (click to enlarge)

I was really inspired by the Mesoamericans and their very graphic stylization. When I got out of the Art Institute, I spent five months in Mexico, and that was really influential. I became immersed in Mesoamerican art, the Day of the Dead festivals. The storefronts, the buses — everything had imagery. It was great. I could see it connecting up to comic art, the exaggeration of physical form. In *Dick Tracy*, for example, Chester Gould was dealing with a certain reality, but he exaggerated their physical nature, especially the criminal types. Just think about meeting some of these characters in the street!

NR: *The sense of movement also changed around 1970. It went from existing in the work as an aspect of the figures' physicality to being a facet of the work — the marionettes, the grommets that allow a figure's limbs to pivot.*

KW: Yes, the activated figuration. The grommets relate to Halloween decorations. Halloween has always been my favorite holiday. The people you see everyday are all costumed up, and carnivals, like Mardi Gras — that transformation of the everyday appealed to me. So the grommets came from the skeletons and scarecrows you see in the windows during Halloween. Their legs and arms are attached by small grommets so that they move or can be positioned. Using grommets also allowed me to think in smaller units — an arm, a leg — and then put them together to make quite large figures. I didn't have that

ability in the smaller spaces I worked in, so these allowed me to go bigger and to make the figures active. Then I moved into making the marionettes, which involve further activation.

NR: *Do you think of building the figures in paintings up in the same way that you build the grommeted figures?*

Karl Wirsum, "Untitled" (c. 1973), ink on board, 28 x 30.5 inches

KW: I do think in sections, so that certain kinds of forms would indicate a forearm and some other kind of forms would indicate the bicep area or the shoulder area. If you think of football players putting on the shoulder pads and other protective equipment, or a baseball catcher with the mask and the pads. It's like armor, and armor really appealed to me, the abstraction attached to the human figure. I made an association to that, too, in terms of movement — the abstraction of the armor allows for movement and presents a fearsome quality to the wearer's

presence. I think about it as putting on a more stylized version of what's underneath, which might look more realistic.

NR: *Do you work the figures out in your sketchbook before you begin to paint?*

KW: Definitely. Drawings are very important to my work. The ratio of drawings to actual work is very high. I have stacks of sketchbooks in my attic. It's like an archaeological dig sometimes. I might go back several years to scout out something. I'll be looking for a hand to attach to something I'm currently working on. It's not so much an idea I'm looking for as a form that I can further elaborate on.

NR: *How many drawings do you do for any one painting?*

KW: I do a number of drawings that aren't linked to the final product, so it's hard to say. Maybe eight or nine or ten different versions. It can be many years that I'm evolving different drawings for ideas that I have. There's an example with Alfred Hitchcock that gives an idea of the way I work. The opening sequence of his film *The Man Who Knew Too Much*(1956) has an Arab running through the streets, running through the crowds. He stops suddenly and whispers some key word to someone and falls to the ground and you see his back has a knife in it. When Hitchcock originally had the idea for this sequence, he could never place it in the proper film. Seven years later, he finally had an opportunity in this film to include it. I've thought about that — that I don't need to go from start to finish. I have at least eight or nine ideas that are on the burner and am generating drawings and different associations. So I don't start from one premise and go through a sequence of drawings and elaborations and then on to the final execution. It's more of a free-association kind of thing. The drawings are more playful, and the paintings are like washing dishes. I'm not as enthused to go into the painting part.

Karl Wirsum, "Untitled" (c. 1976-1978), ink, graphite, and color pencil on paper, 18 x 24 inches

NR: *Do you find inspiration in culture at large, in looking through magazines for instance, or do you invent the shapes you use?*

KW: For the most part, the shapes are invented. Where the inspiration comes into play is maybe some news item or a photograph, something graphic that I can spring off of. I have a collection, for instance, of mountain forms that intrigue me, and I'm doing a series of pieces now that are cutouts. They each have a cliff that is made of all these abstract forms and then I have a guy tilting off that cliff. Sometimes I bring in an ironing board that acts like a diving board and he'll be tilting off that. I'm not sure if it's apocryphal or if it actually happens — there's photographic evidence of it, though that doesn't mean it's true — but there are people who go up onto a large rock formation and they bring their ironing boards

and they iron pants or whatever and then they come down. These wood cutout pieces are inspired by that. I also based them on some sketches I made when I went to the Southwest. I did some drawings and took photographs of the very strange formations there.

NR: *How do you pick your materials?*

KW: Sometimes, with something like the marionettes, which needed to be lightweight and which are made with papier-mâché, I choose material for the functionality of a piece. But it can also be associative. The other day I saw the yellow plastic wraparound billboard, at Sixth Avenue and Fourteenth Street, that says *Sol Moscot*, and it recalled a painting I did back in the sixties when I saw the original Sol Moscot [Eyewear] location in the Village. They had these fantastic eyeglasses that had butterfly frames that were really bizarre and elaborate and compelling, so I thought about what kind of eyeglasses I could create and how it would connect up to Sol Moscot. I got back to Chicago and did a painting using the image of a flattened out scotch-tape dispenser. When that's spread out, you have these arches that would go over the nose. This configuration gives you two arches, so I made my figure with two noses and the spread of the scotch-tape eyeglasses. The whole thing was painted but was initiated by my response to the elaborate material treatment of the eyeglasses in the window display. I called it "Son of Sol Moscot" (1965).

Karl Wirsum, "Alien Dating Service Portrait" (1977), acrylic on acetate, 12.25 x 9 inches

NR: *What about the material for the "Alien Dating Service" portraits (1977)?*

KW: That's acetate, which gives it the reflective, undulated quality, which picks up the light because it's not stretched tautly, and then you also get embedded forms from the reflection. You don't get something like that on paper, and painting on the back of something gives it a nice sheen that you couldn't replicate with varnish.

The original of "Harry Kari" was on a large fabric piece that was extended horizontally. It was like a hammock, an aqua hammock, that was sewed up by my wife, Lorri. So you had the fabric and then strings attached to extend out to trees

or the wall. But the gallery dealer at the time did not see that as a good possibility for sales, and so without notifying me they cut it away and framed it.

NR: *The marionettes are a bit different from your other work, in that you can put them in narrative situations.*

KW: They were originally created to perform in a complete theatrical narrative, but I isolated them in more of a tableau format for exhibition purposes, much like a painting or sculpture, where I provided cues for potential narratives that could be extended by the viewers themselves. I had to abandon the idea of ever having these puppets in an actual performance, and all that implies, because I am essentially an isolated artist and do not have the organizing skills or personality to bring people together to create a theater piece.

NR: *It's like the single panel in comics again.*

KW: Exactly. It is like that.

NR: *Your figures appear so ecstatic. Is there a spiritual element to your work?*

KW: I hesitate to say it, but I do feel that there is.

NR: *Can you say a little more about it?*

KW: That's why I paint — I don't have the capability of addressing that verbally. But I do think it is a connection with something beyond the everyday, whatever that is. There's some kind of strong magic that we can't explain. I don't have a belief in any divine being or anything of that nature, but there are mysterious things that happen and I feel that being a creator you link up in some way to another realm of reality that is not part of the everyday. And I feel a commitment to these things that's not based on fame or fortune. It goes beyond the material into this other realm, which could be described as spiritual.