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# **Karl Wirsum**

By **KEN JOHNSON**

*Derek Eller*

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In the 1960s when he was a member of the Hairy Who, the Chicago group whose influence on succeeding generations of American image makers has never been properly assessed, Karl Wirsum made graphically bristling paintings resembling banners for an underground freak show. His first exhibition of new work in New York since 1988 finds him comparatively mellowed but still driven by rambunctious urgency.

The eye-popping, cartoon-style paintings here present a delightful cast of zany characters whose otherworldly anatomies are defined by curvy, razor-edged outlines filled in by fruity colors. I imagine they would appeal greatly to children. “Your Call Cannonball,” for example, represents a cute, stocky, monstrous fellow with a pointy tail sitting on a branch, his gaping maw about to catch an arcing red ball. Overprotective parents might find some of them too weird, however. In “Taffy Pull Tilt-a-Whirl” two green humanoids — hybrids of sexy women and dorsal-finned lizards — are shown grappling in some sort of violent, erotic choreography.

The humorous sweetness of Mr. Wirsum’s paintings and colored pencil drawings lightly masks deep psychic tensions. “Fat Snowball’s Chance” pictures a red-skinned devil shin-deep in a frigid pool in an icy, blue and white landscape. Grasping a scarlet shovel, he hefts a glowing blue sphere that burns with orange flames. It’s a mythic wedding of formal and metaphorical opposites. The fiery snowball embodies unification of cool intellect and hot feeling, which is the combustive essence of Mr. Wirsum’s art.