

Karl Wirsum, Dynamic and Eclectic Chicago Artist, Dies at 81

A member of the small but influential group known as the Hairy Who, he built his art on a highly original synthesis of multiple sources.

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Karl Wirsum, whose avid, sometimes robotic figures in both two and three dimensions exemplified the group of disruptive artists known in the late 1960s as the Hairy Who, died on May 6 in Chicago. He was 81.

His death was announced by Derek Eller, his New York gallery. His family said the cause was cardiac arrest.

With titles like “Lana Turner With Her Own Eyebrows Before Schrafft’s” and “Some Underwear Over the Rainbow,” Mr. Wirsum’s art was suffused with humor. But the man himself was quiet and reserved, with tastes on the spartan side. Very health conscious, he had followed a macrobiotic diet since the 1970s and went running nearly every day until he was 75.

His self-containment may have stemmed from the deaths of his parents when he was 9, in a car accident from which he escaped without injury. He developed an early sense of independence and seemed determined to get as much as he could out of anything aesthetic that caught his interest.



Mr. Wirsum’s “Some Underwear Over the Rainbow” (2013). His titles often reflected the humor that suffused his art. Derek Eller Gallery

Mr. Wirsum belonged to a generation of artists located mostly in Chicago and Northern California that swam against the current of Abstract Expressionism and Minimalism in the 1960s. Instead, they invented a vital new kind of figuration that maintained a lively dialogue with modernism, popular culture and the viewer.

Mr. Wirsum’s achievement rested on his highly original synthesis of multiple sources — high and low, ancient and modern, East and West — and his fusion of organic and geometric forms. His figures almost inevitably combine a kinetic exuberance with something more sinister. Their masklike faces grin and grimace.

He cited as influences the art of Mesoamerica and New Guinea, medieval Madonnas and Japanese woodblock prints, as well as toys, marionettes and especially comics — but also the work of Picasso, Klee and Jean Dubuffet.

He got into the first Hairy Who show, at the Hyde Park Art Center in 1966, at the last minute. He was suggested by the center’s curator, Don Baum, and welcomed by the tight-knit cohort of artists who had proposed the show: Jim Falconer, Art Green, Jim Nutt, Gladys Nilsson and Suellen Rocca. Mr. Wirsum had graduated ahead of them from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, and they considered him more mature, not realizing that he shared their subversive spirit.

Mr. Wirsum inadvertently originated the group’s name, asking “Harry who?” when the name of Harry Bouras, a well-known art critic for the Chicago radio station WFMT, came up.

Over the next four years, the group staged three more raucous exhibitions at the center and one each in New York, Washington and San Francisco. Mr. Wirsum preferred cartoonish, not-quite-human beings that often resembled action figures or aliens. His early paintings and drawings tended to define these figures in jagged or wavy lines that gave them a manic, electrical energy. Later he smoothed their edges, armoring them in shapes of neon color.

In a 2015 interview for the online art magazine *Hyperallergic*, he called Abstract Expressionism “the active-painting school.”

“I was interested in precision,” he said. But with their stiff frontality, artifice, high-key colors and stylization, his figures had a strong element of abstraction.

Karl August Wirsum was born in Chicago on Sept. 27, 1939, to August and Katharine (Gresik) Wirsum. Both his parents immigrated from Germany after World War I. His mother was a skilled seamstress whose work fascinated her son; his father had briefly studied commercial art before becoming a machinist, but continued to draw. Both parents encouraged his artistic interests.

Karl started drawing at age 4, when he was hospitalized for a month, recovering from a concussion. When he was 6, his parents enrolled him in Saturday art classes at the Art Institute, which he took for three years. After his parents died, he lived with their best friends. He moved to a Y.M.C.A. after graduating from Bowen High School on the South Side.

As an adolescent he frequented the Maxwell Street flea market, to shop and also to listen to the blues and R&B musicians who often played in nearby empty lots. Music remained a lifelong inspiration. The rhythmic patterns and loud colors of his figures could be seen to make their own kind of noise.

Mr. Wirsum attended the School of the Art Institute of Chicago on a full scholarship. He planned to become a cartoonist, but his interests were broadened by several of the school’s teachers and by the museum’s collection. The artist Kathleen Blackshear, for example, taught an art history class from a global point of view, alerting him to the different kinds of stylized figuration that flourished beyond Western art. Soon he was studying painting and printmaking.

Teaching for three years in the early 1970s at Sacramento State University, he had a studio large enough to make nearly life-size puppets out of painted papier-mâché, with arms and legs that moved. He drew nonstop, in and out of class, and later relied on his sketchbooks for ideas. He preferred drawing to painting. “The drawings are more playful,” he said in the 2015 *Hyperallergic* interview, “and the paintings are more like washing dishes.”

After graduating from the Art Institute school in 1961, Mr. Wirsum spent five months in Mexico, traveling with the artist Ed Paschke, a classmate, and immersing himself in Mesoamerican art and contemporary relics, textiles and folk art. He found inspiration visiting New Orleans at Mardi Gras time.

In April 1968 he married Lorri Gunn, who under his tutelage became an artist. She survives him, as do their daughter, Ruby, a schoolteacher, and their son, Zack, who is also an artist.

In late May of that year the couple went to Europe for four months. One of the trip’s high points was visiting Dubuffet and his collection of Art Brut (outsider or self-taught art) in Paris. Mr. Wirsum was already aware of the phenomenon, having been among the first of the Hairy Who group to see and acquire the fantasy landscape drawings of the self-taught Black artist Joseph Yoakum, who was working in a storefront on Chicago’s South Side at the time. At an ethnographic museum in Rotterdam, Mr. Wirsum was transfixed by the intricately appliquéd Mola textiles of the Kuna people of Central America.

Upon his return to Chicago, Mr. Wirsum put the bright colors and flattened patterns of the Mola to immediate use in “Screamin’ Jay Hawkins” (1968), one of several powerful images he created of musicians, including Howlin’ Wolf, Junior Wells and James Brown. It was acquired by the Art Institute of Chicago in 1970, the same year Mr. Hawkins used it as the cover art for his album “Because Is in Your Mind.”

Mr. Wirsum had his first solo show at the Marjorie Dell Gallery in Chicago in 1967. By 1976 he had migrated to Phyllis Kind’s gallery, also in Chicago, where most of the other Hairy Who artists showed. For a while, he also showed in Ms. Kind’s New York gallery. But he went without a solo show in New York from 1988 to 2010, when Derek Eller began representing him.

Over the next eight years, the Eller gallery mounted six well-received Wirsum shows focusing on different phases of his career. But he was never accorded the major museum retrospective that his art deserved.

Not that Mr. Wirsum seemed to notice. In the *Hyperallergic* interview, he said, “My model was thinking about the artist in the cold-water flat, where recognition didn’t arrive until you were under the ground.”