

A Weird Wind From the Second City: Karl Wirsum, Chicago Cohort Have Big Apple Moment

New York is a Hairy Who's Who!

By **Andrew Russeth** | 10/29



'Fat Snowball's Chance,' 2013. (Courtesy the artist and Derek Eller Gallery)

A few years ago, the Chelsea art dealer **Derek Eller** and the publisher and curator **Dan Nadel** were discussing artists they loved when they landed on the name Karl Wirsum, a storied Chicago figure known for cartoon-like drawings and paintings. Mr. Wirsum had been making work for almost half a century and showed regularly in the Windy City, but he hadn't had a New York exhibition in two decades. "How come we never see Karl Wirsum shows in New York?" they recall thinking.

And so they paid him a visit at his Chicago studio. "One day, I asked him if he had any sketchbooks," Mr. Nadel told *The Observer* in early October, "and he started pulling out these mountains of books that had these incredible drawings in them." They were filled with sketches for illustrations he did for *Playboy* and portraits of women and animals that mixed dashes of ancient and non-Western cultures, insects, vintage toys and Americana of every kind. Wild stuff. "With most people, you wouldn't hide them away in sketchbooks," Mr. Nadel laughed.

Messrs. Nadel and Eller decided to curate a show of those drawings, dating from 1967 to 1970, at **Derek Eller Gallery** in 2010. It did well. Mr. Eller kept in touch, and, one weekday afternoon earlier this month, Mr. Wirsum was back at the gallery, watching as a batch of his most recent paintings—intensely bright alien figures in semi-abstract landscapes—were being unwrapped. It's his first show of new work here in 25 years.

He found likeminded friends, like **Ed Paschke** (1939–2004), best known for toxic-colored figurative paintings and the fact that he employed as an assistant a young **Jeff Koons**. (Mr. Wirsum had Mr. Koons as a student at SAIC, where he continues to teach, suggesting that one might find a fruitful dissertation in the Imagists' influence on the superstar.)



Installation view of the show at Eller. (Courtesy Derek Eller Gallery)

After graduation, the two friends set off for a vacation in Mexico City, and Mr. Wirsum ended up staying for about half a year. "What I liked about it was that their art was everywhere," he recalled. "You know, on their buses and all the different festivals—all different kinds of art—and then their ancient artwork was there as well."

That amalgam of sources has animated his own art for his entire career and is particularly evident in his new paintings, which take in images high and low, from museum collections and carnivals. In the beautifully colored *Uh-Oh! Missed the Last Armadillo Outta Here* (2013), an alien-headed man in a green outfit, patterned with what could be Aztec designs, reclines in the middle of a desert the color of a whisked egg yolk. Around him are cartoon mesas and puffing volcanoes that look like retro sci-fi power plants.

"This took me forever to finish, because there were a number of different design options for this mountain situation, different placements of the fragments around the figure," Mr. Wirsum said. He typically makes scores of drawings for one painting, sometimes over the course of many years, so that when he paints it's a matter of transferring his work to canvas or board, carefully applying layers and layers of color, punching up the color to a shocking intensity.



'Your Call Cannonball,' 2011. (Courtesy the artist and Derek Eller Gallery)

He pointed around the painting, decoding it. "This is a half a grapefruit, this a root-beer situation here, and then this is a glass of water, and this is a bag of peanuts there—just the bag, you don't see the peanuts." The ostensibly ebullient, vibrant scene shows a man wasting away in the desert, seeing mirages.

The inspiration for that figure, who appears in a number of Mr. Wirsum's new works, is Winslow Homer's 1899 painting *The Gulf Stream*, which hangs at the Art Institute. "It's a castaway on the boat that has the mast broken, and he's just lying on the deck, and all these sharks are floating around him," Mr. Wirsum said. "And he's just laying there very relaxed, sort of resolved to his end."

He looks at photos of old circuses and sideshows for banners advertising freaks and geeks, magazine spreads and those vintage toys, which he plays with and

abstracts as he draws. His voluminous sketchbooks have countless variations of things like hands and feet. "I have always thought of my art is archaeological," he told me. "I go dig for my own sources in a way within my own work."

Mr. Wirsum pointed to a piece that depicted the blue torso of a man, seen in profile, being presented with two spoons. "It's kind of a weird self-portrait thing," he said. As an orphan, he continued, he was drawn to Huckleberry Finn and *Oliver Twist*. "I think of myself now still as an orphaned old codger, and still I'm eating oatmeal in the morning."