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The New York Times

Art in Review

Karl Wirsum

'Drawings: 1967-70'

Derek Eller Gallery
615 West 27th Street
Chelsea
Through Oct. 9

September in Chelsea is normally given over to the young and the new, but this show of drawings from the late 1960s by an artist who hasn't had a New York solo in two decades deserves a close look.

Like Jim Nutt, his better-known colleague in the "Hairy Who" group of Chicago artists, Karl Wirsum has a manic-graphic way with the figure. The sketchbook pages in this show, populated by weightlifters, pin-ups and human-insect hybrids, pulsate with a raw, authentic energy.

Mr. Wirsum's sawtoothed contour line, which sometimes evokes traditional South American patterns, lends itself to an inside-out view of the body. It's tamed somewhat in studies for a Playboy illustration of a sinewy rodeo queen, but unleashed in other drawings of female forms with hairy, arthropod limbs.

Comic strips and Chicago street signage matter quite a bit, as Dan Nadel, the comics publisher and co-curator of this show (with Mr. Eller), attests in an accompanying essay. But Mr. Wirsum's references aren't always lowbrow. One drawing of a flame-haired vixen (on the cover of Mr. Nadel's booklet) seems to nod to Egon Schiele, another master of jumpy, schizoid line.

The longevity of Mr. Nutt, who had a survey last year at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago and a show of recent paintings last spring at David Nolan in Chelsea, suggests that the "Hairy Who" paved the way for many other kinds of polymorphously perverse figuration. It would be interesting for New Yorkers to see what Mr. Wirsum is up to these days.

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