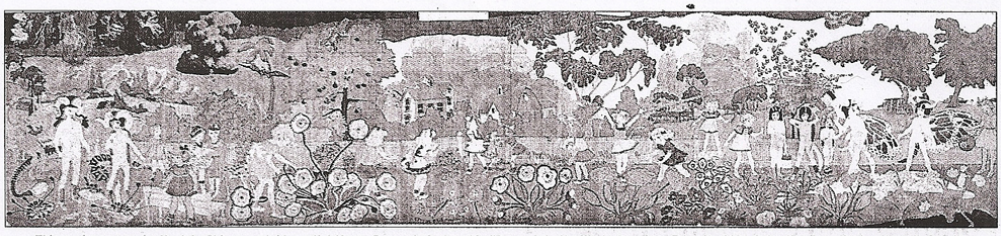

This work on paper by the late Chicago outsider artist Henry Darger is featured in "Drawn Into the World: Drawings From the MCA Collection," continuing through Oct. 15.

ON PAPER, MCA SHOW IS A SMASH

KEVIN NANCE

ART AND ARCHITECTURE

Let me apologize in advance to the Art Institute of Chicago, whose "Drawings in Dialogue," an exhibition of works on paper by famous artists from Constable to Mondrian (which continues through July 30), is an informational and undeniably star-studded show that's well worth the visit. But if you want a gathering of drawings that will knock your eyes out, you'll need to stroll a few blocks up Michigan Avenue to the Museum of Contemporary Art.

"Drawn Into the World: Drawings From the MCA Collection," curated by the sharp-eyed Lynne Warren and continuing through Oct. 15, is Chicago's best museum show of the year so far — full of little electric shocks of pleasure and surprise, repeatedly zinging the viewer with bolts of sly and sometimes bawdy humor and piling up layer upon deepening layer of strangeness.

If it doesn't have anything like the sheer star power of its counterpart at the Art Institute (though the MCA show features some well-known names, including Ed Ruscha, Lee Bontecou, Jean-Michel Basquiat, Robert Smithson, Claes Oldenburg and John Cage), it offers something better: a compelling argument for the continued vitality of drawing as a more-than-viable medium in the computer age.

That's partly because "Drawn Into the World," unlike the Art Institute show, concentrates on drawings as finished works of art, rather than as studies for projects in other media. (The rare exception here, Chicago artist Kerry James Marshall's studies for his "Souvenir" series of paintings, is probably a mistake; it sticks out as process, not product, and as such doesn't represent Marshall at his best.) The show also transforms the viewer's sense of the various means by which contemporary artists are expanding the medium — drawing on pigskin (Matta) and dried ficus leaves (Ana Mendieta), or replacing pens and pencils with gunpowder (Ruscha), soot (Bontecou), petroleum jelly (Matthew Barney) or black gesso (Wesley Kimler).

But the real strength of "Drawn Into the World" has little to do with technical innovation. The treasure-houses in this series of galleries are the ones that feature work in traditional drawing media, much of it by Chicago artists. Besides Marshall and Kimler, these include Henry Darger, Gladys Nilsson, Ed Paschke, Karl Wirsum, Fred Berger, Deb Sokolow and, above all, Jim Nutt.

It's Nutt's, well, nutty genius that gives "Drawn Into the World" much of its special jolt. Less well-known than Paschke but arguably the central figure in the Hairy Who, a group of Pop-influenced Chicago artists later known as the Imagists, Nutt is scheduled to receive a one-man show at MCA (with Warren again at the helm) in early 2008. These selections make that seem like far too long a wait. Nutt's drawings here combine the glossy technique and conceptual glamor of the Surrealists with the raucous rudeness of bathroom-stall graffiti, at once celebrating and sending up the male libido; they're as decorous as farts at a funeral.

There is, for example, "Armed," in which a male figure has been deprived of his upper limbs but remains far from defenseless down below, his equipment swinging beneath him like a beat cop's nightstick. ("Boy!" a cartoonish female figure below him testifies. "Just the way he wraps himself around me!") Then there's "Quaffed," in which a similarly constrained male — he's tied up, a state that seems to leave him surprisingly content — nonetheless salutes the viewer, or perhaps the whole world, with a priapic variant of flipping the bird.

(When I saw the exhibition, I was trailed by a female docent giving a guided tour to a group of high

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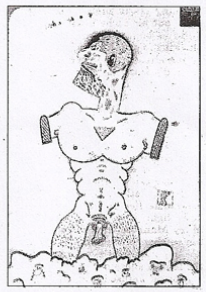
Karl Wirsum's "Saw Saw Saw" (1966) is one of several works in MCA's "Drawn Into the World" by the Hairy Who, a group of Pop-influenced Chicago artists later known as the Imagists.

ART REVIEW

'DRAWN INTO THE WORLD: DRAWINGS FROM THE MCA COLLECTION'

HIGHLY RECOMMENDED

When: Through Oct. 15
Where: Museum of Contemporary Art, 220 E. Chicago
Tickets: $6-$10 (with admission)
Call: (312) 280-2660



Chicago artist Jim Nutt's "Armed" gives the MCA's exhibition a special bawdy jolt.

From Deb Sokolow's hilarious "Someone Tell Mayor Daley, the Pirates Are Coming."

MCA SHOW

Continued from Page 37

school students. She waxed eloquent on several drawings in the show, but when she got to Nutt's, the docent grew remarkably circumspect. "Here's one of my favorite artists," she said tersely, and then moved to the next gallery.)

If Nutt's work inspires thoughts that can't all be verbalized in a family newspaper, so too does the late Henry Darger's. Although somewhat naively drawn — or traced, since he appropriated images from magazines and children's books — they are still among the most remarkable documents ever produced by a Chicago artist, "outsider" or no. (Darger was an eccentric loner whose voluminous life's work was discovered only after his death.)

The show features several examples from Darger's trove of illustrations for his unpublished science-fiction epic, *The Realms of the Unreal*, featuring little girls cavorting in a series of fantastic landscapes or stylized interiors, all rendered in strongly horizontal, scroll-like tableaux. Some of the girls sprout wings or horns, which is perhaps to be expected in a sci-fi yarn; what's odd, though, is that while most of the girls are clothed, many are as free of attire as the day they were born. Odder still, some of these naked girls sport male (if pre-pubescent) genitalia.

In this era of high suspicion when it comes to children in potentially erotic settings, viewing Darger's can make for an unsettling experience for some. But no one can deny the fascination of these protean, lushly colored images, which are self-evidently the products of a singular (and singularly obsessed) imagination. If you're of a certain mind, you can be instinctively repulsed by Darger's work, but you can't ignore it, any more than you can ignore Bosch's phantasmagorias or Picasso's "Guernica."

Equally obsessive and absorbing, if with a decidedly lighter touch, is Deb Sokolow's "Someone Tell Mayor Daley, the Pirates Are Coming," which was seen last year at MCA as part of the museum's increasingly invaluable 12 x 12 series featuring younger local artists. This nervy piece, another super-wide scroll (this one marked up in ink, graphite and corrective fluid), is a high-concept hoot — the first work of art to make me laugh out loud since Aernout Mik's "Refraction" video at MCA last year.

Sokolow's elaborate story line is that of a conspiracy theorist convinced that a band of pirates is coming to infiltrate and eventually plunder the Windy City. We're not talking about corporate raiders here; we're talking about the real thing, bloodthirsty vulgarians with eyepatches, peg legs and scraggly beards. (Think Johnny Depp.) They're digging tunnels, infiltrating the power structure, setting up meth labs (*meth labs?*), all in preparation for the day they appear in their warships on Lake Michigan.

What would Ted Koppel do? So the narrator wonders, before finally deciding to warn Mayor Daley — but wait! What treasure is it, really, that the pirates are after? What if the first Mayor Daley secretly buried it on Northerly Island? What if his son tried to recover it by shutting down Meigs Field, guiding the backhoes by marking the spot with a giant X? What if . . .?

The answers can be found only at 220 E. Chicago.

knance@suntimes.com

William Kentridge's "Drawing for the Film 'History of the Main Complaint' (Second Opinion)" is in "Drawn Into the World" at MCA.