Karl Wirsum:
*Alien Dating Service
Portrait*, 1977,
acrylic on acetate,
12¼ by 9 inches;
at Derek Eller.

KARL WIRSUM
Derek Eller

The nine gridded faces in Karl Wirsum's human-scale, black-and-red acrylic drawing *Marcel Dude Champ* (ca. 1979) bear a strong resemblance to one another, but close inspection reveals nine unique pairs of eyes and ears, nine unique noses and hairstyles and six unique mouths. The immediate impression of pattern and symmetry proves deceiving as one discovers just how much variation there is—repetition is the exception, not the rule. Like Allan McCollum's uniform yet infinitely varied black shapes, these faces hover between identification and difference. They are part of a community, yet are also distinct from one another.

The idea of difference within community is also illustrated by the group to which Wirsum belonged: the Hairy Who, which took 1960s Chicago by storm in unwitting opposition to New York's concurrent Pop art movement. Wirsum, who was born in the Windy City in 1939 and continues to live, work and teach there, is a quintessential member, yet he makes a distinctive, individual probe into abstraction as a means of expounding on the figure. Picasso moved from observation to invention in his famous lithograph series "The Bull" (1945), containing increasingly abstract interactions of line, shape and shade in the animal's form. Similarly, for Wirsum, eyes, ears, noses, mouths, arms, legs, hands and feet become foils for a complex formal language with a weak link to anatomy. He injects fantasy into the human body, incorporating geometry (triangles, squares, cones) and countless marks and hard-edge gestures, some that we don't even have words for and don't need to. His figures are visual rollercoasters that sustain the breathless thrill of a two-minute ride over much more time.

"The Hard Way: Selections from the 1970s," co-organized with writer/curator Dan Nadel, was Wirsum's third solo exhibition at Derek Eller since 2010, and here we learned that the artist is quite indiscriminating when choosing supports to paint or draw on. There were three traditional paintings (with artist-made frames); drawings on fragile, yellowing tracing paper, acetate and bamboo; a life-size chipboard action figure with movable parts; painted faces on Styrofoam heads; and a family of marionettes that combine painted papier-mâché heads, hands and feet with found clothing and furniture. Made between 1973 and 1974, the marionettes were inspired by a puppet theater at Marshall Fields department store in downtown Chicago that Wirsum visited as a child. Though his work is deeply rooted in the city, we would do well to expand the discourse around it. Discussing it in relation to that of Keith Haring and Trenton Doyle Hancock—artists of different times, places and backgrounds—would be a start.

Since Wirsum may be the ultimate believer in retinal wonder, Duchamp seems an unlikely influence. But *Marcel Dude Champ*, as its title suggests, is indeed linked to the original censurer of "retinal art": the drawing was inspired by a 1924 photo series by Man Ray in which Duchamp appears alienlike, with shaving cream covering his face and hair. *Marcel Dude Champ* taps into what Wirsum and Duchamp have in common: humor, puns and playfulness. These qualities underscore Duchamp's entire oeuvre, from his role-playing to the urinal to the "hilarious" (in his view) *Large Glass*. The shaving cream photos reveal an artist-trickster who does not take himself as seriously as art historians do; they also show how easy and natural it is to distort and abstract the human face. Wirsum elaborates this idea through the retina, exploring and manipulating the perception of repetition and difference.

Even the text "Marcel Dude Champ," spelled out at the bottom of the work like a movie title, is happily inconsistent. Wirsum moves between typographic styles at random, less interested in the intricate iteration of pattern than in its disruption by compulsively intuitive force.

—Becky Brown