

Derek Eller Gallery is pleased to present Karl Wirsum *Unmixedly at Ease: 50 Years of Drawing*, a historical survey of the artist's works on paper from the 1960s to recent years. Including sketchbook drawings filled with marginalia, pristine images on larger sheets, cardboard cut-outs, and studies for paintings, prints and posters, this exhibition features a trove of artworks which has never been exhibited.

Sketchbook drawings from the 1960s provide the origins of Wirsum's visual language and incorporate studies for the important *Hairy Who?* era paintings. In the 1970s, Wirsum's artistic vernacular evolved, often leaving behind the curvilinear forms and highkey color of the past, and initiating a hard-edged geometric language with fewer colors. These changes were worked out in detail via meticulous drawings. The evolution of Wirsum's work into the more bizarre, cartoonish, high-color field "portraiture" of the 1980s is similarly reflected in the drawings. Throughout this period, the drawings are filled with diligent notes (ideas for color changes, potential titles, etc.) and improvised variations. During the last three decades, Wirsum's singular figures have been joined by other actors and sometimes placed within elaborate contexts. So too, the drawings from this period reflect multiple iterations of scenarios and backdrops, as well as notes which provides insight into Wirsum's decision making process.

For Wirsum, drawing has always been central to his creative practice, an outlet for spontaneity as well as a means of working through an idea in terms of both content and form. Through repeated iterations, sometimes spaced over the course of years, lines are meticulously perfected and color is finely tuned. *Untitled (Study for Fits Tutu To A Tea Or Stretch Your Coffee Break)*, 1979, pictures a set of gorgon-like conjoined twins rendered carefully in colored pencil on a large, clean sheet. Several other variations not on view are less finished and indicate experimentation with the figure's faces and clothing as well as with contour, shading, and color. *Untitled (Study for Gargoyle Gargle Oil)*, 1969, is also one of several versions of the subject and features an aquatic bathrobe-clad humanoid (as opposed to a dragon-like gargoyle depicted in other works) which comes closest to resembling the work's final iterations as painting on mirrored medicine chest.

Selected works also highlight the decades-long evolution of Wirsum's exploration of the body and figuration. Sometimes using drawings as a means of creating a catalogue of body parts, Wirsum finely tuned his imagery of torsos, arms, and legs, working on an array of versions (bulbous, robotic, crustaceous, elastic, etc.) He would often find his way back to this inventory to construct a kind of seamlessly executed exquisite corpse which has become iconic in his work. He explains, "a lot of my activity is via the drawing modality, which is associative, meandering, *Untitled (Study for Fits Tutu To A Tea Or Stretch Your Coffee Break)*, 1979, color pencil on paper, 28.5 x 22.5 in and

takes elements of fragments from various sketchbooks that may have separate idea threads to form composite images". For example, the stiff armor-plated arms pictured in *Study for Taffy Pull Tilt-a-Whirl*, 2011 or those in *Untitled (Study for Exit Brand X)*, c. 2009, likely originated years before, crystallizing over the course of numerous drawings.

Karl Wirsum (b. 1939) lives and works in Chicago. His work has recently been included in *Hairy Who? 1966-1969* at the Art Institute of Chicago; *How Chicago! Imagists 1960s and 70s* at Goldsmiths Centre for Contemporary Art, London and De La Warr Pavillion in East Sussex, UK; *3D-Doings: The Imagist Object* in Chicago Art, 1964-1980 at The Frances Young Tang Teaching Museum and Art Gallery, Saratoga Springs, NY. Wirsum was also featured in *Famous Artists from Chicago* at the Fondazione Prada, Milan, Italy; *America is Hard to See* at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; *What Nerve!* at Matthew Marks Gallery and the RISD Museum of Art; *Sinister Pop* at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; *Made in Chicago: The Koffler Collection* at the Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C; and *Seeing is a Kind of Thinking: A Jim Nutt Companion* at Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago. Wirsum's works are in numerous public collections such as the Whitney Museum, Museum of Modern Art, High Museum of Art, Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, Minneapolis Institute of Art, Art Institute of Chicago, Smithsonian American Art Museum, and RISD Art Museum.

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