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Passion and Talent In Very Large Doses

By Peter Plagens

Karl Wirsum

◆ Derek Eller

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The old old guard of the venerable imagist group The Hairy Who, including the still-working artists Jim Nutt, Gladys Nilsson and Karl Wirsum, has always made Chicago a very different art city. The trademark of the Imagists is very careful painting of very weird—but oddly nonthreatening—human beings. In the case of Mr. Wirsum (b. 1939), his crackling mix of inspirations—comic books, Japanese prints, pre-Columbian art and blues music—possesses more inventive clarity and chromatic horsepower than just about any art around that doesn't have to be plugged in.

"Your Call Cannonball" (2011) gives us a pointy-tailed, huge-headed Humpty Dumpty sitting on a railing (which, in Mr. Wirsum's mechanico-delirious world, is probably a tree branch) and about to catch a cannonball in his mouth.

The figure in "Chard" (2011) is either a green-haired late Elvis or a fashionable hostess in a long skirt. Either way, the satire is graphically lethal but psychologically tender. Vive la différence.

Mr. Plagens is an artist and writer in New York.