

ART

The Strange Worlds of Artists Keegan McHargue and Karl Wirsum

By Scott Mofesek, October 4, 2013



Weird never goes out of style. For proof, look no further than two exhibitions: **Keegan McHargue's 'Prick of Conscience'** at Fredericks & Freiser, closing tomorrow, and **Karl Wirsum's solo**, opening on October 12 at Derek Eller Gallery. McHargue is in his early 30s; Wirsum, part of the famed Hairy Who group of Chicago-based artists, is 74. (That's his painting, 'Your Call Cannonball,' pictured to the left.) Yet both artists share a vision of the world that is manic, densely playful, and exuberantly fucked-up.

McHargue has been making a lot of drawings in recent years, so it's nice to see him translating a similar aesthetic to an entire exhibition of paintings. At first glance their art palette gives them the soothing appearance of children's book illustrations, or stills from tiny plays involving cut-paper puppets. A closer look serves up the truth, which is harder to stomach. (I've always found something awesomely digestive about McHargue's work, as if we're watching all of the deranged action as it's being processed by some massive intestinal plumbing.) In *Rit*, starfish puke and a Merman drowns. *Nymph of Lo* looks comparatively benign, but it's still unnerving: Who are these monk-like characters, smiling as if unaware that they've been squashed into two-dimensions, all notion of perspective run over with a steamroller? McHargue calls "Prick of Conscience" the "most politically and socially charged work" he's ever made. The paintings, he tells *BlackBook*, came from a mixed bag of inspirations and influences: from the Fukushima disaster to Silvio Berlusconi, ancient Chinese court culture to the aesthetics of garden design.

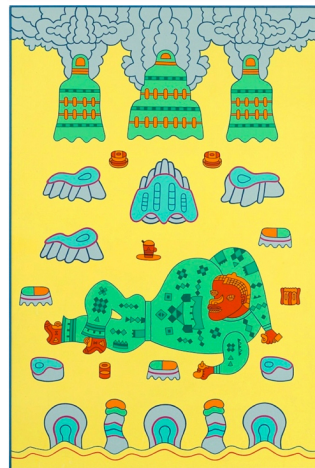


Keegan McHargue, *Rit*, 2013. Oil on canvas, 48 x 60 in.



Keegan McHargue, *Nymph of Lo*, 2013. Oil on canvas, 48 x 60 in.

It's not hard to see why McHargue is a fan of Karl Wirsum. "The thing that I take most from Wirsum is his cleanliness," he tells us. "I love that the ideas are perpetually over-the-top and semi-out-of-control, yet there is an assuredness and mastery of medium within his work that lets you know that there is a man on the other end with his feet firmly planted on the earth. The idea comforts me." Below, a few recent paintings and colored pencil drawings from Wirsum, [on view at Derek Eller Gallery](#) from October 12 through November 16.



Karl Wirsum, *Uh-Oh! Missed the Last Armadillo Outta Here*, 2013



Karl Wirsum, *Study for Last Second Funeral Pyre Still Two Weeks Away*, 2012. Colored pencil on paper.

Main image: Karl Wirsum, *Your Call Cannonball*, 2011. Acrylic on panel.