

# Happy Scary Monsters

One of the Hairy Who—six artists who shook up the Chicago art world in 1966 with a show by that name at the Hyde Park Art Center—is Karl Wirsum, still producing works that might look more at home in a toy store than an art museum. His ten-year retrospective at Jean Albano reflects a number of influences, from childhood toys to Chicago blues to Navajo blankets to Mexican popular art to comics—he says he especially liked the weird-looking, oddly named villains in *Dick Tracy*.

Wirsum, 64, was affected strongly by two childhood traumas. When he fractured his skull at five and was hospitalized, his machinist father drew comic strips about elves for him, and Wirsum focused on his own drawings too. That led to Saturday classes at the Art Institute. But when Wirsum was nine, both his parents were killed in a car crash. Karl survived with just a scratch. Describing himself as “pretty devastated,” he says

he began to identify with Oliver Twist and other orphans in Classics Illustrated comics. Close friends of his parents raised

him, but he associated the Saturday art classes with his parents and would have found it “spooky” to keep going, so he quit.

He didn’t stop drawing, though, and under the influence of EC Comics artists like Jack Davis began to work in an expressionist style in the early 50s. Later, at the School of the Art Institute, he took an art history class with Kathleen Blakshear—legendary for venturing outside the Western canon—who exposed him to Egyptian art and Persian miniatures. He and fellow student Ed Paschke (whose latest works are on view next door, at Maya Polsky) used to amuse themselves by painting satirical or grotesque designs over *Life* magazine covers.

Today Wirsum says he’s inspired by highly stylized art that bears “some connection to reality.” A north-side ice cream vendor he photographed in the 1960s was the primary source for the goofy figure pushing a hand truck in *Whatz Behind the Green Door?* One of the man’s feet is bare while on the other is an oversize shoe, an idea that came from a shop on Ashland that made footwear for special needs. But because the artist is fascinated by asymmetry, he says, he put it “illogically” on the vendor’s longer leg.

Wirsum’s bright colors and surprising shapes are appealing, but what’s most compelling about his work is its mix of the happy and humorous with the disturbing. Many of his figures, which have been compared to robots, seem on the brink of changing from the human to the mechanical or back again. Architectural blueprints suggested the light blue outlining of the dark blue head in *Mr. Newer Bluer*, and dial phones and vision-testing devices inspired his multiple-disk eyes.

One of the strongest—and darkest—works in the show is *Between the Space of Flowers They Tied the Rocks to Attention*. Its alarmingly clut-



Karl Wirsum

tered space is filled with wavy blocks of color against an acidic pink background. A woman and a cat are painted in black outlined with white, a look suggested by photographic negatives.

Wirsum says the cat’s curved neck was inspired by Plastic Man, a comic-book character of the 40s and 50s, but also its overall shape was influenced by old stoves he saw at the Henry Ford Museum in Michigan. He describes the woman as “sticking her feet in a pink pool that has a toxic-dump kind of quality.”

Wirsum sees the male and female heads in *They Were Often Called to the Side* as rising from

the same body, reflecting his interest in Siamese twins. But the “body” looks more like a countertop, oddly including a little stretch of highway. Wirsum says it could be an unconscious reference to his parents’ car wreck: parts of his figures sometimes evolve from the twisted shapes he finds in newspaper photos of car crashes—or from cut-up vegetables as he prepares his meals. Losing his parents at nine, he says, made him realize that he “needed to conjure up strength and independence.” But it also seems to have made the artist in him want to continue to live with them, in his early childhood.

—Fred Camper