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CHICAGO

## KARL WIRSUM

JEAN ALBANO GALLERY

Still impish after all these years, Karl Wirsum's whimsical trove of figural invention continues to mesmerize. He's been at it since the '60s, this meticulous yet goofy rearticulation of the figure into brightly painted flat pattern, performing a tour de force intermingling of comic relief and careful construction. Goofy, but not dumb; what gives Wirsum's work its upbeat tempo and allure is its impressive combination of insouciance and scrupulousness, its air of idiosyncratic fetish obsessively and painstakingly realized. His protagonists perpetually oscillate between two and three dimensions; Wirsum alludes to volume, space, environment, and narrative while retaining an equally fierce commitment to flat pattern and signage, setting up humorous and pertinent intersections. He reduces figures to iconic and cartoony signs, using high-keyed color and pancaking form to brighten and splay his images against the wall.

Tremendous craftsmanship is at the heart of this endeavor. In *Omer, The Towel Tapping Twin*, 2000, Wirsum carefully forms a flat piece of wood into a silhouette of a highly coded dancing male figure. The bravura and bulbousness of this carving and its dutiful attention to craft connect Wirsum to a larger tradition of careful workmanship in Chicago, exemplified in a previous generation by such artists as H.C. Westermann. The bright and exuberant color that Wirsum applies to this shape is similarly controlled and hyperrefined. No brushstrokes are visible, no stretch of paint is permitted to overlap, and no sense of process indicated; the figure of Omer is executed according to an a priori system of careful formal design that is unfettered and irreverent while, within its own mannered vocabulary, completely reasonable and consistent. Omer's "twin," in *Aruo, The*



Karl Wirsum, *Omer, The Towel Tapping Twin*, 2000, acrylic on wood, 49 x 33".

*Towel Tapping Twin*, 2000, is fraternal rather than identical. Although similarly posed, myriad details of Aruo's dress, color, and anatomy offer subtle and playful point and counterpoint in an absurd and informative exercise in comparison and contrast.

Anatomical exaggeration and embellishment remain Wirsum's signature devices. Every major joint—neck, shoulders, elbows, wrists, hips, knees, and ankles—becomes a fulcrum on which Wirsum pinwheels the figure, turning it into a rotating tantriclike wheel, a mandalic and distorted dervish that is sprightly and vivacious. The five integers that extend from the human trunk (arms, legs, and head) proliferate into hands, fingers, toes, ears, etc., providing Wirsum with an inexhaustible repertoire of manipulable incident. His cosmology carries echoes of Mayan or Aztec carving, ancient Egyptian relief, Celtic manuscripts, mid-twentieth-century toys, Indian illumination—indeed, any cultural manifestation of a simultaneously volumetric and planar figure. Almost in spite of itself, symmetry organizes the figure, and in all of Wirsum's work a kind of internal compositional logic makes the translation of anatomy into comic design fully palpable and seemingly inevitable.

Just above and to the right of each "twin," Wirsum installed a paper-towel dispenser, and on its first sheet of scrolled brown paper he inked a sequence of dancing male feet: towel tapping as tap dancing. With this, what were already objects residing at the edge of what defines painting are brought into the realm of sculpture and installation.

—James Yood