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***Karl Wirsum*, a film about the founding member of the Hairy Who and the Chicago Imagists, has been restored**

Posted By Leah Pickett on 10.21.16 at 06:27 PM



Karl Wirsum

Karl Wirsum, an eminent Chicago artist and founding member of the exhibition collectives the Hairy Who and the Chicago Imagists, is the subject of a rediscovered 1973 film that offers a rare glimpse into his fertile creative process. The Chicago-based Pentimenti Productions will screen its digitally restored and remastered version of the original 14-minute short, *Karl Wirsum*, complete with a new score from local musicians Alex Ingilizian and Marc Riordan, at the Museum of Contemporary Art on Tuesday, October 27, and at the Northwestern University Block Museum of Art on Friday, November 4.

Directed by Suzanne Simpson, *Karl Wirsum* focuses on the three years the young artist spent teaching at California State University Sacramento—his longest time living outside Chicago—and on his early psychedelic marionette sculptures and puppetry. Local filmmaker and Pentimenti founder Leslie Buchbinder, along with producer Brian Ashby, unearthed the film while researching their 2014 release *Hairy Who & the Chicago Imagists*. "Portions of it were used in our documentary," says Harrison Sherrod, executive director at Pentimenti. "But we felt like it deserved a stand-alone release, so we digitally restored it and commissioned a new soundtrack in early 2016."

Wirsum, whom Sherrod says "embodies Chicago's penchant for the zany and vibrant," is a fine match for Simpson's playful and visceral instincts. "I do feel that, somehow, whatever I do is based in a kind of city strife, or an electric shock-type of thing," Wirsum explains in the film, as the camera dances over his grotesque but inexplicably alluring marionette forms.

"Often we see artwork as a finished product in the form of an object shielded behind museum glass," Sherrod continues, "but it's uncommon that we get the opportunity to peek inside an artist's laboratory and witness work being forged in the present tense. Suzanne gives us that rare window into Karl's practice and process."

Simpson was pursuing a master's degree in art history in 1973, but her then-husband, a documentary filmmaker, inspired her to make a short film for her thesis project rather than write a paper that would probably languish in the university's library unread. When she shared the idea with her graduate adviser at CSU, he suggested that she profile Wirsum. "I didn't know anything about Karl," Simpson says. "My ex-husband gave me a Bolex camera, a tripod, and a recorder, and I just went to go meet Karl at his house and start filming."

Simpson clearly remembers the first time she saw her subject. "He was coming up the sidewalk on an old bike with big rubber tires, and he had glasses on with this giant nose guard, and a headband," she says, laughing. "I actually have it in the film. And I thought, 'Oh my God, who is this guy?'"



Karl Wirsum

Simpson says she followed Wirsum into his house, "a tiny Victorian in downtown Sacramento," and was initially "horrified" by what she saw: "giant, two-dimensional cutout pieces of very psychedelic, somewhat pornographic figures on the walls." But as filming progressed, so did her fascination with Wirsum's work. "My basic goal was to capture this artist, Karl, and what he was doing, and be really honest about what I was capturing," Simpson says. "But on the other hand, I had to put my own stamp on it."

During the editing process, Simpson says she realized she wanted to see the figures come alive, so she incorporated a puppet show, with Wirsum maneuvering his marionettes to fuzzy ragtime piano music in his backyard. Simpson says she had to push the taciturn artist to open up about himself and his process. "As an artist myself," she explains, "I understand why artists don't want to talk about their work. They just want to do it."

Simpson has self-distributed *Karl Wirsum*, screening it at the Art Institute of Chicago and other museums across the U.S. in the mid-70s, but Pentimenti's re-release marks the first time the film will be screened for a millennial audience. "Pentimenti is passionately committed to preserving and exhibiting films that showcase Chicago artists," Sherrod says, "and this is hopefully the first of several archival projects that we'll undertake."

Karl Wirsum screens Tue 10/27, 6 PM, at the Museum of Contemporary Art. A discussion with Wirsum and fellow Imagist Gladys Nilsson, moderated by art scholar Robert Storr, will follow.

A second screening Fri 11/4, 7 PM, at the Block Museum of Art will include live musical accompaniment by Inglizian and Riordan. A postscreening discussion, moderated by gallery owner John Corbett, will feature Wirsum, Simpson, Inglizian, and Riordan.