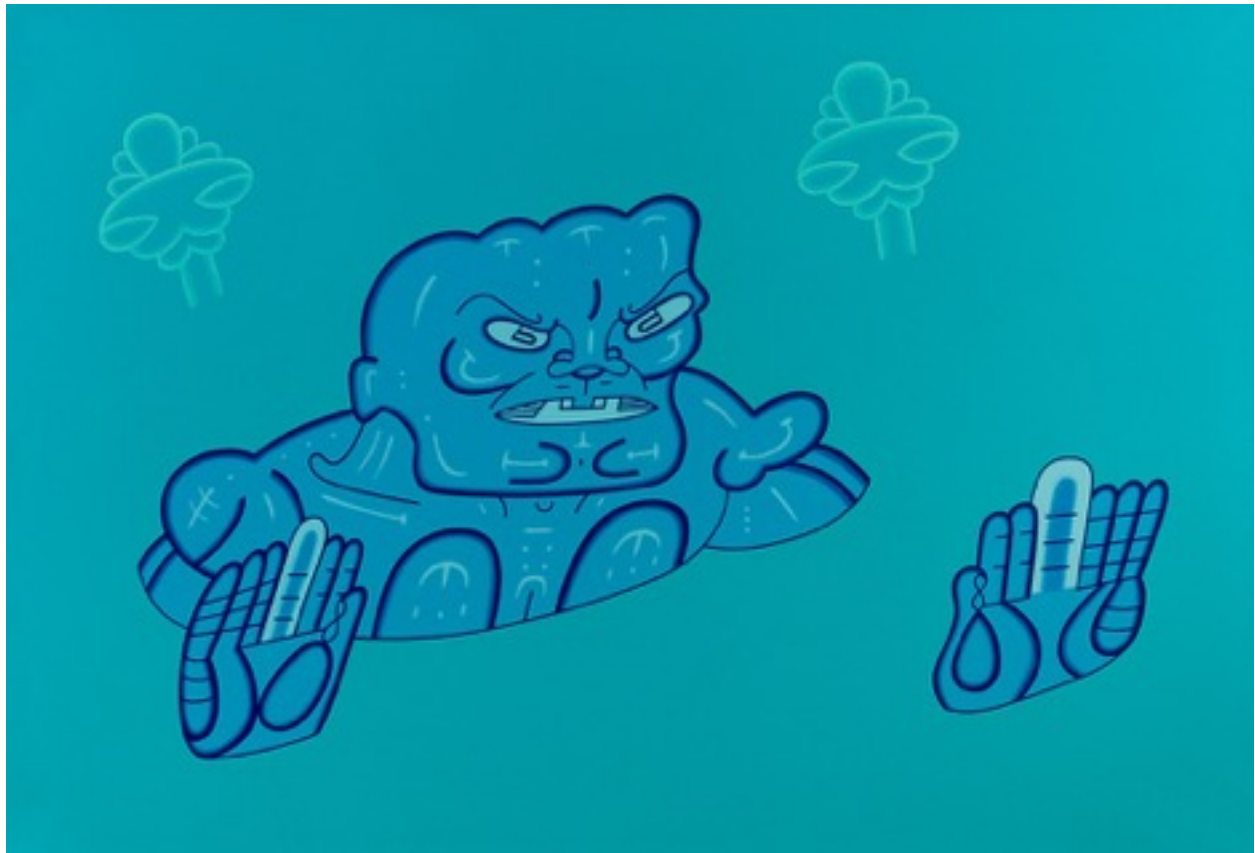


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Karl Wirsum's Casting Call

By Nicole Rudick September 13, 2017

LOOK



KARL WIRSUM, MR. DRY ICED "T", 1987, ACRYLIC ON CANVAS, 38 1/2" X 56 1/2"

In the margin of the drawing *Study for Looking at a Curve Ball in Cuernavaca* are notes written by the artist, Karl Wirsum:

Batter up
9 at Bats
Last Bats
Lost Summer
Robert Catcher
Umbrella

Umpiro
Manic
Sword Fight Thrust Position

He seems to be trying out titles, and given Wirsum's other titling efforts (for instance, the superlative *Study for Drop a Lozenge Ferret Attitude on the Way to the Letter Drop*), I wonder if he wasn't considering something along the lines of "Umbrella Umpiro Manic Sword Fight Thrust Position." Wirsum's titles don't give many hints, if any, about what's going on in the paintings, but in their agglomerations of words and punning (*Shower Girl Taking a Curtain Call*), they, like the works they represent, suggest the potential for ample and adventurous meaning.

A dozen of Wirsum's paintings and drawings are on view at Derek Eller Gallery, in New York, in the show "Mr. Whatzit: Selections from the 1980s." Each work is a portrait of a single character, and the backgrounds, in the case of the paintings, are monochromatic: flat fields of red, teal, ochre. Whether alien, mechanical, or human, each character appears as a kind of totem of their own world, like the corner boxes on the covers of classic comics (those small rectangles in the upper left corner that show Superman or Spider-Man or Hulk on a solid field of color). Mr. Dry Iced "T" is part hulking Jack Kirby creation (too many fingers, too many knuckle joints), part mystic oddity rising out of a blue ether, his hands like two hamsas. The Mesoamerican Shower Girl performs under a showerhead-cum-stage-light in the semiprivacy of her shower-curtained stage. The half-human, half-jet pack figure in *If It's Tuesday It Must Be Nairobi Except in Nebraska* shoots diagonally across a Joan Miró-inflected cosmos.

In the seventies, the abstraction in Wirsum's figures acted as a kind of armor—"the abstraction attached to the human figure," he has said; in the eighties, that abstraction became more anatomical: descriptive of the body itself, if not actually a part of it. Two groups of arcing lines on the bicep and forearm of the figure in *Thumb Thwack* wouldn't be out of place in a William Baziotes drawing. The mix of shapes on the figures in *Looking for a Curve Ball and Half Pint Apple Playing Paper Bag Pipe Music* are distilled, quieter versions of Kandinsky's geometric compositions of the 1930s or the finespun marks in Paul Klee's etchings.

The energy in Wirsum's figures isn't limited to the canvas. "My characters are alive," he has said:

On completion of [the] drawing, the character hops out of this two-dimensional paper confines and achieves a standing position on top of the board. He then hops off the table, onto the floor, running into a mouse hole in the wall or some other convenient portal that times him into a cartoon environment ... That would be the way I perceive the images that I create, hoping there will be a long run on Broadway for them, so they are spared from the production being closed in the first week and their being sucked back into the ink bottle.

This production is up through October 8; see it while you can.

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Nicole Rudick is managing editor of *The Paris Review*.