

KARL WIRSUM*Mr. Whatzit: Selections from the 1980s*

SEPTEMBER 7 - OCTOBER 8, 2017

OPENING RECEPTION: THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 7, 2017, 6-8PM

Derek Eller Gallery is pleased to present *Mr. Whatzit: Selections from the 1980's* an exhibition of paintings and drawings by Karl Wirsum from an important period of his storied career.

After tireless material experimentation in the 1970's (kites, cardboard cutouts, painting on numerous unconventional surfaces), Wirsum rededicated himself to acrylic on canvas, and in this period he completed his largest paintings to date. Notably, he moved away from popular culture references like blues musicians, carnival characters, and pin-up girls, instead



focussing on uniquely alien figures conceived in a kind of meditative state. In these vividly colored paintings, singular characters with impossible anatomy are set against clean color fields. Subjects hover between bizarrely grotesque and cartoonishly simple. Space and bodies are flattened and presented with graphic punch reminiscent of Mesoamerican iconography, a consistent reference throughout his career. The absurd embellishments of these bodies function at once as abstraction and figuration, as lines meander from limbs to calligraphic decorative forms and back again.

In this exhibition, paintings are accompanied by sketchbook drawings. These drawings are filled with meticulous notes (ideas for color changes, potential titles, etc.) and improvised variations that offer insight into Wirsum's planning as well as the development of his subjects. Wirsum claims his adolescent dreams of working as an artist for EC Comics were dashed by his inability to draw the same character consistently from panel to panel. Instead these drawings reflect a restless imagination bored with stagnant images and always looking to improve and modify. As a result, we get the pleasure of seeing these characters progressively mutate and morph into their final iterations within his preparatory drawings. Some go on to a life on canvas, while others exist only as free and exuberant drawings.

The Chicago Imagists have often been noted for their personal take on art making, especially when compared to the cold and mechanical Pop Art of New York City. While Wirsum's paintings are executed with the technical precision of a commercial painter, there is still a great deal of the artist present. His otherworldly paintings are grounded by his ecstatic enthusiasm for art beyond the Western canon as well as his collected experiences. Comic strips with elfish characters his father drew for him when he was a child, his time spent living in Mexico, a visit to the Dubuffet Art Brut Collection in 1968 along with friend Red Grooms,

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Chester Gould's villains with names like Pinkie the Stabber or Breathless Mahoney from the Dick Tracey comics, and infinite other experiences ultimately inform these influential works.

Karl Wirsum (b. 1939) lives and works in Chicago. His work will be included in upcoming exhibitions at Fondazione Prada, Milan, Italy; The Frances Young Tang Teaching Museum and Art Gallery, Saratoga Springs, NY; and The Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, IL. His work was recently featured in *America Is Hard to See* at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; *What Nerve!* at Matthew Marks Gallery and the RISD Museum of Art; *Sinister Pop* at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; *Chicago Imagists* at Madison Museum of Contemporary Art, Madison; *Made in Chicago: The Koffler Collection* at the Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C.; *Chicago Imagists: 1966-1973* at Thomas Dane Gallery, London; and *Seeing is a Kind of Thinking: A Jim Nutt Companion* at Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago. This is Wirsum's fourth solo show at Derek Eller Gallery. A 32 page catalogue with essay by Dan Nadel will accompany the exhibition.

Derek Eller Gallery is located at 300 Broome Street between Eldridge Street and Forsyth Street. Hours are Wednesday-Sunday from 11am to 6pm and Tuesday by appointment. For further information please contact the gallery at 212.206.6411 or visit www.derekeller.com