

# DEREK ELLER GALLERY



*Show Girl I*, 1969, acrylic on canvas, 34 x 24 inches  
Photo credit: David Ward

## KARL WIRSUM

*Eye Adjustment: 1963-2020*

March 16 – April 20, 2024

**Opening Reception: Saturday, March 16,  
2–6 pm**

Derek Eller Gallery is pleased to present a solo show of historic works by Karl Wirsum. The exhibition features over forty paintings, sculptures, and drawings made between 1963 and 2020 and is organized in collaboration with Matthew Marks Gallery (523 W. 24th Street), where Wirsum's work will be on view concurrently. The two exhibitions together comprise the largest presentation of the artist's work in New York to date.

Karl Wirsum (1939–2021) first came to prominence in the mid-1960s as one of the founding members of the Hairy Who and became known for his vividly colorful and “unabashedly figurative” work.

Drawing inspiration from newspaper comic strips, Mesoamerican pottery, and Japanese

woodblock prints, Wirsum created a distinctly graphic style. As the artist described, “The flat color seems to clarify and accentuate the shapes and forms in a more abstract way, independent of what the shapes represent.” With fragments taken from the real world and riddled with word play, Wirsum's work is defined by layered references both enigmatic and humorous. His process was one of recollection and invention, what the artist called “an image stream of ideas” pulled from his “memory bank.”

The works in the exhibition span Wirsum's six-decade career. Early paintings include *Memory Mask* (1964), which evokes an advertisement for before and after dental reconstruction, and *The Odd Awning Awed* (1966), a deteriorating face informed by medical disease drawings rendered in bright, undulating patterns inspired by fabric awnings at a local amusement park. In later works, such as *Fat Snowball's Chance* (2013), Wirsum depicts the idiom with a stylized Devil in an arctic landscape posing with a snowball perched on his shovel. Wirsum's paintings on shaped panel, which he referred to as “flying cutouts,” elaborate kites, and paper mâché sculptures further animate the artist's explorations of the body and activate the surrounding environment.

Several of Wirsum's works on paper, including sketchbook drawings filled with marginalia, pristine images on larger sheets, and studies for paintings are included. Drawing was foundational for Wirsum, as both an independent art form and a preparatory medium. An imaginative space in which observed places, people, and objects could become something entirely different, Wirsum explored a single idea in numerous drawings. In the artist's own words, "It's very much the idea of personalizing. Taking an inspiration, something that you're enthused with and then bringing your own force to it."

Born and raised in Chicago, Karl Wirsum (1939 – 2021), graduated from the School of the Art Institute in 1961. In 1966, Wirsum began exhibiting alongside Jim Nutt, Suellen Rocca, Art Green, Gladys Nilsson, and Jim Falconer under the name Hairy Who. The Hairy Who exhibitions took place in Chicago, New York, San Francisco, and Washington, DC, between 1966 and 1969, drawing international attention and influencing generations of artists. Wirsum was included in the 1968 Whitney Biennial in New York and the 1973–74 Bienal de Sao Paulo. In 2007–08, the artist's first career retrospective, *Karl Wirsum: Winsome Works(some)* was organized by the Chicago Department of Cultural Affairs and traveled to the Chicago Cultural Center, the Madison Museum of Contemporary Art in Wisconsin, and the Herron School of Art & Design in Indianapolis. Wirsum's work has recently been included in *Hairy Who? 1966-1969* at the Art Institute of Chicago; *How Chicago! Imagists 1960s and 70s* at Goldsmiths Centre for Contemporary Art, London and De La Warr Pavillion in East Sussex, UK; *Famous Artists from Chicago* at the Fondazione Prada, Milan, Italy; *America is Hard to See* and *Sinister Pop* at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; *What Nerve!* at the RISD Museum of Art; *Made in Chicago: The Koffler Collection at the Smithsonian American Art Museum*, Washington, D.C; *Nuts and Who's: A Candy Store Sampler*, San Jose Museum of Art, San Jose, CA; *Duro Olowu: Seeing Chicago*, MCA Chicago, IL. Wirsum's works are in numerous public collections such as the Whitney Museum, Museum of Modern Art, High Museum of Art, Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, Minneapolis Institute of Art, Art Institute of Chicago, Smithsonian American Art Museum, and RISD Art Museum. This will be the Gallery's fifth solo exhibition of Wirsum's work.