

DEREK ELLER GALLERY



Untitled (Study for the painting "Miss Tree"), 1966, ink on paper, 14 x 11 inches, 19.75 x 16.625 inches (framed)

NORTH ROOM: KARL WIRSUM

Sideshow: Drawings from the Sixties

November 21, 2025 – January 10, 2026

Opening Reception: Friday, November 21, 6–8 pm

Derek Eller Gallery is pleased to present a selection of works on paper from the 1960s by Chicago artist Karl Wirsum (1939-2021). Wirsum's sketchbook drawings from this era provide the origins of his visual language and incorporate studies for important *Hairy Who?* era paintings.

For Wirsum, drawing has always been central to his creative practice, an outlet for spontaneity as well as a means of working through an idea in terms of both content and form. Through repeated iterations, sometimes spaced over the course of years, lines are meticulously perfected, color is finely tuned, and content evolves. For example, his *Untitled (Study for Gargoyle Gargle Oil)*, 1967, features a humanoid

figure in profile, his scaly face and bulging eyes carefully colored and patterned. This is one of several versions of this theme, and over time, humanoid slowly morphs into reptile and back to humanoid, as the final painting (currently on view in the exhibition *Sixties Surreal* at the Whitney Museum of American Art) pictures a bandaged man with exaggerated features gargling a red substance with the phrase "GRRRL" above him. Similarly, his *Untitled (Study for the painting "Miss Tree")*, 1966, pictures an enthroned woman clutching a scepter, her face obscured by a giant question mark. In the final painting from 1968 (now in the collection of the Museum moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig in Vienna), the woman has lost her throne and her scepter; the question mark on her face remains, her body, hair, and clothing rendered in Wirsum's signature line and patterning.

Born and raised in Chicago, Karl Wirsum, 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's recent solo exhibitions include *Eye Adjustment (1963-2020)*, a comprehensive survey at Derek Eller Gallery and Matthew Marks Gallery, New York, NY, as well as *No Dogs Aloud* at Corbett vs. Dempsey, Chicago, IL. His work has been included in group shows including *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 of American Art, 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 sixth solo exhibition of Wirsum's work.

Derek Eller Gallery is located at 38 Walker Street between Broadway and Church Street. Hours are Tuesday – Saturday, 10am to 6pm, and by appointment. The Gallery will be closed November 27-28 for Thanksgiving. For further information please contact the gallery at 212.206.6411 or visit www.derekeller.com.