

MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY

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If You're An Artist, It Pays to be in New York City



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Jul 10, 2015 · by [Deborah Solomon](#)

Solomon, Deborah. "If You're An Artist, It Pays to be in New York City" *WNYC*, July 10, 2015.

Even those of us enamored of this city know that sometimes New York is just too New York-y. The art world, for instance, tends to favor local painting and sculpture over imports from the west — west of the Hudson, that is. The problem is that art championed by MoMA, the Whitney and other New York institutions is more likely to gain international attention and even canonical stature, whether it deserves it or not.

Happily, a new exhibition at the Matthew Marks Gallery attempts to undo the geographic bias. Summer is the season of the sprawling group show, and the most satisfying one around now is “What Nerve! Alternative Figures in American Art, 1960 to the Present.” Occupying three spaces on West 22nd Street, the exhibition brings together some 19, mostly under-known artists who represent a spirited assault on the art of the capital. They have a few things in common. They don’t live in New York; they don’t give a hoot about the less-is-more forms of abstract painting; and frankly, they’re not avatars of good taste.



Karl Wirsum, "Chairy Blossom," 1969. Painted metal lawn chair. (Courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery)

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Rather, they're proud to be bad-taste people — with all that implies about finding inspiration in such once-disreputable vernacular sources as cartooning, illustration and advertising. Their work can be raunchy and chaotic. It abounds with such pop-culture staples as figures with big hair and swelling muscles. Some of the objects would look more at home in a thrift shop, most notably, Suellen Rocca's "Purse Curse," of 1968, a plastic pocketbook inscribed with a smoochy couple. I can't decide if it's just damn cute or a brilliant work riffing on pristine geometry of Minimalist sculpture.



Suellen Rocca, "Purse Curse," 1968. Oil on plastic purse. (Courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery)

The show is comprised of four loosely-related regional schools that flourished from the 1960s to the 1980s in several cities. Some are already nationally known, such as the Chicago collective Hairy Who (which includes Jim Nutt, his wife Gladys Nilsson, Rocca, and

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Karl Wirsum) and the San Francisco Funk School (including ceramicists Ken Price and Robert Arneson and the painters Peter Saul and Joan Brown). Here they are joined by Destroy All Monsters, a 1970s art collective from Ann Arbor blessed with the presence of Mike Kelley and Jim Shaw.

Taken together, their work allows you to see that sometimes the graphics of pop culture — with its legible outlines and screaming colors — can be the best vehicle for expressing authentic emotion. Put another way, it's amazing how often art that begins as yesterday's bad taste ends up as today's good taste. Does the show discredit the official canon of art? Not at all. but it does acquaint you with some essential additions.

Fun fact: The Chicago art collective Hairy Who got its name after artist Karl Wirsum asked a question regarding the identity of Harry Bouras, an art critic for the Chicago radio station WFMT.

"What Nerve! Alternative Figures in American Art, 1960 to the Present" was organized by Dan Nadel, an independent curator. It will remain on view through Aug. 14, at three different spaces owned by the Matthew Marks Gallery: 502, 522 and 526 West 22nd Street. Free for all.