



*Sleeping
Giants*

Max Streicher

The Dream of Giants
(*strange bodies of Max Stericher*)

[My figures recall] such things as freak shows, carnival and the tradition of the grotesque; expressions of "low" culture that assert the body as undetermined, disrupted, leaky and in direct confrontation to the contained and controlled body represented by the dominant culture.(2)

The "giant is, in himself, neither good nor bad, but merely a quantitative amplification of the ordinary."(3) The same - but more. This might characterize Gulliver when he finds himself incapacitated in Lilliput, but more often gigantic size, strength, weight, appetite, sexual prowess etc. amplify to such a degree that the figures enter the genre of the marvellous (as Cirlot later points out). There is nothing ordinary about Rabelais' Gargantua as he hosts a group of travellers exploring his cavernous mouth, or the spectacular environs of his stomach.

Readers of these marvels must adjust their "laws of reality" to allow (even temporarily) for the extraordinary.(4) When the story is over the sceptical eye reawakens and everyday disbelief again filters experience. In other words, the world remains unchanged.(5)

For Tzvetan Todorov, fantastic literature comprises two genres: the marvellous and the uncanny. While the former leaves the reader's "laws of reality" unscathed, the latter is disruptive. The uncanny travels around a disconcertingly circular path. Literally "unhomelike,"(6) or unfamiliar, it upsets not because of its strangeness, but because it is essentially familiar: 'This strange place is actually my home'.

Enormous balloon-puppets, helplessly lying on their backs, Max Streicher's *Sleeping Giants* seem to provoke both laughter and introspection. Children immediately recognize their marvellous character and enjoy their absurdity. As soon as viewers identify themselves with these ludicrous, pathetic bodies however, a more troubling feature emerges, and it is here that deeper existential reflections can occur.

When Streicher calls attention to freak shows and the tradition of the grotesque as references in his work, he positions it within the anti-authoritarian domain of the carnivalesque. Mikhail Bakhtin has proposed the carnival as a model (both concretely and metaphorically) for literature. The inverted social structures and free speech derived from the great car-

nivals of medieval Europe; increasingly repressed in the modern era, re-emerge in the literature of Rabelais and Dostoyevsky as instances of resistance. These structures are polyphonic, meaning they allow for more than one voice in the text (even when it's at odds with the author's).(7) Like the rebellious behaviour of the carnival, they tend towards parody, vulgarity and the irreverent. Their effect is to turn the "world-upside-down."(8)

As a time outside the official calendar of the church or state, the social economy of the carnival emanates from the unpredictable play of forces in the marketplace. Market relations, in Bakhtin's view, are substantially different from the regulatory effects of the church and state. The market emphasizes materiality and exchange rather than spirit or reason. Carnival characters and festivities likewise privilege the body over the head, and those bodily conditions or aspects that reveal its corporeality also reveal its potential for transformation.

photo: Daniel Spert



"Giants," wrote Bakhtin, are "closely connected with the popular conception of material-bodily wealth and abundance."(9) He recounts a typical scene from a feast in 19th century Kassel commemorating a famine two centuries earlier in which a giant was contracted to distribute free soup to the people. Anna Swan, the Nova Scotian giantess, is said to have been coerced by her father into singing "growing songs" in his newly planted fields for good luck.(10)

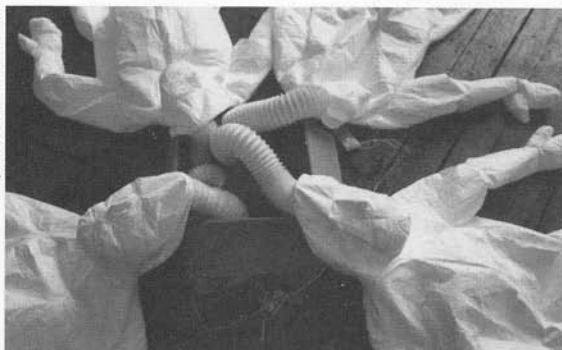
All this is by no means a perfect fit. Streicher's giants are not simply a contemporary instance of carnivalesque inversion, nor are they even simply representations of conventional giants. Commenting on the apparent "futility" of their situation, Gordon Hatt writes that the Sleeping Giants recall "the tragic body," "a soul trapped within spoilable flesh."(11) Considering the suspended figures sucking air from the tit/hose of an air-pump in *Balancing Act* (see illustration) and the obdurate material of the figures themselves, the deeper tragedy may be that these body-shells never in fact had souls.

The white Tyvek material of Streicher's inflatables initially seems ephemeral, even ghostly. But Tyvek was not produced for its aesthetic qualities, and these associations fade as the utilitarian character of this industrial material asserts itself. Rather than transporting us to the world of the marvellous, we are left in the here and now. Although the heaving bodies

appear to breathe, the whirring sounds of electrical fans turning on and off remind us that these life-signs are only a mechanical mockery of our own. In the end, their construction gives them a schematic, generalized, featureless character that continually insists on reasserting its own mode of production.

After the laughter subsides, there is an oddly sombre atmosphere to the installation. It's as if we were caught laughing at something that we realize on closer inspection, is not funny at all. They're not horrific, and unlike the figures in *Quartet in a Box* (see illustration), they're not even macabre. The

photo: Yaron Rozner



Sleeping Giants are ludicrous and pathetic, perhaps even melancholic.

Returning to the artist's statement quoted above, he says that these bodies

are "undetermined, disrupted, leaky and in direct confrontation [with] the contained and controlled [bodies] represented [in] dominant culture."⁽¹²⁾ This is an assertion of their grotesque character, well in keeping with Bakhtin's statements on the subject. And while it is true that the giants are fundamentally open, permeable and physical, their bodies are both ethereal and schematic. No unregulated fluids here, no farts, no genitals. The *Sleeping Giants* actually have a dual nature, and are part grotesque and part polite.

The history of bodies can be construed as a progression from the peasant in the tavern (smelly, burping, drunk, copulating, and largely incoherent), to the bourgeois in the café who talks politics, art and science, and does business. This modern, polite body is regulated to such an extent that it almost ceases to be a body at all. It's more like an autonomous head supported by an unruly apparatus, hidden and controlled as much as possible.

Streicher's giants are uncanny because we come to them with our polite bodies, and recognize the ultimate futility of our own bodily regimes. In spite of wanting to imagine ourselves under control, complete and appropriate, we still "leak."

Marcus Miller (April, 2000)

Sleeping Giants

SAW Gallery, Ottawa May 5 - June 3, 2000

Karlskoga Konsthall June - July, 2000

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Notes

1. after the chapter heading of the same name in Leslie Fiedler's *Freaks*, Simon and Schuster, Inc. NY, 1978.
2. Artist's statement, November 1997 in *Sleeping Giants*, catalogue with an essay by Gordon Hatt, Cambridge Galleries, 1998.
3. J. E. Cirlot, *A Dictionary of Symbols*, trans. Jack Sage, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1984, pg. 117.
4. see Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic*, trans. Richard Howard, Cornell University Press, Ithica, NY, 1975, especially chapter 3.
5. re: ideology.
6. This is the direct German translation that Freud used in his analysis of the uncanny.
7. David Forgacs, chapter 7, "Marxist literary theories," in *Modern Literary Theory*, eds. Ann Jefferson and David Robey, B. T. Batsford Ltd., London, 1989, pgs. 195-7.
8. Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Hélène Iswolsky, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1984, pg. 344.
9. *Ibid.*, pg. 343.
10. Susan Swan, *The Biggest Modern Woman in the World*, Pandora Press, London, 1988.
11. Gordon Hatt, "this flesh," catalogue essay for an exhibition of Max Streicher's work at the Cambridge Galleries, Cambridge, Ontario, 1998, pgs. 21-24.
12. see footnote #2.