



## MAX STREICHER: *Giants*

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The history of inflatables goes back at least to the eighteenth-century in Europe, when hot air balloons first became fashionable adventure. During the past century the development of inflatables has included everything from military blimps to swimming aids to blowup furniture and emergency shelters.

Since 1989 Toronto artist Max Streicher has exhibited his seemingly-alive inflatable sculptures at more than 30 venues in Europe and North America. His first installation, a graduate project concluding his Fine Arts studies at York University, was a nylon bag sewn in the shape of a ram's horn.

sculptures each featured three arms and three legs, topped by three curled ram's horn-shaped ears. Like surreal reincarnations of medieval jesters, the ghostly white figures rose up and up, towering over viewers when the air pump switches were activated.

The airy whiteness of the synthetic Tyvek fabric used for the *Boiler* sculptures inspired the Alberta-born artist to create abstract cloud and smoke forms, which he attached to ceilings. Realizing that these out-of-reach amorphous inflatables diminished the breathtaking physical presence of his oversized figures, his next projects included the installation of five-metre-high swans at the Southern Alberta Art Gallery. "My intention is to overwhelm the gallery space and impose on the viewer a sense of scale like that

titled *Tightrope*, at Synagoga na Palmovca in Prague. The following year, Streicher created *Pleasure Dome*, an interactive installation that included *Quartet in a Box* (1995), for the Pyramida Centre for Contemporary Art in Haifa, Israel. Each of these projects provided an opportunity for Streicher to delve deeper into his exploration of the ephemeral nature of inflatables.

*Giants*, human figures 4.5 times lifesize, are Streicher's latest and largest-scale inflatables. In the inaugural installation of *Giants* in Vancouver, two of the huge 25-foot-long white figures filled the Monte Clark Gallery, wall to wall, floor to ceiling. Viewers had to push aside massive legs, squeeze between swollen bellies, and clamber over arms which slowly raised from the floor in a kind of salute. For anyone who wanted to move around inside the gallery, it was full body contact, not unlike being surrounded with squishy pillows or billowing parachute shrouds.

"People catch their breath when the Giants move," Streicher explained in an interview at Monte Clark Gallery last July. "There's something so lifelike about them, so appealing. It's not that they're complex, just that they're so physical."

As kinetic artworks, Streicher's sculptures pulse rhythmically, like animated bodies, the automated timers of their air pumps intermittently replacing pressure lost through leakage at the stitched seams. As permeable membranes, his inflatables express notions of vulnerability, even frailty, as their materiality wilts and sags, their regeneration dependent on life-supporting machines. As sensual experience, their tactility invites gentle thumps and finger-poking — actions not dissimilar to a child's unabashed response to costumed actors portraying cartoon characters.

"Max Streicher has created images of our greatest joys and our deepest terrors, the site where the imaginary lives of children and adults meet," curator

Gordon Hatt wrote in the catalogue accompanying the 1999 Cambridge Gallery exhibition, *Sleeping Giants*. Hatt suggests that the transmutable quality of inflatables provoke "strong, spontaneous psychological reactions in people of all ages and backgrounds — reactions that run deep and reveal insights into the socially constructed ego."

Uncannily alive, Streicher's sculptures inhale and exhale, the whirl of the motorized pumps emphasizing a physicality as autonomic as our own. Inflating and deflating, awakening and expiring, the figures exceed earlier forms of soft sculpture, such as Claes Oldenburg's *Giant Hamburger* (1962) or his more recent Las Vegas-garish palm fronds and tropical flowers. In fact, Streicher's intentions have never been the representation of commonplace or commercial objects, but lie in an entirely different direction: the imagery of mythology, fantasy, and spiritual awe.

A student of theology before he enrolled in art school, Streicher, in 1999, suspended two huge laughing clown faces in the dome of a baroque church in Hamburg, Germany. Invited to do a site installation, he thought the idea of a Godhead laughing at the human condition would find an appreciative audience — and that two Godheads would be even more compelling. "I was making the installation for believers who would question the idea of God laughing, all kinds of permutations of that, and for me it was serious," Streicher explained. To his chagrin, the members of the congregation thought the clowns were ridiculous. "They were of the opinion that religion is something for grandmothers, something that was forced on them, so putting up the clowns was, for them, sort of a stale joke," Streicher ruefully admitted.

No similar miscues occurred when his *Giant* figures were exhibited in Prague, Haifa, or various sites in Sweden, Finland, or Hungary. Like balloons and soap bubbles, Streicher's buoyant sculptures pass unfettered across barriers of culture and language.



MAX STREICHER, *Sleeping Giants*, 1998. Installation at Cambridge Galleries, Cambridge, Ontario, 1998. Tyvek and electric fans. Each figure: 4.5 x lifesize (762 cm tall standing). Photo: Robert McNair.

Inflated by a vacuum cleaner, *Breath* unfolded upward in a slow spiral movement. Exhibited in the cloistered atmosphere of Bloor Street United Church, the high-pitched roar of the vacuum cleaner motor was as unsettling as the sculpture's somewhat rude resemblance to an erection.

*Breath* was followed by the *Boiler* series of figures, which Streicher describes as "tripedal bunny suits." Twelve to sixteen feet tall, these anthropomorphic

which a toddler might experience," Streicher explained about *Swan Song* (1996). "I am attempting to recreate a situation like childhood encounters with humongous snow banks or haystacks; structures that invite a physical exuberance which in turns leads the imagination."

That same year, he paired acrobatic dancers on hanging trapezes (*Balancing Act*, 1995) with 8-foot reclining figures (*Sextet*, 1996) in an installation

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Perhaps this is because, as Hatt suggests, inflatables make the abstract character of organic existence visible. Describing the *Sleeping Giants* installation at Cambridge Gallery, he wrote: "The giants in their great mass heaved and sighed to the timed intervals of the fans. Lying on their backs and sides, heads rose from the floor, legs stiffened, chests inflated, only to relax again, as if in some futile attempt to get out of bed or off the couch. The giants recalled the body as gross anatomy — of a soul trapped within spoilable flesh — the dispirited body, incapable of action because of the sentiment of futility. The giants also recalled the tragic body — the self-perpetuating machine — needy, voracious, desiring, independent of consciousness and will."

Or maybe, as Toronto writer Sherri Irvin proposed in the Fall 2000 issue of *Lola* magazine, it's because Streicher's *Giants* "lack our essential particularity. They are more shroud than body, their hands ill-fitting gloves, their feet toeless, their crotches sexless mounds...; the *Giants* capture only the facade of body rather than body itself."

More likely the giant is so firmly embedded in our collective psyche that seeing one — or a gallery filled with them — immediately conjures a cacophony of attributes. The monster in the night. Alien pods coming to life. Blimp-like, huggable toys. Whether identified as figures from a dream or from a nightmare, giants are figures of fantasy. They are not us. If their size invokes fear, it is usually of the benign storybook variety; a bumbling, pudgy kind of awkwardness, not outright terror.

Twitching and writhing in their sleep, Streicher's *Giants* are benign Brobdingnagians who achieve the artist's intention of "physically embracing the viewer within a tension between pleasure and threat, enchantment and self-reflexive awareness." ■

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