

GIL McELROY

# Max Streicher Lamentation

The Art Gallery of Peterborough (AGP) is situated in Del Cray Park along the edge of Little Lake, a stone's throw from downtown Peterborough. "Little Lake" seems a bit of a misnomer; it's less a lake, actually, than a somewhat bloated, intestinal distention of the Otonabee River, between two hard bends of its winding course. In the summer months, a constant parade of boats passes through Little Lake into that portion of the Trent Canal that bypasses a rough section of the Otonabee River, just north of the gallery. In the early spring, though, before the canal officially opens for the season, it is free of watercraft.

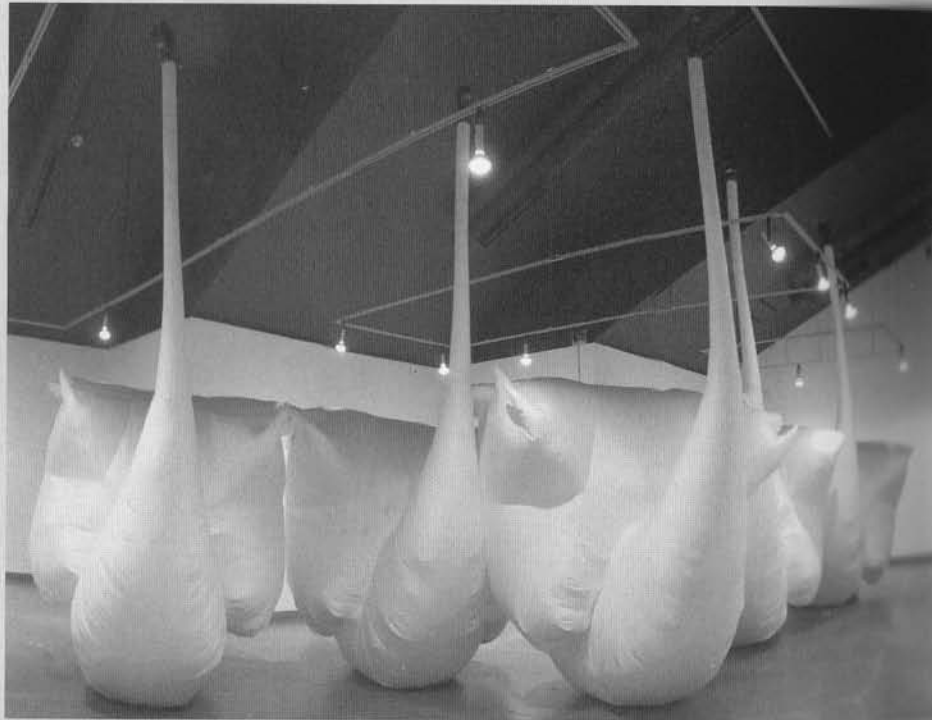
It is not completely empty, however. Little Lake, like so many others in the region, is a stopover for migrating waterfowl, a place numerous species use for rest on their journey northward (or, in the autumn, on the trip south). Like Canada Geese, for example, or, perhaps more exotically, the Tundra Swan, a large white bird that annually treks between the Canadian Arctic and the Chesapeake Bay area on the eastern seaboard of the United States. The collective noun for a group of swans (no matter the particular species) is a "lamentation," and it gives a title for an installation of inflatable sculptures by Toronto artist Max Streicher.

Within the confines of the main gallery space at the AGP, Streicher has situated a lamentation of five swan sculptures, each made of Tyvek, a cloth-like material with which the plywood and lumber shells of newly-built homes are commonly wrapped just prior to final exterior finishing. The pieces are large, rising over six metres from the gallery floor right to the ceiling above. And they're volumetric; each swan has a large, rotund body with a stylized set of wings and long, narrow neck terminating in a head that is, in fact, a small industrial fan attached to the ceiling. Streicher has arranged

his lamentation in the familiar "V" formation that species like geese and swans assume when in flight.

The air pressure from the fans sustains the shapes of the swans, but Streicher has set things up so it isn't quite as simple as filling each sculpture with air and merely maintaining a pressurized status quo. Rather, he equips each swan with a valve mechanism where the anus would be on the real thing, and just like on the real thing, it is there to expel stuff (in this case, the air filling the work). What it all means is that the swan sculptures are in a constant cycle of inflation from the fans and deflation through the valves. Streicher's fans are on timers, alternatively firing up to fill the Tyvek bodies and then shutting down for a short period allowing the swans to deflate slightly before the whole process begins again. It also means that, courtesy of those same fans, Streicher successfully manages to introduce motion and sound as factors in the installation. The noisy process of inflation/deflation sets the swans to rocking on their weighted bases, and by Streicher's arrangement of them into a tightly knit formation each figure constantly bumps and rubs up against its neighbour. It's all quite active and noisy, reminiscent, perhaps, of the real things as they might gather together in a nesting area, or struggle to hold together in a clamorous formation while in flight.

Streicher doesn't restrict his audience to the visual and aural experience of the work; the tactile also comes into play. One may wander about amidst the hubbub and uproar and engage the sculptures first-hand (an activity, not surprisingly, particularly enjoyed by children). The metaphorical sensation of stepping into a cage full of creatures (or simulacra thereof) is very much a part of the installation, as is the juxtaposition between the idea of wildness (inherent in Streicher's choice of swans for the work) and the taming, controlled environment



(i.e., cage) represented by an interior gallery space.

*Lamentation* is by no means a new work. Streicher has shown it before, in other venues and in other incarnations. But it is a work that speaks of the indispensability of a context meaningful beyond the aesthetic, and the Art Gallery of Peterborough, in its suburban park-like location in the city of Peterborough at the edge of a lake that is itself along the flight path of a migratory route, gives it precisely that.

Context fails for *Endgame*, Streicher's other installational piece in this spring exhibition. Outdoors, atop the roof at the entrance to the AGP, Streicher placed a pair of Tyvek sculptures that, when fully inflated, form hemispheric shapes that are in fact the heads of two clowns looking straight up. Now, the obvious vantage point to view this work would seem to be from above while airborne. Realistically, the only practically accessible view of *Endgame* is that from the roadway that runs in front of the gallery, and while it affords enough of a perspective to determine what these rounded

mounds on the gallery's roof are without explanatory aid, the absence of a meaningful context reduces the work to the butt of jokes (the most common, of course, being that of resembling an oversized pair of breasts jiggling in the wind). Streicher may have been referencing some specifics of popular culture in a number of ways, including, perhaps, those inflatable figures often found adorning the rooftops or parking lots of fast food joints or used car lots to advertise some product or service available within. But adjacent to Del Cray Park, along the edge of Little Lake, a stone's throw from downtown Peterborough, such allusions were distant and consequently weakened by lack of contextual proximity. The juxtaposition intended here, atop the roof the AGP, between the aesthetic domains of art and commerce just didn't come off. Better the dichotomy of the work within. Better the birds inside. ←

MAX STREICHER,  
*Lamentation*, 2002.  
Photo: Courtesy of  
the artist.

Max Streicher: *Lamentation*  
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