

Artist Max Streicher's mesmerizing troupe of giant, floating figures leaves SARAH MILROY wondering if they're ghosts, souls, angels or unborn children

# Divine comedy

Inflatables always seem to be so silly and frivolous," says the Toronto artist Max Streicher, who has taken the morning to show me his recent crop of six roly-poly, giant inflatable men, installed temporarily in the upstairs gallery at the Museum of Contemporary Canadian Art in Toronto. "And that is so completely unlike me. But working in this medium, I suppose I'm always going to be working against that assumption."

On this particular afternoon, he will deflate his floating men and pack them up into three small boxes and send them off to the Edmonton Art Gallery, where they are scheduled to go on show, beginning next Friday. The exhibition, organized by EAG chief curator Catherine Crowston, is the most recent in a string of shows Streicher has staged from Vancouver to Prague, Hamburg, Haifa and Taichung, Taiwan. (Even Barrie, Ont., has succumbed; he installed giant inflated clown heads on the roofs of local businesses there three summers ago, although one was annihilated by a passing thunderstorm.)

After 10 years working part time as a technician for Bell to make ends meet, he is now, at 44, finally able to devote himself full-time to his art, as more and more curators and art world power brokers fall sway to its other-worldly allure.

This installation — titled *Silenus*, after the lecherous and drunken father of Dionysius — is classic Streicher. Each one of the figures is powered by its own little fan, which shuts on and off, setting off their

graceful rising and falling gestures. A foot lifts here, a head rises there, and over in the corner, a floating arm traces a lazy trajectory. Dream-like and slow, the vista is mesmerizing. Are these ghosts, souls, angels or unborn children, wallowing in amniotic bliss? "I think they are all of these things," Streicher says with a quiet smile.

His interest in the metaphysical goes back a long way. Raised in the Lutheran Church, he is the youngest boy in a farming family from Olds, Alta., 100 kilometres northeast of Calgary. He trained to be a minister, making it all the way to the Lutheran Theological Seminary in Saskatoon. "The faculty there were extraordinary people," Streicher recalls, but his fellow classmates were so conservative that open debate was impossible. "I started seeing that the church as a place to have a career was not an option."

An internship in Camden, N.J., proved to be the last straw; political activism seemed to him more to the point than preaching in the poverty-stricken industrial wasteland. Then, following the example of another renegade priest who had dropped the cloth to pursue the artist's life, Streicher signed up for a spell at the Art Students League in New York (anatomy and painting), followed by another at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design in Halifax ("my first introduction to conceptual art"), before finally settling in to complete his BFA and MFA at Toronto's York University.

Throughout his student years, he



LOUIE PALU/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

Max Streicher: 'I've always enjoyed the magic of watching these flat shapes fill out and come to life.'

struggled to find a language that would serve his way of seeing the world. His MFA thesis project in a church-turned-condo-development in Toronto explored, he recalls, "idealism, community, and how our consumerism is changing our sense of how we exist together." His series of yellow metal signs installed around the site was an urban intervention, taking aim at the evils of the world. One image depicted a hard hat beneath a halo, another a slice of white bread negated by a diagonal slash, protesting the hunger on Toronto's mean streets.

It was only after finishing his academic training that he really found his artistic feet. His first inflatable work in 1989 was a gesture of jubilation after his release from academe. "I just had this impulse to do something crazy, and not have to think about it," he remembers today. He staged the work — a giant ram's horn, a wonderfully pagan affront — at Bloor Street United Church in Toronto.

Streicher's first giant men, which he began making shortly afterward, were a challenge, and his early efforts, he says today, were very

crude. The hands looked like mittens; the faces looked battered and deformed. Yet somehow they were all the more expressive for it.

Then as now, audiences were struck by the fragility of the floating forms, then made of Tybek, a lightweight synthetic paper used in the making of disposable surgical attire. (His new *Silenus* figures are made of an even lighter sail-making nylon.) Confronted with this vulnerability, his audiences have responded with empathy.

With the giant clown heads that followed, this exploration of empathy continued: the clown is a complex character type, inciting both our tenderness and our fear. Streicher's first clowns were installed in the courtyard of the Morrow Avenue gallery complex in Toronto in 1998, a pink duo with puffy bow ties. For all that they were adorable, they were also unnerving, down in the pit of this former foundry. His inspiration, he says, came from an aerial Weegee photograph of an inflatable Santa Claus, tethered to the ground and swarming with workers before a Macy's parade.

In Streicher's world, the clowns

are always in pairs. "One alone would be a little too sad," he says. "They are like giant puppets that have been left behind. There is this sense of desolation. Also, I was conscious of Beckett." He has christened the pair he later installed in a Hamburg church nave Hamm and Clov, after *Endgame's* fated characters.

**'They are like giant puppets that have been left behind. There is this sense of desolation.'**

In his most recent work, Streicher's craft has clearly reached a high. Starting with modelled clay, wax or plaster figures, he covers the forms with tape and then cuts the tape off into segments, to create miniature patterns. He then stitches the larger corresponding fabric shapes together on the sewing machine in his apartment in Toronto's Parkdale neighbourhood.

While he acknowledges that he has chosen a fanciful métier, he professes a fascination with "balloon disasters", and has collected a number of pictures of Macy's parade balloons that "did something they shouldn't." Pondering his eccentric preoccupation, he says, "They seem to be so gentle, but then the elements get involved and anything can happen." A couple of years ago in New York, he says, one brushed against a light pole and caused a terrible accident. "Then, of course, there's the Hindenburg ..."

In the grip of an idea, Streicher is unlikely to finish his series anytime soon. "I've always enjoyed the magic of watching these flat shapes fill out and come to life," he says. "It's a reference to breathing — to something transparent that animates us." Like divinity itself, I ask? "Well," he answers quietly after a pause, "*pneuma* — wind, breath and spirit. It's all the same word in Greek, isn't it?"

Max Streicher's exhibition at the Art Gallery of Edmonton opens on Sept. 13 and runs to Nov. 17. For more information call: 780-422-6223.