



**MAX** Streicher

THE LOGGIA GALLERY  
FEBRUARY 1 TO MARCH 3, 1996

*CURATED BY JOHN MASSIER*

## I SING THE BODY TYVEK

Max Streicher's sculptures are sewn together from a material called Tyvek., a blend of polyethylene fibres that combines properties of paper, film and cloth. Tyvek is woven from fibres 250 times finer than human hair and results in a material that is, according to the Du Pont end-users handbook, "strong, lightweight, flexible, smooth, low-linting, opaque and resistant to water, chemicals, abrasion and aging." Among its current uses are courier envelopes, shopping bags, chemical drum labels, marine charts, survey and field maps, military instruction manuals, jackets for videodiscs and tapes, filters, reinforcing file folders and packaging for military hardware, electronic components and sterile health care devices.

Streicher sews together patterns of Tyvek as would a seamstress or designer, but he also shares something with puppeteers. As with puppets, the efficacy of Streicher's forms lies in the successful suspension of disbelief, through a combination of convincing physical attributes and a realistic range of motion.

His sculptures are most often connected to mechanical regulating devices which pump forced air into the pieces, animating them with a regular rhythm of swelling and deflating. The range of motion is subtle and limited, but still convincing — they do appear to breathe, struggle against a confined circumstance, tense at the point of complete inflation and relax with a full-body sigh as the process reverses itself.

Streicher's "mechanical performers" are neutered human forms and their physical shape can be as vague as form-fitting cocoons because their physical action, or behaviour, appears so real. With puppets, we accept the illusion of painted wood or foam and fabric if the delivery is convincing because that's what really matters in the kinds of narrative tales in which puppets are used. Streicher's forms suspend our disbelief in a different way. With undecorated surfaces, they are soft and white and all they do is breathe, a seemingly innocuous action that feels more intense the more we bear witness. We begin to see that this is all they will ever do, breathe with a deliberate and patient insistence. This is sufficient.

As the works inflate, there is an obvious pathos at work. As they fill with air and their limbs begin to uncurl and jerk back and forth, searching for a natural resting position, they display a feebleness that simultaneously evokes derision and empathy. It is clear, in some way, that their actions are not their own, that their position and circumstance are somehow involuntary. They are what we hate to be: groping, blind, ineffectual, dependent on something external for sustenance. These qualities are recognizable to us and as true to the current human condition as the more lauded characteristics of individuality, freedom or self-reliance.

There are innumerable literary and science fiction reference in the work, intentional or not. The brutal marriage of flesh and technology in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* is the most obvious, while the hoses by which Streicher's forms are connected and their dependence on a buddy system (alluding to a collective unconscious) brings to mind the nefarious Borg of *Star Trek: The Next Generation*. Better still, Don Siegel's 1956 film *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, where the residents of a small town are being replaced by inert duplicates hatched from alien pods. There is a scene in which the hero happens upon some pods that have almost hatched, the human-like forms extracted from them and writhing on the floor as they come to life. Streicher's prostate foursome on the floor move just like this.

Although we have begun to displace it with newer technologies (of which Tyvek is a part), our culture has not quite finished with The Machine as a dominant cultural metaphor. Since the 1760s and the beginning of the Industrial Revolution, The Machine has played a significant role in how we perceive our culture and ourselves. As older technologies and methods of production are "updated," Information has been named the new gunslinger of cultural metaphors, here to capture our hearts, minds and souls on the precipice of the 21st century. As

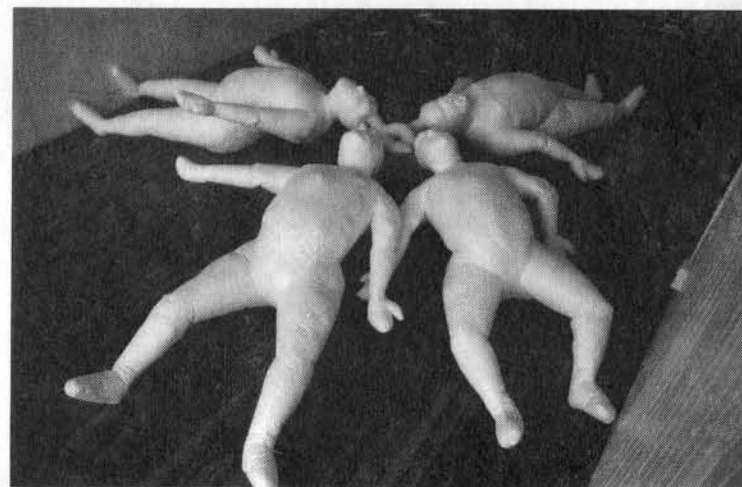
machines that have no functional purpose, Streicher's works can be read as illustrative of this transformative state, the moment between metaphors, when we find ourselves writhing for meaning. What remains unclear in the work is whether these figures are indeterminate forms of new life gestating inside Tyvek-spun cocoons, or the ghostly shells of a vacated physicality.

Among the many uses of Tyvek, the one with the most inherent danger (and the one that alludes most visually to Streicher's forms) is its use in the manufacture of garments and body suits used in the handling of toxic waste — an apt emblem at the end of a century in which we have moved from a modicum of regard for the production of art as a part of a rich, diverse culture to our current state, where art is often regarded as the unnecessary detrius of the culture, a waste product confronted by policies and attitudes that seek to reduce it or eliminate it altogether.

Streicher's sculptures, while utilizing and alluding to many elements of technology are really anti-machines. Unlike almost every other machine imaginable, they are not task-oriented — they cannot solder microchips or measure the proper number of scoops of raisins for your breakfast cereal. The artist is aware of his "improper" application of technology and acknowledges that the tasks of his machines are found "in the realm of beauty and whimsy."

No small task.

John Massier  
Associate Curator



MAX STREICHER is a graduate of the University of Alberta (BA) and York University (BFA, MFA) and has exhibited in various solo, group and collective exhibitions since 1986. He is one of the original members of the artists' collective Nether Mind and has participated in each of their 1991-1995 exhibitions. He was included in the group exhibitions *Mediatrics* (Cold City Gallery), *Naked State* (The Power Plant) and *Hermit* (Czech Republic). Most recently, Streicher's work was shown at Paul Petro Contemporary Art (Toronto) and 00 Gallery (Halifax) and will be seen later this year in a group exhibition at the Southern Alberta Art Gallery and a solo, site-specific project at the Synagoga na Palmovca in Prague.

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