

CANADA

Vancouver

Max Streicher at
Monte Clark Gallery

The history of inflatables goes back at least to the 18th century in Europe, when hot-air balloons first became fashionable adventure. During the past century, however, the development of inflatables has included everything from military blimps to swimming aids to blow-up furniture. For Max Streicher's giant-sized inflatable sculptures, the only description is humongous. The 25-foot-long *Giant* figures that fill the gallery, wall to wall, floor to ceiling, are not merely huge, they are monstrously so. Viewers have to push aside massive legs, squeeze between swollen bellies, and clamber over arms, which slowly rise from the floor in a kind of salute. For those who want to move around inside the gallery, it is full body contact, not unlike being surrounded with squishy pillows or billowing parachute shrouds.

For the past 10 years, Streicher has been producing an intriguing, and literally breathtaking, series of inflatable sculptures. His first effort, a 1989 graduate project concluding his fine arts studies at York University, was a nylon bag sewn in the shape of a ram's horn. Inflated by a vacuum cleaner, the sculpture unfolded upward in a slow spiral movement. Exhibited in the cloistered atmosphere of a church,

the motor's high-pitched roar 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 tripod bunny suits. These 12- to 16-foot-tall anthropomorphic sculptures each featured three arms and three legs, topped by three curled ram's horn-shaped ears, giving the creatures a resemblance to medieval jesters. Like

surreal fantasies, the ghostly white figures rose up and up, towering over viewers when they activated air-pump switches.

The airy whiteness of the synthetic Tyvek fabric used for the *Boiler* sculptures led the Toronto artist to create abstract cloud and smoke forms suspended from ceilings, undulating five-meter-high swans, then acrobatic dancers on hanging trapezes—and to delve deeper

into an exploration of the ephemeral nature of inflatables.

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 interactive experience, their tactility invites gentle thumps and finger poking—the child's unabashed response to costumed actors portraying cartoon characters.

Seemingly 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, in the imagery of mythology, fantasy, and religion.

A student of theology before he enrolled in art school,

in 1999 Streicher 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 work even better.

No similar miscues have occurred when his *Giant* figures have been exhibited in Prague, Haifa, or various sites in Sweden, Finland, or Hungary. Like balloons and soap bubbles, Streicher's buoyant sculptures override all cultural and language barriers. Perhaps this is because, as Hatt suggests, inflatables make the abstract character of organic existence visible.

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.

Paula Gustafson



Max Streicher, *Sleeping Giants*, 1998, Tyvek, fans, each figure 762 cm standing. Photograph by Robert McNair.