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Inflatable Elegance

by Deepanjana Pal

Ashwamedh

Gallery Maskara

Warehouse on 3rd Pasta (b/w Dena Bank ATM and Sanghvi Exports) 6/7, 3rd Pasta Lane, Colaba, Mumbai, India

November 26, 2010 - January 30, 2011



Max Streicher makes sculptures using spinnaker, a lightweight nylon with a tensile quality that is dull white in colour. He stitches it into forms that are then filled with air to create inflatable sculptures. Particularly in his larger works, there's a monumental quality thanks to the size as well as the marble-like texture that spinnaker acquires once it catches the light. This illusion of solid immensity is completely at odds with the fact that the sculpture is largely made of air and can be deflated and folded up to fit in a little suitcase, which is probably how the two massive horses in Gallery Maskara came to India.

Ashwamedh is Streicher's second show in Mumbai's Gallery Maskara. At 30 feet by 30 feet, the two horses in the exhibition make fantastic use of the gallery's soaring ceiling (it used to be a warehouse). Their translucent spinnaker bodies soften the lights shining on them so that they look like glowing, mythical creatures. As with much of Streicher's work, there's a charming balance of technical sophistication and accessibility in the two prancing horses. Regardless of age and background, all visitors are likely to be filled with wide-eyed awe at the sight of the enormous sculptures. Because Streicher doesn't fill the spinnaker sculptures tightly with air, they're just slightly slack, which gives the forms a few natural creases and wrinkles. It also makes the horses bob gently, as though they may move out of their mid-prance pose at any moment. They're accessible and yet imposing because these aren't simple blow-up dolls. They harness in their forms the mythologies and legacies of classical sculpture, in which horses have played an important role as symbols of virility, strength and victory.



Ashwamedh is a fascinating example of how context and location can transform art. Streicher has shown horses before in North America and Europe. The ones in Gallery Maskara at the moment are indeed among the four that Streicher suspended from the ceiling of Toronto's Union Station in 2007. What's fascinating about the exhibition in Gallery Maskara is how the context adds to a work. As in the Western mythology evoked in Streicher's equine displays, horses symbolise strength and virility in India. However, there is a central difference. In Europe and America, the rider-less horses are reminiscent of the majesty of the wild. They symbolise freedom and the possibility of magic (remember unicorns?), which is always shown as a power that lies beyond the scope of the average human mind.

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In India too, horses are a symbol of strength and virility, but there is a difference. They also symbolise conquest, since they were introduced to India by Aryan invaders. This isn't to suggest the animals haven't since been co-opted. Horses have appeared in Indian art repeatedly over the centuries. In modern art, M.F. Husain's horses, for example, remain among his most famous works. However, by calling the show Ashwamedh, Streicher's show references not so much the contemporary as the deep past. The title refers to an ancient Vedic ritual called the ashwamedh yagna in which a king desiring greater power sacrificed a stallion to the sacred flame. For a year before the sacrifice, the stallion was allowed to roam free (followed discreetly by royal servants) because it was believed that the king would colonise the lands that the stallion roamed. At the end of the year, the animal would be sacrificed. It was a brutal practice that seemed to have daunted even the ancient kings. (I suspect the ensuing cost of invasion and the fact that the queen had to simulate sex with the dead horse as part of the ashwamedh ritual didn't help its popularity.)



This is the festering darkness that Streicher's luminous horses couldn't invoke when they were shown in Toronto or Germany but could when they come to India as Ashwamedh. History and ritual add layers to these beautiful works, highlighting the tenuous balance between fragility and strength that marks Streicher's work. Look up at the neatly-stitched parts, and they give a sense of equine musculature. The subtle movements of the hoof and the way the horses seem to rear up towards the light imbues the sculptures with a special dynamism. Ashwamedh is a beautiful meditation on power and the poetry of form. The fact that Streicher's spinnaker can stretch itself to take on various cultural interpretations makes it that much more powerful.

-- Deepanjana Pal

(All images courtesy of Gallery Maskara and the artist.)

Posted by [Deepanjana Pal](#) on 12/06

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