

This series of essays on emerging Canadian artists is sponsored
by THE FRASER ELLIOTT FOUNDATION in memory of BETTY ANN ELLIOTT

[Spotlight]



Space Invaders

Max Streicher's air-filled characters
bob and sway to an oddly sinister beat,
as Corinna Ghaznavi explains

My first encounter with Max Streicher is in his downtown Toronto studio. "Before we start talking I might as well just show you something," he says, opening the lid of a cardboard box. There is a hiss of air and a mass of white material slowly inflates; elongated forms untangle and fill, resolving into limbs and torsos. Finally, four life-size figures, their feet out and their heads connected to tubes extending

from the box, bob gently off the ground.

The experience is fascinating and disconcerting. So insistent is their expansion into the space I occupy I find myself stepping back, uncertain whether the figures will stop growing. Titled *Quartet in a Box*, the piece has a delightful gadgety, toy-like appeal. Yet there is an oddly sinister quality, too. It plays upon the kind of fear a child must experience when

ABOVE: Max Streicher *Quartet in a Box* 1995 Installation at Pyramida Center for Contemporary Art, Israel, 1997 Tyvek, industrial fans Figures life-size Photo Yaron Rozner Courtesy the artist

RIGHT: Max Streicher *Sleeping Giants* 1998 Installation at Thames Gallery, Chatham, Ont. Tyvek, industrial fans Figures four times life-size Photo Barrie Jones Courtesy the artist



It's not a critical stance vis-à-vis technology so much as an ambivalent one.

For Streicher, technology both enhances and threatens

confronted with an oversized toy.

Since graduating with an MFA from York University in 1989, Streicher has exhibited his work in Canada and internationally and has been involved with the local collective Nether Mind. His inflatable sculptures began as abstracts but then progressed to figurative form. They are constructed of Tyvek, a material used to make, among other things, barrier suits worn by chemical workers. It's light, durable and nearly indestructible—body-wear for the hazards of technology.

As a material, it reinforces Streicher's paradoxical relationship with technology, the incongruity of the space-age fabric and the handsewn human figures brought to life by relatively unsophisticated air pumps. It's not a critical stance vis-à-vis technology so much as an ambivalent one. For Streicher, technology both enhances and threatens, protects and overwhelms. Survival becomes a matter of maintaining a balance with it.

Balancing Act, a work first shown at the Synagoga na Palmovka in Prague, in 1996, is a literal demonstration of Streicher's double-edged ambivalence. Two sculptural figures are suspended near the ceiling, attached to tubes inserted into

their mouths. The tubes are like fragile lifelines and the figures make a vanitas or memento mori. One inflates as the other deflates; it is technology, and the timed reciprocation of air inhaled and exhaled, that keeps them "breathing." Their state of suspension becomes a metaphor, and the air releasing from one into the other comes as a relief. It is a reprieve from the danger of over-inflation, from severed lifelines, from the prospect of the figures withering into a heap of white fabric.

In Streicher's work, the insertion point of pump and air-lines is always visible, and makes a vital tool for interpretation. In *Quartet in a Box*, the tubes insert at the top of the heads, like Zeus bearing Athena. In *Balancing Act*, it is through the mouth and makes an iconic negation of the possibility of speech. It reduces the oral cavity to the sole purpose of attaining air and the figure's function, seemingly, to mere survival. In *Sextet*, the six figures that extend head first into the room are given their "life" through the belly button, the tubes snaking like umbilical cords to the primal point of sustenance.

More than lifelines, the tubes are also part of the sculptural configuration of the installations. All are essentially

architectural. The dimensions, the materials (seemingly translucent, yet opaque) and the figures (ethereally white, yet solid) threaten the viewer's space. More disconcerting, they insist on breathing. The six, fourteen-foot swans in *Swan Song* sway not serenely but largely, pushing out into the room so that we must interact with them physically. Alert to the potentially vicious nature of swans, Streicher implicitly uses their image to recall the complex relation between beauty and horror.

Pleasure Dome, with its hollow Tyvek sphere, is an actual architectural space, four metres in diameter. Yet the solidity which structures usually imply is completely negated. Again, Streicher inverts expectations. Behind the joy and laughter of this pleasure dome, he reveals a void. As viewers enter, they lose all sense of orientation as the opaque white shell surrounds them. The division between self and space is wiped away. A material designed to protect us from technology insulates so well it takes on spatial and temporal dimensions all its own.

This was not intentional on Streicher's part, but he accepts the consequences of his materials, converting it into a moment of triumph. With the loss of self inside the dome, we experience the danger of play, the consequence of pushing boundaries. And, most especially, we learn the vital necessity of finding an equilibrium.

In his most recent piece, shown this summer in the outdoor pit area at the Olga Korper Gallery complex on Morrow Avenue, in Toronto, Streicher installed two huge heads, inflated by blower fans, that glare up from the pit with Mickey Mouse eyes. At the mercy of the elements, they sway, touch and rebound, miming an endless Beckettian dialogue. A sense of anger and absurdity offsets a laughing signing of Pop Art and playground equipment in these breathing, severed heads. It's the combination of play and menace evident in all of Streicher's work. ■



Max Streicher *Endgame* 1998 Installed in the courtyard of the Morrow Avenue gallery complex, in co-operation with Christopher Cutts Gallery Tyvek, industrial fans
Figures two and a half times life-size Photo Max Streicher Courtesy the artist



Max Streicher *Balancing Act* 1995 Installed at Cambridge Gallery, 1998 Tyvek, industrial fans Figures life-size Photo Robert McNair Courtesy the artist