

MAX STREICHER *Cloud* 2004 Tyvek, vinyl, electric fans
9.75 x 9.75 x 7.31 m PHOTO CRAIG BOYKO



Max Streicher

◀◀ ART GALLERY OF ONTARIO, TORONTO

A cloud is fascinating in a rare, breathtaking way. It is both familiar and abstract, fixed yet mutable. We perceive a cloud as a physical, sensuous object, immaterial and voluptuous all at once. Clouds are beautiful and ominous and apocalyptic. Max Streicher's *Cloud*, which made a brief, fleeting appearance at the Art Gallery of Ontario in March, encapsulates these qualities.

Like Streicher's previous installations, *Cloud* is perfectly poised within its setting. It floats about four feet off the floor and extends upwards about 32 feet, activating the vast space of Walker Court. It is a grand gesture embracing the site's vertical challenge, creating a sensation of capture—the gallery as a cage of glass and concrete. Streicher has made a number of giant, inflatable Tyvek sculptures that fill rooms, but this is the first time we get to see inside, since *Cloud* is hollow in the middle. The work's vast scale dwarfs the human figures who stand beneath it, peering upwards at the receding chamber of its inner dimensions. It is a space that is both immense and intimate. Inside, *Cloud*'s simplicity of expression, its fabrication and tactility are unveiled—the maze of seams that form its elaborate structure and the two small fans that keep it afloat. Yet the initial feeling of wonder doesn't diminish. It brings to mind carnivals, with their inflatable chambers where children bounce and frolic. It is a cartoon cloud that manages to be both goofy and reverent.

Cloud is part of an exciting trajectory in Streicher's work. As in previous pieces, the elusive element of air takes form and shape and is given physical presence, allowing us to engage its metaphoric potential. In this new work we also experience a void in the middle—a space for meditation and contemplation that connects the viewer to the universe and an awareness of the infinite. *Cloud* also plays on levels of the subconscious and dreams, and the thin membrane of its construction tentatively delineates inside from outside.

During his remarks at the opening reception, Streicher noted that the idea for *Cloud* came to him as he was gazing out the window of an airplane. To fly, to be surrounded by clouds, is to participate in a suspension of disbelief at the wonders of engineering that make suspension of matter possible. The mechanisms are readily apparent, yet they manage to transport us to other worlds, an experience that is mirrored with this sculpture. Citing the paintings of Tiepolo and Turner as influences, Streicher has nonetheless gone beyond the annotation of clouds in paint to painstakingly construct one that, despite its labour-intensiveness, still lifts and soars, mimicking the aerodynamic experience. *Cloud*, with its force and fragility, enters a joyful realm of conceptual and emotional osmosis. **DIONNE MCAFFEE**