

Being Inflatable

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The allure of Max Streicher's giant kinetic inflatables lies as much in the familiarity of their form as in their dimension. Two of the six eight-meter *Sleeping Giants (Silenus)*, 2002, are currently on show at Galeria Leme, São Paulo, Brazil.

In the main exhibition space, a theatrical suspension of disbelief shifts into action upon first sight of the huge white spinnaker bodies sprawled on the gallery's glistening cement floor. They fill the space with a calm yet intense and overwhelming presence, quietly humming in their pathetic vulnerability. On their backs, the gigantic bodies seem helpless; overturned tortoises or whimpering puppies; limbs upturned, waving every so often due to a current of air or a slight nudge. It is virtually impossible to be in the same space as these monumental sculptures and not yearn to touch them, brush against them and initiate a series of movements and noises. It is not strictly their size that is overwhelming, it's the strange feeling that you could fit inside them, inhabit them, (re)animate them. They are not assertive enough to remit an adult figure, neither are they totally human; but they are most certainly alluring, not to mention disconcerting.

The large bodies appear asexual: lacking genitals, body hair and any of the plausible *sexualizing* signs. Or are they not yet developed? Are these huge babies or evidence of our need to anthropomorphize, classify and judge everything that we set eyes on? Are we really that insecure about identity, how it's formed and the meaning society gives it?

These sleeping giants are smooth to the touch, yet their stitching reminds us of their fragility. The boundaries of a body that seems so familiar,

and yet so strange to the eye, are the same as our own: imperfect. Just as skin can be torn and what we contain may ooze into the world, so can this spinnaker lining. A body filled with *air* metaphorically reminds us that an inflated ego could be more vulnerable than its imposing dimension suggests. If it is broken, all that is left is an empty unrecognizable/inhuman shell (see *Balancing Act*, 1995).

Streicher works off cast models and *photograms* of bodies, both of which register line and mass that he then transposes onto these textile monochromatic figures, sewing the fragments together himself. The lack of color, according to Streicher, is a conscious choice made to keep at bay the *pop* implications. If one is to view these as huge balloons, the evocation is easy to come by, as is Thanksgiving parade in New York, inflatable Santa Clauses outside stores in Florida during the holidays, and other icons of consumer society at large (see *Endgame (Barrie)*, 1999).

Kinetic inflatables have occupied Streicher since the 90s and he has developed these greatly over the decade, until they reached the detailed form visible in the pieces on show at Leme gallery. His first in 1991, *Breathe*, was no more than an abstract tusk-like floor-piece which opened precedence for bodies, animals (as in *Four Horses*, 2003, *Stuck Unicorn*, 2003, and *Swan Song* 1996) as well as *natural* phenomena (*Where There is Smoke*, 1992, and *Cloud*, 2004). The kinetic inflatables are filled/fuelled by industrial fans, sometimes placed outside the bodies but in the case of these giants, inside, and invisible to the eye. Also inside, are weights, which Streicher places carefully in order to keep the inflatables from rolling around, freely. □

Max Streicher, *Sleeping Giants (Silenus)*, 2002. Nylon spinnaker, electric fans, each inflatable figure is eight meters tall. Photograph by Everton Ballardín. Courtesy of www.galerialeme.com.br / www.maxstreicher.com / www.artcoregallery.com