



Max Streicher

Mammatus

Essays by

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Head in the clouds....

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Some of my most memorable and peaceful moments as a child were spent lying on the grass of my backyard, watching clouds. I would point out these shifting shapes to my constant companion, my little sister. In my imagination these forms resembled fantastical animals (with a particular emphasis on dinosaurs) and magical beings. Clouds are marvellous entities, impossible to pin down, constantly changing and evolving in unexpected ways. They mark impending weather (both good and bad) while at the same time they signify the heavens. They are at once both rich and ethereal, making for a complex subject matter in which artist Max Streicher finds inspiration.

When we consider clouds, we know they are not solid or permanent and hence do not possess clear definition.¹ They defy the notion of a contained shape yet they possess the power to both disguise and reveal. According to ancient Greek mythology, clouds were thought to be created by the gods to keep private activities hidden from nosy humans.² As we understand them today, clouds can block the sun, hide an airplane and, on a truly overcast day, can eliminate or even become a “stand-in” for the sky. “What can poor mortals say about clouds? While people describe them they vanish.”³ According to Renaissance master Leonardo da Vinci (1452-1519), a cloud is a body without a surface; it is a point where the visible meets the invisible, where the representable meets the unrepresentable.⁴ Because clouds are full of opposing characteristics their required presence and symbolization have been the bane of artists

¹ Hubert Damisch, *A Theory of /Cloud/: Toward a History of Painting*, Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002, 15.

² *Ibid.*, 23.

³ Annie Dillard, *For The Time Being*, Toronto: Penguin Books Canada, 1999, 71.

⁴ Damisch, 124 & 129.

since the Renaissance, as it is quite difficult to create a realistic-looking cloud... Or is it?

Clouds evoke thoughts of flying. They are liberated from gravity and hence are seemingly as limitless as our imagination. Their presence in the sky can signal all sorts of events, such as a sunny day or a threatening thunderstorm. With the interplay of shadow and light, clouds create a wide range of effects, from the dazzling brilliance of “rays from heaven” to the ominous umbrella of a lightning-filled downpour. For some, clouds represent fragments of one’s destiny and so to watch clouds is to hope for a good future.⁵

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However, what clouds have consistently been used to represent in art is the axis between heaven and earth. In his book *A Theory of /Cloud/: Toward a History of Painting*, Hubert Damisch discusses what the presence of a threshold between the terrestrial (defined space) and the celestial (infinite space)⁶ signifies in Renaissance and Baroque religious painting. Here clouds are the apparatus on which Jesus and the Saints miraculously ascend from earth to heaven. Even in popular culture, clouds are considered the substance of the heavens, or more accurately Paradise — evidence the perky “spokesangel” for Philadelphia Cream Cheese hanging out in the clouds. This theme of rising, of crossing over, of transcendence with all its accompanying visions and/or hallucinations is exemplified in the installation by Max Streicher.

The title of this exhibition — *Mammatus* — is drawn from the meteorological term for a rare type of cloud that is pouch-like in appearance and occurs just after the passing of a thunderstorm. There is, however, a common misconception that these atmospheric entities are a sign of an impending tornado. The term thus lends itself well to Streicher’s installation, where bodies entwined in his cloud formation tumble about, are split up and confused.

Like a Renaissance cathedral ceiling fresco, Streicher’s clouds seem to pierce through the gallery (which is arguably a cathedral for art), creating an imaginary opening to the sky. These clouds invade, overflow, and envelop the space. Within the clouds, figures in arbitrary positions defy gravity and seem to be

⁶ Damisch, 166.

⁵ David Albahari, “Watching Clouds,” *Geist* 60 (Spring 2006): 23.



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engaged in fanciful nonsense. Less like flesh and blood, constructed out of the same white Tyvek material as the clouds, Streicher's figures appear like apparitions, ghosts, and spectres. The figures hover between corpses and angels, at the threshold between life and death. The immobility and mobility, form and formlessness, absence and presence of these entities highlight Jacques Derrida's discourse surrounding the philosophy of the spectre in *Specters of Marx*.

For Derrida, the spectre is an apparition that does not occupy a space in a determinate way. It is the remainder of the remnant. The spectre transcends all conceptuality and it resists the grasps of knowledge. No one knows where it is and what space it is in.⁷ In structural terms a spectre is a presence that is disappearing, emerging, but at the same time in reserve — just like a cloud. The indeterminacy of the spectre, according to Derrida, renders time out of joint, allowing the dead to be brought into presence demanding justice for the unmourned, unavenged, and unresolved trauma. This point of disturbance from the past returns to dislocate the present, demanding vengeance and resolution. The structural indeterminacy of the spectre is evident in Streicher's work. In particular, *Mammatus* embodies a ghostly luminous presence, bordered by shadow, transparency, and the uncanny. Neither here nor there, neither familiar nor unfamiliar, this unsettling oscillation is mimicked in the reciprocation of breath between the clouds and the figures. The spectre first of all sees us, from the other side of the eye; it looks at us even before we see it.⁸ We feel as if we are being observed and under surveillance — just as angels (if we believe in such a presence) observe from the sky. This notion of haunting, of being visited unknowingly, is experienced by viewers of *Mammatus*. Due to their placement high up in the ceiling, the figures see us before we notice them, they view us before they appear in our vision.⁹

But what is the story that Streicher's *Mammatus* relates? Is it a story of creation or destruction? Are these figures really occupying a place between heaven and earth, an unstable site where it is impossible for the laws of nature to operate?¹⁰ Similar to the TV drama *Lost*, are they just playing out a series of nonsensical plot lines in an attempt to leave purgatory to achieve life eternal? Or perhaps this barrier between the two worlds, of infinite and finite space, is due to a more existential opposition, a tension

⁷ Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx*. Chicago: Routledge, 1994, 6.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 101.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 101.

¹⁰ Damisch, 141.



that questions: How did we get here? Are we alone? What is the purpose of our existence? Given these larger questions, I find it no coincidence that Streicher once studied theology.

In the early eighties, Streicher completed his bachelor's degree at the University of Alberta and attended the Lutheran Theological Seminary. After a semester at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design in 1985, he came to York University to obtain his master's degree in fine arts. While at York he began to reconcile the conceptual element of his work to the physicality of its making.¹¹ The actual process of making and the concentration on the dynamics of installation started to merge. Perhaps without Streicher's awareness, theology tended to permeate his work. This influence is evident in his 1989 MFA thesis, "The Life We Are Living," which explored the penetration, infusion, or transfusion of the sacred into the profane and everyday.¹²

While *Mammatus* marks a culmination of Streicher's artistic practice over the last sixteen years, this type of imagery first appeared in his work in 1990. It was just after he finished his MFA that he created his first inflatable piece. *Breathe* (1990) was made from nylon and, upon its inflation with a vacuum cleaner, took the shape of a giant ram's horn. Religious and phallic connotations aside, Streicher felt that this inflatable was going to be just "a one-off."

During 1991, Streicher's concerns with inflatable art began to evolve. As a member of the Toronto-based artist collective Nether Mind, he created inflatables that began as abstract forms and evolved into kinetic and interactive artworks. *Boiler* (1991) was developed for the first Nether Mind exhibition in 1991. Although it was his second inflatable sculpture, he was dissatisfied with nylon material, and so it became the first work made from Tyvek. Streicher was attracted to the paperiness of this "fabric." Tyvek is a blend of polyethylene fibres that combines the properties of paper, film, and cloth. It is non-woven, synthetic paper that, according to the Dupont end-user's handbook, is "strong, lightweight, flexible, smooth, low-linting, opaque, and resistant to water, chemicals, abrasion and aging."¹³ It is currently used in courier envelopes, shopping bags, survey and field maps, military instruction manuals, jackets for video, discs

¹¹ Interview with Max Streicher, Nov. 9, 1998.
¹² Max Streicher, "The Life We Are Living," MFA thesis. Toronto: York University, 1989, 1.
¹³ John Massier, "I sing the body Tyvek," Max Streicher, Toronto: Koffler Centre of the Arts, 1996.

or tapes, filters, reinforcing file folders, packaging for military hardware, electronic components, sterile health care devices, garments and body suits used for handling toxic waste. Tyvek is cheap, durable, easy to store, easy to transport, and recyclable—an ideal material with which to construct a cloud.

The triplet figures that make up *Boiler* were created by using one single pattern from which Streicher would cut a multiple of three, then attach them together using a standard sewing machine. In this work each figure possessed three protruding horns, arms, and legs. This method of working would sometimes incorporate unexpected surprises which Streicher felt were part of his intuitive working process.¹⁴ It is in this very early work that we see traces of *Mammatus* emerge.

Closely following *Boiler*, Streicher created two related works, *Pillars of Cloud* (1992)¹⁵ and *Where there is smoke* (1992). Further experimenting with inflating Tyvek, Streicher placed his skinny ziggurat-like puffs on golf carts. Funnels that reach to the sky, they sway with the forced air delivered via the handbrake mechanism of the cart. Evoking unstable staircases *Pillars of Cloud* points to the heavens as guiding emblems of hope yet are grounded by life-giving carriages. With the commissioned work *Where there is smoke*, a more complex pattern and design came into play. This is the first instance where Streicher's clouds are no longer fixed by gravity; instead they float against the ceiling, in a baroque mode of breaking through the architecture, acting as an early precursor to *Mammatus*. To evoke the colloquial saying “where there is smoke, there is fire,” it could follow that “where there are clouds there are Saints.”

Following in this trajectory is Streicher's figurative work, *Balancing Act* (1996), which embraces a spectral indeterminacy. Two pairs of acrobatic figures are suspended from the ceiling, hanging from tubes that are inserted in their mouths. One deflates as the other inflates. As a figure inflates, its chest expands and its arms extend forward, its back arches, and legs and feet extend backwards to a stiff point, taking the pose of a *vanitas* or memento mori. Due to the reciprocation of air, the danger of over-inflation is arrested in this eloquent dance. Upon deflation the cocoon-like sack dangles limply, clutching its life support/breathing apparatus system. A sense of human fragility emerges through the use of fabric. Also

made out of Tyvek, the bodies seem to take on a luminous effect; they appear translucent, even though they are opaque. The figures are not solid but they are not ethereal either. So ambiguously poised the acrobats become a metaphor for the precariousness of human biological existence. Through this mode of presentation, air becomes the substance of life but also negates any verbal speech.

Streicher pushes the unsettling effect of his work further with the element of humour. He states: “In my work I attempt to maintain tension between play and critical discussion, humour and visceral response.”¹⁶ Such is the case with the gigantic clown heads, *Hamm and Clov* (1999), named after the two main characters in Samuel Beckett's (1906-1989) play *Endgame* (1957). Due to the design and immensity of these two faces, they reference blown-up cartoon figures used in cheesy advertising, carnivals, and circus events. Looking down on us mere mortals, *Hamm and Clov* create all-encompassing feelings of anxiety, threat and claustrophobia. There is also an undeniable sense of personal interaction and fantastical association with these heads, which transforms the space into a magical playground.

Evoking feelings of wonder and awe in the expansive central atrium of the flagship station of CBC in Toronto, Ontario, is Streicher's installation *Floating Giants* (2001). These enormous flying beings, complete with gender-appropriate male “bits,” border between what is playful and what is frightening. Soaring high in the office building, these figures closely resemble big puffy white clouds that mark a sunny, summer day yet are contained by the architecture that surrounds them. Their sheer volume and skydiving pose clouds over certain areas, diffusing sunlight. A result of the pattern, seams acting like veins subtly define each figure with a geometric schema. Accompanied by white helium balloons that threaten to settle down at any unexpected moment, these giants achieve what we can only dream about.

Over the last fifteen years, Streicher has created a whole range of inflatable works, steering away from abstract forms and instead employing animal imagery, such as swans, horses, and even a dung beetle, but predominantly finding an interest in the human body. Through the use of fans and the movement of air, his figures “breathe,” becoming infused with the sense of the uncanny. Impressive in proportion, these

¹⁴ Interview with Max Streicher, Nov. 9, 1998.

¹⁵ The title of the work is taken from the biblical verse recounting the Israelites being led out of Egypt by Moses in Exodus (13:21-22): “The Lord was going before them in a pillar of cloud by day to lead them on the way, and in a pillar of fire by night to give them light, that they might travel by day and by night. He did not take away the pillar of cloud by day, nor the pillar of fire by night, from before the people.”

¹⁶ Max Streicher, “Artist Statement”, in Louise Dompierre, *Naked State*, Power Plant, Toronto, 1994.

works generally engulf an interior space or dominate an outdoor location. However, his interest in clouds has continually punctuated his practice.

In 2004 abstract forms returned to his work. In the Art Gallery of Ontario's Tannenbaum Sculpture Atrium, Streicher mounted *Cloud*. Big, billowy and beautiful, hanging in the centre of this light-filled space, *Cloud* embodies all the fantasy and illusion of flying. It is low enough to the ground for a viewer to move around and into the magical object. In 2006 *Cloud* became *Alto Cumulus* at the swimming pool at Hart House, University of Toronto. This time, four impressive sculptures hovered above the clear pool of chlorinated water. According to the artist:

Swimming is much like flying. My intention is to disrupt and extend the architecture of this room and add an element of playfulness to the physical activity that happens there. The Hart House swimming pool is primarily used for athletic training, and...it has a very clinical and regimented feel to it. There appears none of the frolic and play that can also be part of swimming. I hope to give the swimmers pause to float on their backs and look at the "sky," and perhaps imagine themselves as floating saints...[or] recast as putti frolicking in the clouds.¹⁷

And so by 2006, placed in Museum London and The Winnipeg Art Gallery, *Mammatus* is more than the visual manifestation of infinite space. Here a direct formal link is made to Streicher's interest in Baroque religious painting, particularly to Tiepolo's intermingling of various beasts with human figures and the function of clouds as an apparatus to support saints and buildings. According to the artist, "clouds allow for the unexplained and the random."¹⁸ All sorts of unexpected events appear in the sky section of paintings that ignore the principle of gravity, yet somehow these elements make sense due to the presence of clouds.¹⁹

Mammatus is a magical airy treasure, full of flying bodies and shadows, where colours are reflected,

shapes merge, collide, and become anew. To return to Da Vinci again, "space only exists because bodies do: where there are no bodies, there is no space.... Although it has no surface, [a] cloud is visible."²⁰ Clouds are full of deformations, divisions, and magnifications. They embody our desires and even our romantic reveries. A cloud resembles a dream; in other words it resembles nothing.²¹ I experience this all and more when looking up at *Mammatus*.... Or maybe I am just a curator whose head is lost in the clouds...

Mary Reid