

Deep breathing



AMIT CHAKRAVARTY

Air born Max Streicher with "Silenus"

Max Streicher's sculptures hold their breath for the opening of Warehouse at 3rd Pasta, says **Deepanjana Pal**.

When we met Canadian sculptor Max Streicher, he was staying with his gallerist, Abhay Maskara. Polite and reserved, his steely composure seemed to suggest that it's de rigueur to have an eight-metre inflatable sculpture bob gently in a south Mumbai living room. An industrial blower intermittently pumped air into the giant, making a sound that was a cross between wheezing and snoring. The giant that snored through our interview with Streicher is "Silenus", named after Dionysus' wisest and most drunken follower. It's one of the two huge sculptures in Max Streicher's debut show at Warehouse on 3rd Pasta, a new art space that opens this fortnight.

Breathe at Warehouse on 3rd Pasta is a selection of Streicher's sculptures and photograms (images made by placing objects on

photosensitive paper and exposing them to light) made over the past 10 years. Streicher knew he had found his medium the moment he started studying sculpture while doing a Bachelor of Fine Art degree at Toronto's York University. The idea of inflatables came to him in the late '80s when he was completing his master's degree. In the early '90s, Streicher and some of his artist friends like Catherine Heard

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formed the Nethermind collective, which focussed on creating experimental works. This was when Streicher chanced upon the idea of sculpting using spinnaker material, which is used for making sails.

A number of Streicher's inflatables, his term for his blow-up doll-like sculptures, are made of faulty spinnaker material that manufac-

turers had to dump because the material was too thin. The fragility of the material is well-suited to Streicher's work, providing a curious contrast to monumental sculptures like "Silenus". In smaller figures, spinnaker material makes the babies seem like ethereal foetuses that are cute and yet strangely ghostly. When he started crafting his sculptures, Streicher would cut and sew the figures together himself. "My first few figures didn't have fingers because I wasn't sure I could do them so it was as though they were wearing mittens," remembered Streicher.

Some of Streicher's work is bound to invite comparisons with the oversized sculptures of American sculptor Ron Mueck since both artists explore larger-than-life human forms. Streicher's works, like Mueck's, are "intended to overwhelm", as he puts it. The inflatables seek to overpower the viewer by their form and also the soundscape provided by the noisy industrial blowers that breathe life

into them. However, the translucence of the ultra-thin material gives Streicher's a fantastical feel that contrasts the visceral realism of Mueck's sculptures.

Streicher likes making site-specific installations but for his Indian debut at the Warehouse on 3rd Pasta, the sculptor didn't work in the space because it wasn't complete when *Breathe* was being planned. The gallery has been a long time coming and a steady struggle for Abhay Maskara. He has spent more than one-and-a-half years getting permissions from various authorities. In hindsight, he feels it could have happened quicker if he'd been willing to follow the established system of greasing palms. "The problem to some extent is that these guys in these offices don't really have any idea of art," said Maskara. "They're seeing these things about one painting going for crores and a person who can afford to buy land in Colaba so they immediately decide there's money to be made here."

Maskara's aim with the Warehouse is not to cash in on the current craze for buying art. After collecting Indian contemporary art for more than a decade, Maskara now sounds disgruntled by the current situation in which local collectors are in danger of being outpriced because the art is being valued with foreign collectors in mind. With the Warehouse, Maskara hopes to bring unusual works to the city. He doesn't know at the moment whether this will work for him financially but he's hoping that the gallery will have enough supporters to sustain itself. He is looking to target people like himself – young collectors and art enthusiasts – who have seen enough money-spinners and want something different. Like, for instance, a giant or a set of two sculptures titled "Romulus and Remus" in which one deflates to inflate the other. "I'd buy him," Maskara said, patting Silenus' big toe. "Wouldn't you?" *Breathe opens this fortnight at the Warehouse at 3rd Pasta. See Exhibitions for details.*