

Max Streicher's **Four Horses nodding in the Saint John wind**



"I hear, 'Some guy has inflatable horses and he wants to stick them on a roof,' so I said, 'If you don't mind, I'll take a swing by your gallery and take a look at what you're talking about.'"

This is how Arthur Irving Jr. described his first conversation with the Beaverbrook Art Gallery when he was approached to consider sponsoring the installation of Max Streicher's Four Horses in Saint John. When Mr. Irving saw the four inflated horse sculptures, then mounted on top of the Beaverbrook in Fredericton, he was impressed.

"It was art for the masses. It wasn't elitist," he said.

Once decided that Irving Oil would be the Saint John sponsor, in cooperation with McCain Foods, which is the presenting sponsor, and the Beaverbrook which is the organizer, the location had to be settled. Originally the horses were to be placed on top of the Workplace Health Safety and Compensation Commission on Portland Street. But Mr. Irving felt the roadside location was not ideal.

"If you're doing art at 100 miles per hour, that would be the place to be." It was decided that a central location where people, especially children, were walking, would be more suitable. Mr. Irving also felt it would be appropriate to have the works on a "nice, architecturally attractive building".

This is why, when you're at the foot of King Street and you look up, you will see four vast, gently nodding horses looking back at you from atop CenterBeam Place.

The sculpture looks like it was made for this historic corner building.

In fact, it was created in 2003 and was first shown, as three horses, atop the Beaverbrook last summer. Mr.

Streicher added a horse and all four have been back at their Fredericton rooftop pasture since the spring. The exhibition was hugely popular in the capital city. And now we are lucky enough to have them here.

Mr. Streicher is a Toronto-based installation artist who has been working with kinetic inflatable forms since 1991. They are often giant white human figures, sewn out of Tyvek nylon spinnaker or vinyl. For indoor pieces, he relies upon industrial fans and valves to create movement within the works. In this piece, the fans are at work filling the vinyl bodies, but the lifelike movement is provided by the coastal breeze.

Mr. Streicher has exhibited his pieces around the world, most extensively in Europe, which is perhaps why they endow Saint John with the sense of a grand European city.

The horse theme of this piece was originally inspired by Salvador Dali's Santiago El Grande, with its rearing white stallion, which dominates the foyer of the Beaverbrook. It seems appropriate that they are now by the sea, since Dali spent much of his life in Spanish seaside towns. White horses also give rise to the association with water when stirred to waves by the wind.

I have to wonder about the addition of the fourth horse, however, and it's inevitable association with the Four Horses of the Apocalypse. Streicher has a background in theology that preceded his art studies. In this

interpretation, the horses represent, at best, conquest, at worst, death.

"Inflatables are the medium of enchantment, fantasy and optimism," Streicher wrote. "But things do go wrong. Take the Hindenburg, for example." Or heck, maybe the sculptures are just a reference to the Rolling Stone's Wild Horses.

If you're wanting to see the horses, you can't miss them if you look toward King Street from Market Square. From ground level you see the massive heads against the sky, rising up over the edge of the building.

This is probably the most impressive vantage point, as their vastness is emphasized by their height. Their white billowness makes you feel as though you are imagining horses in the clouds. This seems to mesh with one of Streicher's stated goals of his giant inflatables.

"My intention is to overwhelm the space and impose on the viewer a sense of scale like that which a toddler might experience. I am attempting to recreate a situation like that of childhood encounters with humongous snow banks or haystacks; structures that invite a physical exuberance which in turn leads the imagination," he wrote.

For a better view of the full bodies you can go to Treats in the Shoppes of City Hall. This will have to be a teetotal viewing as you can't see them from the neighbouring sports bar, Rocky's, even if you jump up and down on the pool table.

But the best vantage point, and one that's worth a trip just for the view of the harbour and city, is from the observation room on the 16th floor of City Hall. Take the elevator to the fifteenth floor and go up the flight of stairs under the exit sign, then follow the hall to the corner closest to the sculptures. I'll see you there if a good wind blows up.

The Four Horses are tethered in Saint John until September 30.

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TELEGRAPH-JOURNAL

New Brunswick Telegraph-Journal
Thursday, August 18, 2005
Section: Life
Byline: KATE KERR ARTS IN THE CITY