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Jaume Plensa Is Deep in Thought
The Barcelona artist's pensive works blend into the landscape
at Yorkshire Sculpture Park



Lorne Campbell / Guzelian
Sculptor Jaume Plensa with his work 'I, You, She or He' (2006) at Yorkshire Sculpture Park

I am standing at the back door of the Yorkshire Sculpture Park's visitor center, in hazy spring sunlight. On the left, mature trees tower above a formal garden, graced with bronze sculptures. Beyond the trees, a rolling landscape, shaped in the 18th century, sweeps down to a lake before rising steeply once again through woods filled with fields and bluebell woods. Directly ahead lies the Sculpture Park's ingenious Underground Gallery, a series of large white spaces for exhibiting art discreetly hidden beneath a grass roof. Normally, your eye travels on unimpeded over this roof, around the sloping Bothy Garden. But this spring two extraordinary, large sculptures catch the eye. Entirely constructed of fine stainless-steel wire mesh, these much larger-than-life-sized heads are both enormous and barely present. You see right through them to the landscape beyond, and yet your experience of that landscape has been fundamentally altered, haunted and framed as it is by those airy heads. It is as though the landscape has become thought and every thought, the landscape.

This might be a metaphor for all that Peter Murray, founder of the Yorkshire Sculpture Park in 1976, has ever hoped to achieve: the transformation of English landscape from an ignored backdrop to an acknowledged work of art, through its interaction with great modern and contemporary sculpture. In this case, however, the installation is also a core statement of intent by one of the world's most admired contemporary sculptors, Jaume Plensa. Opening his first major U.K. show Saturday, Mr. Plensa has brought to this dramatic slice of northern England some of his most celebrated installations, altering some, creating others, to make the most of this uniquely rural setting. Coming from Barcelona, heir to a very different Mediterranean idea of landscape, it was, as Mr. Plensa puts it, "the most exciting prospect for me, to dialogue with this amazing tradition of landscape."

Mr. Plensa is one of a handful of major international artists to have reinvigorated the tradition of large-scale figurative sculpture. "The main focus of my work is human beings," he explains. Using a variety of means and materials, from steel to glass to light, Mr. Plensa also creates sculpture for public spaces throughout the world. His most famous work is perhaps the Crown Fountain in Chicago's Millennium Park, which opened in 2004.

In Britain, Mr. Plensa's light-beam piece, "Blake in Gateshead," the Baltic Centre of Contemporary Art's only permanent art work, was commissioned in 1996. The more recent "Breathing" (2008), a glass, steel and light installation, was commissioned by the BBC for its roof in Central London, where it projects a beam of light 900 meters into the air every evening at 10 p.m., in honor of news journalists who have died in the course of their work. Perhaps his most spectacular project here, however, is "The Dream," realized

in 2007, a 20-meter-high elongated head of a young girl, in white marble and concrete, her eyes closed in meditation. The public art project is located at a former colliery near St. Helen's, Merseyside. "I like the risk, because when you install a piece in a public space, it is so wild," he says. "In a public space, art also becomes very political, because you are in the middle of the problem, you are not hiding, protected by the institution."

For this show at the Yorkshire Sculpture Park, the impact of his work is less political than philosophical. Near the entrance to the park, a blind figure, cast in fiberglass and resin, sits on his haunches high on a steel pole, lit up from within, as though gazing out fruitlessly over the landscape. This emphasis on interior light recurs in one of the Underground Gallery spaces, where three larger-than-life-size fiberglass figures, squatting in the fetal position, stick out from the wall facing downward, lighting the dark room from within. The piece is titled "Hear No Evil, See No Evil, Speak No Evil."

Outside the Underground Gallery, seven other knee-hugging figures, cast from Mr. Plensa's own body, sit on small grassy hillocks, with cherry trees shooting upward between their arms. Mr. Plensa claims to have been inspired by the alchemical idea of the Philosophical Tree where "the roots of a new tree come up from our dead body. The trunk is the bridge and the branches are embracing the cosmos." Paradoxically, these figures in that most substantial material, bronze, almost disappear into the landscape, owing to the weathering patina of green and brown. These figures are covered in bronze letters, which make up the names of great composers.

Mr. Plensa's imagination has from childhood been fired by music and poetry as much as by visual art, and he works frequently with opera companies. His father was an avid reader and a keen pianist, and Mr. Plensa would hide in the space beneath the family's upright piano, while his father, unwittingly, played. "I felt the vibration of the instrument in my body," he recalls. "I am from the Mediterranean area, I have to feel everything. I am a physical person, but I guess that things that you cannot touch and cannot see are also touchable and visible—light, poetry, music." Mr Plensa's own work is based on such contradictions.

In Yorkshire, he is constructing a 58-meter curtain of steel letters from the poetry of favorite authors, to run down the middle of the Underground Gallery's corridor. Visitors can choose to pass either the side of landscape or the side of the dark interior spaces and also to pass through the curtain, which will tinkle like the metal curtains of grocery shops in Barcelona. Outside, there are three large kneeling figures ("Yorkshire Souls I, II and III," 2010) and one enormous sitting figure ("House of Knowledge," 2008) entirely constructed of letters. In certain lights, they look substantial; in others their elusive spirits seem to have escaped into the landscape.

Although inspired by the human figure, Mr. Plensa's work seems always on the point of dissolving into the immaterial. As he puts it: "Sculpture is not only talking about volumes. It is talking about something deep inside ourselves that without sculpture we cannot describe. We are always with one foot in normal life and one foot in the most amazing abstraction. And that is the contradiction that is life."

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