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by Rachel Small

Jaume Plensa's "Silence"



Ideas about memory and transcendence swirl beneath the placid wood and bronze veneers in "Silence," Barcelona artist Jaume Plensa's latest solo show at New York's Galerie Lelong. Displayed alongside other new work, the titular piece is a massive installation defined by four wood beams that Plensa salvaged from the remains of various demolished structures. Between 15 and 25 feet long, they extend across the main space, crisscrossing in broad strokes that nudge viewers toward the room's perimeters.

Perched on top of and around these blocks are seven polished sculptures that depict the heads of young girls that have been oddly elongated. For the artist, their closed eyes and calm expressions embody characteristics of the wood—quiet, still, unknowable.

It's no more obvious what the work shares with one of Plensa's much louder creations: the 50-foot-high, LED-clad "Crown Fountain," a crowd-pleasing public installation in Chicago's Millennium Park. Since its 2004 debut, the fountain's two towering screens have featured video portraits of the city's residents, whose virtual lips periodically pucker and spout real water onto a paved plaza. Capturing the movements of 1,000 faces that play on a loop ultimately sparked Plensa's interest in portraiture—albeit of a more reticent nature.



In the show, the girls' likenesses allude to youth and memory as paradoxically ephemeral and eternal, both fleeting and lasting in one's mind. "I've always considered memory to be female," Plensa says. "It's women who pass memories down. Femininity [connects] past and future."

The material, then, builds on that metaphor. "These beams are maybe 100 years old, maybe more," Plensa says. "They had a presence in life, which means they are filled up with memory of something that I don't know." The details aren't important, he

stresses. "It's fine to know that you missed something."

That peaceful secrecy, emulated in the girls' closed eyes, lends the show its atmosphere. "In this moment in history, our society is very noisy," says Plensa. "We should fabricate silence, literally. We have to produce silence, if not it does not exist."