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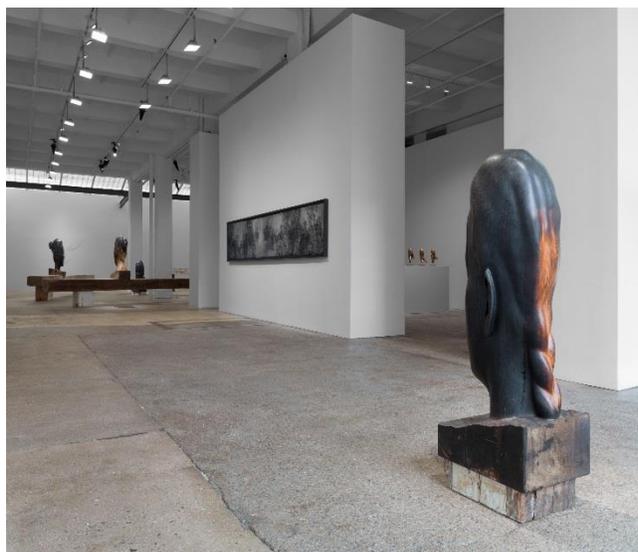
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The Brooklyn Rail

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by Laila Pedro

Jaume Plensa with Laila Pedro



Jaume Plensa's sculptures and installations create serene, communal, or spiritual disruptions in public spaces around the world. His engagement with, deployment of, and calculations of scale, material, and space, speak to a vast depth of emotional nuance, spiritual reflection, and cerebral consideration. On the occasion of his new solo exhibition, *Silence*, at Galerie Lelong (through March 11), Plensa spoke with Laila Pedro about the noisy world, the inevitability of emotions, and not trusting suppression.

Laila Pedro (Rail): This show is an interesting moment in your trajectory. Can you tell me about the origin and development of this body of work? I'm especially interested in the decision to start working with these wooden beams, which is a departure in some ways.

Plensa: I've been working with wood for years, but I've never used these kinds of beams. I found and collected these from places that kept them from the elements, from demolitions. These beams, which I suppose were part of a warehouse, are ideal for my intention because I was aiming to talk about the importance of the roof, the importance of the shelter. If you move or you reveal a wall, the house continues to stand perfectly well. The problem is when the roof falls down—then it's clear that it's the main part of the house. It's something that we never see, because we are always looking down, and so never see it. Many times, beams are hidden inside the ceiling, too. I felt this was a beautiful metaphor about humanity also, the idea of beams because beams are strongly related to the main questions in life, I think. Generation after generation, we are back to the same main questions. I think those questions are finally the beams of our life, and that is a little bit the point of that part.

Then, as you know, I've been working for many years on the portraits of young women. I've been working a lot with the idea of the female, of the feminine because I always consider that memory is

female and that the future is as well. I'm very pleased to see that at some demonstrations now people have this quote "The future is female," because I've been working for twenty years in that vein. I think this applies to memory too, not only the future. Also, it's important to say that "female" or "feminine" doesn't only mean "women." I think that men have a very strong feminine aspect as well. My intention is to say that "female" is an attitude towards life, it's not exactly to be a man or to be a woman, but the realization that something else would be wiser.

Rail: Would you say that it's a perspective?

Plensa: Well yes, women have different attitudes towards the same reality than men do sometimes. The world needs more feminine attitudes now than ever before. You would probably agree that in this country, politically, it seems like bad things are happening. but this problem is global. It's not only in this country, unfortunately; the world is a little bit crazy today. Every country has their own specific problems, but I'm taking about something more general. That's probably why people are saying "The future is female": it's so strongly integrated with the idea of a society where people feel they are in danger in so many ways. But what does it mean to be in danger? Danger means to lose shelter, to lose the roof of our order, the structure.

Rail: To lose our beams.

Plensa: Beams again. I also think they are really beautiful because the beams were once alive as trees, and they also have a specific memory from that life. Then those beams were used for something else and now I took them in another direction. They are becoming part of a dream. An art piece is always a dream: it's an intention, it's a miracle. I look to these object's memories for that reason. I carve the portraits of the girls from pieces of beams as well.

Rail: Can we look at them more closely?

Plensa: You see, the shape of the base is the same as the shape of the beam. It's beautiful because, from all materials, a new life comes out, which I think is also very interesting.

Rail: It's a beautiful synthesis between a bust and a portrait; it bridges both genres. I think it's interesting that you brought up the historical moment that we're in because this is not the largest scale, by any means, that you've worked in; often your work is monumental in scale. Do you feel that that ideas of monumentalism and iconography and these big, blown-up images are particularly significant in this moment? Populist governments, authoritarian governments, tend to have a strong association with monumentalism. Do you think that maybe your work, by being tender and beautiful and more feminine, can subvert the monumentalist tradition in a certain way?

Plensa: This is strongly related to the question of scale: what is big is not necessarily monumental, and vice versa. In my view, the monumental is always strongly related to attitudes and ideas: in this way, scale is key to every level of life. I love Alice in Wonderland, because she had the same problem that we

are talking about in front of a door. Every time I watch hands move, I think about what “scale” really means—what “big” means—because compared to them, I’m a giant. Yet to me they are amazing, because they are carrying much, much more weight than they could carry in my scale.



Sculpture is strongly tied to scale. I have worked, and continue to work, a lot in public spaces where you have a different dialogue with the space and you need to control the size very well. The message inside my pieces is never monumental. It’s also true that when I’m working on my shows for a gallery or museum, my relationship to the space is completely different, because it’s much more intimate. I’m talking about me, I’m not talking about me and a community, you know? When you are working in public space, you must be very respectful of the site, because the site is

already something alive, with or without you. You must integrate a little touch in one canvas or just to push the people to look at the space with different eyes. Often intervention in the public space is just an excuse to rediscover one place, but it’s strongly informed by size and scale. In my gallery and museum exhibitions, I could talk without any justification because it is strictly me, you can like it or you cannot. I guess I’m a very tender person. Very emotional, unfortunately.

Rail: Why unfortunately?

Plensa: My relationship with art, and with life, and with everything is extremely emotional. I’ve been trying to be more mental, but it’s impossible—probably because I was born in the Mediterranean region. My eyes are in my fingers, and I need to verify the shapes and the ideas with my hands. A long time ago, I did a lecture in Des Moines, in Iowa, because they installed my largest sculpture in front of the museum. I spoke a lot about the interaction between people and my work. At the end of the talk, a very kind woman said, “Mr. Plensa, you are talking a lot about interaction but beside your pieces a little display hangs: Do not touch. How do you justify that?” So I said, “Well, sorry but the museum needs to complete the quote, it should say, ‘Do not touch—please caress,’” because my work is based on that. I never touch my work, I never touch my lover, I never touch my kids. I caress them. I think it is very important in art or in ideas or in life, to caress others. That is the message that I am trying to send, because if you understand that, everything changes, the relationship with your community, with your ideas, with yourself. We must teach people “Don’t touch—but caress.”

Rail: That’s a beautiful correction—evocative and transformative.

Plensa: I think so. You know, people never consider my work political. I don’t trust suppression. Even sometimes I’m afraid that, for artists working specifically on politics, the art loses something because it’s too strongly related to journalism. Okay, of course art should talk about our time; we are part of our time, but should embrace the totality. There are not many artists, there is only one. My attitude is

always more emotional. If you try to dream, if you try to understand what you are keeping inside yourself—the quantity of beauty that each human being has inside themselves—your relationship will be more honest, more correct, more beautiful. I suppose that’s still a strong political position, though.

Rail: It is, but in an alternative way, which I think is a significant part of what art offers in fraught political times. Right? You’re not a journalist, you’re not documenting a reality, you are offering the potential for a different experience.

Plensa: Yes, because my intention is that art is always something that is a path of wisdom, it’s trying to transform the community, to put the community higher. I guess we have to add to this, rather than kill ideas. It’s my opinion, in any case.

The work in public especially is great because often you are introducing art in places that nobody cares about. When you introduce art, you are transforming what previously had not been thought of as places but rather simply as space. I think it’s great because, suddenly that community feels proud that beauty is coming to them as well, you know? It doesn’t automatically go to the rich—which is where work in a museum or gallery often goes. I think that is something important.

Rail: It’s interesting, because a lot of your work, being situated in public spaces, lives in a kind of constant dialogue. Conceptually, can we talk about the idea of “silence,” for you? You’ve talked before about silence in sort of technical terms, as negative space. Negative space in sculpture is very generative, it’s full of potential and meaning. This show at Galerie Lelong is called Silence, and the softening effect of the materials and the serenity of the faces reinforces that somatically.

Plensa: This is my seventh show with the gallery. The first, when the gallery was still at 57th Street, was about sound. It was a huge piece, it was a wooden platform, and it was called Conversation.

Rail: So there’s a symmetry!

Plensa: I think so. People were walking on the platform, listening to the sound of a couple making love. It was a beautiful piece, a very sensual piece. It’s funny because I’ve been working a lot with sound, because sound is the opposite of silence, and our world is very noisy. Silence is just a dream. In French they say *une envie*: something that we want to reach but it is impossible because there is always something blocking our relationship with sound, which is our own body. Apparently you can only hear the sound of the body of your mother when you are inside, but when you are out, you don’t listen to those sounds. I did a very big installation in a museum in Germany, many years ago, which was called Love Sounds. I recorded the sound of my bloodstream moving in my body because people always relate blood with something tragic, but blood is the life of our bodies, it is moving, you know? And the sound is just amazing, it is so beautiful. I was working with gongs and cymbals. I’ve been working a lot with the paint brush and materials. Why? Because I was talking about silence. It is very beautiful to talk about opposites. Today, the situation is the situation is so crazy that I renounce it—making sounds—I just say “silence.” I am a little bit concerned I guess; the world is in a very strange moment.

Rail: The works in this show, Silence, have a dark coloration to the wood. You generate this patina with fire, not a stain. Is it an industrial blowtorch?

Plensa: With a torch, yes. The color is not paint, it is the wood burn, and even in that, it generates this amazing beauty. Silence today could be a good mindset about people screaming and screaming. If you would scream again, you increase the sounds but you solve nothing, I guess. We must fabricate and produce silence. If not, silence does not exist.

Rail: So these sculptures advocate for silence?

Plensa: Well, it's a suggestion.

Rail: Before you do the burning, what is the process of shaping and carving?

Plensa: I have a beautiful team that helps me to do it. I've been working a lot of with computers. When I invite a person to take a portrait I literally scan the head, I don't take a portrait.

Rail: Like a 3D scan?

Plensa: Exactly. And I'm working with my computer, elongating the head. That is [a technique] I have kept from the "Crown Fountain" in Chicago. It's the same proportions. It gives a sense of spirituality in the faces. The installation I did in Venice for the Biennale two years ago was elongated with the same proportions, as were the alabaster heads. It's something that I care about, this idea that I could use the portrait as a canvas in which I could talk, I could do my work. It's not exactly the portrait of the person—thanks to the portrait, I am able to say something else. Of course, they are real people.

Rail: How do you select them?

Plensa: We meet and then I ask the parents if they mind if I scan their daughter. [Laughter]. They're always a little bit surprised. We have a tradition after thirteen years, that Saturday morning is the day of the scanning. It's really a beautiful morning.

Rail: Can we talk about the relationship between the drawings and the sculpture?

Plensa: More and more, I have been making my drawings on the wall. It is the way I embrace the architectural elements of the piece. If not, it seems that the walls are something separate from the works. When you are walking around you continue to be inside the piece—surrounded, more or less. They're kind of like ghosts. I love to know that these drawings disappear at the end of the show. I cannot explain how much I love doing those drawings.

Rail: Really? What is it about them?



Plensa: They're just graphite and my fingers.

Rail: You did it with your thumb directly on the wall?

Plensa: Yes.

Rail: Because they're impermanent there's a shadowy lightness to them that balances very beautifully with the sculptures.

Plensa: Yes. A show is also a laboratory. It's where I could try and experiment with new situations. Sometimes with mistakes. Thanks to mistakes, you arrive at something else. Here, I am very happy.

Rail: How did you decide about the levels of the beams? Because that's a very important relationship, too.

Plensa: In my studio I have an area, which is pretty similar in size to this gallery. When I am preparing the exhibition, I love to reproduce the show in my studio. I make many models that I can play with, like dolls. Even the little pieces of beams that I cut as plinths for other pieces, slightly smaller than the head. Normally plinths are bigger—I don't know why—but they have a certain fragility.

Rail: I felt an uncertainty or nervousness about the heads but I didn't realize what it was. And it is the slight disproportion, the unbalanced scale, between the plinths and the heads. It's very subtle.

Plensa: Yeah, it's coming from different beams. The beams with the heads are a little bit wider, and I like that it seems that it's not correct. That is my intention.

Rail: It creates harmony and instability at the same time, which is very interesting. You said you were looking at it as a laboratory, and you said you were very happy, but is there anything that you learned from this that you feel is a new challenge?

Plensa: Of course. The second piece in that direction, the first one I did last September for a show in Germany at the Max Ernst Museum, and it was a piece with beams, but only two, and only seven heads for each beam. It was a piece I did to pass in between, a corridor. Working in my studio there are plenty of different families, and I am working now on portraits in cast stainless steel, which I have never done before. Because the light isn't fixing the shape of the faces properly, it becomes a lot more abstract.

Rail: Is that an abstraction from the heads?

Plensa: No, no, it's just a globe, with a figure inside the globe. Which is my self-portrait. I've always thought I could be a beautiful oyster. [Laughter.] Protecting myself. In some ways, we all need a poetical shelter to stay within ourselves and protect our own silence. It's a very loud time. We never know if our words are from us, or just the echo of somebody else.