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**by Kurt McVey**

## Master Artist Jaume Plensa's Latest Exhibition, "Silence," Is A Dream



Installation view of "Silence." Image courtesy of Galerie Lelong.

It's something of a paradox; writing about an art show called Silence. Master Spanish multi-media artist Jaume Plensa's seventh exhibition at Galerie Lelong, which opened February 2nd and runs until March 11th, is a meditative two-room altar to one of the planet's most precious and increasingly rare commodities: silence.

In the Chelsea gallery's main room, seven monumental, slightly elongated, impossibly smooth female heads carved out of the same salvaged timber as the rough wood beams upon which they rest, form a simple, angular

labyrinth through which the audience and all their collective thoughts and emotions must navigate. Each head, which was modeled after a real-world, young woman from various countries in Asia, Europe, and Latin America, was put through a rigorous sculptural procedure, only to be set ablaze by Plensa in his Madrid studio, igniting the wood's dormant and highly flammable resin, resulting in a colorful, emotive glaze of purples, oranges, greens and blues—a reflection of the young model's intrinsic, indomitable spirit and a bold declaration of the wood itself.

"The future is female," declares Plensa, whose predilection for shooting and sculpting young women ("Always young women") is a main through-line in his oeuvre. "So is the past, though I'm not exactly sure 'female' means only women. Men have an important feminine part as well. Female, to me, is an attitude or sensitivity. Man is just an accident—a beautiful, necessary accident—but just an accident."

In the gallery's smaller chamber, eight bronze heads, each a fractal, miniature, contemporary godhead variant of the "hear no evil, see no evil, speak no evil" proverb, tease the viewer into contemplating our daily, yet often unconscious perception, consumption, and production of sound and other sensory information. Most importantly, as Plensa would argue, we must be more conscious if not aggressively proactive in producing silence ourselves. "Our words are not always the best way to express feelings; our ears are not the best way to listen, our eyes—not the best way to see, etcetera," offers Plensa, a

Mediterranean who claims his “eyes are in his fingers,” in a soothing, gravelly tenor. “I guess all my work is appealing to or thinking about individuality and how much we’re keeping inside, in terms of beauty or expression. There is a huge landscape inside ourselves.”



Installation view of "Silence." Image courtesy of Galerie Lelong.

All would be temporarily forgiven if the assumption were made that Plensa gives preference to the improvement of exterior landscapes as opposed to the interior. Silence arrives on the heels of Plensa’s delightful and highly ambitious multi-media public art installation, Crown Fountain at Millennium Park in Chicago, which bridges digital media and urban design effortlessly and on a truly massive scale. Plensa also impressed with his 39-foot, white marble and resin sculpture, Looking Into My Dreams, Awilda, which departed the windy city and found a lovely home at the Pérez Art

Museum in Miami. Whether it’s an interactive, industrial marvel like Crown Fountain, or one of Plensa’s trademark head monoliths scattered across the globe, the complex dualities inherent in our most pedestrian and philosophical experiences are always at the forefront.

“I’ve been working for many years with this idea of silence, but working with sound, its opposite,” says Plensa, whose first show at Galerie Lelong (when the gallery was on 57th St.), 1999’s Twin Shadows, which coincided with a joint show at Richard Gray Gallery, featured a now infamous installation, “Full Contact,” which consisted of a raised wooden platform covering the entire room and a sculpture that emitted ambiguous sounds of love making, all culled from pornographic films. Silence, illustrates, as Plensa puts it, “The evolution of the visual in my work, but keeping this same obsession, first about sound, this about silence. It’s the same, just the other side of the mirror.”



Installation view of "Silence." Image courtesy of Galerie Lelong.

Plensa, in many ways, bears a striking resemblance to Martin Scorsese, who coincidentally has a film out currently with the same title, “Silence is a dream.” Plensa has deliberately swerved any direct religious implications with this exhibit, and believes, rather simply, that people should think more. Incredible if not revolutionary advice in 2017, as media, especially of the social variety, often appeals to the basest mechanism within our mental reward system, compelling our thumbs to our phones like a sun-spotted, wrinkled old hand to a slot machine lever, a frantic moth to a

flame, or an insatiable lab rat to a cocaine drip. We live in the age of the knee-jerk reaction. Is it surprising then that the leader of the free world is an undisputed jerk? In a culture of digital sharing, have we forgotten how to share IRL, or listen, or worse, have we forgotten how to communicate entirely?

“You ask me if it’s important to listen more,” notes Plensa. “Of course, yes, but it’s also important to talk more. Culture pushes us not to voice our real thoughts, because they are maybe not polite or convenient. Our ideas are part of a huge strategy, to get what? This is a strange moment in politics, in an increasingly complex world. I think we should speak from the heart more often.”



Installation view of "Silence." Image courtesy of Galerie Lelong.

with plenty of facets-the function of the light, the cut-it changes over time. It is the same stone, but it never looks the same. The human being has this same capacity for change.”

This can be problematic of course, as this year’s presidential election showcased the electorate’s preference for a candidate who “speaks from the heart” as opposed to the facts. This is the main discovery that could be achieved with art exhibits like Plensa’s latest, which reignites the relevance of secular space for free, public reflection: the idea that a nation or planet of individuals can trace their most surface level fears, anxieties, prejudices and desires to a deeper well of experience, however traumatic or serene. “I compare a person to a diamond

The biggest issue in a post Brexit, Trumpian America, and it’s certainly more existential than tangible, is our collective apprehension to create enough space to unearth the buried ills that compel us towards isolation and misunderstanding-all the toxic noise that pollutes our purest instincts. We cannot address the macro before the micro. “I always accept the misunderstanding of something as the only way to evolve ideas,” says the artist. “My main concern is the individual, not just the community or the group. They’re made out of people-individuals. When one person disappears, you lose so much information that is impossible to get back.”



Installation view of "Silence." Image courtesy of Galerie Lelong.

Much like Crown Fountain, which organically and unintentionally morphed into a warm weather water park for Chicago's youth, Silence, the exhibit, though seemingly heady (pun intended) in its presumed intellectualism and somber minimalism, leaves plenty of space for a playful audience, young or old and of any gender, race or nationality. During the show's opening, young, diverse art fans mirrored the gestures of the small bronze sculptures, covering their eyes, ears, and mouths in various combinations like contemporary Hindu deities, laughing wildly while their friends snapped

hundreds of photos, presumably destined for Instagram or for better or worse, the void. One could argue that they seemed to be missing the point. Throughout all this, however, Plensa could be seen smiling.