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Inside artist Jaume Plensa's giant Millennium Park sculptures

By: Christopher Borrelli / June 17, 2014



Jaume Plensa visited his giant heads the other day. He arrived at a corner of Madison Street and Michigan Avenue, found a park bench and reflected. His giant heads appeared to be doing fine, he said. The older heads hadn't aged very much, and the newer heads, despite a long trip in shipping containers from Spain, looked serene and comfortable in Chicago. The two older heads — or rather, the two older faces: 50 feet tall and 23 feet wide, gargoyle-esque and spitting water — stood where he left them a decade ago.

Plensa is the Barcelona artist who created Crown Fountain in Millennium Park. For a few moments he watched the faces etched in video within the fountain's twin pillars transform into different faces.

The fountain, which famously holds the images of 1,000 Chicago faces and has become an iconic landmark since the park opened in 2004, was a radical gesture when it debuted, a kind of video sculpture of everyday people, not a stone monument to a famous son or politician. The four new heads that Plensa is having installed in the park are more traditional, much less fluid. These new heads are made of cast iron, marble, fiberglass; they weigh many tons each. But the concept, using ordinary citizens in monumental public art, has not changed.

Plensa collects heads. Ordinary heads of ordinary people.

His four new heads open to the public on Wednesday. "I call this '1,004 Portraits,' because of Crown, and for its 10th anniversary," he said. "The three new heads on the ledge (east of Crown Fountain) are made of cast iron. This one, facing Madison, is here because Madison is the (north-south) dividing line in Chicago. I like that. It was made two years ago for Rio de Janeiro. A beautiful installation — it stood in the surf. But I always thought it should be in Chicago, because my relationship to Chicago is about water."

He gestured to Lake Michigan. "I thought it would be beautiful to have it close to the lake, close to Crown Fountain. Water is my obsession. As a child, I could not float. I could not

swim. This piece, it carries my memories of water.” He sat back.

He squinted up at the large white head that stands now in the park at Madison. Perhaps you've seen it. It will sit there (along with its smaller, iron compatriots) until December 2015. The sculpture was originally titled Looking Into My Dreams but Plensa was asked so often in Rio about its origin, it is now Looking Into My Dreams, Awilda.

Awilda is 39 feet tall, made of marble and resin; the internal frame is fiberglass. She arrived from Spain in 15 pieces, then was bolted together. Her expression is placid, and, like many of Plensa's heads — several more can be seen at a new exhibit in the Richard Gray Gallery in the John Hancock Center into September — her eyes are closed, as if dreaming.

Or she could be an alien clone, an extra in “Invasion of the Body Snatchers,” smooth, featureless, eerie.

“She is real,” Plensa said. “She was a young girl when I made this, maybe 9. She is from the Dominican Republic. She came to Spain with her mother and now is officially Spanish. She is one of the women I have collected.” The eyes are closed “because we keep beauty inside ourselves, and one day we all need to look inside.” But she was made, he continued, by “capturing her portrait with a (laser) scanner, then the 3-D information was manipulated, elongated, flattened out — I like the way that this girl suddenly resembles a flame or a candle as her head becomes stretched. Next step, we decide what materials to use to build her.”

Approach Awilda head-on (so to speak), and you will notice a kind of optical illusion: Her head is so subtly elongated, it is like looking at the statue through a refracted lens. The ground beneath you feels unsettled.

“Really?” Plensa asked. “I have never heard that.”

He thought a moment.

“Yes, I love that! That could be dangerous. I could exploit that feeling,” he said. “For years, a kind of obsession of mine has been marrying sculpture and photography, the concrete and the photo image. It started with the Crown Fountain, that question of whether I could capture the image of a person in something solid but stay photolike. Because a sculpture, it is for eternity, but a photo is the opposite — it is something wider, less rooted.”

Since Crown Fountain, Plensa has only made portraits of women, he said: “I have come to think that the future is female. Men are simple.” He has scanned about 28 female heads, all roughly 8 or 9 years old.

Plensa was in town for the anniversary of the Crown Fountain and the installation of his newest heads, and now, at 58, he looks like a man playing the role of an eminent Spanish artist. His hair is close-cropped and naturally stylish, black with slivers of white that match the speckles of white in his eyebrows and beard. Even on a weekday morning, over the mechanical bangs and whines of bulldozers preparing the sculpture's grounds, he still managed to sound elegant: “For me, a face is not a reproduction of someone, it is a way of talking about the artist. The face is also a gift for others, one part of our body that we cannot see naturally. I am interested in the relationship between body and soul, and the way, as

they say, the face is a portrait of a soul. When we were building Crown, I would say to engineers, "The body is not enough. We need the soul."

He stood and walked toward Crown.

He walked with a slight stoop, as if carrying a bundle on his back. The fountain was off for a repair, water puddled between its twin towers. Plensa walked through the dark plaza area. "This fountain, it was very important for me. It became a point of departure for how I thought about the body in the 10 years since," he said. "But I also love this fountain because anyone can create a beautiful object, but the fountain created a beautiful space." It was also never a sure thing, said Tom Jacobs, a principal architect at Krueck + Sexton Architects, the Chicago firm that build Crown Fountain: "It seems effortless now, but back then, Jaume's renderings of what his vision was, it was really hard to imagine if it could be great or, well, not great at all."