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WOMEN OF ABEX | PERGAMON | WALKER EVANS | BIEDERMEIER STYLE | JAUME PLENSA

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STUART DAVIS

Heads Up

A TRAVELING EXHIBITION SHOWCASES SPANISH ARTIST JAUME PLENSA'S SCULPTURE AND DRAWINGS. BY JOHN DORFMAN

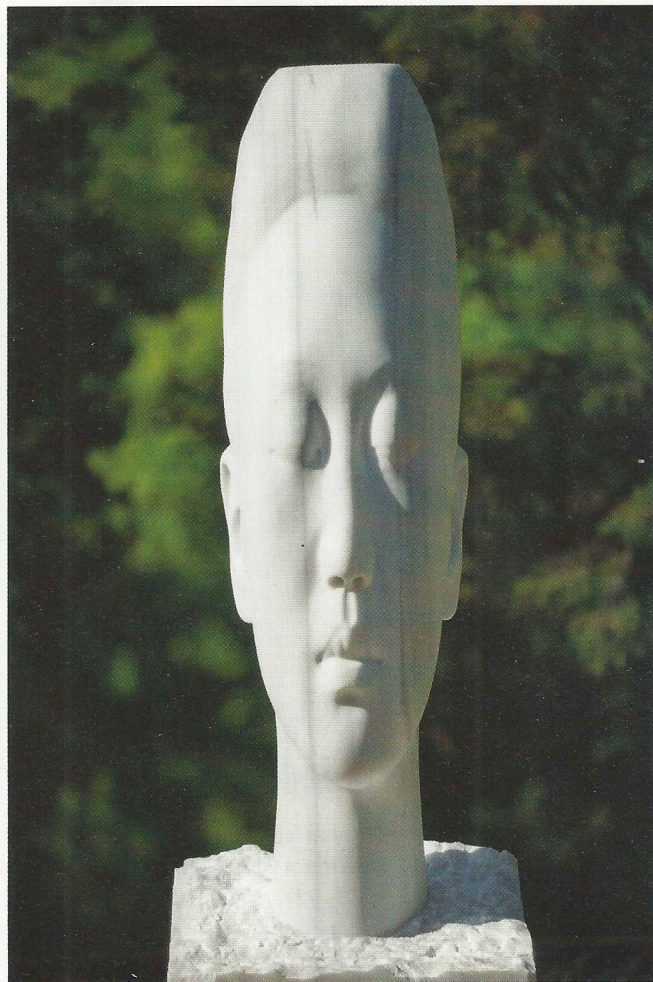


Jaume Plensa, *Spiegel*, 2010, painted stainless steel, 148 ½ inches x 92 ½ inches.

THIS MONTH, visitors to the Toledo Museum of Art may do a double-take for a moment and imagine that they've arrived on Easter Island instead of a city in northwest Ohio. That's because of the gigantic heads rising from the grassy grounds of the museum, their eyes closed in seeming contemplation, their eerie, timeless affect suggesting that they might have been placed there by artists of an ancient, now-vanished civilization. In fact, they are the work of a Jaume Plensa, a 61-year-old Barcelona-born artist who has made monumental sculptures of human heads his signature. In addition to the heads, the museum will be showing other outdoor sculptures by the artist, large-scale indoor

sculpture installations, and works on paper that give insight into Plensa's thought and work processes. "Jaume Plensa: Human Landscape" will be on view at Toledo from June 5–September 7. The exhibition was jointly organized by the Frist Center for the Visual Arts and the Cheekwood Botanical Garden and Museum of Art in Nashville, where it was on view last year, and then traveled to the Tampa Museum of Art for the first half of this year.

Plensa's large heads combine perfection and imperfection. Whether polished cast iron or alabaster, their surfaces are, in the words of the museums' literature, "smooth as young skin and inviting to the touch." Their facial expressions are as

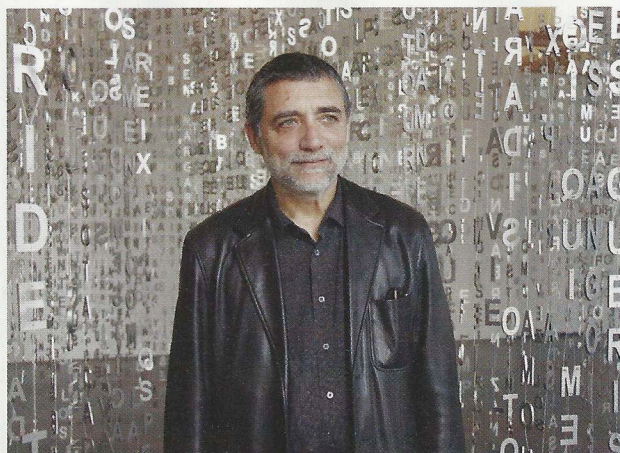


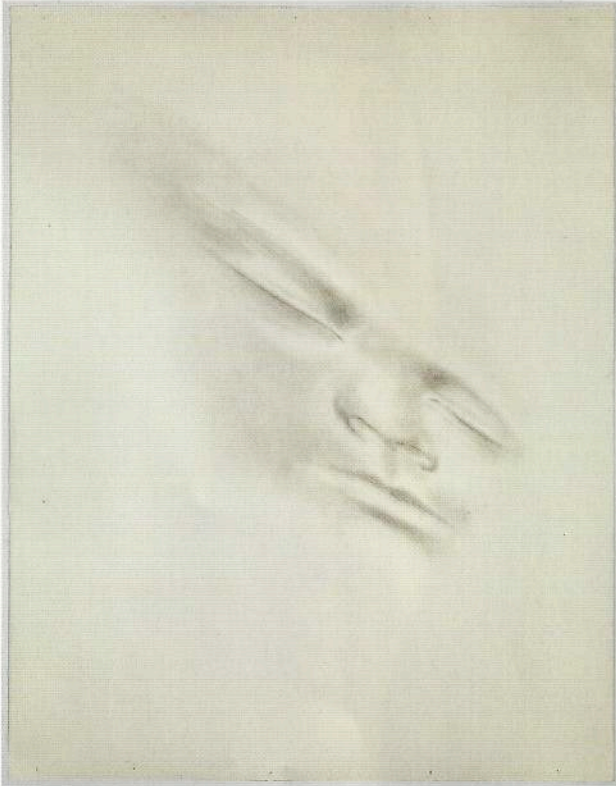
unruffled and hieratic as that of a monumental Japanese Buddha. However, they are anamorphically distorted, elongated and compressed, as if you were looking at them from an angle even when you're standing right in front of them. Plensa accomplishes this effect by altering a source image on a computer with 3-D modeling software. This kind of distortion has been used by earlier artists to various effects—think of the anamorphic *memento mori* skull in Hans Holbein's *The Ambassadors* (1533), which functions as an optical puzzle challenge to the viewer as well as a bravura display of the artist's technical prowess. The 20th-century English painter Austin Osman Spare used the technique to approach to the grotesque and push the limits of perception. But for Plensa, the distortion is simply a reminder to the viewer that the human condition is imperfect. These beau-

tiful, serene heads would be classically ideal if not for their shifted proportions.

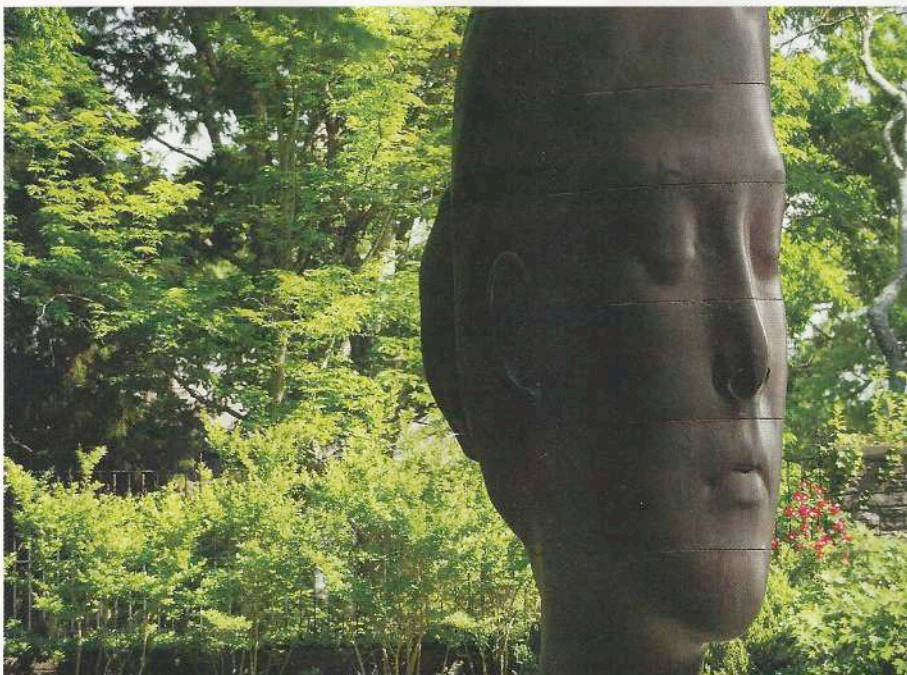
This idea of almost-perfection is also embodied in other ways in Plensa's large head sculptures. In *Laura II* (2015), the girl's head is, as usual, smooth and almost radiant, her eyes closed peacefully, but the top of her skull is violently cut, leaving a crater in the alabaster. It's interesting, too, that Plensa has created her features by making a blend of various racial characteristics, yielding a face that is idealized, universal. Laura becomes an image of humanity itself, and her partially shattered state is a powerful reminder of

From left: *When*, 2005, mixed media, 63 x 44 inches; *Rui Rui's World II*, 2013, marble, 73 x 26 x 26 inches, installation view: Cheekwood Botanical Garden & Museum of Art, Nashville, 2015; Jaume Plensa standing inside his installation *Silent Rain*, 2003.





Clockwise from top left: *Slumberland VI*, 2014, graphite on paper, 57 x 45 inches; *Paisatge VII*, 2009, mixed media, 87 x 79 inches; *Laura with Bun*, 2014, cast iron, 277 x 39 x 122 inches, installation view: Cheekwood Botanical Garden & Museum of Art, Nashville, 2015.



humanity's fragility and paradoxical combination of endurance (as a species) and impermanence (as individuals).

Other works of Plensa's, while still strongly sculptural, make use of lexical elements as well. Some simply have words etched into them, such as the three-piece installation called *See no Evil, Hear no Evil, Speak no Evil* (2010). Mirroring the stances of the iconic monkeys covering their eyes, ears, and mouths, the figures of polyester resin are illuminated from within and mounted on the wall, like "fat angels who cannot fly," as Plensa puts it. The glowing figures seem to cower, their knees drawn up as in a fetal position, and their bodies are labeled with the words "stress," "anxiety," and "hysteria." In other pieces, the artist has used quotations from classic literature, such as the works of Shakespeare, Rabelais, and William Blake.

Sometimes Plensa uses pure typography as a graphic and even a structural element. The painted stainless steel sculpture *Spiegel* (2010) is an openwork globe made up of letters from many different scripts—Latin, Arabic, Cyrillic, Hindi, Chinese, and



From top: *Self Portrait*, 2013, stainless steel, 128 x 138 x 138 inches each, installation view: Cheekwood Botanical Garden & Museum of Art, Nashville, 2015; *See No Evil, Hear No Evil, Speak No Evil*, 2010, polyester resin, stainless steel and LED light, 48 x 58 x 81 inches each installation view: Frist Center for the Arts, 2015.

more. “Each letter is a possibility,” Plensa has said. “After a long period using quotes and sentences from poets, I decided to work only with letters and alphabets: the most biological part of the text, it means the letter as a ‘cell.’” Here, the combination of letters represents the Babel of world languages reunited, as a symbol of world unity.

The show also features a number of works on paper that support and illuminate the three-dimensional works. *Slumberland VI*, for example, a graphite on paper drawing, is a study in anamorphic distortion done by hand rather than on a computer. *When* (2005) shows a female Native American-looking head dripping rivulets of ink, with the word itself stamped below her jaw.

Plensa hopes that his viewers will reflect on how what lies within his works transcends their physicality, much as language transcends matter. He has said: “When

for some reason you understand that life is not a physical problem and that physical material is hiding something essential, you must talk about spirituality.”

