# ARTnews

MARCH 2010

## LOOKING AT ART

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**Uncovering Matisse**

**Posing for Alice Neel**

**Jumping with Yves Klein**

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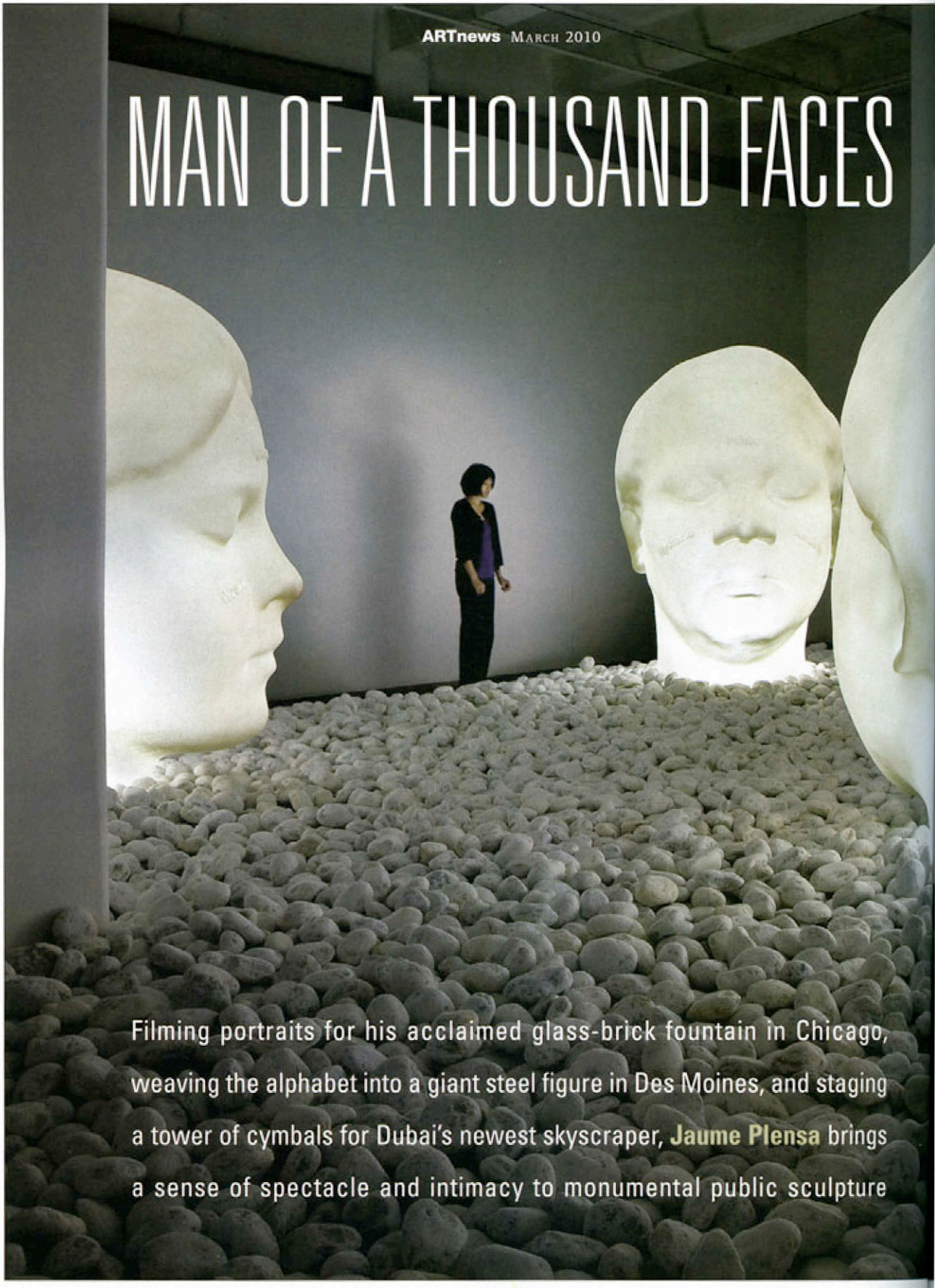
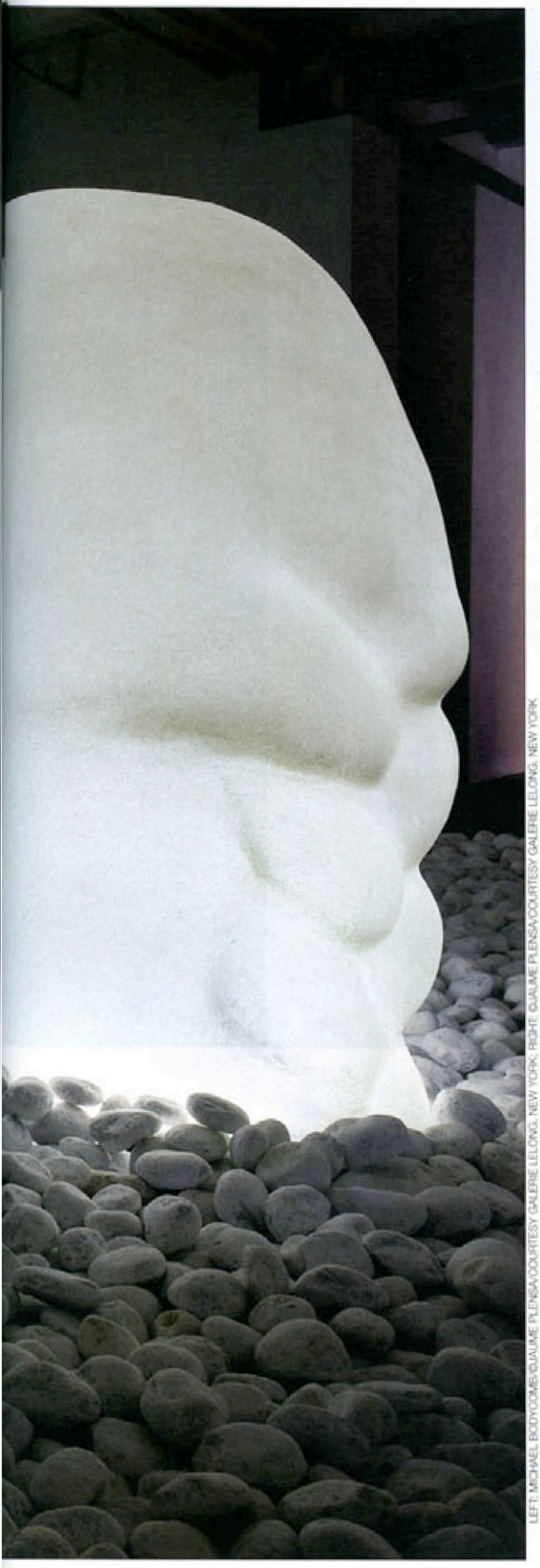
# MAN OF A THOUSAND FACES



Filming portraits for his acclaimed glass-brick fountain in Chicago, weaving the alphabet into a giant steel figure in Des Moines, and staging a tower of cymbals for Dubai's newest skyscraper, **Jaume Plensa** brings a sense of spectacle and intimacy to monumental public sculpture



LEFT: MICHAEL BODYCOMBE/©JAUME PLENSA/COURTESY GALERIE LELONG, NEW YORK; RIGHT ©JAUME PLENSA/COURTESY GALERIE LELONG, NEW YORK

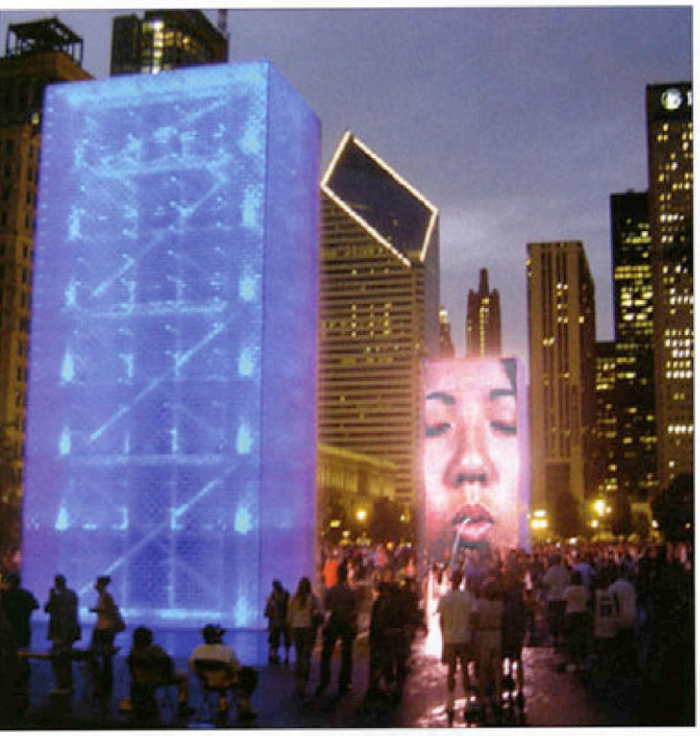
ABOVE **Jaume Plensa in his studio with elements for *Conversation à Nice*, 2007, an installation of seven glowing figures atop 40-foot poles in the center of the French city.** LEFT **Last year's show "In the Midst of Dreams," at Galerie Lelong in New York, included three cast-resin heads, *Anna*, *Irma*, and *Nuria*, based on photographs of real people.**

When Jaume Plensa was invited to participate in a competition to design a fountain for Chicago's new Millennium Park, in 2000, he knew he was a long shot. The Barcelona-based sculptor, now 54, had done public commissions in Europe and Asia since the late '80s but was not well known in the United States. Given the prominence of the site, on Michigan Avenue adjacent to the Art Institute of Chicago, and of competitors such as Maya Lin and Robert Venturi, Plensa felt his chances of winning were slim and he might as well dream big. He envisioned two monumental glass-brick towers more than 50 feet high, with water cascading over them. LED screens embedded in the structures would display giant faces, their features moving slowly as if in conversation across a shallow black reflecting

**BY HILARIE M. SHEETS**

pool. Their mouths would periodically spit out a jet of water, like Roman fountains. Plensa's fanciful idea caught the attention of the selection committee, and since its completion, in 2004, the Crown Fountain has drawn mobs of people into the reflecting pool itself, delighted to be gently doused by the modern-day deities.

"When we took the fence away the night before the opening, it just sucked people in—I couldn't believe it," recalls the artist, whose intention had been to create an empty, contemplative space within the dense city of Chicago. "I never expected that beautiful response from people—that they would adopt the fountain as part of their lives, especially

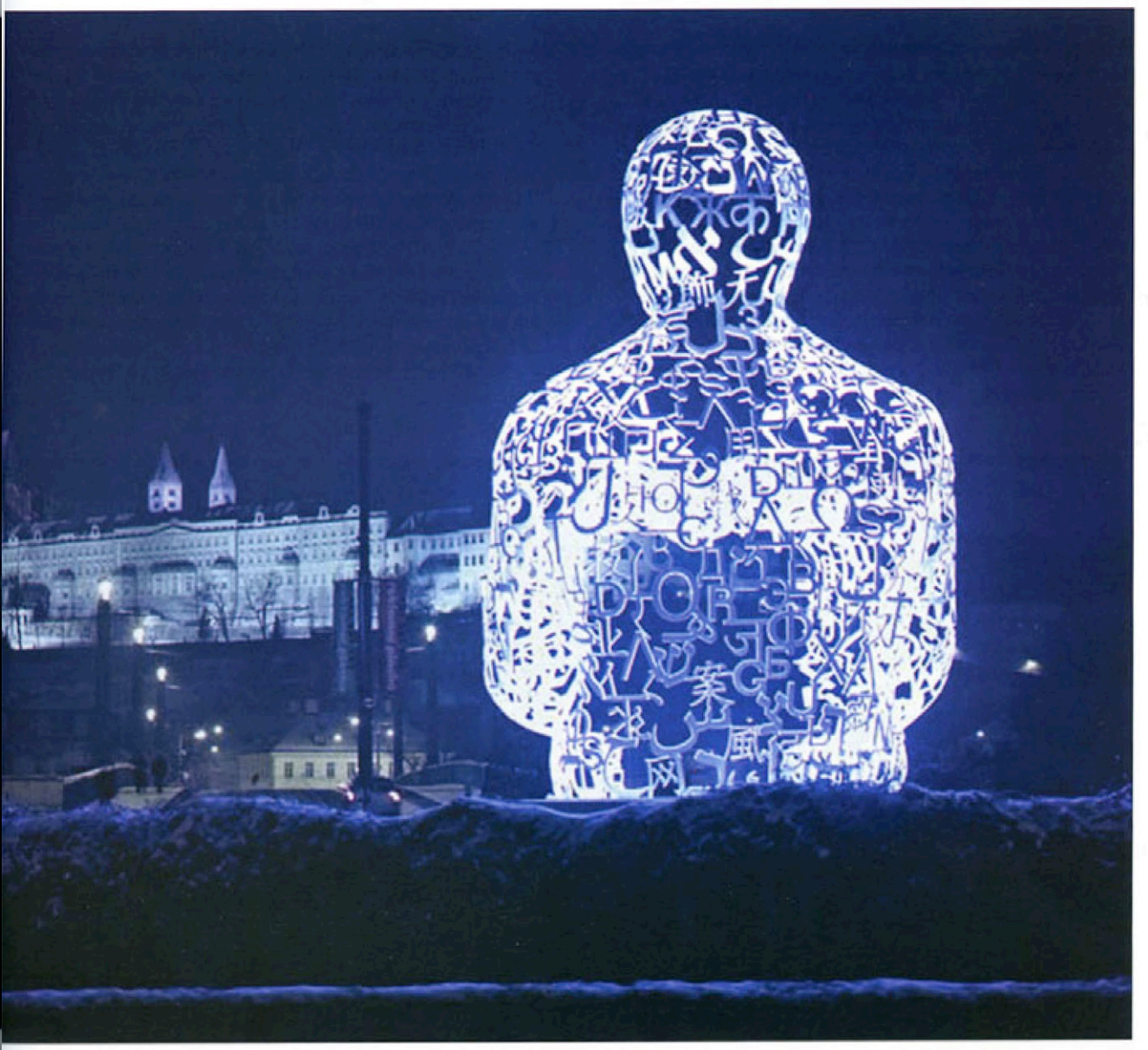


LEFT **Crown Fountain, 2004, in Chicago's Millennium Park.** RIGHT ***We*, 2009, was installed in Prague as part of the "Transparency" exhibition of light-based public artworks.**

kids. The municipality had been a little concerned that it would be too intellectual and too much technology for the public space, but it's probably the most visceral piece I ever did in my life. I improved a lot in that project."

Indeed, the fountain has proved to be a watershed in the evolution of Plensa's work and career. While the towers were consistent with his longtime use of Minimalist volumes as containers for light or sound—what he views as an abstract depiction of the relationship between body and soul—the pixelated faces were his first use of representation of the human form in his work. "I had never had as strong a relationship with people as I had in Chicago, filming 1,000 faces, one after another," says Plensa, who holds a deeply romantic attitude about art and life.

Since then, the artist has regularly modeled his sculptures—which can rise as high as 65 feet—on human bodies and faces; sometimes they glow from within like beacons or open up to surround visitors. In New York last fall, he exhibited a series of giant totemlike heads in the show "In the Midst of Dreams" at Galerie Lelong, which represents him in collaboration with Richard Gray Gallery in Chicago. The success of the Millennium fountain has placed him in greater demand internationally—he has more than 40 public commissions around the world, including recently completed projects near Liverpool and in Dubai—and raised his visibility in the United States. Last September, his 26-foot-high sitting figure *Nomade* (2007), made out of a lacy skin of letters cut from steel, took up permanent residence in downtown Des Moines, at the new Pappajohn Sculpture Park. And eight sculptures and installations from the past five years are on view indoors and out in the exhibition "Jaume Plensa: Genus and Species," at the Nasher Sculpture Center in Dallas through May 2.



"I think the Millennium fountain is one of the most successful instances of public art in a very long time, in the way in which it ties to the Chicago community and engages the viewers at a physical level," says Jeremy Strick, director of the Nasher. That kind of emotional appeal is evident throughout the Nasher show. Positioned on the street corners in front of the museum are two tall stainless-steel poles topped with kneeling resin figures whose constantly shifting colors suggest changing moods. In the entranceway is one of Plensa's curtains of text, spelling out 29 of his favorite poems in iron letters strung on vertical lines that brush visitors as they enter. Inside Plensa used die-cut metal letters welded together to build the permeable skin of *Twins* (2009), two 12-foot-high meditative-looking figures, similar to *Nomade*, that are left unfinished at the legs so viewers can walk inside and animate the bodies. "His work not only establishes a relationship with the viewer but also creates a social space between the viewer and other viewers," says Strick.

Indeed, after the opening of the Pappajohn Sculpture Park, which includes work by Richard Serra, Louise Bourgeois, and Mark di Suvero, among others, a *Des Moines Register* poll found that about 75 percent of the people surveyed chose *Nomade* as the piece they most connected with. "People with zero to extensive knowledge about art are drawn to Plensa's work," says Paul Gray, a director of Richard Gray, where Plensa's pieces sell for up to $2 million. "He feels a responsibility for the relationship people have with it, particularly the work he puts in the public domain, where the person didn't make a conscious effort to go into a museum or gallery."

For Plensa, the most important part of starting a new

project is collecting information about the site where his work will be installed, and trying to understand how it might function there. "It's not just a geographic area but a place where people do something just by passing through or relaxing or eating," he says. "Public spaces are an expansion of your body, your home. They are another circle." In planning each project, he takes copious photographs, then collages the pictures with sketches.

One thoughtful response to an urban site is Plensa's *Breathing* (2005), a permanent installation on the rooftop of the BBC's Broadcasting House in London. Playing off the conical spire of a church directly adjacent to the BBC, the artist turned the form upside down to create a 32-foot-high glass cone, opening toward the sky like a megaphone.

"Before, God was talking to men, but now people have the courage to turn the other direction," says Plensa, who describes himself as nonreligious. He engraved the glass with a poetic text he wrote about the duality of voice and silence. Every evening at half past nine, when the BBC radio news goes on the air, a bright light beams from the cone for the duration of the show, giving the piece a prominent place in the Westminster skyline.

Plensa's *World Voices*, his just-completed commission for the Burj Khalifa in Dubai, the world's tallest building, takes a wholly different approach, imbuing the building's more-than-80-foot-high lobby with a sense of intimacy. He suspended 196 handmade gold-plated cymbals—representing each of the countries of the world—on titanium rods rising out of two pools like reeds. Each reflective disk rings with a unique voice as water gently falls on it, filling the voluminous space with sound and light. "In Arabic culture, the representation of the body is forbidden," says Plensa. "I wanted to represent our peoples and countries metaphorically."

For Plensa, who was born and raised in Barcelona, the music and books that filled his home were the formative influences of his youth. His parents were very literary, and his father's great love was playing the piano. "There were little doors underneath the piano, and I remember when I was a child I would hide myself inside the piano and close the doors," recalls the artist. "My father had no idea I was there. He was playing and the vibration and smell of the piano were unforgettable."

Plensa's poetic nature was stimulated early on by the writings of Blake, Rabelais, and Shakespeare, to which he has referred in various pieces. And his love of opera has led him to design the sets and costumes for several productions, including Hector Berlioz's *The Damnation of Faust*—one of his favorite operas—at the 1999 Salzburg Opera Festival and Mozart's *The Magic Flute*, at the Paris National Opera in 2005.

Plensa considered becoming a doctor, writer, or musician, until he decided that through art he could meld all these roles. He went to the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris for a year, but found it boring. He continued as an artist, though, giving form to his ideas about the body, language, sound, and space through his exploration of materials. He first garnered acclaim in Spain in the '80s, for his work in cast iron. He incorporated light in the '90s, with cell-like structures, made from materials such as alabaster and glass brick, that could

be entered through doors. For his 1998 installation *Love Sounds*, first shown at the Kestner Gesellschaft in Hannover, Plensa recorded the thrumming of his own bloodstream and played the amplified soundtrack inside five intimate alabaster cells: viewers inside the cells were immersed in glowing light and a strangely familiar sound. "We are so noisy we don't have the capacity to hear our sounds," says Plensa. "I introduced in those translucent houses the sounds you only hear inside your mother."

Even as Plensa's work has shifted dramatically in recent years from such abstract forms to more-figurative ones, he is still exploring the idea of a house or a body containing the intangible essence of human beings. After his experiences filming faces in Chicago, Plensa explains, he "decided then to continue deeper into the idea of portraits, because they have the capacity to express the soul of the person, to express the amazing contents that we have inside, our experiences, our memories, everything." In his show last fall at Lelong, three sleeping female heads cast in resin rose more than seven feet from a bed of marble stones. Each was lit internally with white neon and branded, on their faces, with words such as "hunger," "insomnia," and "disease." Plensa lifted these words from *De Profundis*, a poignant letter Oscar Wilde wrote to his paramour about the afflictions he faced during his incarceration. "If you think about it, these are the problems of life, of humanity," says Plensa.

He based the heads on specific people he knew, including the daughter of the owner of a Chinese restaurant near his studio. "Some people have a very general type of beauty, and those are the ones I'm choosing," says Plensa, who uses photographs to create 3-D models of their faces on the computer, from which he develops the form and makes the silicon mold. Plensa likes the way the glowing heads in the darkened room have the quality of a photographic negative. While he changes hairstyles, he leaves most features untouched. Yet at this enormous scale and stripped of differences in pigmentation, the faces are difficult to distinguish by race or even gender, and are thus more universal portraits.

Also in the show were three large female heads carved in alabaster, a naturally luminous stone, which Plensa first cut with a laser and then finished by hand. In his initial manipulation of the subjects on the computer, Plensa stretched their faces vertically by one-third, the same proportion he used in elongating the 1,000 faces for the Crown Fountain in Chicago. "I love that, because people get more of a sense of spirituality; it's more like a flame," says Plensa. "It's not exactly a portrait anymore. It's something more interior." He sees in this technique the influence of Romanesque art, which is plentiful in Barcelona.

At the Nasher, Plensa is showing a constellation of eleven alabaster heads titled *Slumberland*; he reworked the concept on a monumental scale for *Dream*, a 65-foot sleeping head in alabaster, recently installed in a park outside of Liverpool. "On the day of the opening, the people put on a parade, with an orchestra playing, that ended up at the head like it was a divinity," says Plensa. "I'm from the Mediterranean and I can understand that in my culture, but I never expected that in England—or in Chicago. People get crazy. For me it's nice, because you see that humanity needs very similar things. You have to offer possibilities and then they react." ■

**For *The Heart of Trees*, 2007, Plensa placed seven crouching bronze figures covered in text in a suburb of Madrid.**