

RICHARD GRAY GALLERY

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Monuments: The Poetry of Dreams

By CAROL KINO MAY 5, 2011



The sculptor Jaume Plensa in Madison Square Park supervising the installation of his 44-foot-high work "Echo."
Credit Benjamin Norman for The New York Times

OVER the last decade Jaume Plensa has become one of the world's most celebrated public artists, best known for wondrously monumental figurative sculptures that can be seen from Calgary to Dubai. But ask this Barcelona native how he creates his work, which seems to involve feats of technology as well as imagination, and he prefers to talk about music, dreams and poetry.

“Shakespeare is the best definition of sculpture,” he might say, quoting the “sleep no more” soliloquy from Macbeth. “You are working always with physical elements. You are always touching, touching. But you can’t describe it.”

Clearly, though, more than poetry has gone into “Echo,” his 44-foot-high sculpture of a girl’s head, which was raised in Madison Square Park last week. (With a budget of \$620,000, it is the Madison Square Park Conservancy’s costliest project to date.) The work is made from an amalgam of polyester resin, white pigment and marble dust, and its glittering neck rises straight from the grass, creating an otherworldly beacon amid the furor of the Flatiron district.

As a crew put finishing touches on the foundations and the lighting last week, Mr. Plensa, 56, a charming and effusive man, paced about the site, trailed by his wife, Laura Medina, who manages his studio in Barcelona, and Debbie Landau, the director of the conservancy. “So now the conversation starts,” he murmured. Not far off, passers-by crowded up to a temporary fence, snapping photographs of the statue’s closed eyes; its elongated Modigliani-esque features, which oddly recall a hologram; and its thick, abstracted braid — Mr. Plensa’s homage to Brancusi’s “Endless Column.” (“Brancusi was following a dream in his work,” he said last month, “the concept of eternity.”)

Mr. Plensa completed his first gigantic cast female head in 2009, when his 66-foot-high “Dream,” cast in concrete and sparkling white dolomite, was installed atop a defunct colliery in St. Helens, a former coal mining town near Liverpool, England, to commemorate, he has said, the miners’ “dream of light when underground.” But his inspiration for “Echo,” his first public artwork in New York, was the nymph of Greek myth, condemned by Zeus to repeat the words of others. Mr. Plensa hopes that it will jolt busy New Yorkers into an awareness of their own voices.

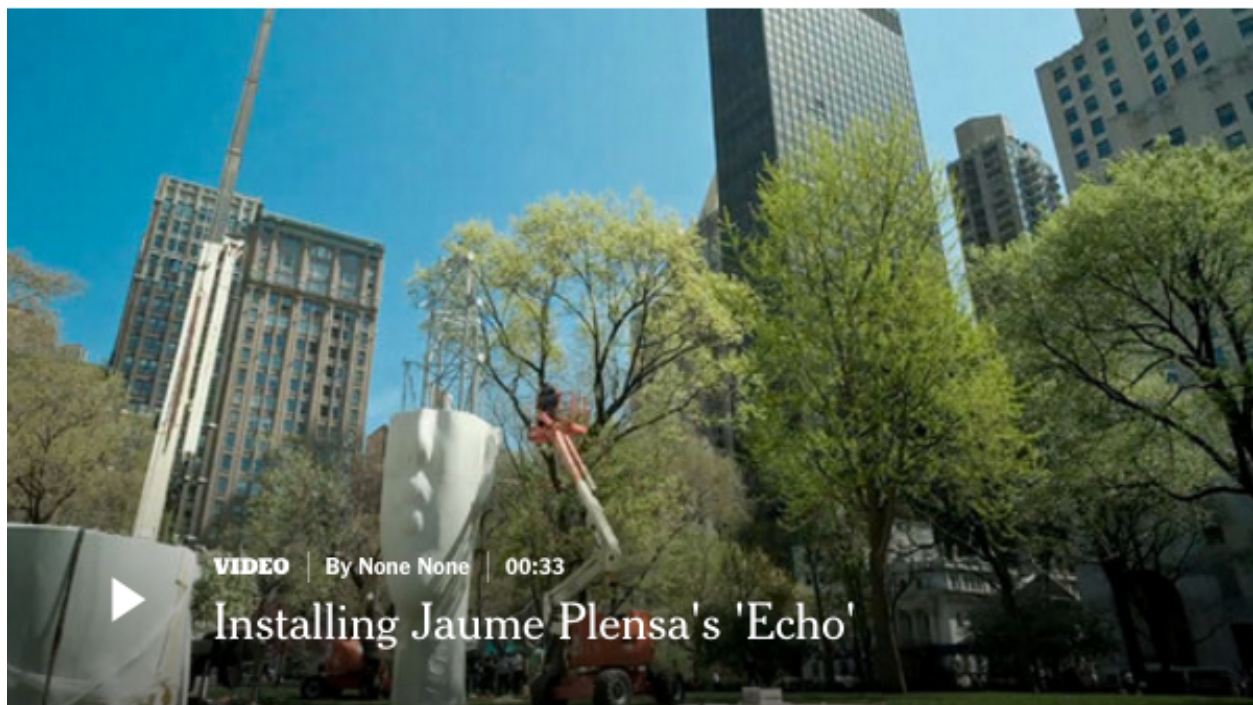
“Many times we talk and talk,” he said, “but we are not sure if we are talking with our own words or repeating just messages that are in the air. My intention is to offer something so beautiful that people have an immediate reaction, so that they think, ‘What’s happening?’ And then maybe they can listen a little bit to themselves.”

If anyone is too busy to hear himself think, it should be Mr. Plensa, who always seems to be ricocheting around the globe for different projects.

On Friday, Galerie Lelong in Chelsea opened his show “Anonymous” (through June 18), which includes 40 portrait drawings based on 19th-century ethnographic photographs. Last week between the “Echo” and “Anonymous” installations, he visited Toronto, where he has been invited to propose a public artwork. He recently traveled to Chichester Cathedral in England, where he is creating a sculpture for

the nave, a hand raised in blessing, formed with a stainless-steel lattice of letters drawn from eight different alphabets.

And he just opened his largest exhibition to date, at the Yorkshire Sculpture Park in Wakefield, England (through Sept. 25). It gathers what he calls his families of work, including several “Souls”: large crouching figures made from alphabet latticework and perched on boulders; a fiberglass Buddha, glowing with colored light atop a 35-foot-high steel pole; and a sound piece, “Jerusalem” (2006), a dozen gongs with mallets, waiting to be struck.



A time-lapse video of Jaume Plensa's new site-specific work "Echo" being installed in Madison Square Park in Manhattan. (Video courtesy of Henry Jacobson/Madison Square Park Conservancy) By None None on May 4, 2011. [Watch in Times Video »](#)

Then there are the heads, ranging from 5 ½ to 13 feet high, some in translucent resin, lighted from within; others built with metal mesh, suggesting 3-D computer drawings. One gallery-size group, carved from alabaster, seems to struggle from rocky pedestals like Michelangelo’s “Slaves.”

“Plensa is a very interesting artist because he’s firmly rooted in the conceptual camp,” said Peter Murray, the executive director of the Yorkshire park, “but the making of the works is also very important.” Yet in contrast to sculptors who are known for creating work in a particular way, often in a particular material, like Anthony Caro (“essentially a welder”) or Isamu Noguchi (“essentially a carver”), Mr.

Plensa has “always been an artist who searches out the right technology for the piece,” Mr. Murray added.

Also unusual for a conceptualist is Mr. Plensa’s focus on the body. “The figurative tradition in monumental sculpture is such a 19th-century idea,” said Mary Sabbatino of Galerie Lelong. “But when you look at Jaume’s work, you know it could only have been made in the 21st century.”

Early in his career, when Mr. Plensa began showing widely in Europe, he was known for working with cast iron, the medium of his first public sculpture, “Born” (1992), which put a chest and cannonballs on a Barcelona street, an enigmatic reminder of the city’s medieval past. Over time he incorporated light and sound, as in “Love Sounds” (1998), a group of light-filled alabaster chambers that throb with the recorded sounds of his own body.

But for years he had dreamed of an “art totale,” he said, that would meld the contradictory disciplines of photography and sculpture. (While photography captures the moment, he explained, “sculpture thinks about eternity.”) That finally happened in 2004, with “Crown Fountain” at Millennium Park in Chicago. Two 50-foot-high glass towers, linked by a pool of water, play giant video portraits of a thousand Chicago residents, rotating at random. Every few minutes each portrait purses its lips and spouts a jet of water, metamorphosing into a high-tech gargoyle. A hit from the start (YouTube is plastered with videos of people splashing in the water), “Crown Fountain” catapulted Mr. Plensa to international renown.

“Crown Fountain” also won the attention of the curator Brooke Kamin Rapaport, a member of the committee that advises the Madison Square Conservancy’s art program, who proposed him to the group. “When we think of great modern and contemporary public art, usually we think of work that uses an abstract visual language,” she said. “But Plensa is using an everyday regular person as his source.”

Mr. Plensa, for his part, had always wanted to work in Madison Square Park. “Every time I’ve come here,” he said, “I’ve been fascinated with the stream of people passing through. It seems like the heart pumping the bloodstream in the body.”

Yet his first idea — a cluster of mammoth leaves, made from the alphabet latticework — was decidedly uncorporeal. It was accepted, but when Ms. Landau visited Mr. Plensa’s studio last May to talk logistics, to her amazement, Mr. Plensa said, “I have a surprise for you.” He presented her with the maquette for “Echo.”

“We’ve never really had this happen before,” she said. “The artist doesn’t typically change course. But Jaume just kept thinking about the space and what he wanted to convey. And there was no question that she was perfect.”

Mr. Plensa began “Echo” as he does many of his heads: first making 3-D digital photographs of his subject — in this case the 9-year-old daughter of a man who runs a Chinese restaurant near his studio. Using computer modeling he elongates and abstracts the features, altering details so that the image “loses the journalistic sense of portrait to become an icon.” An industrial prototyping machine generates a plastic-foam scale model, which he recarves by hand. The process is repeated many times before a full-size mold is made.

This particular head was cast in 15 pieces in Spain and assembled over a steel scaffolding on site with visible joins. “It comes from an old tradition that the Romans used when they built the columns in their temples,” he said of the approach. “They built them in slabs with a very thin sheet of lead in between. It produces an amazing sense of transparency.” (The Lelong show includes a marble head joined with lead.)

The rest of the process — the materials, the foundation and the engineering — always depends on the size of the sculpture and the site, which in the case of “Echo” was tantamount to erecting a temporary four-story apartment building in the park. Although Mr. Plensa’s studio, together with the conservancy’s engineering adviser, Aine M. Brazil of Thornton Tomasetti, eventually figured out answers. Ms. Landau said the process involved a mind-boggling amount of back and forth.

“When Jaume came up with ‘Echo,’ we had a lot of technical questions,” she said. “He would say, ‘We’ll figure that out later.’ He really did help us focus just on the work and not let details get in the way of making it happen.”

Mr. Plensa, hearing this, smiled. “Technique can be a problem if you think about it beforehand,” he said. “You just dream. Then you find a solution.”

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