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Cheekwood exhibit will bring the art outdoors

By MiChelle Jones, For The Tennessean 6 p.m. CST December 22, 2014



Jaume Plensa’s stainless steel and stone sculpture “Thoughts” will be part of his “Human Landscape” exhibition, on display at Cheekwood from May 22 through Nov. 1. (Photo: Laura Medina)

When Cheekwood debuts "Jaume Plensa: Human Landscape" in May, it will not only be the largest U.S. exhibition of the Spanish sculptor's work to date, but it also will be another step in Cheekwood's strategy to raise the museum's national profile.

"Jaume Plensa: Human Landscape" — at Cheekwood May 22 through Nov. 1 — will consist of nine outdoor pieces as well as an indoor show, a first stop on a planned U.S. tour. As with the blockbuster 2010 Dale Chihuly exhibition, there will be a companion show at the Frist Center for the Visual Arts.

Jane MacLeod, president and CEO of Cheekwood, was familiar with Plensa's work from her tenure at the Nasher Sculpture Center at Dallas, where a Plensa exhibition was presented in 2010.

"His work is so accessible and so aesthetically pleasing, that the response was really quite extraordinary," said MacLeod, who immediately thought of mounting a Plensa show upon her arrival at Cheekwood in 2010.

MacLeod has reason to expect a similar response here given the results of a comprehensive research study commissioned by Cheekwood in 2011. That study revealed the gardens were the No. 1 reason visitors come to the museum and that people wanted to see art on the grounds.

The 55-acre botanical garden and art museum has attracted more than 1.3 million visitors from 2010 to 2014.

In 2010, "Chihuly at Cheekwood" brought in 264,000 visitors to see famed glass artist Dale Chihuly's colorful sculptures in the gardens. In 2013, 180,000 came through as the second stop on the North American exhibition of "Bruce Munro: Light" illuminated Cheekwood grounds at night.

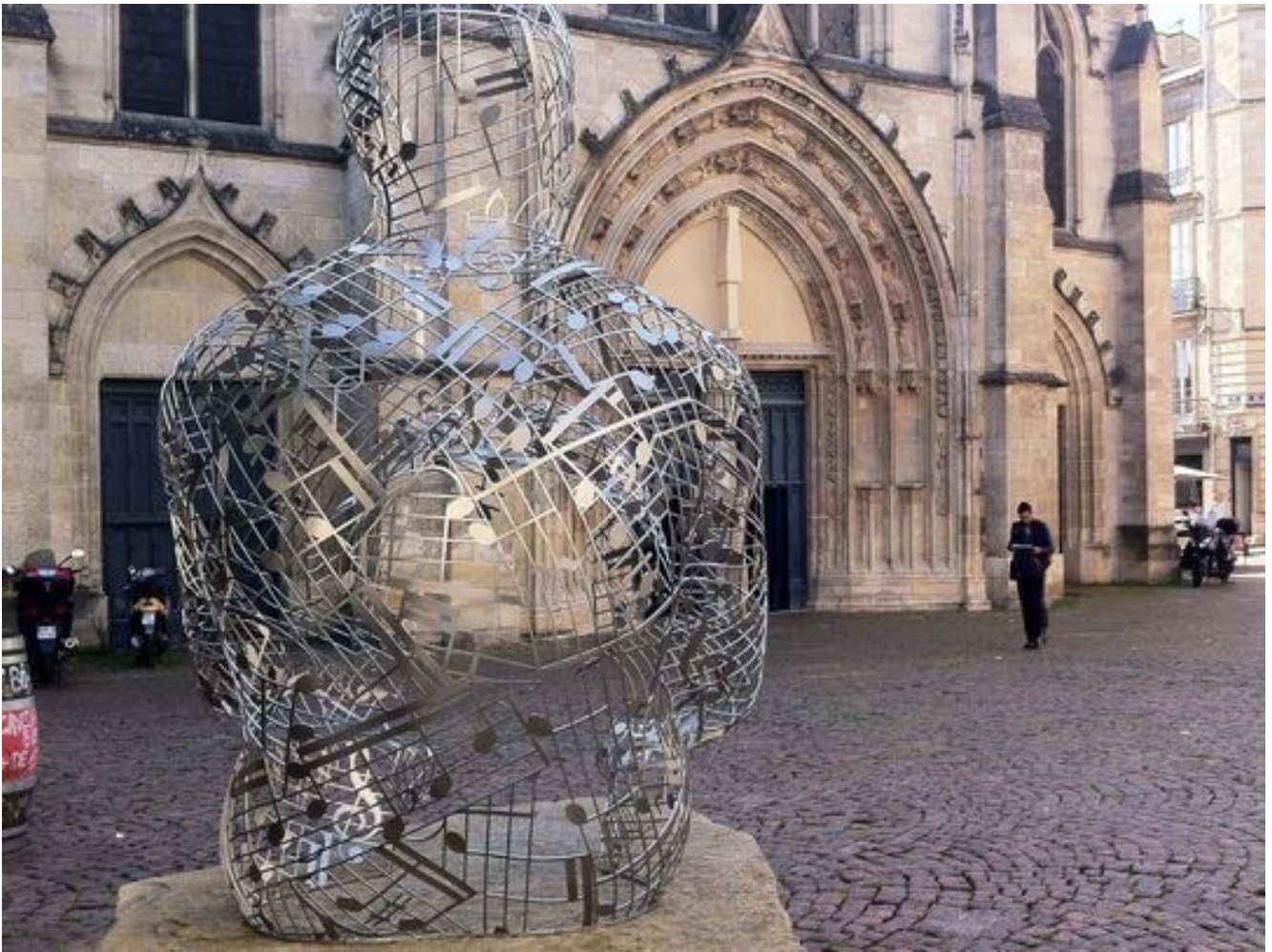
"What I think is really resonating with the public also is the juxtaposition," MacLeod said. "There's something really exciting about seeing contemporary work in this beautiful, historic landscape."

Giving people what they want is crucial for Cheekwood (and any cultural institution), particularly as it tries to offset what MacLeod says is a small endowment.

"Cheekwood only has a \$4.5 million endowment, so we really rely so heavily on admissions and membership and donor support. That's also why these big exhibitions, "Holiday Lights" (coming in 2015) and these (tulip and harvest) festivals are important," MacLeod said.

That's where Plensa comes in.

Relationship to nature



(Photo: Laura Medina)

If Plensa's name is known to Americans, it probably is from his glass-block Crown Fountain in Chicago's Millennium Park. He also is known for monumental metal heads, often depicted with eyes closed and a "skin" of words through which the surrounding area can be seen.

Plensa's sculptures contemplate humans' relationship to nature.

"He's a master of finding materials that are extraordinarily seductive, that are just beautiful and that make you want to touch them and caress them," Frist Center curator Mark Scala said. "They're not just decorations in the landscape; there are fairly strong philosophical groundings for the works."

"Human Landscape" will showcase four pieces designed specifically for Cheekwood, among them "Awilda & Irma," stainless steel mesh faces that the museum hopes to install in one of the ponds.

"Laura with Bun," a 23-foot-tall portrait in cast iron, will be situated at the entrance to the grounds to be in "conversation" with "Isabella," a large piece that will be installed at the Frist Center.

"It is certainly another milestone for us, especially in terms of sculpture as a temporary exhibition," said Cheekwood curator Jochen Wierich, who organized the Plensa show.

"It's remarkable how his work can interact with different kinds of spaces, but I knew that he had really only had two major shows in gardens," Wierich said. Those shows were at the Frederik Meijer Gardens and Sculpture Park in Grand Rapids, Mich., and the Yorkshire Sculpture Park in England.

Wierich said Cheekwood's landscape, though more compressed than the Yorkshire location, would nevertheless be "ideal in many ways for sculpture because there are so many different vistas, and so many different angles and elements. Jane sometimes refers to it as a canvas," Wierich said.

The Frist's Scala said of Plensa's sculpture, "The work takes on different meanings depending on where it is situated. Things that may have looked one way, say, in Dallas or at the Yorkshire Sculpture Garden will probably look radically different at Cheekwood."