

The Man With a Thousand Faces

By Joel Henning

What is art?" the Barcelona and Paris-based sculptor Jaume Plensa asks me over breakfast at a hotel hard by his monumental and iconic \$17 million Crown Fountain in Chicago's Millennium Park. "Art should be an echo," he continues, "a feeling of your heart . . . a mirror, a container of memory." At his Crown Fountain, we see aspects of the childhood memories animating Mr. Plensa's work.

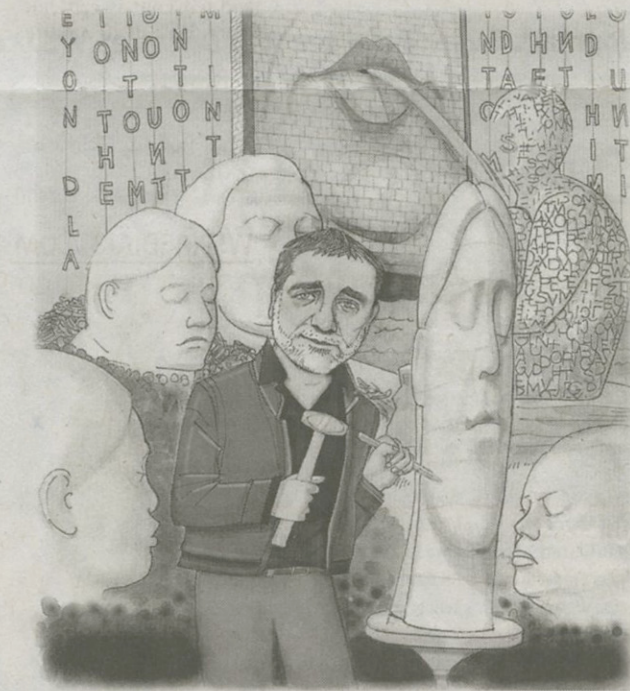
"I didn't grow up with art but with books," he says, "including medical books, but I had more of a fantastic than a scientific interest. I loved the body. In fact I was obsessed by it."

No wonder, then, that the Crown Fountain's central aspect is a dramatic display of heads—the heads of 1,000 Chicagoans filmed by the School of the Art Institute of Chicago (where he teaches courses on public art). The heads randomly appear on huge LED screens covering two 50-foot-tall glass-block towers that stand as massive bookends to a shallow black granite pool, fed by water cascading down the towers. At brief intervals, each head puckers its lips and—like a modern gargoyle—spews a stream of water into the pool.

The 1,000 video images that dominate the fountain have inspired much of Mr. Plensa's subsequent work, including another large video project for later this year in Seoul. This visit to Chicago is only a stopover on his way to Calgary, Alberta, to oversee the selection of fabricators for his monumental public sculpture of a young girl's head, planned for 2012.

Mr. Plensa's Calgary project follows from other recent public monuments featuring elongated faces of young girls. One is "Dream" (2009). Fabricated in a luminescent finish of white marble and concrete aggregate, this head of a young girl with her eyes closed rises more than 60 feet from the site of the former Sutton Manor Colliery near Liverpool, England, shimmering above the skyline. His 16-foot-tall "Awilda" (2010), a bust of a young girl in highly polished white Spanish marble, was unveiled in Salzburg, Austria, in October. Like "Dream," she appears to spring out of the ground and cast a tranquil aura on her surroundings. Just as "Dream" is intended to suggest hope for the future on the site of an abandoned coal mine, Mr. Plensa hopes that the face of "Awilda" "injects an image of the future into the heart of our old traditions."

For his New York public-art debut in Madison Square Park on May 5, he is creating "Echo,"



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a 44-foot-tall head and face of a 9-year-old girl named for the goddess. "New York has so much movement. I want to do something that doesn't move at all, but offers a still, quiet place to relax."

As we walk along Michigan Avenue, Mr. Plensa recalls other early memories. "I shopped with my mother in Barcelona stores where we passed through beaded curtains. I thought the rustling of those curtains made beautiful music. Also, I love not only great poetry but the physical aspect of text. So I dreamed about transforming letters into something physical." In "Twenty Nine Palms" (2007), Mr. Plensa sculpted steel letters of the alphabet and strung them together to hang—like curtains in the Barcelona shops. The letters make up selections from some of Mr. Plensa's favorite authors, including Baudelaire, Blake, Allen Ginsberg, Goethe and Shakespeare. The work was exhibited earlier this year at Dallas's Nasher Sculpture Center. "Everybody passed through these curtains, and the letters spoke to each other making beautiful music," he told me. "I dreamed about transforming letters into something physical. Poetry transformed into music."

In his exhibition last fall at New York's Galerie Lelong, he included three sleeping female heads, all lit internally with white neon and branded on their faces with words taken from "De Profundis," a letter from Oscar Wilde to his paramour about the travails of prison life.

He uses letters "like cells of information" to create human forms, as in "I, you, she or he . . ." (2006), in the permanent collection of the Frederik Meijer Gardens and Sculpture Park in Grand Rapids, Mich. Three human figures sculpted of letters in stain-

less steel rest atop boulders, facing one another in what could be a conversation. For the MIT sesquicentennial in Cambridge, Mass., he installed "The Alchemist," a human torso more than 10 feet tall consisting of mathematical symbols in stainless steel.

"As a child, when my father played piano, I was small enough to hide myself inside the case at the base of my family's spinet. I could feel the vibrations," Mr. Plensa tells me. And this feeling of sound figured prominently in the installation "Jerusalem" (2006), composed of 18 bronze gongs suspended at eye level, part of his exhibition at the Meijer sculpture park last year. A padded mallet accompanied each gong, and viewers were encouraged to strike the works. "You feel the vibration, then energy," Mr. Plensa says. For "World Voices" (2010) in the lobby of Dubai's Burj Khalifa, the world's tallest building, he crafted 196 cymbals of stainless steel, brass, bronze and gold. Here, water drips onto the cymbals, creating the interplay between sight and sound.

Music is also central to the bronze self-portraits, each with arms and legs wrapped around living trees, on exhibition outside of the Nasher Museum of Art at Duke University until the end of this week. Each is inscribed with a composer's name, including Bartók, Beethoven and Gershwin. "I want people to remember music as they look at them," Mr. Plensa explains.

"I invite people to touch the materials," Mr. Plensa says of his works. "So many things you have to explore with your hands. I want people to be engaged, to touch. When you love somebody, you must embrace. When I spoke in Des Moines . . . I invited people to touch my 'Nomade' [2007],

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a 26-foot-high stainless-steel figure fabricated from latticed letters. But a lady told me that a sign said 'Do not touch.' I said to her, 'Then don't touch the sculpture, caress it.' At my lecture at the Nasher Sculpture Center [in 2009], I said 'I'd love you to touch the alabaster heads.' Even the guards touched them."

We return to the complexities he confronted with the Crown Fountain. "Crown was one of my most challenging projects in a public space. It's like a symphony with many elements. The city took amazing risks. They allowed me and my colleagues to create a technology mixing water, electricity and people."

When engineers announced that the project would cost about \$17 million, well beyond what was originally contemplated by the Crown family, the Crowns asked Mr. Plensa if he could scale it back. "I'm pretty good with scale," he tells me he answered them. "I can reduce the scale of my piece if you can reduce the scale of Chicago."

The Crowns supported the fountain on Mr. Plensa's scale. "They understood," he said to me. "We talk a lot about weight and size, but not about soul. But it's about soul. Soul, not body. For the Crown Fountain, the body is only the physical elements. The soul equals the faces. That's why you feel comfortable here." With that, he left for Calgary to continue crafting his next face.

Mr. Henning writes about the arts and culture for the Journal.