

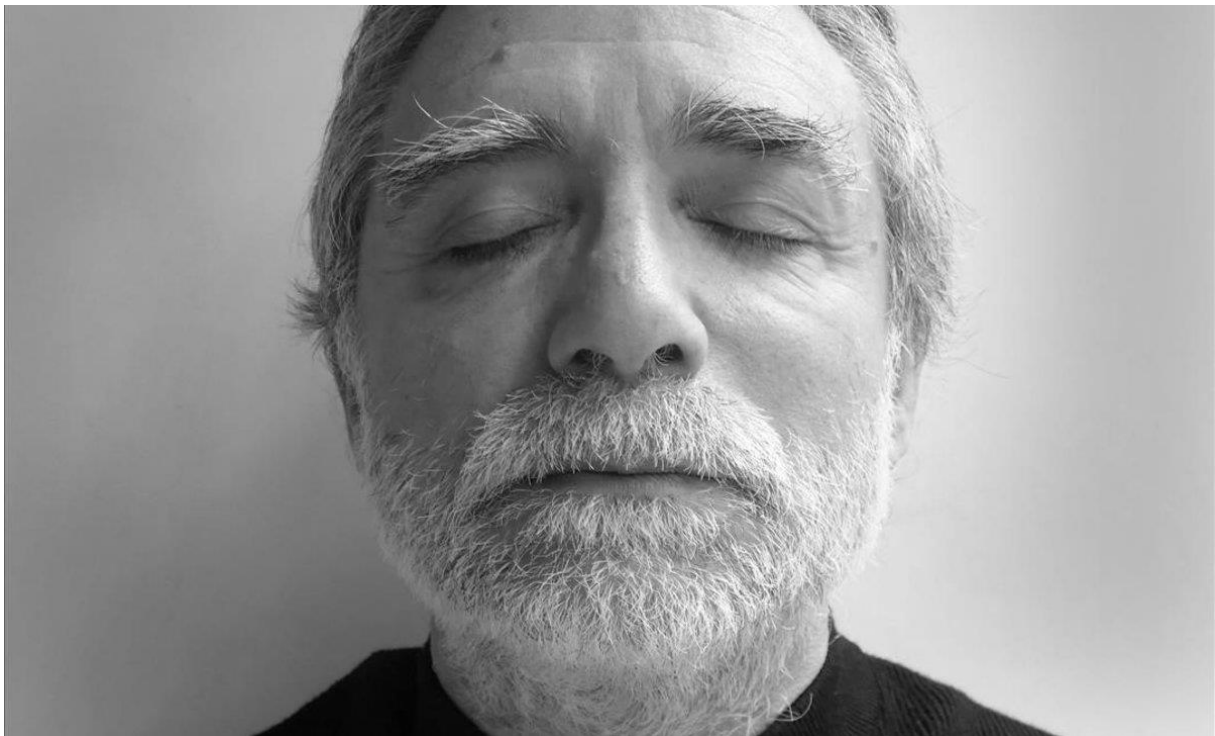
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Jaume Plensa: “The important things in life are invisible”

The sculptor, possibly Spain’s most international artist, is using the power of thought to cope with the lockdown rather than paper or pencil.



As a child when his father would play the piano, Jaume Plensa liked to get “inside it” to feel the vibrations. And now he is experiencing another type of “enclosure”, more silent, and more distressing. The Catalan sculptor has seen every single one of the international appointments in his packed diary get cancelled. He has closed his workshop in Sant Joan Despi - “I didn’t want anyone to be at risk” - and has opened a studio inside his head.

Q. At least you were not on the other side of the world.

I had come back from Hawaii via Pittsburgh and cancelled a trip to Saint Petersburg – one of my sculptures is being displayed outside the Hermitage – just as Russia started to block Spaniards from entering the country. A stroke of inspiration. Otherwise I’d be there now.

Galerie Lelong & Co.

Paris – New York

Q. How are you finding this unexpected turn of events?

I am in complete shock, but fascinated by the behaviour of my fellow citizens. Their behaviour is more remarkable than that of politicians. I am appalled that some are more concerned with the state of the market rather than whether more people will die today. Community spirit moves me. I believe in people.

Q. Your work has always aimed to create silence. You have succeeded.

I have always looked for a poetic, internal silence that borrows from the vibrations of our body. This is a worrying silence, including the painful silence of disease and death.



His sculpture, Julia, in the Plaza de Colón, Madrid. / DAVID CASTRO

Q. And your monumental heads are in public spaces with no public.

I find it very moving that my work forms part of the community. Chicago switches on the water in my Crown Fountain in the Millennium Park to herald the arrival of spring. This makes me very happy. In Macbeth, it says: "The night is long that never finds the day." We are the middle of a long night and we have to wait patiently for daybreak.

Q. Your talent helps you. You are naturally patient.

Yes, I'm quite self-contained, it's true. I'm not very sociable. But I love to travel. I love to travel by plane, because it's where I can be alone with myself. And at home, now, it's as if I was in another country, on a utopian island. Consequently, my mind is my studio. I do something that requires neither paper nor pencil: I think. I am alone, sitting down, thinking. It's wonderful! You go to places that you had never dreamt of.

Galerie Lelong & Co.

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“You see that there is no use in being brilliant, educated or dynamic. I have re-learned to appreciate slowness”.

Q. In this “journey”, what ideas are blossoming?

I am sowing seeds that will eventually be ready for harvest. When we can once again enjoy being together, art will emerge spontaneously. In the meantime, I see great creativity in social media. People have transformed it into an almost physical means of communication. That is the quality of the human being, this ability to transform the unexpected.

Q. Can you imagine a visual representation of the coronavirus?

I don't know if it was an omen, but my exhibition in the Palacio de Cristal of the Reina Sofia in Madrid was entitled “Invisible”. The important things in life are invisible. Such as love and hate. The coronavirus is another.

Q. You like to play with words. What defines this strange scenario?

The word “utopia.” It is what keeps the human being standing upright and proud. Beauty is a utopian concept; we seek it but never reach it. Natural disaster, wars, pandemics occur and something extraordinary happens when we overcome them. This time, it is a lesson in life.



Installation by the Barcelona-based sculptor in the Macba. /RICARD CUGAT

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Q. What have learned from this experience?

Exhibitions of my work have been postponed in Chicago and New York, as have the Basel and Hong Kong art fairs; my entire economy is founded on these. You see that there is no use in being brilliant, cultured or dynamic. I have relearned to appreciate slowness. For my first exhibition in Paris, I wrote: "Slowly, three times more slowly, be as slow as a deluge." I had forgotten that.

"I have never spoken to my wife as much as now."

Q. From what do you draw comfort?

I have started reading crime novels and, more than anything, I have never spoken to my wife Laura [Medina] as much. When our three children left home, we went back to being like lovers. This break in the routine has brought some of that back.

Q. Would you hazard a guess at what will come next?

I am an artist and the life of an artist is always extremely precarious. We don't get as anxious as businessmen and workers, who see their future in danger. An artist does not have a future. An artist is.

Q. What is the first thing you want to do?

Open the doors to my studio, meet people again and celebrate that we can complete the works we had left mid-creation and that have undoubtedly "evolved" during our absence.

Q. And Barcelona has – at last – commissioned one of your works for the city.

Well, we have to let Gaudi rest and allow contemporary artists to leave their legacy. Maybe after all this, we will have a moral duty to celebrate Barcelona with something as banal as living, breathing, loving each other.

Núria Navarro