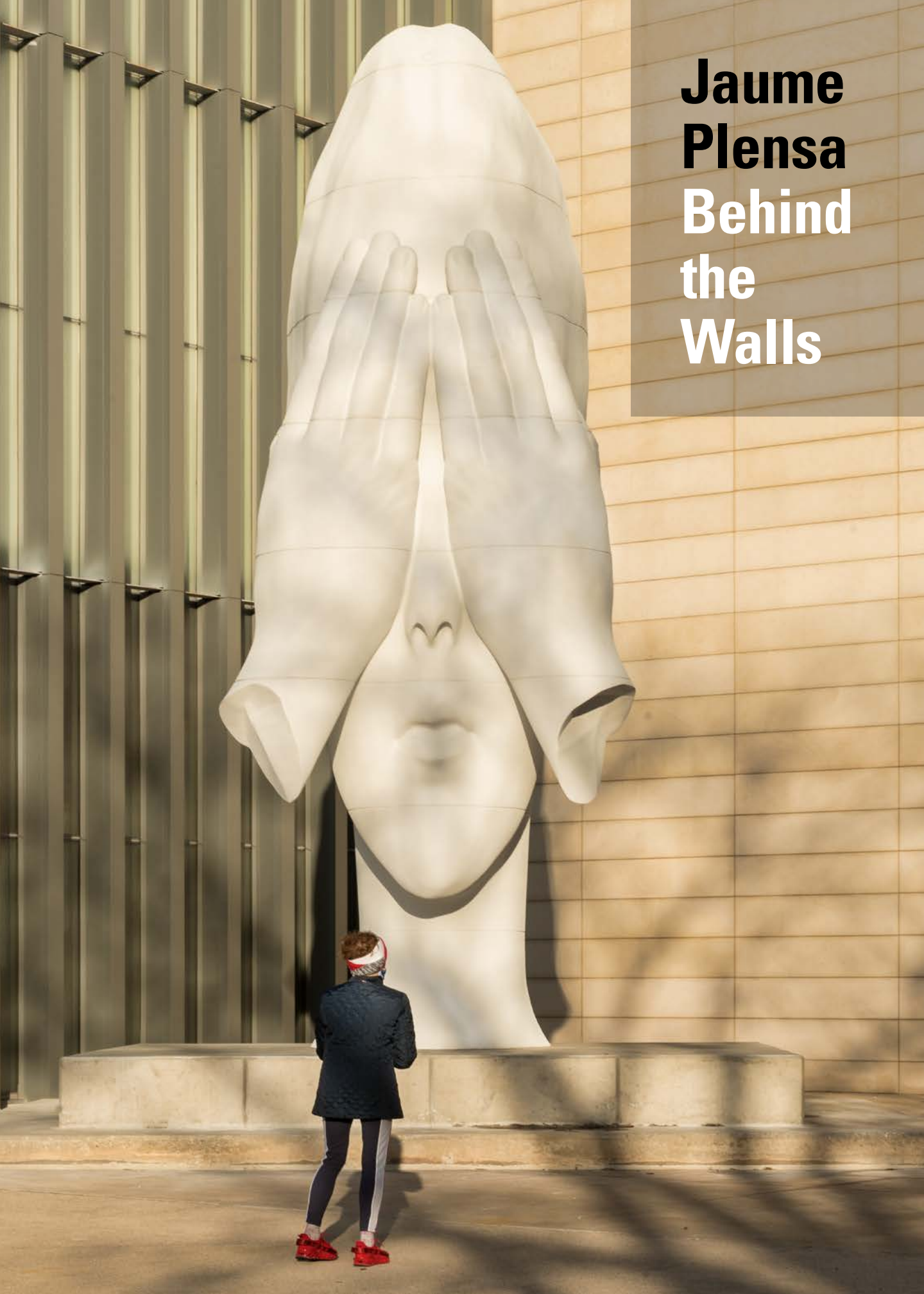


# Jaume Plensa Behind the Walls





### **For four decades, the Spanish artist**

**Jaume Plensa** (born 1955) has pursued a practice with drawing and sculpture at its core, and in which a discourse about humanity prevails. In media ranging from iron and bronze, to glass, light, and sound, Plensa forges a careful interaction between material, light, and place, and in so doing elucidates the infinite capacity of the human soul. Concerned that people are increasingly losing the ability to meaningfully converse, both with others and with themselves, the artist sets out to help us reconnect with our deepest thoughts and to create moments for purposeful exchange. Within this, silence is imperative, giving Plensa's art the facility to deeply touch and transform, to introduce, "a quietness, a place where you can listen to your own words and your own heart."<sup>1</sup> The artist has carefully nurtured this transcendent impulse throughout his career: "When for some reason you understand that life is not a physical problem and that physical material is hiding something essential, you must talk about spirituality. When you make a decision, or you dream, or fall in love, or hate, there are not only chemical reactions within your body, but something that catalyses to form a new energy, which can take you somewhere else. It is important to seek and nurture this."<sup>2</sup>

**Over the past ten** or so years, working in "families" of sculpture that include cell-like structures, doors, and hunkering and kneeling figures, Plensa has created multiple series of girls' heads in materials that include basalt, alabaster, and iron. *Dream*, the first of these large heads, was created in 2009 for the town of St. Helens in England, a community drastically affected by the demise of its coal mining industry. A former miner described to the artist the absolute blackness of working far beneath the earth's surface, a realm "so dark that even light becomes a dream."<sup>3</sup> The experience of complete darkness and of dreaming, both in sleep and as an aspiration, come together in *Dream*, in which a girl, eyes closed, imagines a future. For a man who rarely sleeps an entire night, Plensa knows how waking-dreams allow the mind to expand, and one of his most loved phrases is British writer and artist William Blake's (1757–1827) "one thought fills immensity."<sup>4</sup>

**Mirroring a portrait** photograph of the artist, *Behind the Walls* introduces the gesture of hands covering the eyes; this girl physically shuts out what she does not want to see. Plensa has commented, "It is a very direct piece... Many times we are blinding ourselves with our hands to be in a more comfortable position." Echoing American poet T.S. Eliot's (1888–1965) phrase, "humankind cannot bear very much reality,"<sup>5</sup> it is a generous expression that acknowledges the psychological and physical difficulties of negotiating the harsh realities of life, allowing a line of defense. Simultaneously, the work's title explicitly raises questions about the function of walls, which have protected, contained, and excluded people across cultures and geography, from ancient Troy and Babylonia, to China, Zimbabwe, Berlin, Jerusalem, and Mexico. Seen through this lens, the sculpture is a compelling comment about understanding the geopolitical situations that affect many millions of people, calling for individual and societal empathy and compassion.

**Sculpted portraits** date back at least to the Upper Palaeolithic period and the Dolní Věstonice ivory of a woman's head, hewn from mammoth tooth around 24,000 BCE. Carved "reserve heads" from Fourth Dynasty Egypt (ca. 2575–2465 BCE) were an idealised version of their subject, serving as an alternative home for the spirit of the dead owner, while thirteenth- to fourteenth-century Ife heads made by the Yoruba people of Nigeria depict individuals in their prime. In *Behind the Walls*, Plensa pays homage to an art historical tradition of isolating and amplifying the head as a physical form and as a symbol of our singular complexity—the repository of our memories, ideas, and emotions. All the girls' heads are of actual people, scanned and manipulated to slightly elongated proportions, which serves both to evoke the anonymity of ancient sculpture and to dematerialize the face and render it ethereal. Plensa's subjects are diverse in ethnicity, and, often modeled on adolescents who have migrated between two or more countries, they represent human potential. In Plensa's vision they occupy a world without borders. Both the strength and the tenderness of their impact lies in our lack of familiarity with teenagers as subjects for sculpture; serene, with closed eyes, they offer a powerful endorsement of humanity.

**Dematerialization** of sculptural matter is an essential pursuit in Plensa's work. *Behind the Walls* is cast in white resin into which marble dust has been blended, allowing light to dance on and enliven its surface, while also reducing the sense of the head's solidity. At twenty-four feet high, it is a sculpture that holds its own in relation to the architecture of the University of Michigan Museum of Art, as well as the adjacent open spaces. Plensa's acute understanding of scale and place is vital to the work's success, and when it was first shown in New York City's Rockefeller Center in 2019, it functioned as a talisman, a point of stillness for those who witnessed it.

**When working** in public spaces, Plensa aspires to the creation of shared social interactions at the sites of his sculptures. This social imperative connects him to a host of artists who have worked in the public realm, but perhaps more fundamentally to the ancient Greek *agora*—the center of a city's artistic, spiritual, and political life. Plensa's approach is similarly democratic and visionary, recalling the opening words of ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle's (384–322 BCE) *Politics*: "Every state is a community of some kind, and every community is established with a view to some good; for mankind always act in order to obtain that which they think good."<sup>6</sup> Depicting diverse cultures, ages, genders, and ethnicities, Plensa unambiguously affirms that we are all of the human race, all equal. He furthermore asserts his aim "to reintroduce beauty into society,"<sup>7</sup> and art's "tremendous capacity to transform the world."<sup>8</sup>

### Clare Lilley

Director of Programme  
Yorkshire Sculpture Park

- 1: Jaume Plensa, "Art and Form," filmed 2011, TEDxSMU video, 18:11. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zKCb7fjNsM>
- 2: Jaume Plensa, interview by Clare Lilley, in S. Coulson, C. Lilley, and J. Plensa (eds.), *Jaume Plensa: Yorkshire Sculpture Park: Exhibition Guide* (Wakefield: Yorkshire Sculpture Park, 2011), p. 130.
- 3: Plensa, "Art and Form."
- 4: William Blake, "The Marriage of Heaven and Hell," in D. V. Erdman, H. Bloom, and W. Golding (eds.), *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, 2nd ed. (New York: Anchor Books, 1988), p. 35. <http://www.bartleby.com/235/253.html>.
- 5: T. S. Eliot, "The Four Quartets I: Burnt Norton" (1936). [http://www.famouspoetsandpoems.com/poets/t\\_s\\_eliot/poems/15132](http://www.famouspoetsandpoems.com/poets/t_s_eliot/poems/15132).
- 6: Aristotle, *Politics: Book One*, trans. B. Jowett, *The Internet Classics Archive*, <http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/politics.1.one.html>.
- 7: Plensa in *Yorkshire Sculpture Park*, p. 130.
- 8: Plensa, "Art and Form."

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Jaume Plensa *Behind the Walls*, 2018, polyester resin and dust. University of Michigan Museum of Art, Museum purchase made possible by J. Ira and Nicki Harris Family, 2020/2.1 © 2018 Jaume Plensa courtesy of GRAY, Chicago/New York

Inside cover: Portrait of Jaume Plensa. Photograph by Angélica Heras © Angélica Heras/ELLE Spain

UMMA installation photography: Patrick Young, Michigan Imaging Gallery guide design: Franc Nunoo-Quarcoo

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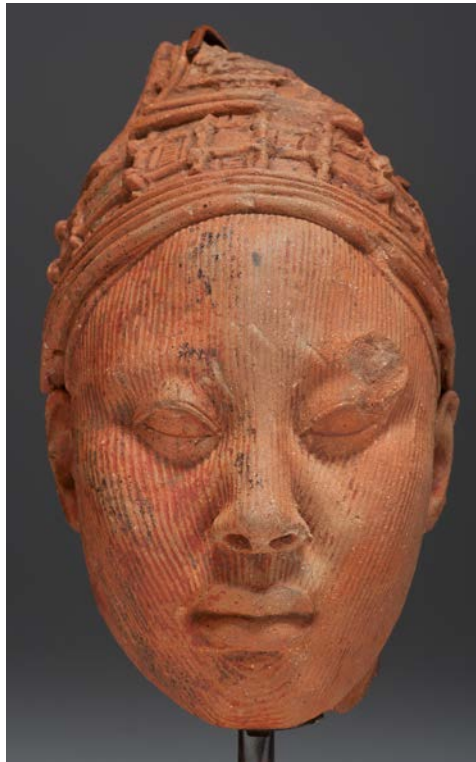
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1-3 *Behind the Walls* installation views at UMMA, 2020

4 The artist's studio, 2019.  
Photography by Inés Baucells © Plensa Studio Barcelona, courtesy GRAY, Chicago/New York

5 Two installation views of *Dream*, 2009, concrete and Spanish dolomite, 65 x 55 ft. (2000 x 1700 cm), Sutton Manor Colliery, St. Helens, Liverpool, U.K. Commissioned by St. Helens Council/Liverpool Biennial for Contemporary Art, U.K. Photographs by Stuart Rayner © Plensa Studio Barcelona, courtesy GRAY, Chicago/New York and Galerie Lelong & Co., New York

6 Installation view of *Behind the Walls* at Frieze New York, Rockefeller Center, New York, 2019. Photograph by Timothy Schenck © Frieze Sculpture, © 2018 Jaume Plensa courtesy of GRAY, Chicago/New York & Galerie Lelong & Co., New York

7 Carved female head from Dolní Věstonice, Czech Republic, 24,000 BCE, mammoth tooth, 1 7/8 x 15/16 x 7/8 in. (4.8 x 2.4 x 2.2 cm). Photograph by O. Kroupa. Courtesy of The Anthropos Institute, Moravian Museum, Brno, Czech Republic

8 Reserve head, Fourth Dynasty Egypt, ca. 2575-2465 BCE, limestone, 10 5/8 x 6 5/16 x 8 1/4 in. (27 x 16 x 21 cm). Courtesy of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

9 Head, possibly a king, Ife, Nigeria, 12th-14th century, terracotta with residue of red pigment and traces of mica, 10 1/2 x 5 11/16 x 7 3/8 in. (26.7 x 14.5 x 18.7 cm). AP 1994.04. Photograph by Robert LaPrelle. Courtesy of Kimbell Art Museum, Fort Worth, Texas