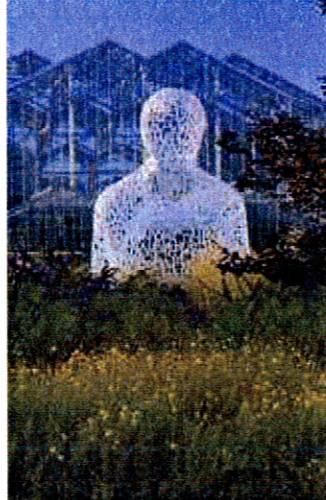


Published: Oct 05, 2008 12:00 AM
Modified: Oct 05, 2008 01:50 AM



'Nomade,' a 26-foot-tall sculpture made of stainless steel letters by Jaume Plensa, is shown at Frederik Meijer Gardens & Sculpture Park in Grand Rapids, Mich.
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Plensa's vision finds home in Midwest

BY JAMES PRICHARD, The Associated Press
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GRAND RAPIDS, Mich. - The renowned Spanish artist whose Crown Fountain made such a big splash in Chicago -- but whose concept for a similar water-and-electronics installation in downtown Raleigh evaporated under political inertia -- is returning to the Midwest for his largest U.S. exhibition.

The exhibition at Frederik Meijer Gardens & Sculpture Park will include eight featured sculpture installations and 18 paintings by Jaume Plensa. Many of the works have never been displayed in this country.

Plensa also will take part in a major art conference tied to his show, which opened Friday and runs through Jan. 4.

The 21st International Sculpture Conference took place this weekend at Meijer Gardens and focused on sculpture in public places. Plensa was to provide an overview of his career as the keynote speaker for the first day of the three-day conference for artists, curators, museum directors, patrons, educators and students.

"I like very much art in public places," Plensa, 53, said in an interview from his home in suburban Barcelona, Spain.

The exhibition will center on Plensa's interpretation of the human form, primarily through his creative use of text. Nomade, a 26-foot-tall piece already installed outdoors, is made of

stainless steel letters painted white and shaped to resemble a crouching person, arms wrapped around lower legs. The unusual construction gives it and other Plensa figures in the show a somewhat ghostly appearance.

"He is a figurative artist, but the figure is not sort of defining his career as it defined Rodin's career or Michaelangelo's career or something like that," said Joseph Becherer, director of exhibitions and curator of sculpture at Meijer Gardens. "He's really a conceptual artist that's dealing with these issues, about communication, about context, about how we interact with one another."

Nomade is similar to a trio of Plensa sculptures that will grace the lobby of the N.C. Museum of Art's new building in Raleigh, scheduled to open in spring 2010. The large, humanlike works are a gift from philanthropist Jim Goodmon, who is also president and CEO of Capitol Broadcasting, which owns WRAL.

Goodmon had offered the city \$2.5 million toward a monumental piece of public art by Plensa in the plaza at the south end of Fayetteville Street. He withdrew the offer after the city manager deemed it impractical.

Plensa, whose career started in the late 1970s and took off in the 1990s, has permanent works installed throughout the world, with Crown Fountain in the Chicago's Millennium Park being his best-known creation in the United States.

During warm days, the fountain helps cool off as many as 1,000 people, from babies in diapers to senior citizens in wheelchairs, said Ed Uhler, director of the park's design, architecture and landscape.

"It has become sort of the free water theme park in Chicago," he said.

The four-year-old fountain sculpture consists of two 50-foot glass-block towers, one at each end of a long, black granite reflecting pool. The LED-lit towers use computers to randomly select and display giant video images of faces whose lips periodically pucker just before water appears to start shooting from their mouths, like 21st-century gargoyles.

Becherer said he has been wanting a chance to work with Plensa for five or six years.

"I think this is a very important project for us," Becherer said. "Obviously, Plensa is one of the leading international figures in the art world today, and we're honored that we're working with him."

The show's featured sculptures include I, Me, She or He, a recent addition to the Meijer Gardens permanent collection. Seven others are on loan, including six from the Richard Gray Gallery in Chicago.

With its nearly translucent appearance, Nomade, which belongs to art collectors and philanthropists Mary and John Pappajohn of Des Moines, Iowa, may look very different from the flashy Crown Fountain but its message is identical, Plensa said.

"The content is exactly the same -- it's always to try to invite people to be as one with me and in the sense of community."

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Staff Writer Craig Jarvis contributed to this report.

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