

RICHARD GRAY GALLERY

The Telegraph

Dream, by Jaume Plensa: the new face of the North West

Dream, by Jaume Plensa is aiming to be a rival to the Angel of the North.



Winning by a head: Dream, by the Spanish artist Jaume Plensa, cost £1.9 million

By **Alastair Sooke**

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"I've never been into art," says Pauline Halpin, the landlady of the Smithy Manor pub in the former Merseyside mining town of St Helens. "But I think this is brilliant." She is talking about an enormous concrete sculpture that has recently appeared on the hill behind her pub.

Conceived by the Spanish artist Jaume Plensa, and erected at a cost of nearly £1.9 million, Dream is the star of a new four-part TV series called The Big Art Project which starts on Channel 4 next month. Its backers hope it will become a symbol of the North West, just as Antony Gormley's celebrated Angel of the North is now synonymous with the North East.

From the nearby M62, the 20m-tall, 500-ton Dream might not look like much: an elongated white blob, surrounded by trees. But, up close, the sculpture resembles the head and neck of a young woman, her eyes closed in Zen-like meditation. Her face has been stretched and distorted, like a model in a painting by Modigliani. As clouds scud by behind her, she looks weightless, like an apparition.

Dream has been constructed on the site of the old slag heap of the Sutton Manor Colliery, one of the largest pits in Lancashire until its closure in 1991. You'd never know it: Plensa has coated the sculpture with sparkling Spanish dolomite (a particularly pure white marble), creating a deliberate contrast with the coal that has played such an important part in the history of St Helens. Power stations sprout like fantastical toadstools on the flat countryside around the hill, but Dream pays no attention to the relics of heavy industry around – or beneath – her.

The sculpture grew out of consultation with a group of ex-miners, who first hatched the idea of creating a piece of public art in their home town in 2005 in the Smithy Manor (a pub once owned by Liverpool footballer Tommy Smith). They decided to accept Channel 4's nationwide invitation to the public to apply to create "big" art in their back yards.

"At first, Jaume [Plensa] proposed a miner's lamp," says Terry Murray, who was an electrical engineer at the colliery. "But we didn't want it. There are lots of miners' lamps and memorials all over the country. We wanted a piece of modern art."

All the back-and-forth between the artist and the ex-miners is superbly documented in the series. In 2006, their idea for St Helens was one of seven proposals selected by Channel 4 from 1,400 applications. The other sites to make the final cut were Beckton in east London, Belfast, Burnley, Cardigan, the Isle of Mull and Sheffield.

Not all of the stories have had such a happy ending. A minority of locals has so far blocked plans by the Mexican artist Rafael Lozano-Hemmer to install a cluster of 127 buoys in the middle of the estuary in the Welsh town of Cardigan. In The Big Art Project, one man rails against the "elephantine flatulence" of Lozano-Hemmer's plans. "I've never heard such bilge water in my life," says a woman after another meeting. "It's an immoral waste of money."

All this gets to the heart of the perils of public art. Since no work of art is to everybody's taste, local councils rarely champion the visions of contemporary artists. "It's easier to rebuild your house than it is to make a work of public art," says Jan Younghusband of Channel 4, who dreamt up The Big Art Project. Bureaucracy is no friend to the avant-garde.

Yet, since 1990, there has been more public art commissioned in the UK than at any time since the 19th century. As a result, for every success such as the Angel of the North, there are countless bland sculptures cluttering municipal spaces up and down the country that are the victims of compromise. People are also quick to criticise the sums of money spent on public art, especially during a recession. "But recessions come and go," says Andrew Nairne of the Arts Council, which contributed £200,000 to realise Dream. "Great art endures."

The most exciting aspect of The Big Art Project, though, is that it directly involves local people. "Usually, public art is top-down," says David Barrie, director of the Art Fund, which donated £180,000 to the project, "and the public are asked to take it or leave it. Sometimes it works well, often it doesn't. The idea of working from the bottom up is magical."

In this sense, Dream is art by the people, for the people. Almost everybody from St Helens that I spoke to said that they loved the sculpture, and they are the ones who have to live with it every day.

Channel 4's 'The Big Art Project' starts on May 10