



"VEILED SHADOW XXX," 2011, **Jaume Plensa**
MIXED MEDIA ON PAPER, 16½" x 11¾"

CHICAGO

Jaume Plensa: "The Hermit"
at Richard Gray Gallery

Orientalism has always been more about the West than the East. It often almost abjectly seeks to satisfy some lack, or plays out a fantasy of how Asian culture might provide an escape from the pressures and corruptions of Western existence, offering a respite in the "other" of exotic eroticism and the promise of serene spiritual purity. Barcelona-based Jaume Plensa, well known in Chicago for his impressive Crown Fountain in Millennium Park, mines this always-evocative arena in "The Hermit," an exhibition named for two of his recent sculptures. In both of these works the hermit huddles stoically and impassively on a rock, arms drawing the legs toward the body, seeming like some meditative Bodhisattva completely impervious to the outside world. The two figures are hollow and their exterior is totally constructed out of a permeable raiment of stainless steel letters drawn from eight languages—Arabic, Chinese, Cyrillic, Greek, Hebrew, Hindi, Japanese, and Latin. Like some global figures of Babel, they sit forever silent but also forever comprised of this jumbling of the component elements of language. They have no faces, no interior volume, just this cloak that's a kind of sign of universal communication, mute and aloof, figures literally of calligraphy.

It is in the some thirty drawings shown here that Plensa most delves into a memory of Orientalism. The smaller drawings come from his *Veiled Shadow* series, the larger from his *Shadow Study* series. The latter are closely linked to the Hermit sculptures, though often in fragmented form, the letter-figures are graphically presented here, and washed over with various viscous baths of ink. Plensa luxuriates in the drawing process itself, while a few of these are rather sparsely done, most are effulgent with inks and scumbling, the letters often obscured by his cascading liquids. The smaller and more intimate *Veiled Shadow* drawings proffer an Asian allusion even more strongly; in these, a digital photograph of a figure with eyes closed, sometimes with the raiment of letters, but sometimes not, also gets bathed with a process of inks and a kind of resin-like coating. The figures have that aura of the inscrutable East so beloved by Eurocentric culture, that sense of the serene, impassive, and inward-looking meditative soul approaching a kind of Nirvana. The search for such a state of calm bliss remains important to Plensa, and the search itself may be more revelatory than its realization.

—JAMES YOOD