





Pablo Serrano

Spanish, 1908–1985

Spiritus Mundi, 1977

Bronze, 120 x 199 x 240 inches

University of Houston-Clear Lake

Pablo Serrano's monumental sculpture takes its name from the Latin concept for humanity's spiritual source, *Spiritus Mundi*, which W. B. Yeats famously invoked in "The Second Coming" of 1919. The title, given by Alfred Neumann—the University of Houston-Clear Lake's founding chancellor—following its installation on campus on April 12, 1977, was particularly fitting to one of Serrano's most ambitious public art commissions ever.¹

Throughout his long career, the artist had toggled between an understanding of "reality as conflict" and a deeply humanistic stance. His concern with existential dualities—order versus chaos, body versus spirit, creation versus destruction, presence versus absence—led to a continuous line of explorations of these themes. Yet this preoccupation with discord was often at odds with his visual evocations of more personal themes such as unity, mutual understanding, communication, illumination, and love.²





In 1965 Serrano arrived at a breakthrough: “man, seen from without, from only his physical and material self, has little to say to us.” The realization that man is nothing unless he opens his door led to *Unidades-yuntas* (Oneness, 1966–77), a series that allowed him to harmonize the main antitheses at the core of his production. At stake were forms that could be “opened, revealing the ideal, luminous interior space, or they could be closed, locking up that space.”³ The title *Unidades-yuntas* includes the Spanish word “yunta,” meaning a pair of oxen that ploughs as a team, bound together with a yoke. Fittingly, they consist of pairs of complementary rounded shapes that are either separated from one another, as in the work at Clear Lake, or perfectly coupled as parts of a whole. Like all works from the series, *Spiritus Mundi* has outer surfaces that are coarse and rough, whereas its interior finishes are luminous, polished bronze. Imprints of Serrano’s hands, personal objects, and tools are commonly found throughout the series—a nod to the artist as the creator as well as to Spain’s rich legacy of cave painting.⁴

Spiritus Mundi is one of the most significant of the *Unidades-yuntas* in terms of size and conceptual complexity. Houston’s preeminent role in pushing the boundaries of space exploration had challenged Serrano to expand his understanding of space. The result was a monumental “budding seed that opens up to space,” recalling how a new man—“man in space”—is open to the race to discover the cosmos and to “the great struggle that mankind wields from birth to death, testing its essential values of emotion and reason.”⁵ *Spiritus Mundi* is evocative of both the physical and cosmic sense of space. Here, chaos and human unity are no longer in confrontation but, rather, are complementary and interdependent.

María C. Gaztambide

- 1 Pablo Serrano had been brought to Clear Lake by Dr. Calvin Cannon, dean of human sciences and the humanities at UHCL, who had lived in Madrid for years and was a friend of the artist. Ann Holmes, “Striking Sculpture in Place,” *Houston Chronicle*, April 18, 1977, Section 1, p. 18.
- 2 Calvin Cannon, *Serrano en la década del 60* (Madrid: Galería Juana Mordó, 1966), 3–4.
- 3 *Ibid.*, 9.
- 4 María del Carmen Rodríguez Berbel, *Pablo Serrano: Una nueva figuración y un nuevo humanismo* (Zaragoza: Institución “Fernando el Católico,” 2015), 308.
- 5 Archive of Pablo Serrano, undated letter to Asunción Lazcorreta of *Arte-Noticias* (Mexico City), c. 1977.