

Jean-Michel OTHONIEL

Forbes,

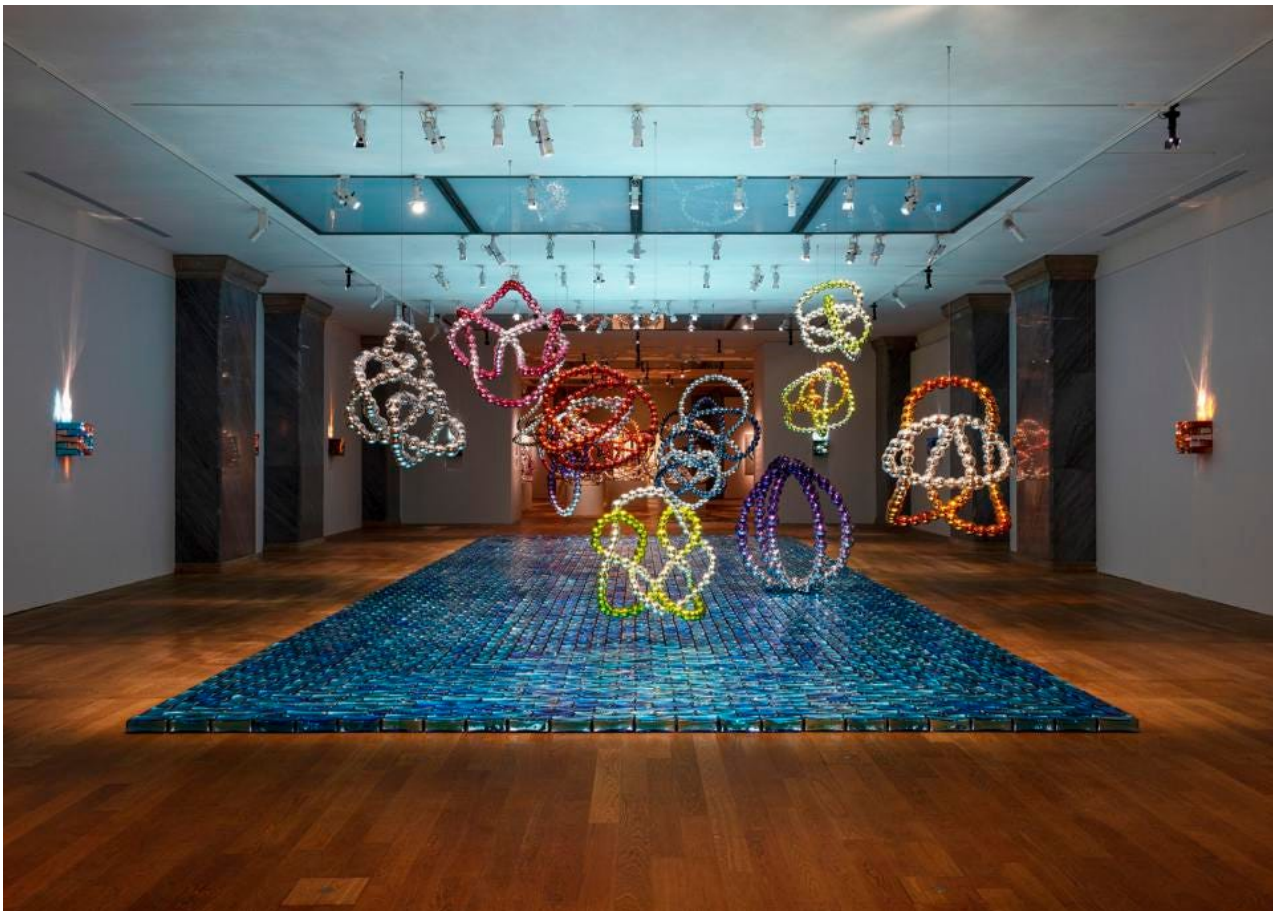
French Artist Jean-Michel Othoniel Takes On The Myth Of Narcissus

November 2021

French Artist Jean-Michel Othoniel Takes On The Myth Of Narcissus

F forbes.com/sites/yjeanmundelsalle/2021/11/26/french-artist-jean-michel-othoniel-takes-on-the-myth-of-narcissus

The first contemporary artist invited to put on a major solo show at the Petit Palais museum in Paris, Jean-Michel Othoniel invites us inside his enchanted fairy tale kingdom of infinite reflections, adorned with mirrored glass and metal beads and bricks, where time stands still. Known for his *Kiosk of the Nightwalkers* at the exit of the Palais Royal metro station, his dancing sculpture-fountains at the Château de Versailles, his ink and white gold leaf roses in the Louvre's permanent collection, his 114 black pearl fountains installed in the lagoon in front of the National Museum of Qatar and for his recent induction into the Académie des Beaux-Arts in Paris, his largest solo exhibition in the French capital since 2011 allows us to resist, just for a moment, the disillusionment of the contemporary world. I sit down with him to discuss his exhibition, *Narcissus' Theorem*, running until January 2, 2022, which sees a blue glass river cascading down a grand staircase, colored bricks set on fire, giant necklaces suspended from the branches of exotic trees and golden lotus flowers emerging from reflecting pools in a garden of Eden.



Jean-Michel Othoniel's Knots hang above a lake of blue bricks in the exhibition *Narcissus' Theorem*
Photo Claire Dorn. Othoniel/ADAGP, Paris, 2021. Courtesy of the artist & Perrotin

How did your solo exhibition *Narcissus' Theorem* at the Petit Palais first come about?

The museum asked me at the beginning of the year. It was amazing for me because it's the first time they give all the Petit Palais to one artist. It's a place the director, Christophe Leribault, really opened up to contemporary art over the past three years. He was doing events during FIAC and Nuit Blanche with a lot of artists, but it was more group shows with one or two pieces by the artists. He had this idea to connect the beautiful collection of the museum to the contemporary art public. That's why he decided to ask just one artist to do a big show. And he chose me because he wanted something joyful and enchanted, so I hope I will make the public dream a little bit.

What's so significant about this exhibition?

Since my Centre Pompidou exhibition, *Narcissus' Theorem* is really my biggest show in Paris with new pieces. It's really different from the Centre Pompidou show because it's not a retrospective; it's just focused on a body of work. I had a series of pieces that traveled to South America, Argentina, Mexico and Canada, and now I brought them here for the show, so I did not have to produce those pieces. Half of the works in the show were already made, but they're all new pieces for Europe. Nobody saw them all together. The architecture of the Petit Palais is also very inspiring. It's really something that gave me the energy to do the show. I wanted to use the architecture as a connection with my work because it has very strong meaning. The Petit Palais was built for the World's Fair in 1900, so it was a sort of utopic pavilion. A lot of buildings were destroyed, but the Grand Palais and the Petit Palais are still there, and the Eiffel Tower, all built during the same period.



These Wild Knot sculptures are the result of exchanges between Jean-Michel Othoniel and Mexican ...

[+]

Photo Claire Dorn. Othoniel/ADAGP, Paris, 2021. Courtesy of the artist & Perrotin

Why did you name your exhibition *Narcissus' Theorem*?

It's playing with the garden because there are three pools of water. I decided to put sculptures on water, like I did in Versailles, but they're not fountains, they're sculptures. The reflection of the sculptures in the water is really amazing; it doubles the pieces. So it started with that and then I saw that some of my sculptures were also reflecting because they are mirrors like the big *Knots*. At the same time, I have been working with the mathematician, Aubin Arroyo, about the theory of reflection that he has been working on for 15 years. All this presence of reflections in my work, the work reflecting itself or the work reflecting the building, all this made me think I had to build a story around the idea of how reflection is important in the history of art, but also in our personal lives, so I used Narcissus because it's a figure everybody knows. It's sort of creating a story about this theorem of Narcissus, which is a theorem about reflecting yourself, but also reflecting the world around you. I think this preoccupation is quite important now in the world we are living in today, when you see all the selfies, the use of Instagram. You give your image to other people, but you also give your background, what you have behind you, so you give a story about yourself through your environment. The myth of Narcissus is really about that, about how by reflecting yourself, you reflect the world around you, and also in Freudian theory, narcissism is something very joyful and that's what I love. It's the moment when children discover themselves in the mirror, when they're one or two years old, that they're looking at themselves and not at another person. This is a moment of pure joy and they love to share it with their parents or the people around them, and the

more they see people looking at them enjoying their reflection, when they see how people react and how they are joyful, the more they play with it. This is really the myth of Narcissus for Freud, and this is the basis of our lives because it's about seduction and love. We discover how our image can create a way to connect with others, in our personal lives, but also in our business lives. The myth of Narcissus is really something strong in the way people construct themselves. For my exhibition, it was a way to create a story people could enter and also follow the works in the museum. It's really a journey in the garden and in the museum itself.



Jean-Michel Othoniel, *Gold Lotus*, 2021, stainless steel and gold leaf, 142 x 135 x 122 cm
Photo Claire Dorn. Othoniel/ADAGP, Paris, 2021. Courtesy of the artist & Perrotin

The main idea behind this exhibition is for the public to enter a sort of enchanted fairy tale world. Do you think this is what we need during COVID-19?

I think we definitely need a connection with nature, a connection with another way to use our time with more time for contemplation, to look at beauty, to reconnect with our own feelings. The garden is a perfect place for that because it's a place where we can really focus on ourselves, enjoy the beauty around us and be protected. It's a place where we can get away from the world, but at the same time, a place where we can take a big breath and rejuvenate ourselves.

Your six stainless steel beaded *Knots* reflect the ceiling murals painted by Paul Baudouin to portray the four seasons in the semi-circular colonnade around the garden.

Yes, the frescoes evoking the beautiful gardens of Italy are amazing paintings you don't really see because you don't walk there. You see the gardens more than the frescoes, but my mirrored sculptures will reflect the frescoes, which are also linked to nature and to gardens in the representation of the flowers. In fact, the garden of the Petit Palais is not really well known, although it's a beautiful place to work in and so unique.



Jean-Michel
Othoniel in his
Academician's
uniform made
by Dior

Photo Brigitte
Lacombe for Dior
© Jean-Michel
Othoniel / ADAGP,
Paris, 2021

Describe *The Blue River* on the entrance staircase made of 1,000 blue glass bricks.

It is like a cascade of bricks, so you don't know if the cascade is going down to you or if you have to follow the cascade up. It will be the first piece that people will see, and for me, it was important to play with the facade of the building, which is very spectacular with this golden gate that's so beautiful and rich with ornaments from the 19th century. I thought it was a big challenge and I wanted to play with this part of the architecture that was really the masterpiece of the building, to create a dialogue with the beauty of the architecture. I think it's also an important statement today with COVID-19 to show my work outside as a way to bring the public from the streets into the museum, so it was really a way to connect with people who don't want to go to museums or don't have the time.



The Blue River
of glass bricks
entices visitors
to enter the
Petit Palais

Photo Claire Dorn.
Othoniel/ADAGP,
Paris, 2021.
Courtesy of the
artist & Perrotin

Water also acts as a portal that allows you to cross between two worlds...

Yes, water is quite amazing because you have it in a lot of poems, fiction and series where the mirror of water is something you can pass through, so you are really in a fairy tale like *Alice in Wonderland*, when she passes through the mirror. It's really important for me to speak about water as a mirror. Also what is beautiful in the garden is it's always changing, when it's raining, when it's sunny. When the leaves change color, turn yellow and disappear, then you will see the sculptures more. This dialog with the rhythm of nature is really amazing. It's a big luxury to have a garden in Paris and a free museum around it. It is really unique. I don't know if you have this in other countries.

Tell me about *The Night Crown* you're showing for the first time in France, and how it entered the Petit Palais' permanent collection.

This is something really amazing because when I was looking at the building itself, my idea was to make a show linked to the garden, but also to the architecture. I did not want to make my work in relation with the art from the museum's collection because I already did that at the Louvre. I wanted more to play with the architecture, and while taking one of the staircases, I saw this wonderful cupola. It was totally white without any wall paintings. Speaking with the director of the museum, he told me this was the only thing that was not finished in the building. I thought I have something in my studio that has been there for years. I never had the chance to show it. It was this *The Night Crown*. And taking the proportions of this piece, putting it in the space, it was so perfect. It was really like it was made for it. So I decided to show it in the exhibition as a sort of invitation for people to use the staircase to go down to the rest of the show. It brought something theatrical to the space, which was made for the public to enjoy. My crown is very dramatic, beautiful and joyful, and this space was built like a theater. It was the same period as the Paris Opera House, when buildings were made to put the public in situations as if they were playing a role, showing their beautiful dresses, showing themselves, so I decided to put the crown to remember this period of craziness

with operas, ballets and beautiful parties of the beginning of the last century. When the museum curators and director saw my proposal for this space, they said, “We have to keep it.”



Jean-Michel
Othoniel's *The
Night Crown*
has entered the
permanent
collection of
the Petit Palais
Photo Claire Dorn.
Othoniel/ADAGP,
Paris, 2021.
Courtesy of the
artist & Perrotin

Describe the *Precious Stonewall* pieces that you imagined during the first COVID-19-induced lockdown in France.

During lockdown, I made drawings every day of the same number of bricks, like a music partition, with the same form. How can I create new emotion using color and the placement of the bricks? It's sort of an infinite calculation. So I drew this every day like a mantra, something I was doing just to relax and to try to escape. The situation was very scary and stressful, so I was really happy to do that without the idea of building those pieces one day. It was more like a diary of this difficult period. Later, when the Petit Palais proposed the show to me, I said maybe I have to try to realize them for real. I worked in the studio with my assistant to build the first one, and it was so magical, intense and dense, like a focus point, a sort of small altar to this period. They're very contemplative small pieces. In the museum, because there are a lot of walls in the big room downstairs, I decided to make this area as if you were walking in my diary. I really love those pieces. I think they are really strong.



Jean-Michel
Othoniel,
Precious
Stonewall (#4),
2021, mirrored
glass and
wood, 33 x 32 x
22 cm

Photo Pierre
Antoine. Othoniel -
ADAGP, Paris,
2021