

PERROTIN

Jean-Michel OTHONIEL

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ART

Jean-Michel Othoniel Explains the Hypnotic Potential of Flowers

Gesturing toward rebirth, spirituality, and enlightenment, the French artist recasts the Brooklyn Botanic Garden's serene Lily Pool Terrace as fertile soil for his elegant beaded sculptures to sprout like roses and lotuses.

BY JESSE DORRIS | July 31, 2023



In the world of Jean-Michel Othoniel, vast strands of beads drape around the trees of Versailles, transforming their trunks into delicate necks. Water fountains write Arabic calligraphy into the air around Jean Nouvel's National Museum of Qatar. Stacks of bricks in a Seoul gallery glitter like precious gems. Based in the south of France, his graceful sculptures can be encountered in the permanent collections of Tokyo's Mori Art Museum, the Musée du Louvre, and countless other institutions worldwide.

This summer, he arrives at the Brooklyn Botanic Garden as part of “The Flowers of Hypnosis,” where his penchant for gardening and horticulture shines through six mesmerizing new sculptures that link the spiritual and the sensory. “Gardens leave a great deal of space for the irrational, the inexplicable, and the extravagant,” he says. “They’re places of mystery, magic, and secrecy. ‘The Flowers of Hypnosis’ carry within them the spell of the imaginary.” It’s his largest exhibition in the country since his retrospective “My Way” came to the nearby Brooklyn Museum more than a decade ago, in 2012. (Another exhibition of new work, “The Reconciliation of Opposites,” will open at Perrotin in October.)

Below, the artist speaks with *Surface* about the new shows, the architecture of roses, and the importance of tending to your own garden.



Jean-Michel Othoniel

When was the first time you encountered the Brooklyn Botanic Gardens?

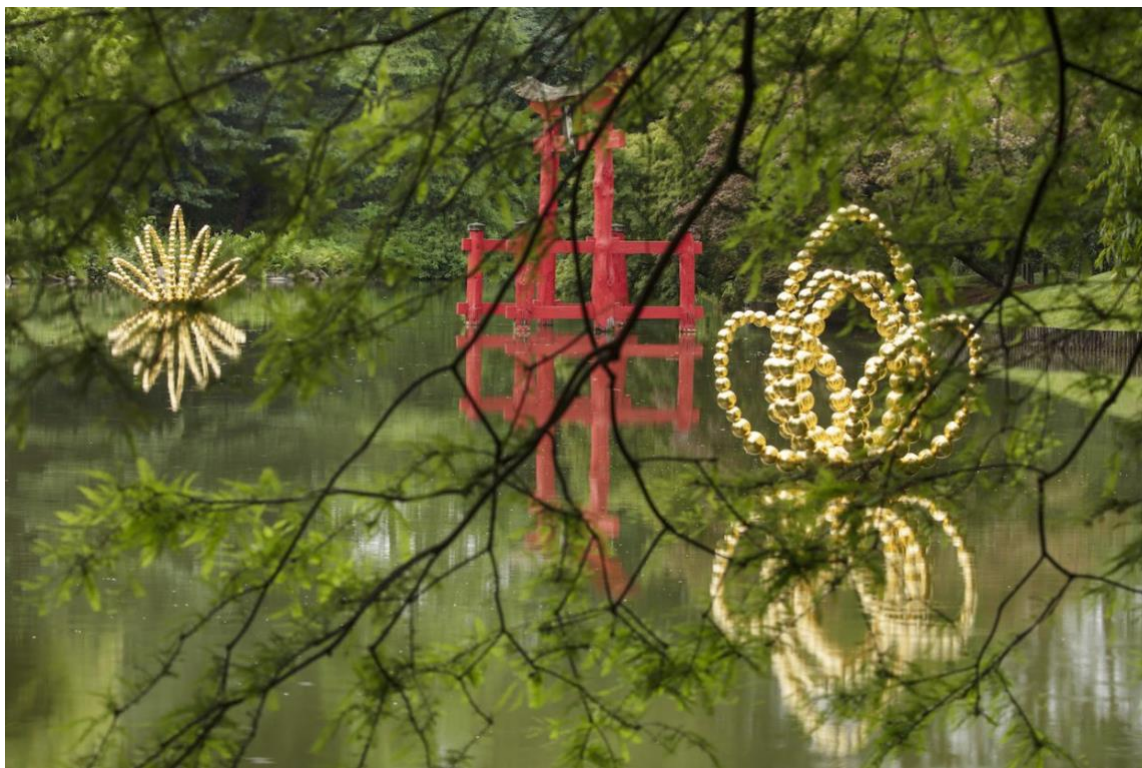
Ten years ago. I was totally fascinated by the extravaganza of this 19th-century garden. It was when I had my solo show at the Brooklyn Museum, and that was why I wanted to exhibit my sculptures today. For me, it's a frame for absolute craziness.

This is the third of your shows as part of the Dior Cultural Gardens initiative. What interests you about the connection between fashion and horticulture?

Dior perfume helped me to realize several interventions in historical gardens. We share a passion for flowers and gardens. It was an obvious encounter: Flowers are the base of their fragrance creations, as they are for my sculptures.

What's hypnotizing about flowers?

Flowers are the first images. For centuries, humans have looked at them, hoping they will discover signs. In my show, sculptures are paying homage to the architecture of flowers. The beads follow the curves and pace of the petals.





The lotus flower inspires five sculptures. What resonated with you?

Lotus is a very spiritual flower. I wanted to create a contemplative exhibition. The Japanese garden is the perfect showcase for sculptures inspired by lotuses, because of the importance of this flower in Buddhist culture.

You've also long been influenced by roses; what remains fascinating about them?

Rose is the queen of the flowers. I draw and paint a lot of them, including the ones permanently installed in the Louvre. The rose is one of the stronger flowers in terms of structure. It is an architecture by itself. How the petals are displayed and connected is very inspiring for a sculptor. It is an example of perfection, a gift of nature.

Why did you decide to make the rose in gold?

Gold is more than a color. It is a material coming from the stars. This sculpture facing the sky is an homage to the universe.

In the mirror sculptures, do you expect views to see themselves reflected? Or will the sculptures reflect each other? What is important to you about this reflectivity?

Reflectivity creates a world of infinity. Being trapped in those reflections as a viewer makes you part of the landscape. It brings to life the sculpture, catching all the movements and changes around it.



How do you think the sculptures might look different when they're next shown, at the Oscar Niemeyer Museum in Brazil?

The architecture of the Niemeyer Museum is pure and radical. The history of abstraction is part of Brazilian art history. I think people will focus more on the mathematical theory behind my sculpture than the floral references.

What will you show at Perrotin in November?

A series of new paintings inspired by flowers. They are like the shadows of my sculptures, but in this show, they will be in colors. I will turn the gallery into a shimmery garden. I will also show a series of abstract sculptures in glass brick, like altars for mother nature.

Where are you spending the summer?

I'm not traveling at all. I have a real garden in the south of France and I need to take care of it.



“Jean-Michel Othoniel: The Flowers of Hypnosis” will be on display at Brooklyn Botanic Garden (150 Eastern Parkway, Brooklyn) until Oct. 22.

All photography by Guillaume Ziccarelli, courtesy of the artist and Perrotin