

Jean-Michel OTHONIEL

Johan CRETEN

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studio*

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Artists Johan Creten and Jean-Michel Othoniel in their new studio in Paris' Montreuil, with Creten's bat sculpture, *De Vleermuis*, 2014-2018. Creten's workshop is separated from the rest of the studio by a dramatic concrete wall, 5m high and 27m across. *Photography: Vincent Fournier*

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A couple of decades ago, this writer's handbag 'disappeared' at the edge of Montreuil, a gritty eastern suburb of Paris once best known for its *marché des voleurs*, or thieves' market. In recent years, however, artists have been flocking to Montreuil, drawn by its proximity to the capital and affordable real estate. It's not yet Brooklyn, but change is in the air.

The latest big name to arrive is Jean-Michel Othoniel, who splashed onto the scene in 2000 with his colourfully beaded Palais Royal-Musée du Louvre metro entrance. He has since become one of the country's foremost contemporary artists and a member of the Académie des Beaux-Arts, his poetic glass sculptures appearing everywhere from the Château de Versailles gardens to the National Museum of Qatar.

This autumn, Othoniel is moving into a vast space he will share with his life partner, the Belgian sculptor Johan Creten, who built his reputation using ceramics as a material for contemporary art when it was still considered passé. (Creten is showing a three-ton bronze bat, *De Vleermuis*, in front of the Petit Palais during the FIAC art fair.) Until now, Othoniel had three different studios in Paris, while Creten earned the nickname 'clay gypsy' after years of working in temporary studios around the world. Both were finding it increasingly problematic to store their monumental artworks.

Hoping to locate all their activity in one place, they searched for years in the Paris suburbs. And then, three years ago, Othoniel stumbled upon a space for sale, nearly 4,000 sq m and only one metro station beyond the Périphérique. Built as a metal workshop in the early 20th century, it was in excellent condition, with Eiffel-era architecture of metal beams and glass ceilings. 'It's a beautiful space, almost a postcard Paris atelier,' says the soft-spoken Othoniel. 'It's very rare to find a place like this that hasn't been destroyed by the years.'

The pair call their new studio *La Solfatara*, after a volcanic crater near Naples that has inspired artists for generations. The name references the re used for their sculptures in glass, ceramic and bronze, as well as Othoniel's earliest works, which were made of sulphur from yellow stone. It will be a place 'bubbling with energy, eruption, fusion – a dynamic place for collaboration,' he says. Othoniel believes the new studio will encourage each of them to think about their work in a different way. Though *La Solfatara* will receive visits by appointment only, the duo want it to feel like a community, welcoming art-world figures and artists of all types for exchange and experimentation.

La Solfatara also offers them another place to exhibit their works, especially the largest pieces that are complicated to move. During FIAC week, they will show a mix of their recent creations to collectors and friends, such as Othoniel's *Agora* steel brick igloo and Creten's gigantic vulture, *De Gier*.



De Gier (The Vulture), 2015-2016, by Johan Creten

La Solfatara consists of two buildings side by side. The larger of the two, the Great Hall, covers roughly the length of a football field. The smaller, the High Hall, is about three-quarters as long and nearly 15m-tall at its highest point. Each features a huge open area, too spacious to be heated, yet perfect for creating and installing large artworks (or throwing parties).

Determined to have a major say in the renovation, the artists called upon French architect Dominique Lyon, a friend, to help design the project. They agreed to leave the buildings' bones basically untouched, while adding a few strong details. 'We wanted to keep the spirit of the place,' says Othoniel. 'We worked with it in a utilitarian way, to make it practical for the artworks.'

One striking new addition to the High Hall is the entrance, a folding glass door 7m high and 5m wide. To one side, a bookstore is planned for a later stage. (Othoniel and Creten have both produced a number of books, considering them artworks in their own right, and this autumn Phaidon will release Othoniel's first monograph in ten years.) Across from the store, a café will eventually occupy a space where an auto shop once stood, with a visiting artists' residence above.

In the open space of the High Hall, the artists have placed a low platform on the floor as a theatrical way to exhibit installations. Othoniel covered the upper parts of the walls with charred wood, a Japanese process known as shou sugi ban, which he fell in love with years ago after seeing it on the island of Naoshima. 'Burnt wood with its subtle odour fits in well with the idea of La Solfatara,' he notes. Stuck to the back of the High Hall is a delightfully random structure, an actual three-storey townhouse peeking into the space from one corner. Built in 1869 to manufacture alcohol for fuel, it will now house the staff offices, as well as Othoniel's personal office, which comes with a view of the studio.

Next to the old house, the artists have restored a 1941 'glass house' by architect Maurice Cammas, installing an interior façade with large windows. Its three floors will contain a metal shop, photography studio, spaces for collaborators, a conference room and archives. Creten says the importance of archives is 'something we learned from American artists, many in their fifties like us, who start thinking about how to organise their work for art historians or young artists to study'. An open-air terrace overlooks Montreuil's mishmash of industrial buildings and residences; Othoniel plans to create a major sculpture there, as a landmark for La Solfatara.

No glass will be blown at the studio (Othoniel relies on specialists in Switzerland, Italy and India), but he and his team will use the space to string together large glass orbs or metal beads into fountains and oversized necklaces. They will stack and weld bricks of glass or polished steel into waves and walls, and run computer simulations to test how these large sculptures will stand up over time. Othoniel will continue to work in other media here, too, such as his ink and gold leaf paintings currently on display at the Louvre Museum.

La Solfatara's Great Hall is where Creten has set up his new studio, 500 sq m at the rear of the building. Settling down in one place will be an adjustment after his nomadic lifestyle, but he is taking inspiration from Auguste Rodin's former atelier in the southwestern suburb of Meudon, a hive of activity where close to 50 people once worked. Tourists still travel to Meudon to see Rodin's studio – perhaps a century from now, La Solfatara will draw them east to Montreuil. §

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