

PRESSBOOK

Jean-Michel OTHONIEL

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Renowned French artist's monumental art piece unveiled at NMoQ



Alfa, a monumental art installation by internationally-acclaimed contemporary French artist Jean-Michel Othoniel, seen at the National Museum of Qatar (background).

Alfa, a monumental art installation by internationally-acclaimed contemporary French artist Jean-Michel Othoniel for the National Museum of Qatar (NMoQ), was unveiled on Wednesday during the architectural masterpiece's official inauguration.

"It was done to be something more theatrical and joyful, especially at night, because my idea, my concept is always to bring joy to the public," said the artist, who was commissioned to develop the site-specific work for NMoQ.

Citing the complexity of his latest piece, Othoniel said the five-year project with Qatar Museums (QM) is the biggest and most difficult installation he ever built – comprising 114 individual fountain set within the museum's lagoon. Their streams have been designed to evoke the fluid forms of Arabic calligraphy.

The artist noted that this stunning art work in Qatar, a huge public art piece (nearly 1km long) that reflects the country's heritage and culture, is five times bigger than his glass fountain sculpture in the gardens of Chateau de Versailles.

"We based this idea on reeds you have in the desert, which is used by the people to make baskets or elements for the house," he said, adding that the concept was to create something related to the desert rose-inspired architecture, designed by renowned French architect Jean Nouvel.

The black fountains, activated once an hour, have been shaped to resemble Arabic calligraphy or the tall reeds that calligraphers use to make their pens.

Othoniel, in collaboration with QM, also built the impressive public art piece at the Hamad International Airport (HIA) titled 'Cosmos', a one-of-its-kind sculpture providing a unique experience to a multicultural audience at the airport.

Cosmos is the artist's first art work to be installed in an airport, representing a colossal celestial globe echoing the trajectories of travellers from around the world with more than 30mn passengers passing through HIA last year.

The striking piece resembles bright calligraphy drawn in space when observed side-on or from below, and appears in the shape of a blooming rose when observed from the front.

QM, under the patronage of its chairperson, HE Sheikha Al Mayassa bint Hamad al-Thani, worked with local, regional and international artists for many years to commission and acquire artworks for key locations in and around HIA, as well as other parts of the country. It aims to create easily accessible cultural experiences for all those who live in and visit Qatar.

The artist expressed his keen interest in doing public art, where an artist spends time in the street apart from holding shows in museums, galleries and privately-commissioned ones.

Othoniel was born on January 27, 1964 in Saint-Etienne, and now lives and works in Paris. He shows a fondness for materials with reversible properties.

While glass has become the hallmark of his work, he used stainless steel, covered with ceramics, for Alfa citing the country's hot temperatures during the summer. Such material, he stressed, is one of the strongest elements used for outdoor sculptures

"The idea was to turn these (individual) sculptures into fountains, linking the shape of the jet to the shape of the architecture (NMoQ) to follow all the shape of the petals of the (desert) rose," the artist explained.

Othoniel, whose works have architectural dimension, has permanent installations in public and private places around the world.

Alfa arises like majestic black reeds

Alfa arises like majestic black reeds along the 900m-long shores of the lagoon. From various angles, silhouettes reflected on the water evoke the abstract beauty of Arabic calligraphy. During the day, every half hour the sculptures transform into fountains, launching arabesques of water towards the sky. At night, the water jets light up, highlighting the curves of the museum's architecture.

Othoniel's enchanting aesthetics revolve around the notion of emotional geometry. Using the repetition of modular elements such as bricks or his signature beads, which are a recurring motif, he creates sculptures whose relationship to human scale ranges from intimacy to monumentality.