

PRESSBOOK

Jean-Michel OTHONIEL

*Prestige Singapor*

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FROM LEFT: *THE BIG WAVE* DISPLAYED AT THE CENTRE RÉGIONAL D'ART CONTEMPORAIN IN SÈTE. *GÉOMÉTRIES AMOUREUSES* IS OTHONIEL'S FIRST MAJOR EXHIBITION IN FRANCE SINCE 2011

# In the Eye of the Storm

The subject of a double exhibition in the South of France, artist JEAN-MICHEL OTHONIEL discusses with Y-JEAN MUN-DELSALLE the architectural dimension of his work



AN OMINOUS SIX-metre-high wave composed of more than 10,000 black glass bricks swells up from the gallery's wall and floor, almost swallowing up visitors. Weighing 25 tonnes, *The Big Wave* required two years of work, several months of technical drawings with French engineers, a 50-strong team, and one month to install.

As in the deep of the ocean, these bricks — made by glass-blowers in Firozabad, India — gleam all shades of blue, green, purple and grey to illuminate the wave with a mysterious light from within. Jean-Michel Othoniel's creation reflects the violence of the elements, recalling the 2011 tsunami that struck Fukushima (when he was in Japan), and echoes the first photograph of La Grande Vague taken in Sète, France, in 1857 by Gustave Le Gray. Filled with contradictions, it metamorphoses from dramatic to meditative. This duality is a recurring theme for Othoniel, who has mastered the art of reconciling opposites.

Othoniel's *The Big Wave* was part of *Géométries Amoureuses*, a double exhibition in his native France that closed in September. Held at the Centre Régional d'Art Contemporain (CRAC) in Sète and at the Carré Sainte-Anne in Montpellier, this display of some 60 sculptures, a dozen paintings and more than 100 works during the particularly propitious summer months saw the international art world flocking to the South of France to take in the sun, sand, sea, art and culture.

Othoniel's first major solo exhibition in France since his retrospective at the Centre Pompidou

in Paris in 2011, the CRAC show was not only his most monumental to date, it also marked the end of an era. Othoniel was the first artist CRAC director Noëlle Tissier invited for an artist residency back in 1988. She again chose to work with him, this time for her final project with the Centre.

"For this show, Noëlle and I had the same feeling we had 30 years ago when she was building her residency and I was starting out...there was the same openness, which is now not so easy to find because it's become more and more professional," says Othoniel.

The new series of architectural monochrome sculptures (ranging between €190,000 and €480,000) in glass, mirror, aluminium, steel, ink and obsidian — the opaque, light-absorbing black glass-like volcanic rock — are inspired by nature and unveil the importance of movement and gesture in Othoniel's work.

They at once encapsulate sensuality and rigour, pain and beauty, attraction and repulsion, which characterise his art. "I bring together light and darkness, the monumental and the fragile, the austere and the marvellous,

PHOTOS: NIKOLA DE PARIS



FROM LEFT: *BLACK LOTUS* (FOREGROUND) IS CAST FROM BLACK ANODISED ALUMINIUM AND STEEL; THE CARRÉ SAINTE-ANNE EXHIBIT FEATURES WORKS FROM THE 1990S UNTIL 2016, ASSEMBLED TOGETHER FOR THE FIRST TIME

minimalism and baroque," he notes.

He considers introducing beauty and wonder into the world to be both an aesthetic and a political act. "What's happening now in the world due to climate change means artists have developed a sensibility of the world and it's infused in our work. Artists are linked to and affected by society; we don't exist only in our own world. Beauty is a way to bring joy and hope, and also a step towards spirituality."

"What I discovered in Asia was how beauty is linked to meditation and the sacred. This helped me see my work in another way, to see that beauty can bring you towards the idea of the sacred — not religious — and how you can escape from the world through beauty."

In Othoniel's version of the mobile made popular by Alexander Calder, large chrome-painted, aluminium and steel *Tornado* kinetic sculptures are suspended from the ceiling by a single wire. Stand inside one and you'll feel as if you're inside the eye of the storm as it rotates around you. "Over the past 30 years, I've built my world around me slowly...to bring energy to my work and be proud of being different in the art world so

that when people see just one bead or when they see glass, they think of me," he shares.

"That's why I love the idea of the tornado because it is a metaphor for creation itself. You can spend years building something, to have this energy turning around you, and at some point it becomes so strong, it takes on a life of its own, and if you don't take care of it, you can be ejected from it. You're looking at your work, but you're no longer in the work. I want to stay at the centre of the tornado and be the one who keeps it moving around me."

Also exhibited at Sète were his *Black Lotus* ink paintings on white gold leaf and their accompanying black anodised cast aluminium and steel sculptures that represent a world darkened by man, and countless watercolours created between 1996 and 2017 that reveal the early and crucial stage of Othoniel's creative process. "Working by myself on watercolours allows me freedom, to dream about projects instead of being in the production of pieces. Working as a team, which is also very exciting, however, can sometimes [lead to] loss of concentration and intuition," he explains.

The Sète exhibition will travel in 2018 and 2019 to the Galerie Perrotin in New York, Saint-Étienne Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, and Montreal Museum of Fine Arts.

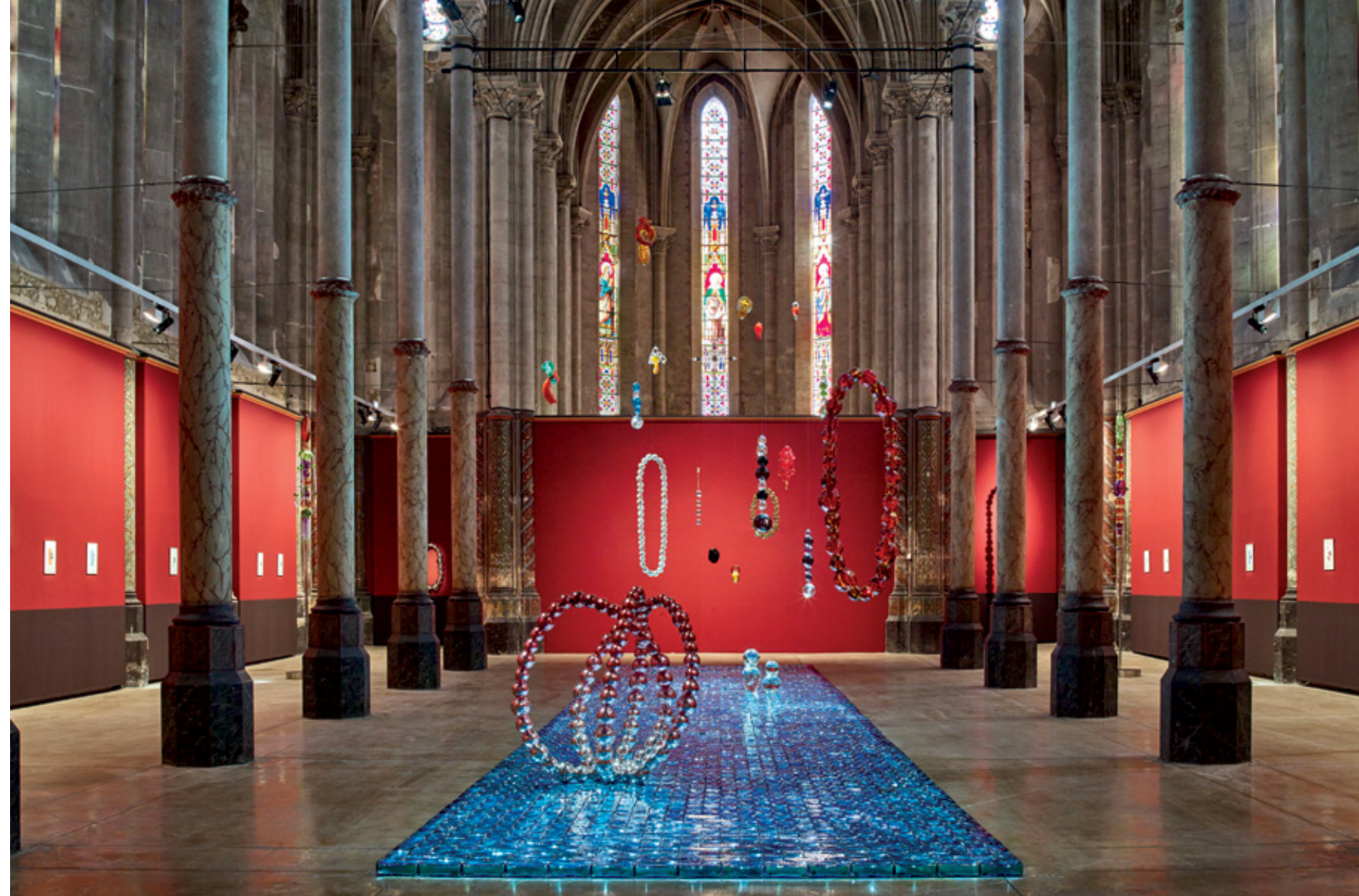
Othoniel's exhibition at the Carré Sainte-Anne is his most intimate yet — works from the 1990s until 2016 are assembled together for the first time. In the deconsecrated church, light streams

through stained-glass windows to strike the pieces and transform them into precious sacred talismans, many resembling torture and erotic jewellery. He collects his own works not because he can't find buyers, but so he can return to them later.

"Collecting my own works allows me to keep a memory from each step of my journey," he states. "It's also a way to create a foundation of my work one day."

On display were Othoniel's major sculptures such as *Le Contrepet*, his first work in obsidian, at the centre of which a human orifice or volcano on water appears; *Le Collier Seins* necklace with voluptuous milky white beads resembling breasts that was blown in Hawaii to recall traditional *lei* flower garlands; Mexican-made bottled landscapes of spun-glass hearts, tongues, testicles, tears, thorns, hooks and stinging flowers in *Lágrimas*; and the cross-shaped *Géométrie Amoureuse* that showed among Near Eastern antiquities at the Louvre in 2004.

These were reflected in a carpet of blue bricks to evoke the contemplative nature of the sea that he playfully calls "the blue brick



PHOTOS: 2017 OTHONIEL/ARS, NEW YORK/ADAGP, PARIS.

road" (a homage to Dorothy's in *The Wizard of Oz*), made by the same Firozabad glassmakers.

"I've always dreamt of working with Indian glassblowers because in India, glass is used for beautiful palaces or furniture," he reveals.

Born in 1964 in Saint-Étienne, Othoniel graduated in sculpture in 1988 from the Fine Arts School of Cergy-Pontoise near Paris. He began his career in the early 1990s with sculptures made of wax or sulphur, which he presented at the *Documenta IX* in Kassel in 1992, before introducing glass into his work after discovering obsidian and working with CIRVA, a glass research centre in Marseille.

"What I love about glass is that it's very simple. It's something everybody has had an experience with. As a child, you find a chunk of glass on the beach or you watch

the light coming through a glass of water. It's not sophisticated, unlike crystal or precious stones. I love using a very popular material in a very refined way."

No stranger to installing his works outdoors, be they massive gilded glass-fountain sculptures for the Château de Versailles, or giant necklaces suspended in the gardens of the Alhambra in Granada, the Villa Medici in Rome and the Peggy Guggenheim Collection in Venice, Othoniel's works form an intimate bond with their environments, becoming one with the colours, shapes, scents and seasons.

Nonetheless, he also enjoys exhibiting in galleries and museums. "I love both. I try to connect with different people and cultures, as with my installations in Korea, Japan, Singapore and the US. It's not just about the French talking to the French. My work is very personal and unique, but it can talk to a large public. That's a big goal today for an artist: Globalisation. You have to be able to spread your ideas across different cultures."

Othoniel wants to widen the increasingly architectural focus of his work through projects

of scale. He is regularly invited to create in-situ works that converse with historical sites and modern architecture.

He completed in 2016 a *Trésor* installation of floors, ceilings, walls, lighting, windows and cabinets in the Angoulême Cathedral, which took eight years to complete. His *Clear Water Bay's Rebounds*, a knot of silvered aluminium beads posed in a water feature, was unveiled in Hong Kong at Adrian Cheng's Mount Pavilia property. Upcoming is the *L'In Noir* for the Mitsubishi Bank Collection in Tokyo.

Othoniel, who wants to bring about change in the real world, relishes art as it "brings beauty into the world. It's not because it's beautiful that you can't talk about the environment or disasters — beauty can also be strong and full of meaning." ■