

Robb Report

September 2015

robbreport.com.sg

SINGAPORE

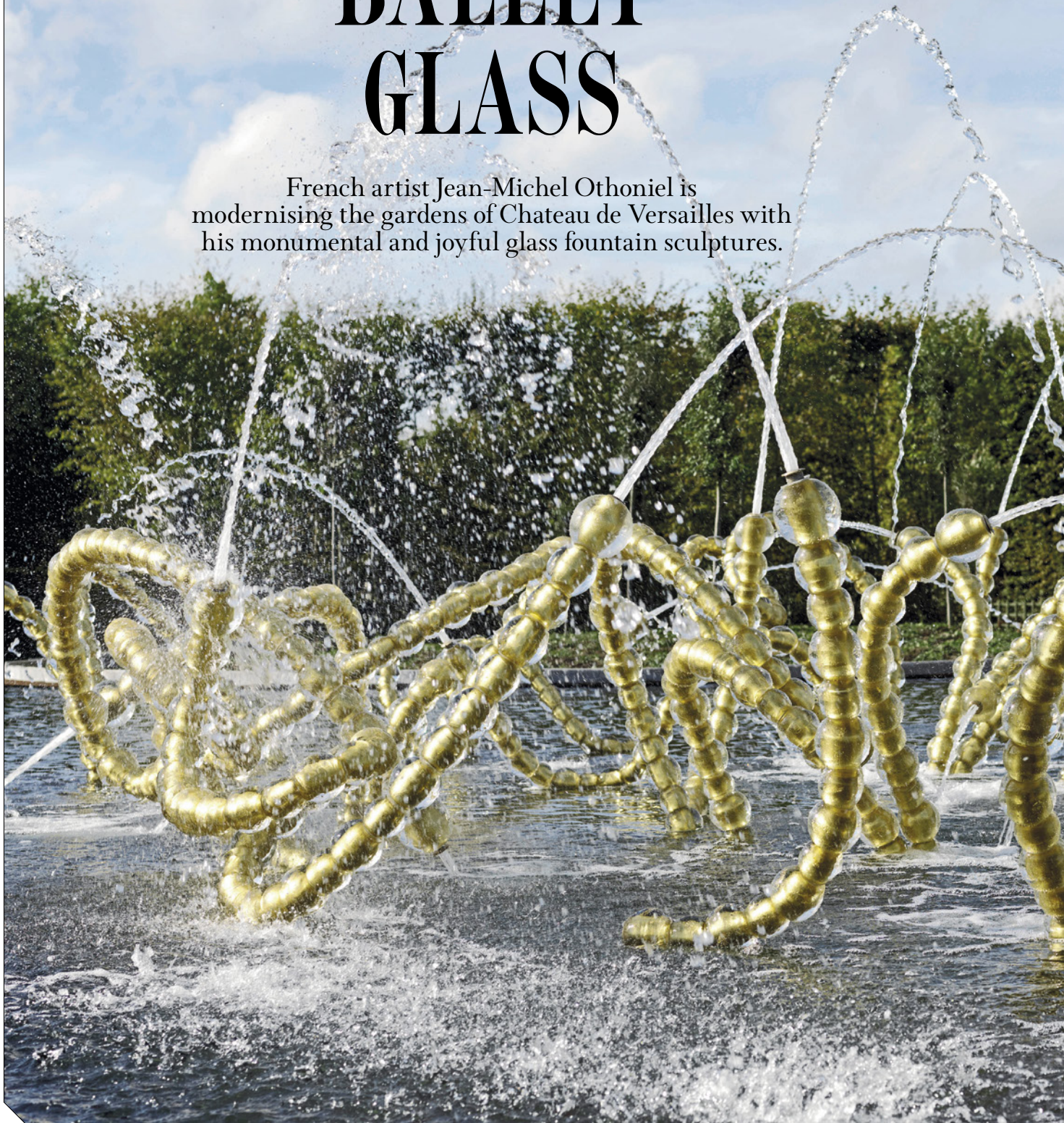
**BEST
OF THE
BEST**



STYLE | TIME | WHEELS | WINGS | WATER | TRAVEL & LEISURE | HOME

BALLET GLASS

French artist Jean-Michel Othoniel is modernising the gardens of Chateau de Versailles with his monumental and joyful glass fountain sculptures.



Each orb in *Les Belles Danses* weighs from four to eight kilogrammes and took five days of work.
Inset:
Jean-Michel Othoniel.



By **DIONNE BEL**



The Water Theatre Grove at Chateau de Versailles was once the venue for parties, performances and concerts during the reign of King Louis XIV. Closed to visitors since 1990 after a devastating storm, May saw its grand reopening after a major makeover orchestrated by respected landscape architect, Louis Benech, and contemporary glass artist, Jean-Michel Othoniel.

Breathing new life into the 1.5-hectare fountain-filled wooded grove, the pair delved into its storied past and infused a contemporary feel into the venue.

A work of epic proportions, Othoniel's three massive gilded fountain sculptures for the grove's ponds – his most extensive and challenging artwork to date – comprise 1,751 bowling ball-sized blown-glass orbs, 22,000 sheets of gold leaf and custom-made piping and nozzles, and required 14 months of production. Entitled *Les Belles Danses* (The Beautiful Dances),





Othoniel used Murano glass to create this four-poster bed.

they feature loops and arabesques that evoke the body in movement, amplified by water jets. The sculpture is directly inspired by the ballets put on by Louis XIV, the calligraphic floor pattern notations in the book *L'Art de Decrire la Danse* (The Art of Describing Dance) written by Raoul-Auger Feuillet in 1701 to help the king remember court dance steps and Le Notre's famous embroidery parterres that echo the king's garments.

BODY OF WORK

When contemplating Othoniel's sculptures, Louis XIV thus appears to be dancing on water. The artist notes: "The figure of King Louis XIV is really the subject of the whole garden, depicting his power and evoking his divine dimension.

But this king is not merely an abstraction, he is king incarnate. He is recognisable, even through allegory. In my work, I often evoke the body, a symbolic absent one. Here, the only body required is that of the king. My imperative is to speak of Louis XIV in a contemporary manner, rather than

Othoniel's works form an intimate bond with nature.

of my own obsessions. The formal relation between the ways dance and gardens are written about appeared to me to be an obvious source of inspiration. There is the evocation of a joyous, leaping dance, a triple-metre dance with convolutions and ricochets. I redrew

these elements to stage the king's body. It seemed natural to place my sculptures on the water, as Louis Benech's pools are a contemporary evocation of the theatre stage in the ancient grove."

Depending on the sky, *Les Belles Danses* metamorphose from dramatic, like a monster emerging from the sea, to meditative, like a pagoda on water. The breathtaking sculptures were the result of the expertise of a team of 70, including glassmakers, metalworkers, engineers and gilders.

GLOBAL INFLUENCES

No stranger to installing his works outdoors – his giant necklaces have been suspended in the gardens of the Alhambra in Granada – Othoniel's works form an intimate

bond with nature. Nonetheless, he also enjoys exhibiting in galleries and museums.

He explains: "I love both and I try to connect with different people and cultures, like 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 is able to talk to a large public. That's a big goal today

for an artist: to be local and global."

There is an inherent duality to Othoniel's pieces. While concerned about the durability of materials used in a piece that is meant to last for years, he also aims to convey a sense of fragility and delicacy. "What appears to be very light is actually very heavy; what looks simple is actually very complex," he states. "So you have this sort of

double feeling about it, which I love.

I want people to feel energy and joy when they look at my works. My goal is also to bring beauty. What I discovered in Asia was how beauty is linked to meditation and the sacred. This has really helped me to see my work in another way, to see that beauty can bring

you to another level

and towards

the idea of



Using Murano glass and water, Othoniel sculpted *Bottle of Tears* in 2011.

the sacred – not religious – but of how you can escape the world through beauty.”

ARTISTIC ORIGINS

Born in 1964 in Saint-Etienne, Othoniel graduated in sculpture in 1988 from a French art school 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. The following year, he introduced 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 a very simple material,” he admits. “It’s something everybody has had an experience with, an emotion. As a child, you find a chunk of glass on the beach or you watch the light coming through a glass of water. I love this idea of using a very popular material in a very refined way.”



One of the exhibits in Othoniel's travelling retrospective, *My Way*.

“I love this idea of using a very popular material in a very refined way.”

Othoniel is regularly invited to create in situ works that converse with historical sites and modern-day architecture. In the pipeline is a complete installation called *Le Tresor* consisting of floor, ceiling, walls, lighting, windows and cabinets – an entire glass room to house an actual treasure – in Saint-Pierre Cathedral in Angouleme,

France, as well as a major travelling exhibition of all-new pieces.

Today, Othoniel works with glassblowers Salviati in Murano and Matteo Gonet in Basel that use the Venetian technique. Glass has become his signature as he crafts oversized hand-blown spheres and strings them together like pearls to form necklaces, knots or flowers.

“There is a strong link with the body in my work; it’s all about sensuality,” he remarks. “For example, the necklace connects you directly to your body. You have the desire to wear it, but frustration because you can’t. I love to play with attraction and repulsion. There’s also the idea of the sacred because beads are used to pray in different religions. So

it's something linked to the body and the spirit, which is important in my work. The knot plays with the idea of movement. It's like an infinity sign and your eyes never stop running around the form. It's not a fixed form. The flower is about finding beauty in a very simple thing. It's not flamboyant; it's the idea of how a small, discreet thing from nature can talk to you, how a sense of wonder can come from reality. You don't have to escape into

red for blood and blue for the sea. He never oversteps that boundary that would give his pieces an ornamental dimension. He describes how his art has evolved over the past 30 years. "In the beginning, I was in my own world, with my own obsessions and problems, and I tried to cure myself using art. Now for the past 15 years, I've learnt to talk to the public and to bring them with me into my vision of the world. Through contemporary art and through

The use of vibrant hues in sculpture is uncommon.

a fantasy world – just look at the real world and you'll find beauty. That's also one of the messages I wish to convey."

ART VS CRAFT

Some may call Othoniel's work "decorative", but that's a label he fights against, especially since the use of vibrant hues in sculpture is uncommon. Sculptors have difficulty with colour and tend to favour browns, blacks, greys and whites through the use of stone and metal. Othoniel establishes precise limits around his choices of colour, only working with shades that have strong meanings in different cultures like pink for the body,

my work, you can find happiness and reach an elevated state. The Versailles project arrived at the right time; I'm at a stage where I have achieved my own language and I'm more mature, readier to give to others. I'm not doing this project for myself, but for others."

www.othoniel.fr

Riviere Blanche, a rigid aluminium structure with opaque Murano glass beads, was exhibited at the Louvre in Paris in 2004.

