



**MUSÉE D'ART  
MODERNE ET  
CONTEMPORAIN  
SAINT-ÉTIENNE  
MÉTROPOLE**

# JEAN-MICHEL OTHONIEL

*FACING DARKNESS*

MAY 26<sup>TH</sup> - SEPTEMBER 16<sup>TH</sup> 2018

OPENING : FRIDAY 25<sup>TH</sup> 2018

**PRESS  
RELEASE**



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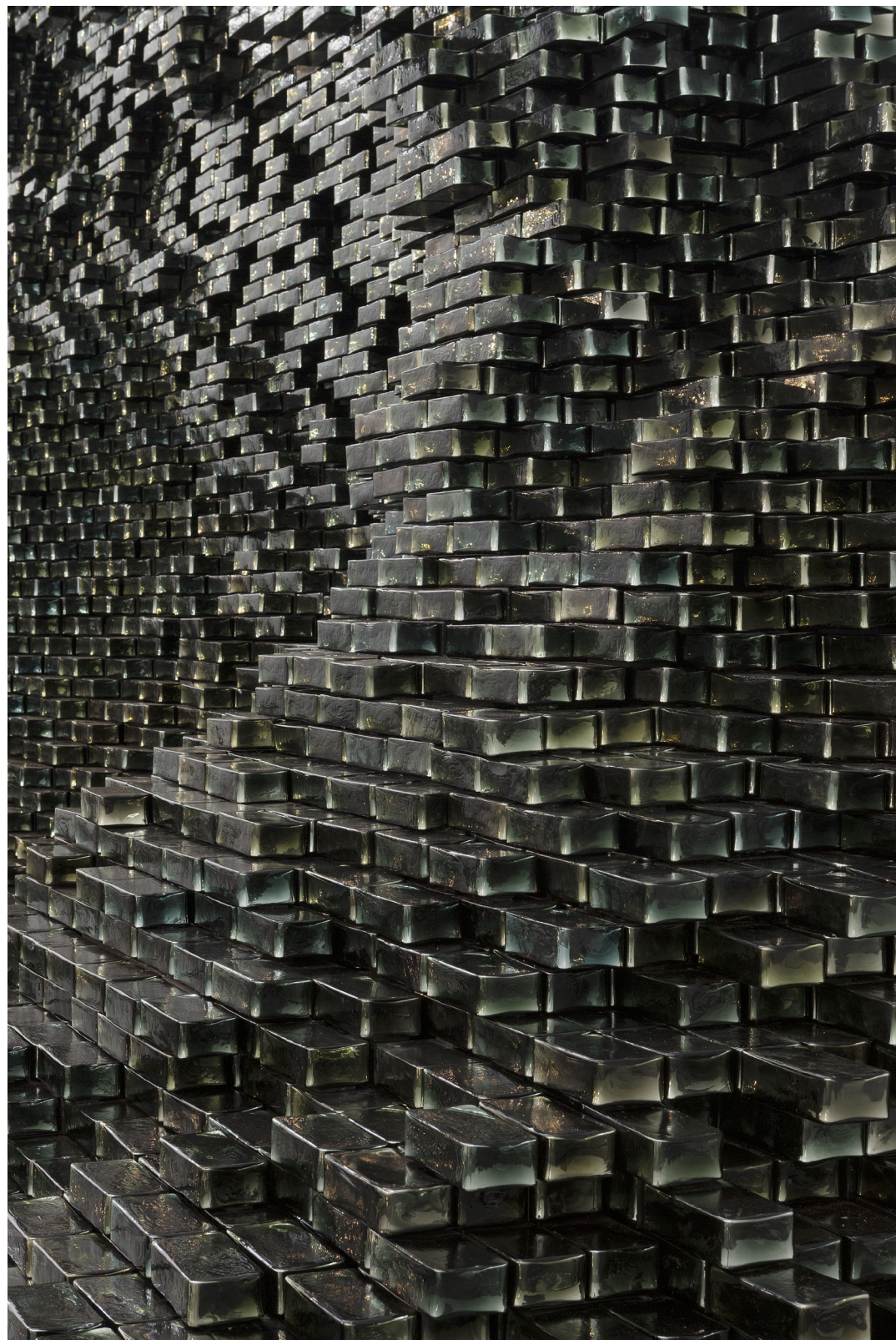
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**Jean-Michel Othoniel**, *The Big Wave* (detail), 2017. Black indian glass bricks, steel.  
Photo : Claire Dorn. © ADAGP, Paris 2018.



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# JEAN-MICHEL OTHONIEL

## FACING DARKNESS

*This is the third exhibition the museum has devoted to the artist and the first of such importance. Specifically conceived for the MAMC's 30th anniversary, it marks a turning point in the work of the artist with the presentation of works which are darker and more intimate, but still just as poetic and mysterious.*

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Saint-Etienne is the birthplace of Jean-Michel Othoniel and the city of his childhood. At the age of 6 he attended introduction to art classes at the "Maison de la Culture"; at 7 years old he signed up for guided visits at the Museum of Art and Industry and between the ages of 9 and 17 followed evening classes at the School of Fine Arts. Having obtained a High School certificate in plastic arts in 1981 he left his home town for Paris.

Jean-Michel Othoniel has never concealed his passion for the Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, a living space and one of enchantment. The Museum and its collections form the source of his vocation as an artist.

*"It is thanks to the Museum that I became an artist. I remember when I was 7 years old being struck by the works of Robert Morris and minimal art, their formal simplicity masking a whole thought process of the purity of contemporary art".*

### Facing darkness

The works exhibited in central hall of the Museum all refer to the artist's worried and anxious vision of the world. By revealing works which are very closely linked to features of his home town, Jean-Michel Othoniel raises questions about our presence in the face of global change. In an autobiographical journey his older and intimate works converse with his latest architectural and telluric creations. Placed at the four cardinal points of the central exhibition hall, the works interchange and enter into dialogue.

### 1. Experiencing darkness

The centrepiece of the exhibition is the large panel of dark glass in the form of a wave, specifically designed for this space. The big wave, began in Sète in the summer of 2017, is transformed here into a wall of menacing black bricks, a cave or a cavern. Othoniel is paying homage to memories of the walls in his town, formerly blackened by coal dust. Physically confronted by this wave we experience a feeling of being consumed by darkness, engulfed in the reflections of the dark black matter. In the face of an apocalyptic reality of unleashed elements, this crashing swirling structure, 6 metres high and 15 metres long, takes on the presence of a tidal wave, and the colour of an oil slick.

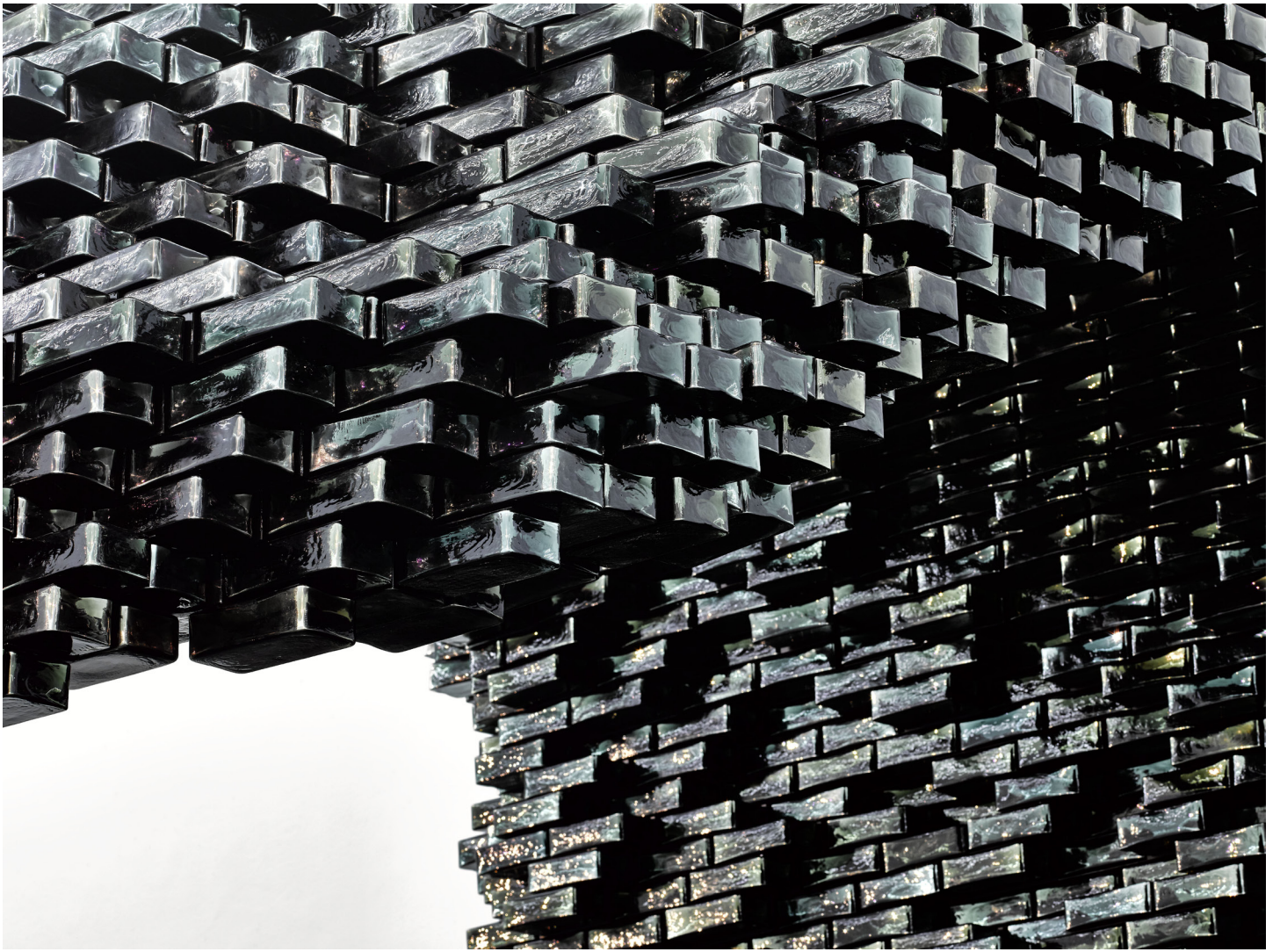
### 2. Facing childhood monsters

In this former blackened city, the grim slag heaps still made the child artist dream. In 1996, when invited to exhibit at the Mining Museum in Saint-Etienne for the "Art in the City" event, he presented a filmed performance in which he transforms a black slag heap into an erupting volcano. He was staging his vision of a spell bound child. This short poetic film will be presented in the exhibition: a child in the face of darkness, conjuring up monsters from the past, transforming shadows into luminous gems and the volcano's smoke into fireworks.



**SAINT-ETIENNE  
métropole**





**Jean-Michel Othoniel**, *The Big Wave* (détail), 2017. Black indian glass bricks, steel.  
Photo : Daniel Infanger. © ADAGP, Paris 2018.



**Jean-Michel Othoniel**, *The Big Wave* (détail), 2017. Watercolor on paper.  
Artist private collection. © ADAGP, Paris 2018.





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### **3. The darkness within us**

In contrast to the gigantism of the wave, the other key work of this exhibition is a minute photograph depicting the artist facing the obscurity of an uncertain future. The minuscule *Self-portrait in priest's vestments* timidly reveals another of Othoniel's performances produced in 1986, a period when the artist was undergoing an existential crisis: to live or to die, leave the secular life, become an artist. As if to hide and to transform himself the artist returned to the region of his birth to produce this first performance, disguised as a priest. This very first work was carried out in Cotatay, not far from a miraculous cave: a photograph taken from the rear in which he confronts the wall of a frozen dam and tries indefatigably to climb the icy face.

This first image condenses the major themes and elements making up his work: the self-portrait, mystery, the transition from shadow to light, finesse and obstinacy, a game, a secret, risking danger, solitary pleasures, joy, the instantaneous and the unique, the importance of "off-camera", conveyed narration, the sacred, the predominance of the elements, the desire for enthrallment, ghosts and poetry, the wish to be submerged.

### **4. Face to face**

In one corner of the hall, Jean-Michel Othoniel presents his very latest works in glass, *Invisibility Faces*, set out in blocks of obsidian, like mysterious totems. They are self-portraits sculpted in the black glass of Armenian volcanoes. Placed on chestnut wood pedestals carved by anthroposophical woodworkers from Dornach in Switzerland, the energy of these enormous stones of vitrified lava converses with that of the wood.

These dark masses, resembling meteorites fallen from the sky, sculpted by the artist with the help of his glassmakers, absorb the light, allowing a pale reflection of our own image to show through.

Reminiscent of Giacometti's *Cube* or the dodecahedron of Dürer's *Melencolia I*, these "calm blocks here below, fallen from an obscure disaster"<sup>1</sup> become a homage to the blackened faces of miners, the "gueules noires" (black-faces) of his childhood.

### **The artist and the Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art**

This audacious radicalism, presented very early on by the Saint-Etienne Metropolitan Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, endures in Othoniel's current work. With his latest almost monochrome works, he seeks the purity of form inspired by nature and even a certain form of abstraction. The artist is attempting to express a desire for violent enthrallment which is minimal and telluric.

The Museum supported the works of Othoniel from his beginnings, with the acquisition for its collections of an emblematic work from his "Soufre" (Sulphur) period, entitled the *Hermaphrodite*, along with his phosphorous paintings in homage to the *Fiancé* by Picabia.

With "In the face of darkness", Othoniel returns to Saint-Etienne to reveal his latest works in glass, the fruits of his present research into the purity of form, monumentality, monochrome and radicalism. The historical works of the artist presented in the exhibition, produced towards the end of the 1980's, show both the genesis and the constant renewal of themes dear to the artist, which like successive waves, continue to submerge him.

**Curator** : Martine Dancer-Mourès, general curator in charge of 30th anniversary program

<sup>1</sup> From the "Tomb of Edgar Poe" by Stéphane Mallarme, 1875.



**Jean-Michel Othoniel**, *Invisibility Faces*, 2015. Obsidian, chestnut wooden base. Artist private collection. Photo : Claire Dorn © ADAGP, Paris 2018.



**Jean-Michel Othoniel**, *Self-portrait in priest's vestments*, 1986. Black and white photography. Artist private collection. © ADAGP, Paris 2018.



*Jean-Michel Othoniel at 6 years old during art class at the «Maison de la culture» of Saint Etienne. Artist private collection.*



There is also the release of a new book in March 2018, entitled *Jean-Michel Othoniel, Dark Matters*, published with the Galerie Perrotin, which includes an original text from the Franco-American art critic, Natasha Boas. This artist's book presents his latest monumental works, notably *The Big Wave*, by means of an innovative lay-out featuring waves of pages in different formats, playing on the overlapping of images.