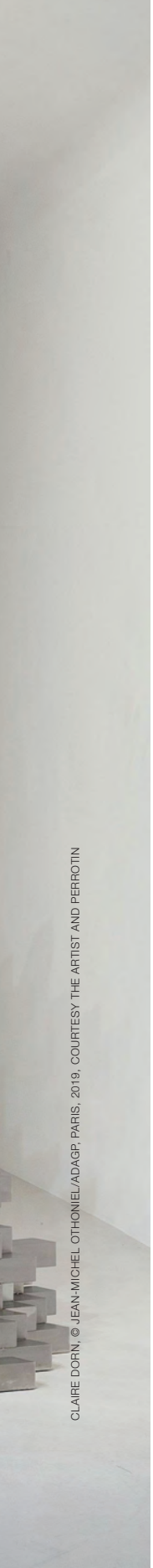
# q/a

***Agora,***
**2019.**
2700 polished stainless steel bricks,
301 x 428 x 369 cm.



CLAIRE DORN, © JEAN-MICHEL OTHONIEL/ADAGP, PARIS, 2019, COURTESY THE ARTIST AND PERROTIN

# Shapes From Illusions:

## A Conversation with Jean-Michel Othoniel

by Rajesh Punj

**For Jean-Michel Othoniel,** glass has "opened up… a realm of endless possibilities," allowing him to create transformative works on the edge of unreality. Like the 19th- and early 20th-century visionary Paul (Karl Wilhelm) Scheerbart, Othoniel aspires to illuminate the world with complex translucent structures that encapsulate the elemental order of the universe—sometimes benign, sometimes threatening, always beautiful—with glass conjuring water, air, fire, and earth, as sculpture turns into architecture and the architectonic turns into the sublime.

Whether created from delicate strands of glass beads or glass (and now stainless steel) bricks, Othoniel's works weave a web of illusion and imaginative freedom. In "The Narcissus Theorem," his current exhibition at the Petit Palais, blue brick rivers, golden lotuses, necklaces, crowns, and wild knots hide within architecture, float on mirrored pools, and hang from the trees, all telling the story of a man-flower who, in reflecting himself, reflects the world around him. As always, Othoniel's message is one of openness—to ideas, to (re)enchantment, and to change. His work offers an occasion to dream and, at least for a while, to resist the disillusionment of the world.

**Rajesh Punj:** **Many of the works in "Oracles," your 2019 exhibition at Galerie Perrotin, introduced steel. Do you see glass and steel as elemental, one as necessary as the other?**

**Jean-Michel Othoniel:** I have always used different materials to realize my work, including sulfur, wax, photography, obsidian, glass, aluminum, and now steel. For the first time, I am using metal in a visible way on the surface of the sculpture—before it was hidden behind the glass beads and bricks, used more as an inner skeleton.

**RP:** **You use both materials to form bricks, which have become a staple of your work. What significance do bricks have for you?**

**J-MO:** The representation of bricks has been present in

FROM LEFT:
Jean-Michel Othoniel in his exhibition "The Narcissus Theorem," Petit Palais, Paris, 2021.

***L'Autel ou le Parloir (the Altar or the Parlour),* 2019.**
Yellow Indian glass bricks and stainless steel, 127 x 212 x 30 cm.

THIS PAGE AND OPPOSITE: CLAIRE DORN, © JEAN-MICHEL OTHONIEL ADAGP, PARIS, 2019. COURTESY THE ARTIST AND PERROTIN

my work since the end of the 1980s. "The yellow small wall of bricks," as Marcel Proust described Vermeer's *The View of Delft* (1660–61), was present in my early work as a metaphor of freedom and a space for reverie. I love the poetic and very mysterious world evoked by the brick wall throughout the history of art. The brick is the first physical step toward building, a common language for many different cultures. It is also a module that allows me to create colossal works.

**RP: You've had glass bricks handmade in India, where they are buried and burned in the Rajasthani dirt, but the steel bricks have a very different character. Are you introducing something more machine-like?**
**J-MO:** The big difference is that the ones made of Indian glass have an organic shape, but are too fragile to be considered structural, whereas the metallic ones are fundamentally stronger, but have to be transformed to become sensual—and that's crucial, because I do not like the machine aesthetic. I always intend to show the gesture of the craftsmen with whom I work. The metal in my work is intended to create a surrogate for glass. I want it to have the same sensuality, the same softness as glass. You can see my approach to metal in the beads of my tornadoes, which are made of mirrored or painted steel, and in *Le Kiosque des Noctambules* (1996–2000), the gates of the subway entrance that I created in Paris. The metal there was hammered or cast to appear more sensual. I want the metal skin to remind you of the touch of the glassblower, of the prints I put into the clay, sulfur, or wax while making the molds.

**RP: Have the steel bricks allowed you to take the works in a new direction?**
**J-MO:** The decision came with the relationship of the work to architecture, and the involvement of the architectural has always been crucial to the overall aesthetic. It took me more than 20 years to realize these "sculptures-architectures," such as *Agora* (2019), which is the first habitable sculpture I ever created.

**RP: The steel brick sculptures do not have skeletal supporting frames, which are essential in the glass works. Has that liberated their construction? Or are the possibilities the same, basically applying one unit to another until you have something substantial?**
**J-MO:** *The Big Wave* (2018), at the Musée d'art moderne et contemporain de Saint-Étienne Métropole, was indeed supported by a big metallic structure; it was necessary to hold the 10,000 Indian glass bricks that make up the 25-ton piece. Behind the monumental glass wave, there is a monumental wave of steel, designed by a group of engineers. During a year of collaboration with the metalworkers, I developed the idea to build the sculptures using metallic bricks, which would allow me to create greater volumes in space.

**RP: You have talked about your desire to create art as architecture, meaning that you want viewers to be able to enter into an environment and experience your materials. Do you see *Agora* as "enveloping the spectators," giving them an alternative to concrete and stone?**
**J-MO:** The idea of enveloping the viewer was already present in some of my older works, like *The Golden Rain* (2000), which was made entirely of fabric. It was a space enclosed by blue veils embroidered with thousands of gold sequins. The viewer was intentionally trapped in an arachnoid world. But this installation created a space of wonder rather than a space of architecture. Inside *Agora*, there is a real space, where you can sit, stay, and talk. The idea came to me after conversations in New York with architects, critics, and specialists in public art. For me, it was obvious that an artwork is the only thing that allows you to build a "free space" for people—a new agora in the city where you can talk and avoid all types of censorship. I still believe that the art world is a place where you can be free. This is what is missing in the city. As an artist, I feel obliged to build shelters of freedom. I'd like to place a new agora in another city, constructed of different materials.

**RP: The space within the work is meant to encourage people to sit and exchange ideas, to think less about the world outside and more about internal spaces of the mind and imagination. By isolating us from**

# jean-michel othoniel

CLAIRE DORN, © JEAN-MICHEL OTHONIEL/ADAGP, PARIS, 2019. COURTESY THE ARTIST AND PERROTIN

Installation view of "Oracles," with ***La Rivière Bleue (blue river),*** 2019. 760 blue Indian glass bricks, 45 x 830 x 220 cm., Perrotin, Paris, 2019.

**everything, where would you like to lead us?**
**J-MO:** My agora is covered, which makes it different from the old Greek agoras. Today, talking as a social exchange has to be protected from censors, including our own censorship, and from the eyes of social media—I dream of a space of total freedom based on human values.

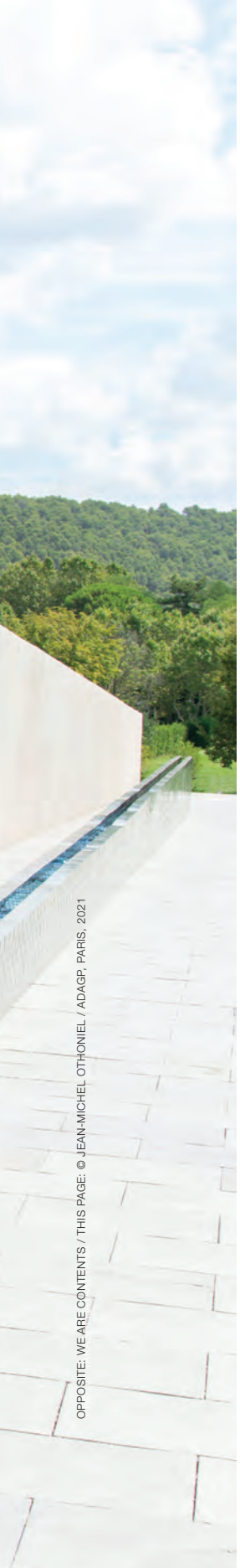
**RP: How important is it that viewers associate the blue bricks in *La Rivière Bleue* with water and the honey-colored ones in *L'Autel ou le Parloir* (both 2019) with flames?**
**J-MO:** Titles are very important to my sculptures because the power of the colors and the beauty of the materials are so strong. The titles essentially guide you in a poetic, positive direction, which might also be political or socially engaging. The beautiful blue from India recalls the old forbidden cities of the Mediterranean world or the Middle East, but if you look closely toward the surface of the pavement, you can see the first shock wave of a tsunami. I installed collapsing icebergs in the same room at Perrotin. These works capture catastrophic moments on hold forever. I think we still have the power to stop our own decline. In *L'Autel*, one of a series of altars, the reflections on the wall recall theatrical flames. This has to do with the sequences and rhythm made by the positioning of the modules in space, which causes a minimal, musical abstraction of illuminated enchantment to radiate from the mirrored glass. For me, such effects are the visualization of sounds, voices escaping from walls of sighs.

**RP: I see the flickering reflections emanating from the *Oracles* and *Altars* almost as light drawings. They introduce an element of animation to works that are otherwise stationary and rather imposing.**
**J-MO:** I love the idea of light drawing. The light and shadow on the wall are like a musical score; for the first time, I decided to free them. The baroque is in my work, and I love to emphasize it sometimes.

**RP: There is something quite magical about *L'Autel ou le Parloir*, which has impressive warmth and**

THIS PAGE:
Installation view of "Îles Singulières," Chateau La Coste, Le Puy Ste Réparade, France, 2019.

OPPOSITE:
Installation view of "The Narcissus Theorem," with rendering of *Noeud miroir*, Petit Palais, Paris, 2021.



OPPOSITE: WE ARE CONTENTS / THIS PAGE: © JEAN-MICHEL OTHONIEL / ADAGP, PARIS, 2021

**yet seems almost otherworldly, a liminal point of entry to a sacred space. Did you intend a sense of alchemy or of the divine?**

**J-MO:** This work is very contemplative—I believe art has to help you escape from reality. Pure emotion is more important to me than alchemy, and the concept of the divine is almost impossible for me to handle as an artist. It is the altar of the human, the altar of our hope.

**RP: How does color generate such intensity?**

**J-MO:** I have a feeling that artists perceive the events of the world a little bit in advance. Land artists were talking about climate change in the 1970s, Pop artists criticized hyper-consumption in the 1960s, and today our premonitions are burning faster and faster as the world becomes increasingly crazy. When I thought about building *Agora* in 2018, the "yellow jacket" movement didn't yet exist; six months later, people were building huts at street crossings in Paris in an attempt to create spaces for people to talk and exchange their ideas and angst. I created *The Boat of Tears* in 2004, 15 years before the massive waves of migration to Europe. My work involves intuitions, and my poetic sculptures sometimes express political emotions. The intense colors, exalted by the concept of beauty, scream with the urgency of our need to speak.

**RP: Are your works a criticism of current conditions, or are they intended as interventions?**

**J-MO:** The sculptures are like oracles, questioning people in a poetic way, serving as a source for thinking seriously about everything. I am creating sculpture for people to be more aware, hoping to be in advance or at least on time.

**RP: Felix Burrichter, in *PIN-UP Magazine*, observed that your works "before being structures or sculptures are entirely improbable." Would you agree?**

**J-MO:** Most of my projects are improbable, and the mystery, or magic, is to bring them to reality, to make them exist in the real world, which is why I love public art. I am still amazed that I could bring a glass folly into the heart of Paris 20 years ago, a golden heart to the Mori Garden in Tokyo, or a glass fountain to the gardens of Versailles. Building utopias is like creating shapes from illusions.

I strongly believe that fiction and fantasy do not exist in art. It is just a question of mindset and perspicacity to concretize our desires. I am a sculptor, and I am not scared of Pygmalion's syndrome.

**RP: Could you explain how you see space?**
**J-MO:** Space is what makes thoughts happen. The confrontation with space is the only way to create and not stay in a purely imaginary world; it is an act of crystallization. I would remain a watercolorist—every project would remain in my notebooks—if I did not force myself to enter the real world. I am a dreamer, and to fight with reality is to make my work come alive.

**RP: What subtler sensations or feelings do you see existing within your work?**
**J-MO:** From the first idea, the first sketch, to the fulfillment of my dreams, there is a succession of emotions on the way to a work's creation—love, hope, and happiness, but also doubt, pain, and frustration. I desire to share the first three emotions with the people who look at my work and keep the other three for my own creativity.

**RP: Are "eroticism" and "sensuality" inherent? What about beauty?**
**J-MO:** The materials that I use are sensual—you want to touch them, to protect them; they are my mirrors. I want to create an intimate, complex relationship with the viewer based on mutual dependence. That is why I call my works erotic. I have no bible, but, for me, beauty is the way to bring you closer to spirituality.

**RP: You have been installing your works around the world since the late 1980s. How do you understand**

CHARLOTTE PIÉROT, © OTHONIEL/ADAGP, PARIS 2018

> **“These works capture catastrophic** moments on hold forever. I think we still have the power to stop our own decline.”

***The Big Wave,* 2018.**
Black Indian glass bricks and metal, view of work as installed in “Facing Darkness” at the Musée d’art moderne et contemporain de Saint-Étienne Métropole, 2018.

**and experience location and its role in your work?**

**J-MO:** The idea of location is crucial. I had the chance to discover the world before globalization, when local differences meant something. We were without the Internet, so it was harder to have an idea of what other countries were like—you had to travel to nourish your senses with new sensations. Today, there is a sense that the only location is on Instagram. In my work, I try to make the experience of the real more important than the image of the work. I am convinced that you still have to travel to see and experience a sculpture, and I strongly believe in the idea of pilgrimage to a site to reveal your emotions. This was what Land Art was all about: you had to travel to the Utah desert to experience Nancy Holt's *Sun Tunnels* or to Nevada to see Michael Heizer's *Double Negative*.

At the Château La Coste in the South of France, I recently installed a cross in dialogue with Tadao Ando's building, and I am sure that this permanent installation at this fantastic sculpture park has to be experienced in reality. You need to feel the heat of the sun, to smell the land of Provence, and hear the echo of sound between Ando's walls for everything to come alive. In our world today, everything has to be identified. In my case, being French and at the same time a global artist, my work has to be open

***Invisibility Faces*, 2015.**
Obsidian and chestnut wooden base, view of installation at the Musée d'art moderne et contemporain de Saint-Étienne Métropole, 2018.

enough to translate and speak to American, Asian, and European viewers. You have to be "Instagrammable," but at the same time, your work has to be unique and complex, offering emotions that justify your physical displacement. One way to handle this complex situation is to not care about it.

**RP: What matters to you most?**
**J-MO:** Love.

*Jean-Michel Othoniel's "The Narcissus Theorem," with more than 70 new works, is on view at the Petit Palais in Paris through January 2, 2022.*

> **"Space is what makes thoughts happen.** The confrontation with space is the only way to create and not stay in a purely imaginary world…I am a dreamer, and to fight with reality is to make my work come alive."

CHARLOTTE PIÉROT, © OTHONIEL/ADAGP, PARIS 2018