

ART

Jean-Michel Othoniel's Palace Of Mirrors Plunges Us Into The Myth Of Narcissus

The internationally-acclaimed French artist's biggest solo show in Paris since his 2011 retrospective at the Centre Pompidou transports visitors to a palace made of reflective glass and metal pearls and bricks.

BY Y-JEAN MUN-DELSALLE

In Greek mythology, Narcissus was a hunter, known for his beauty, who fell in love with his own reflection in a pool of water. He stared at it for the rest of his life, and a yellow and white flower bearing his name sprung up where he died.

Jean-Michel Othoniel has now transposed this myth of a man-flower who, through his own reflected image, reflects the world around him, into the setting of the Petit Palais in Paris, crafting a narrative anchored in the museum building constructed around a hidden garden in a dialogue between art and architecture.

Drawing from the edifice's gilded surfaces and the garden's exotic plants and mirror pools, he is the first contemporary artist to be granted a major solo show at Petit Palais.

Running until 2 January 2022, *The Narcissus' Theorem* presents over 70 artworks, mostly new or never before exhibited in Europe. Playing with concepts of wonderment and reflection, the master of re-enchantment aims to bring back joy and poetry into our lives.

"I hope I will make the public dream a little bit," he pronounces.

In an example of Othoniel's increasingly monumental production, a site-specific, shimmering river of 1,000 blue glass bricks resembling gemstones cascade down the grand staircase outside, enticing us to climb up the steps and walk through the ornamental gilt bronze gate imagined by the building's architect Charles Girault, which acts as a portal into another dimension.

"I think it's important today with



Gold Lotus (2015)

Covid-19 to bring the public from the streets to the museum, to connect with people who don't go to museums," states Othoniel. Like Alice in Wonderland, we've climbed through the looking glass into a fairy-tale castle, detached momentarily from reality.

Entering Othoniel's magical kingdom is a call to defy the disillusionment of the world, to leave behind our earthly woes and go for a stroll in an enchanted paradisaical forest where gold-leaf necklaces hang from tree branches and golden lotus flowers bloom from reflecting pools paved in turquoise and purple tiles.

The scene is mirrored by six stainless steel

PHOTOS CLAIRE DORN COURTESY OF THE ARTIST & PERROTIN, ADAGP, PARIS 2021



ART

“WE NEED A CONNECTION WITH NATURE AND MORE TIME FOR CONTEMPLATION, TO RECONNECT WITH OUR OWN FEELINGS”

knots, whose swirling beads and shiny bases reflect themselves and everything around them, from the lush garden, infinite skies and mosaic floors to the semi-circular colonnade and ceiling murals painted by Paul Baudouin to portray the four seasons.

“The architecture is very inspiring and gave me the energy to do the show,” notes Othoniel. “The Petit Palais was built for the 1900 Paris World’s Fair as a sort of utopic

pavilion, and as you see with the frescoes, it’s a way to evoke Italy and its beautiful gardens, which has a strong connection with my work. We need a connection with nature and more time for contemplation, to reconnect with our own feelings. The garden is the perfect place for this because we can focus on ourselves, enjoy the beauty around us, be protected, take a big breath and rejuvenate.”

Flowers and gardens have always played



French artist
Jean-Michel Othoniel

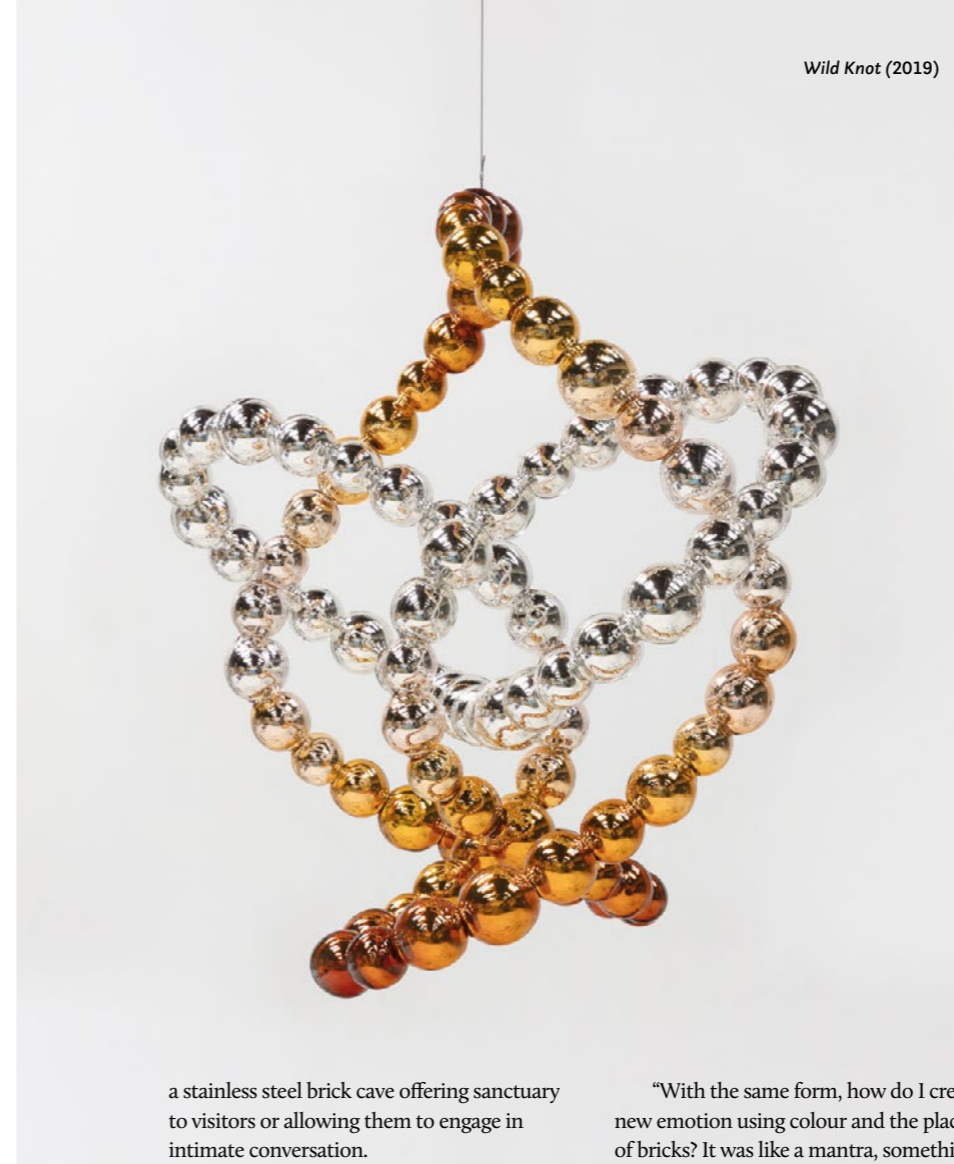
a starring role in Othoniel’s art. No stranger to installing his works outdoors, whether in the gardens of the Alhambra in Granada, Villa Medici in Rome or the Peggy Guggenheim Collection in Venice, his works form an intimate bond with nature, becoming one with the colours, shapes, scents and seasons.

“I had a grandmother who was a gardener, growing vegetables and flowers for the house,” he shares. “When I was a child, I helped her to grow plants. Then I discovered the beauty of the gardens in Spain at the age of 13. This really opened my mind to all the symbolism of the garden, how it can be a place conceived for different uses: entertainment, relaxation, politics, music. Since then, each time I go to a new country, the first thing I do is to go see its gardens.”

Leaving behind the Petit Palais’ garden of delights, we come face to face with the theatrical *Crown of the Night* adorned with a constellation of ultramarine, aquamarine, pink and silver Murano mirrored glass orbs, drops and hearts, a crown you can picture gracing the heads of the storybook royals of our childhood. It bears resemblance to Othoniel’s first public commission, when he transformed the entrance of Paris metro station Palais-Royal - Musée du Louvre into the glass and aluminium bauble-decorated *The Kiosk of the Nightwalkers* for the millennium celebrations, drawing inspiration from Hector Guimard’s Art Nouveau arabesques.

Suspended from the cupola above the dramatic northern spiral staircase, the giant *Crown of the Night* chandelier — just acquired by Petit Palais — lures us down. Descending into the depths of an underground realm, Narcissus’ grotto finds form in *Agora*,

PHOTOS CLAIRE DORN COURTESY OF THE ARTIST & PERROTIN, BRIGITTE LACOMBE FOR DIOR



Wild Knot (2019)

a stainless steel brick cave offering sanctuary to visitors or allowing them to engage in intimate conversation.

Altar-like relief sculptures in radiant, baroque mirrored glass bricks — the result of a months-long meditative ritual when Othoniel sketched alone in his Parisian studio during the first Covid-19-induced lockdown of 2020 — project wild, fiery reflections on the walls, which illuminate the darkness.

“I made drawings every day using the same number of bricks, playing with it like a music partition,” he relates.

“With the same form, how do I create new emotion using colour and the placement of bricks? It was like a mantra, something I was doing just to relax and escape the very scary and stressful situation, without the idea of building those pieces one day. It was more like a diary of this difficult period. When Petit Palais proposed the show to me, I said, maybe I have to try to realise them for real.”

Returning to his first loves, the pure, geometric lines of *Precious Stonewall* find echoes in the minimalist works of 1960s American artists like Donald Judd and Carl



Agora (2019)

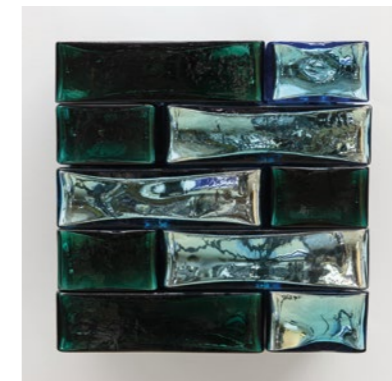
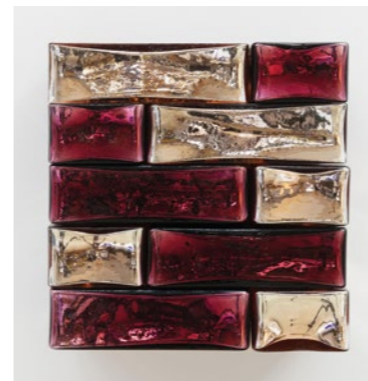
Andre, which he first discovered as a child at the Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art in his native Saint-Étienne. While he was not from an artistic family, he frequented the coal mining city’s sole contemporary art museum — among the first in France — to escape the sadness of life.

“I had the chance to be in a city that had a fantastic contemporary art museum,” he says. “Tony Cragg and Joseph Beuys came when they were young artists. For me, it was a window of hope. It was how I discovered my passion for art as a child, and then I said I want to be a part of this world.”

Wander slightly further in the room and a still, peaceful lake of contemplation composed of blue glass bricks appears, as water is often depicted as a mirrored threshold between two universes in literature. A series of glass *Wild Knots* with endless reflections are suspended above, the fruit of exchanges debuting in 2013 between Othoniel and Mexican mathematician Aubin Arroyo.

Although the two lived on separate continents, Arroyo had seen the artist’s works online and realised that his intuitive, sensual Borromean ring-shaped sculptures

(from left) *Precious Stonewall* #4, #6, #7 (2021)



**“IN MATHEMATICS,
THE IDEA OF INFINITY
IS LINKED TO THE
COSMOS, AND THE
BEAD LINKED TO THE
STAR IN AUBIN’S THEORY,
SO IT HAS REALLY OPENED
MY WORK TO A MORE
COSMOGONIC VISION OF
THE WORLD”**

A R T



Kiku (2021)

were strangely similar to his own rational, computer-generated images of complex mathematical formulas and theory on infinite reflections that he had been developing for more than 15 years. Othoniel has even started creating artworks based on Arroyo’s theorems over the past two years.

He remarks: “In mathematics, the idea of infinity is linked to the cosmos and the bead linked to the star in Aubin’s theory, so it has really opened my work to a more cosmogonic vision of the world.”

His knots may also be found in black ink on white gold leaf paintings in the guise of peonies, which respond to the sculptures sitting atop pedestals. Lastly, in the southern rotunda, the *Kiku* purple glass beadwork named after a Japanese chrysanthemum is housed in a 19th-century display case in a final goodbye to Narcissus and his reflections.

Othoniel’s artistic journey has been nourished by his travels and the use of a universal material and savoir faire that he doesn’t master directly, collaborating with glassblowers Salviati in Murano and Matteo Gonet in Basel. Since a residency in 2009 with artisans in the ancient glassmaking city of Firozabad, India, he has also been building architecture from glass.

Interested in scaling up his art, he has been producing modular blown glass bricks in shades of azure, amber, yellow, pink, emerald, black and grey that pave floors, spring out from walls or cantilever. The most impressive one was *The Big Wave*, which measures 15 metres wide and six metres high and arose gradually from the emotion caused by the 2011 tsunami in Japan.

“The glass in India is made with natural pigment and blown in the earth, so it’s not pure and the colour is not stable,” he discloses. “You can feel the energy and the vibration. I love the fact it’s not perfect. I love this beauty in imperfection.”

Born in 1964, Othoniel graduated in sculpture in 1988 from an art school near Paris. He began his career with sculptures made of wax or sulphur, which he presented at Documenta IX in Kassel, Germany, in 1992, before introducing glass into his work in 1993, 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 growing up, 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



La Rose du Louvre (2019)

stones; it’s something you have a direct feeling with. I love this idea of using a very popular material in a very refined way.”

Othoniel has since become one of France’s leading contemporary artists, his poetic creations surfacing everywhere from the Château de Versailles gardens and the Louvre to the National Museum of Qatar.

Now, in the ultimate consecration, Othoniel has officially been inducted as an Academician (sculpture section) of the Académie des Beaux-Arts in Paris. The storied institution’s mission is to defend and promote French artistic creation.

Based on his ink drawing of an olive branch, Othoniel’s costume was designed by Kim Jones and fashioned by Dior’s ateliers in beautiful hand embroidery of gold thread, green silk and sprinklings of obsidian, his material of choice.

“Usually for an Academician, military embroidery is used, but this is really haute couture,” he points out. “Dior used 3D printing behind the embroidery to give volume, so it’s really sensual. I wanted also to show to the public that the academy is not about old people doing nothing, just sleeping, so I used the costume as a pretext to show how a contemporary designer can be interested in this very traditional academic dress, and Kim Jones was happy to make a proposal.”

Othoniel’s Academician sword was created together with his life partner, Belgian sculptor Johan Creten, and marks their first ever joint work. It features a bronze pommel in the shape of a Borromean knot edged with pearls — an intertwined infinity ribbon reminiscent of the Sèvres porcelain waves Creten exhibited at the Louvre — while the

sword’s blade, made by Othoniel, is carved from a single block of obsidian.

Recently, Othoniel inaugurated *The Wind Rose* permanent sculpture in San Francisco’s Golden Gate Park and a public artwork, *The White Gold Tower*, in Amboise in France’s Loire Valley, a project initiated by the local winegrowers. The 14-metre-tall rostral column in steel, aluminium, glass and gold leaf is topped by an aedicule that acts as a lantern watching over the town.

One of 200 talents selected by Louis Vuitton to celebrate the bicentenary of the founder’s birth, he imagined a glass brick trunk whose digital image was projected in the brand’s stores worldwide and will later be auctioned off, with his artist’s fee going to an Indian children’s charity.

“I was very moved by the people in India, by the beauty of their culture, the beauty of the light, the colours everywhere,” he explains. “At the same time, there is real poverty. This pile of bricks in the shape of a Vuitton trunk reminded me of the piles of bricks I saw along the roads there, which people had piled up to be able to build their houses one day. They are piles of hope and dreams. That’s how I decided not to blow beads in India, but bricks.

“Now, I want to give back to the people in India what they gave to me.”

A R T



Artwork for the 200th anniversary of the birth of Louis Vuitton

PHOTOS CLAIRE DORN COURTESY OF THE ARTIST & PERROTIN