

CULTURED

AN OBJECT IN MOTION

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Lil Buck at the opening of Les Belles Danses at Versailles. Photo by Morgan Lugo

“It’s a challenge for an artist today to be totally yourself and global,” says Jean-Michel Othoniel. Known for his large Murano-glass sculptures, often in dynamic contours evoking motion and sprite, Othoniel has been exhibited at the Guggenheim in Venice, the Fondation de Cartier and the Centre Pompidou, while his splashy patrons include Chanel, Louis Vuitton and Dior. “Chanel’s ‘pearl’ icon was a natural for Jean-Michel to interpret. Her strings of pearls provide endless variants for his creative interpretation.”

At 50, Othoniel is now in a place where “I feel more mature and totally free to express my own language, own signature using those glass beads.” Those glass beads weren’t always Othoniel’s signature. In fact, before 1993, he had never used the material. Othoniel’s early explorations were heavily impacted by the 1980s AIDS epidemic and even earned him a place in Documenta IX in 1992, the career-defining every-five-years summer exhibition in Kassel,

Germany. But as his mid-career retrospective, "My Way" (which traveled from the Centre Pompidou in Paris to the Leeum, Samsung Museum of Art in Seoul to the Brooklyn Museum for most of 2011 and '12), revealed that his early career and current practice, naturally, stem from the same theme. As Lisa Small, exhibitions curator at the Brooklyn Museum, explains, "Though these have a deceptive decorativeness, Othoniel's work deals with ideas about metamorphoses, issues of the body and desire, and personal mythology.



Kin no Kokoro, 2013, at the Mori Art Museum; right, Othoniel at work in his studio.





Murano glass destined for Les Belles Danses



A watercolor by Fabrice Moireau of the Water Theatre Grove at Versailles, designed by Louis Benech, with Othoniel's Les Belles Danses as the fountain centerpiece

While his current task at hand, the one awarded to only the courtliest of artisans, isn't a typical project, Othoniel's signature creations offer universal appeal—with an even deeper mythology. That project? To outfit the renovation of Versailles' Water Theatre Grove with a cabal of contemporary statues.

There aren't many things sacred to the French—baguettes, butter, Breton stripes—but few places are more cherished and symbolic to the Gallic nation than Versailles. Former seat and playland of the Sun King and Marie Antoinette, the palace staged an international competition for the restoration of its bosquet, which is both an ancient grove and an hydraulic amphitheater. The garden gloves were passed to Louis Benech, France's beloved landscape architect who's tamed the countless grounds of treasured châteaux such as Vaux Le Vicomte and Fontenay, as well as for the Rothschilds and Arnaults. Benech also executed the replanting of another sanctified spot, the Jardins des Tuileries.

For Versailles' hallowed ground, Benech extended the invitation to Othoniel (though the two had never met) to propose an art agenda for the sculptures in the reimagined fountain that once accompanied the original 1661 André

Le Nôtre landscape tableau. “I had some ideas, but he said, ‘no thank you!’” tells Benech of his chosen partner in crime. “I chose Jean-Michel because he was not going to give me godchildren. When he told me that he worked from the dance of Louis XIV, I was up to the sky in happiness.”

Othoniel’s proposal, *Les Belles Danses*, consists of four gold-bead linear forms that appear to be in motion and about to burst with water. This references not only the monarch’s favorite pastime, but “connected my work at the same time to the past of Versailles.” Othoniel, as did Benech, found synchronicity in their outlooks. “Louis is building the garden around my work or I’m putting my work inside his garden,” says Othoniel. “So you have this dialogue between land art and landscape design.”

Othoniel was in residency at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston when he divined the plan for Versailles. “We never actually invite anyone to do something,” says Pieranna Cavalchini, the museum’s contemporary curator. “We give them the gift of time, and to come think and let thinking take you. While he was here, he was looking for this particular book, and that got him off thinking in a very beautiful way.” It’s true, in Boston, a city celebrated for its culture of higher education, Othoniel got lost in the archives of the Boston Public Library and scavenged one of three known copies of “Choreography, or the Art of Describing the Dance” by Raoul-Auger Feuillet, the revered choreographer of Louis XIV. The dynamic movements in the book’s “filigree calligraphy” inspired Othoniel, who found that the text “was the key to enter this project.” But the ISG wasn’t just a place of discovery; Cavalchini is giving Othoniel the reigns in 2015 for an exhibition dedicated entirely to his new work, as well as room dedicated to the Versailles project.

All along, however, Othoniel has been in search of a quality in his own practice that initially enticed him into the art game. His first encounter with art was at the age of six at an exhibition of Robert Morris, where he was mesmerized by the artist’s brazen autonomy. “He could do whatever he wanted,” Othoniel says. Since then, Othoniel’s quest has been to develop a formal language that both he and the public are comfortable with. For him, to express, for the world, to read the larger message contained in those recognizable orbs. “Jean-Michel is not afraid of beauty,” says Emmanuel Perrotin, who has been his dealer since 2003. “Beyond the aesthetic seduction of the forms, he is questioning notions of absence and desire, emotional scars and healing, as a form of self-portraiture.”

“I try to bring to people a sensation that they can escape the real world by using my work as a window to a spiritual level that escapes reality,” he says. Though Othoniel has been plagued by the criticism that his work is merely “decorative,” or more interior design than art, Perrotin counters, “The forms in his work have a meaning and are grounded in history.” Othoniel adds, “I think this idea of the decorative is something that a lot of artists work around. It takes time for people to understand your work.”

Photography by Philippe Chancel

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