

Q&A: Jean Michel-Othoniel

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A journey to beauty starting from the “Black Lotus”

French installation artist Jean-Michel Othoniel who recently visited Korea is famous for his unique method of connecting glass marbles like a pearl necklace to create different installations. Over the last four years, he took part in a project that restored the gardens at the Palace of Versailles, which were damaged by typhoons. He also re-established himself as one of the best contemporary artists in France. Five years has passed since his last retrospective was held and the title of his private exhibition this time is “Black Lotus.” For the first time, 10 of his new pieces, including glass marble installations of diverse lotus images and his silver canvas and blank ink drawings, are being shown at Kukje Gallery.

It has been years since you had a private exhibition in Seoul. How do you feel about it?

For me, personally, this feels very important because it's my first show in a gallery after Versailles. The lotus flowers I saw in Korea serve as the motif of this work. Also, I think the shows before were a bit crazy but this one is more sensual and sexy; it's more controlled. Aesthetics played a more important role in previous shows, sensuality is most important in this one.

Your lotuses are in black, pink, gold, purple and more. Why did you name the exhibition “Black Lotus”?

Flowers are important to my work and I am very interested in flowers and their meanings. I chose black because it's the very opposite of white, the color of the lotus. The lotus is also associated with metamorphosis, as it changes forms during the day and night, so I wanted to emphasize the double meaning and tension that it has. To mix the opposites creates energy and a poetic image. The exhibit is named “Black Lotus” because it

has more impact than something like Purple Lotus. I mean it sounds like a rock band. [laughs]

Your paintings take up a large portion of the exhibit. What kind of dynamic exists between the paintings and the space?

When I looked at the space, I knew I needed to have things on the walls because they are so bright. The paintings are the reflections or shadows of the sculptures on the wall and they give the pieces another dimension; they expand the space. The paintings are a new step I discovered between the initial sketch and the making of the sculptures that express the forms in new ways. There is the contrast between fullness and emptiness in the paintings, much like the sculptures, creating dialogue between them.

Did you have any theme in mind when you curated this exhibition?

The idea was to create a fantasy world in this gallery as a site-specific exhibition. The goal was to bring people into my world and allow them to slowly discover the meanings of the flowers and the shapes of the sculptures themselves.

Can you give us some tips that will help us better enjoy the exhibition?

I think you have to almost be alone in the gallery, in silence. When it's very full of light and when the beads are floating, it's quite magical. The joy is still in the piece, like my previous works, but it's joyful in a more serious way. Through this show I want to convey how it's important to look at reality and enjoy life. It's a serious message, but carries joy as well. — *Harry Jun (Design Journalist)*

PHOTOGRAPHS: JANG HYUNWOO