

French Artist Jean-Michel Othoniel Builds An Island At The Heart Of Chateau La Coste

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page 1 of 10

Renowned French artist Jean-Michel Othoniel, 55, has been busy. In one of the most important years of his career with five major solo shows and the launch of his most ambitious work ever, he is indefatigable. Amidst the art and architecture paradise of Château La Coste in the heart of Provence – famous for its biodynamic vineyard owned by Paddy McKillen – and part of his exhibition running until November 22, 2019 that has been one year in the making, he has built La Ligne Infinie (The Infinite Line), a 60-meter-long brick wall that appears to be a contemporary version of a Roman aqueduct in which you can imagine water flowing through it. But these are no ordinary bricks: they are blue glass and silver mirror-polished stainless steel bricks that work in conversation with the extraordinary linear configuration of the site conceived by Italian architect Renzo Piano. You blindly follow that descending, straight trajectory that leads you inside the building to come face to face with Ile Singulière (named after Paul Valéry's poem of the same name in reference to the seaside resort of Sète on the Mediterranean, where the French poet and philosopher was born and where Othoniel has a home). You spot a mysterious island, or perhaps a meteorite or iceberg, performing a strange balancing act atop a rectangular sea of blue bricks, before your eye wanders outside to La Cascade (The Waterfall), the end of that long brick wall, which has been embedded in the hillside and transformed into a fountain.



La Ligne Infinie at Château La Coste PHOTO COURTESY OF WE ARE CONTENTS

It's not the first time that Othoniel has used polished, reflective stainless steel bricks. That honor goes to Agora (named after an assembly place in Ancient Greece serving as a site for public dialog and freedom of expression), recently displayed at his eighth solo exhibition at Perrotin Gallery in Paris, which appears to have a certain prophetic quality. Believing that artists possess powerful intuition and as if able to predict the future, he had started drawing the sculpture more than a year ago in his studio in Sète before the start of the Yellow Vest movement that has rocked France, where people have been staging protests against the government and been trying to connect with one another again. He has created a grotto, a shelter, a place for encounters and discussion, where free speech is protected by the status of an artwork. Straddling sculpture and architecture, it is at once monumental and intimate, political and poetic, minimalist and sensual, a glowing example of how he uses beauty to bring joy and hope to the world. He had the same sentiment of foresight with his work Bateau des Larmes (Boat of Tears) – a wooden raft abandoned on a beach in Miami and adorned with a canopy of glass beaded chains and necklaces – created in 2004, which foreshadowed the arrival in Europe of refugees by boat 15 years later. "Sometimes it scares me how an artwork can be in advance of the things that happen in the real world," he notes. "It can be 10 years, five years or six months earlier. That's why I called my show Oracles. It's the vision that an artist has sometimes."



Agora in stainless steel bricks, Oracles exhibition PHOTO CLAIRE DORN. COURTESY OF PERROTIN GALLERY

As for building architecture from glass, Othoniel works with artisans in the ancient glassmaking city of Firozabad, India, to produce modular glass bricks in shades of azure, amber, yellow, black and gray that pave floors, spring out from walls or cantilever, interested in scaling up his art. The most impressive is The Big Wave, which measures 15 meters wide and six meters high and arose gradually from the emotion caused by the tsunami in 2011 in Japan. Among his latest creations is the dramatic, mystical and meditative Altar that gives the impression of being ablaze when the light hits it just right, referencing the religious symbolism often seen in his work and the numerous altars draped in offerings and colorful necklaces he encountered during visits to India. It is the universality of the brick, used by myriad cultures since the history of humanity, that intrigues him and enables him to surpass the idea of sculpture and form a radical new relationship to space, buildings and the body, while re-evaluating how it fits into its environment.



Agora in stainless steel bricks, Oracles exhibition PHOTO CLAIRE DORN. COURTESY OF PERROTIN GALLERY

With an oeuvre in constant evolution, in 2015, Othoniel was the first contemporary artist to conceive a permanent work for the gardens of the Château de Versailles with *Les Belles Danses* (*The Beautiful Dances*), massive, dancing gilded glass fountain sculptures, while in 2018, he was elected a distinguished Academician (sculpture section) of the Académie des Beaux-Arts in Paris. Last March, he unveiled his largest work ever, *Alfa*: 114 individual fountain-sculptures evoking majestic black reeds and Arabic calligraphy covering the entire surface of the 8,800-sqm lagoon of the National Museum of Qatar in Doha designed by French architect Jean Nouvel. In celebration of the Louvre Pyramid's 30th anniversary, he currently has a solo exhibition of never-before-seen abstract ink on gold leaf paintings at the Louvre running until February 2020, based on a rose in *The Wedding by Proxy of Marie de' Medici to King Henry IV* by Rubens (which to him represents the emblematic flower of the museum), and launched a book, *The Secret Language of Flowers*, capturing details of plants depicted in various artworks in the eight departments of the museum's collection accompanied by his notes telling their stories and mythologies. Coming up in November and December, Perrotin Shanghai will host his first one-man show in the city, where he will present a new series of monumental sculptures and gilded paintings, inspired by his passion for flowers and his first trip to China 27 years ago.



La Rose du Louvre installation PHOTO ANTOINE MONGODIN. COURTESY OF LOUVRE MUSEUM

Q&A with Jean-Michel Othoniel

Describe your new work *Agora* that was featured in your exhibition *Oracles* in Paris.

There are about 3,000 handmade bricks welded together, which were produced by artisans in the suburbs of Paris specialized in making fireplaces. It's a piece that can go outdoors or indoors. I love how the light can pass through the bricks. It could be very powerful. But basically the idea is that it be placed outside in a landscape, a park or a city – the space where agoras were supposed to be – in the heart of the city where people were free to sit and talk about whatever they wanted. I saw some of them in the south of Italy in Paestum in a big archaeological site, where people talked to each other and exchanged ideas. It was very moving because it was the space where people could express themselves. Today, it's more and more difficult to have this sort of free talk in the city, whether in Iran, the United States or France, so I say maybe an artwork can be the place that protects the voices of people because as an artist, you have the power to create spaces out of reality. So why don't we bring this space back into reality and give this freedom that an artwork is able to give to people? Maybe they can express themselves through exchange and it can also be a place to connect, when now we are so connected in the virtual world but disconnected in the real world.



Alfa, 2019 PHOTO MARTIN ARGYROGLO. © 2019 OTHONIEL / ADAGP, PARIS

You recently unveiled Alfa, your monumental permanent installation composed of 114 fountain-sculptures commissioned by the National Museum of Qatar...

This is a crazy project I worked on for three years. I installed more than 100 sculptures in the artificial lagoon shaped like the coast of Qatar in dialog with the architecture, which will turn into fountains like in Versailles. They're also abstract forms, but this time they are all inspired by Arabic calligraphy. I worked with a real calligrapher based there and we discussed the different letters and how it's not possible to put this letter next to that one, so it was very interesting to discover the local culture through this project. It's a museum of the patrimony of Qatar and calligraphy is part of it because it was a nomadic country. People traveled in the desert and calligraphy was one of their treasures, so I'm really happy also to pay homage to it through this project. They look like my sculptures, but from another point of view, they turn into calligraphy, and when you face the building, it's totally abstract, almost like grass on water, so it's linked to the lagoon itself, which is really the entrance to the city. Everything was made in France and shipped to Qatar, filling eight containers. The installation took nine months. The project itself is five times the size of my work in Versailles, so it's really huge and the sculptures are four or six meters high. I used black ceramic-coated metal beads. What is beautiful is the reflection on the water, which is like the ink you see when you clean your calligraphy brush. It's the biggest project I have ever done in terms of scale and visibility.



French artist Jean-Michel Othoniel PHOTO CLAIRE DORN. COURTESY OF PERROTIN GALLERY

How did it feel becoming an Academician last November, and how will you help the Académie des Beaux-Arts to fulfill its mission to defend, promote and support artistic creation?

It was a surprise. I didn't expect to enter the Academy. What I love is this idea of transmission from generation to generation, and also between different fields: music, film and photography, not just sculpture. We have different ways to think about creation, art and where inspiration comes from, so it's really interesting to cross ideas with different fields and different generations because most of them are much older than I am and can speak about how the art world was after the war. Some of them knew artists like Giacometti or Picasso very well, so it's totally crazy for me to talk with them about those very important artists. I learn a lot from them – at my age, I really appreciate becoming the young one who has to learn again. Secondly, we support young and old artists. We choose artists we think need help in terms of their careers because they are at the point they need to develop, or they are very old artists who for example they break their hand and can't work, so we help them for one year, the time they need to recover. It's very moving for me to help different generations. And the third thing, which I didn't really expect is the fact we have this mission to help the government decide what happens in terms of culture in France. This is really interesting because you have to discover so many different subjects, most of them I don't know about, so I have to research and meet very important people in each field they want to help. At the beginning, I was a bit scared because I felt it was a bit too vain to pretend to be an Academician at my age, that it would be just old painters and old sculptors sleeping all afternoon, but in the end, it's work because I have to go every Wednesday to exchange with them on different subjects and find solutions, help people or give advice. Now what's fantastic is that dance will enter the Academy. We are opening a new series of seats for choreographers, so it will bring another vision of art.



Ile Singulière at Château La Coste PHOTO COURTESY OF WE ARE CONTENTS

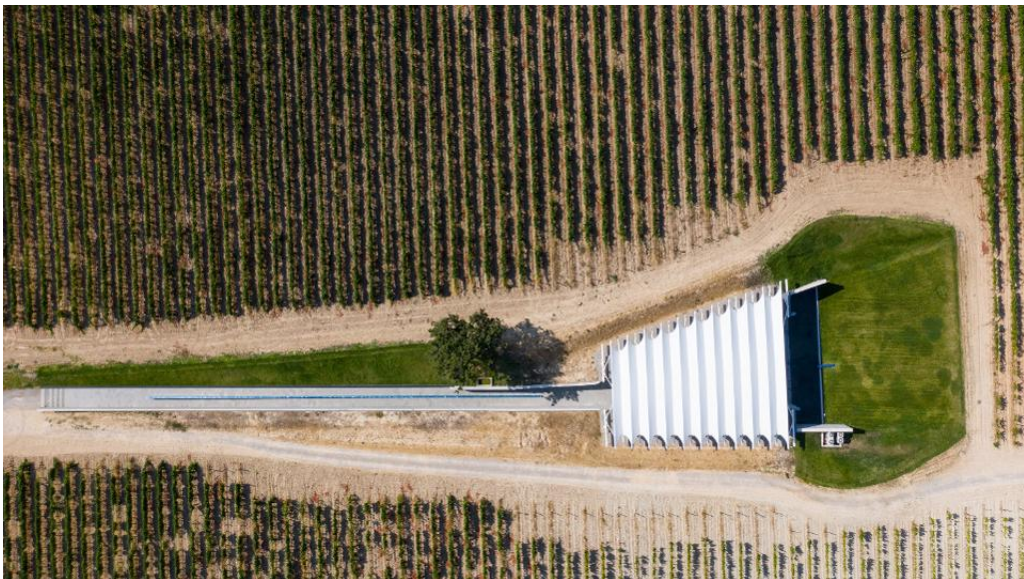
Tell me about the Îles Singulières exhibition that you're presenting this summer and fall at Château La Coste.

Château La Coste is a dream because it's one of the most beautiful and ambitious projects of outdoor sculpture. They invited me to do a show in the pavilion designed by Renzo Piano, but instead of doing a gallery exhibition showing just objects, I wanted to take the space and have a dialog with the architecture and landscape, like a land art project. It will be very radical with just two big pieces using bricks in this huge space that has a lot of spirituality. It's really a gift to the public, something very generous.

In October, you'll be relocating your three Paris studios to a single 4,000-sqm space in Montreuil called La Solfatara. What do you hope to achieve in this new space that you couldn't previously?

It's a project I'm doing with the artist Johan Creten. It will be the first time we'll do a big project together because it's not just his studio and my studio, our storage and all the people who work for us who will share the same space together, but we are also building a space for exchanging with others to cross the different disciplines and for organizing our own shows.

With a space like that, you can control all your work. You produce the work and you can show it. You have your own gallery, which is quite crazy. Also, my dream of architecture will be supported by the space because it will give me the freedom to express myself on a bigger scale and to maybe leave the work in one corner of the building and do another one, so to take the time to look at the work in a different way. It's a big luxury.



Aerial view showing La Ligne Infinie in dialog with the Renzo Piano Pavilion at Château La Coste

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Your work is universal and you've traveled many times to Asia. Why do you think your work speaks to so many different Asian cultures, and what has Asia given to you personally and professionally?

I had the chance to travel to Asia when I was very young, at the end of the '80s. It was a shock in terms of culture, delicacy and respect. I started my international career in Hong Kong, and I lived there for two months. It's where I learned English because I didn't speak English before. The connection with Japan was so delicate in terms of craft and spirituality. Then I discovered Korea when I went to exhibit there 10 years ago, and it's another way of thinking.

The acceptance of beauty was really something for me that came from Asia, which I think is the key to looking at the world in a different way. Beauty for us in Europe is quite a sin in fact because when you make something beautiful, they say it's too beautiful or too decorative or not radical enough. In Asia, it's the opposite. When you do something beautiful, people tell you it's a way to go towards the spiritual world, and this totally changed my vision of my own work. Those trips to Asia freed me in fact. That's why I have had this connection with Asian curators and museums since a long time.