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# GLASS ARCHITECTURE

## JEAN-MICHEL OTHONIEL INTERVIEW

RAJESH PUNJ

In his early correspondence on glass, seventeenth century Italian glassmaker Antonio Neri referred to the Roman author and natural philosopher Pliny the Elder, who cited that its origins could be located to the mouth of the Belus river in Northern Syria, 'by merchants driven thither by the fortune of the sea, - making fire upon the ground, where there was a great store of this herb which many called Kali. This herb burned with fire, and therewith the ashes and salt being united with sand or stone fit to be vitrified is made glass', all the natural elements combined to create liquid gold. And for Saint-Étienne born, Paris based artist Jean-Michel Othoniel, Neri's sand and stone substance has become a leading elixir for his own modern imagination. As the artist has over time applied himself to creating

<sup>^</sup> Jean-Michel Othoniel,  
*The Big Wave*, 2018. Indian black glass  
bricks, metal.  
553 x 1500 x 500 cms  
Photo : Charlotte Pérot.  
© ADAGP, Paris 2018.

transformative works that under his influence manifest as a series of bold and very beautiful artworks.

Giving glass gravitas, Othoniel appears as animated as he is positively enslaved by the anatomy of this age-old coloured compound, as it has become the transparent flesh and bones of many of his more memorable works. Explaining how "Glass has opened up, as we have discussed, a realm of endless possibilities, and today I am willing to go even further in the creation of pieces that see them as more than sculpture, in order they can become real 'glass architecture'." And as German author Paul (Karl Wilhelm) Scheerbart sought before him, Othoniel intends to illuminate the world with his translucent masterful works that in and of themselves encapsulate the elemental order of the universe.

Enlightened by the 19th and early 20th century visionary, Othoniel says of its visual appeal, "I can't help but imagine creating works on such a scale, people could enter them, climb them, and live with them: whereby sculpture, architecture, site specific works, art and day to day life are porous notions that I am trying to split and merge." By which the premise and politics of such ideals had Scheerbart exalt the virtue of 'glass houses built deep into the sea', as a utopian alternative to the brutalism of brick buildings. Opening



*In 2015 as one of his standout works, Jean-Michel Othoniel created The Invisibility Faces series that were housed in a concrete cathedral outside Basel. Designed by German architect Rudolph Stein in 1924, this Gesamtkunstwerk (for the synthesis of diverse artistic media and sensory effects) as avant-garde architecture proved the ideal setting for a series of cut-glass self-portraits. For which Johannes Nilo, director of the Goetheanum, saw Othoniel's series of blank busts as 'earnest and timeless kings sitting on their wooden thrones'.*

< ^ Jean-Michel Othoniel, *The Big Wave (détail)*, 2018. Indian black glass bricks, metal. 553 x 1500 x 500 cms, Photo : Charlotte Pérot. © ADAGP, Paris 2018.

his own glass window onto the world, Othoniel finds purpose in creating works that for their material form are as intimate, as they are overwhelming. Citing a definite duality between micro and macro sensibilities, as though materials are as much human as they are human made, Jean-Michel Othoniel sees scale as integral to an audience's experience. Declaring, "The desire to scale up my work was a challenge, glass as everyone knows is very fragile, and at the same time I found there was another duality to explore and create works on a monumental scale, both delicate and strong."

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"I showed The Invisibility Faces for the first time at the Goetheanum near Basel in 2015, and the sculptures resonated astonishingly within this unique environment. The concrete building acting as a jewelled case in dialogue with the works, since the large totems of obsidian and wood with their angular and organic shapes could be likened to the building that housed them. Concrete, wood, glass, the materials mingled in harmony in an almost carnal way, allowing for an awakening of the senses." Which led to parallel projects such as Versailles, (as a fountain for a King), Angoulême, and a work resembling Katsushika Hokusai's 19th century print of a great wave. Entitled The Big Wave Othoniel's surge of static ocean water is made up of hundreds of coloured glass bricks. Major works that required of the artist his fundamental need to "work in parallel on a series of intimate almost secret works, bearing a meaning that only I could understand at the time; an escape you could say, like Dorian Gray's painting." As glass has for Jean-Michel Othoniel become a model material that has allowed the artist to create a more translucent vision for the world. Jean-Michel Othoniel's next exhibition Face à l'obscurité is at Musée D'Art Moderne Et Contemporain, Saint-Étienne Metropole, from the 26 May – 16 September 2018.

**Interview**

**Rajesh Punj:** *To borrow my first question from your book, 'why glass?'*

**Jean-Michel Othoniel:** I was using sulphur in my early works, and in 1989 I decided to actually go and see sulphur in a volcanic setting, on the Eolien Islands close to Sicily, and whilst there I met a French volcanologist and archaeologist, who introduced me to an element called 'obsidian', the chemical compound for volcanic

glass. And like an alchemist, I began exploring how to manufacture obsidian artificially at the International Glass Research Centre(CIRVA) in Marseille. Having a passion for metamorphoses, sublimations, and transmutations of all kinds, I decided to focus on glass, and went onto work with glass blowers in Murano, Venice; and I showed my first glass works during my residence at the Villa Medici, Rome in 1996. Ever since I have chosen to explore with the greatest of pleasure a material that effectively crystallises all of my desires.

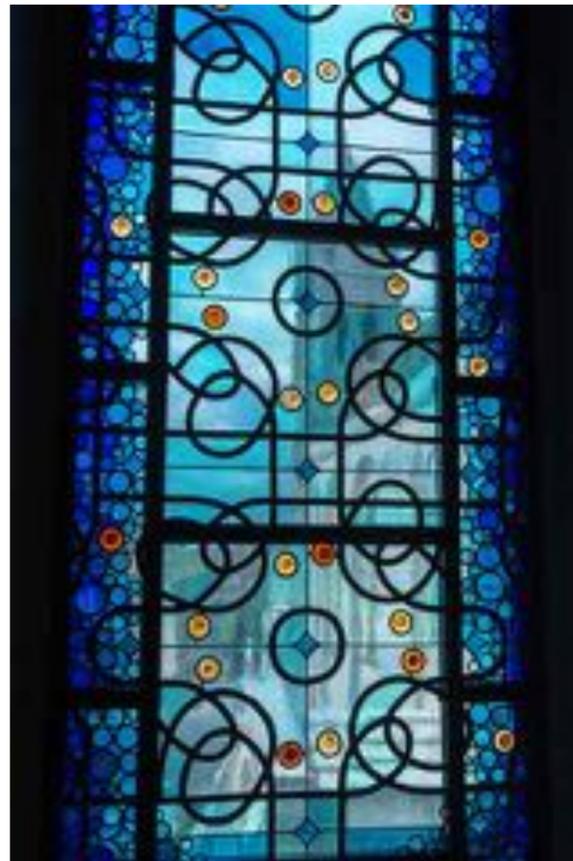
**RP:** *I was lucky enough to attend your combine exhibitions, Géométries Amoureuses at CRAC (Centre Régional D'Art Contemporain Occitanie) Sète, and at La Carré Sainte Anne, Montpellier, where a whole body of works demonstrate your devotion to glass. Can you explain those two exhibitions, and of your having situated works at the former church in Montpellier?*

**JMO:** This double event, under the single title Géométries Amoureuses presented many facets of my work through some sixty sculptures, a dozen paintings, and more than a hundred works on paper. By itself, the title unites the dualities that characterizes the main theme I am working on since the very beginning: of sensuality and rigour, the hidden and the revealed, and of pain and its relationship to beauty. The CRAC exhibition in Sète presented an exhibition composed of a new series of monumental works. Inspired by the forms of nature, it presented a journey close to a radical, monochrome and abstracted architecture. These new works of glass, mirror, metal, ink and obsidian, showed how my practice has further evolved since my retrospective at the Centre Pompidou, Paris, in 2011. It showed an audience the new issues and ideas I am currently exploring.

The Carré Sainte-Anne, Montpellier, showed some fifty of my works, which are part of my personal collection; and it proved more of a retrospective look on my own work. Like an enclosed garden or a dream world, the work Map of Tendre modestly showcased the works as a precious talisman. I have kept all these key pieces in a collection of my own works in order to be able to go back to them, and as a way of rejuvenating my energy. And I decided to show in this former church, the pieces that I have been collecting since the 1990s, when I initially began to take on an interest in glass. Trying since then to retell the key moments in my own journey through this glass period.

**RP:** *Can you expand on your interest in site-specificity, as it appears to play such a crucial part in the invention and intention of your works?*

**JMO:** In 2000 I was commissioned to create a new entrance for the metro station Palais-Royal – Musée du Louvre in Paris. The artwork I created was my first sculpture as architecture, and the beginning of a series of site-specific works created for locations around the world. It really was at that moment that I moved fully into public art and architecture, creating works of a scale that engaged directly with landscapes, cityscapes, historic and sometimes religious spaces. The desire to scale up my work

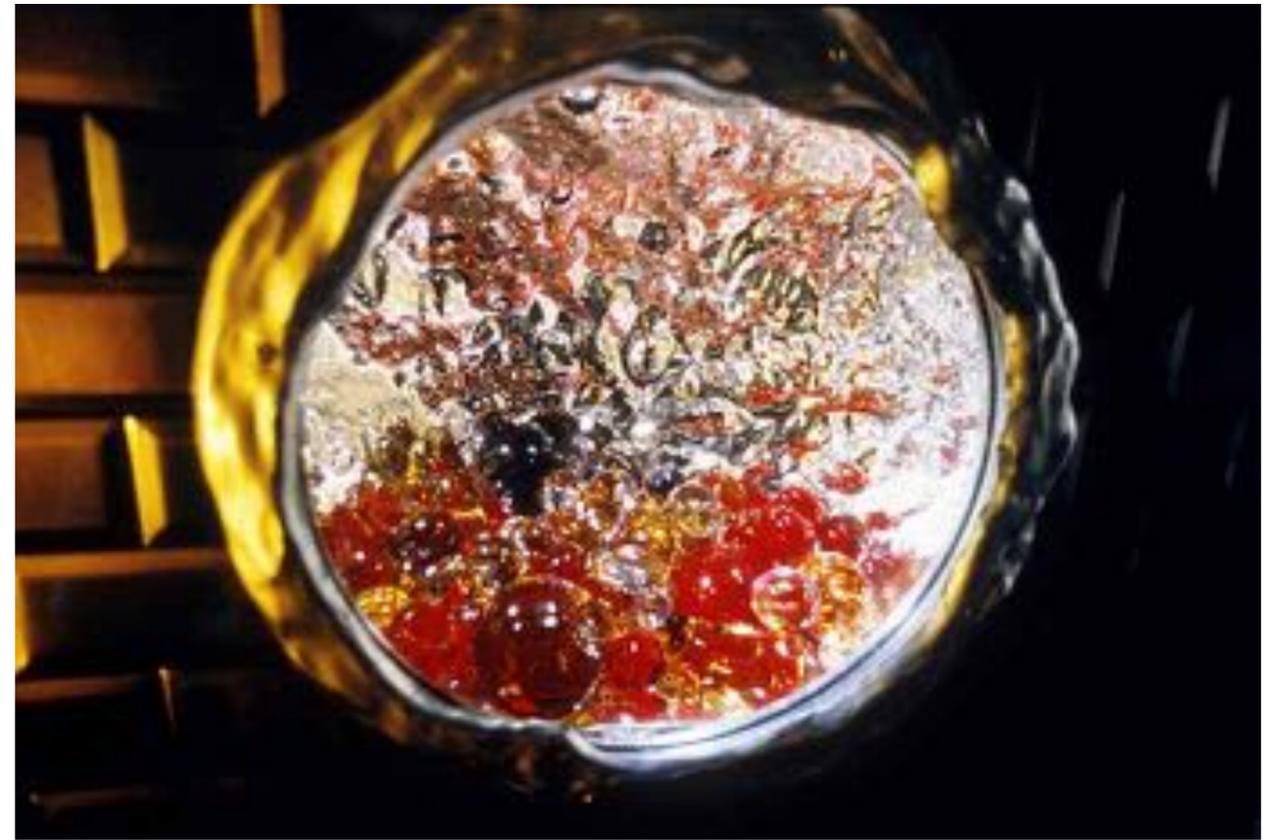


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^ Jean-Michel Othoniel, *Le Trésor de la cathédrale d'Angoulême (detail)*, 2016. A public art commission from DRAC Nouvelle-Aquitaine Photo : Yann Calvez

> *Le Trésor de la cathédrale d'Angoulême*, 2016. Detail of the statue of Joan of Arc in front of the large aluminum valance, created in collaboration with Arsculpt and Technival Industrie. ©Yann Calvez





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Jean-Michel Othoniel  
*The Kiosk of the nightwalkers, 2000, A permanent installation for the métro station Palais-Royal – Musée du Louvre, Paris, Murano glass, aluminum, metal, ceramic 220 1/2 x 236 1/4 x 78 3/4 in. RATP*  
 Photo: ©Philippe Saharoff

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Jean-Michel Othoniel  
*The Kiosk of the nightwalkers, 2000, A permanent installation for the métro station Palais-Royal – Musée du Louvre, Paris, Murano glass, aluminum, metal, ceramic 220 1/2 x 236 1/4 x 78 3/4 inches RATP*  
 Photo: Jean-François Mauboussin

was a challenge, glass is obviously very fragile, and at the same time I found there was another duality to explore and create works on a monumental scale, both soft and strong. That I have since installed in natural and more industrial environments; with works sited on trees, placed overwater ponds in the most beautiful of gardens, or situated in front of ancient and cutting edge contemporary buildings. This new site-specific aspect of my practice led to my working closely with architects. And that initial cross-disciplinary dialogue nourished my work, led to my always seeking to create bigger artworks, in order to push the material limits to their maximum.

**RP:** *And how do you see it as possible that you bring 'light' and 'darkness', the 'monumental' and the 'fragile', the 'austere' and the 'marvellous', the 'minimal' and 'baroque' to the same piece of work? Are such parallels fundamentally born of one another, rather than acting in opposition?*

**JMO:** I create monumental sculpture made of glass (fragile, sensual, attractive) that can be as terrifying as The Big Wave. A work made of glass bricks intended to engulf us, literally, like a nightmare. It is then a matter of thinking outside the box and going beyond the strict meaning of the works original interpretation. The marvellous, a theme very important in my work, can bring together notions as complex and compassionate as beauty, astonishment, stupor and dreams, whilst also instilling a disturbing, confusing, even overwhelming aspect to the work. And I love to play with such universal and yet very intimate feelings at the same time.



**RP:** When I first saw *The Big Wave 2017* at CRAC in Sète, besides its homage to French photographer Gustave Le Gray, I think of the Japanese printer Katsushika Hokusai's *The Great Wave off Kanagawa*. How did you decide on the scale of that particular work? And you have previously talked of the combine 'joy' and 'sadness' of that work, why is that?

**JMO:** The Big Wave is the result of two years work and several months of technical drawings. Composed of several thousand bricks that were all blown in India following my residency with Indian glassmakers. It was both an exciting and a somewhat exacting challenge for me. I say that filled with contradictory feelings of joy and sadness because, even though I have always had this enthused obsession for waves since I was a child, for which I really had the desire to create a monumental crystallized wave in 2011; incredibly I was preparing an exhibition in Japan when the devastating tsunami struck Fukushima, and like everyone else there I was extremely shocked and very shaken by the strength of nature. The unqualified violence of this unprecedented event imposed a new sadness on my understanding of water, and had quite a profound effect on me thereafter.

Paradoxically a few years ago I was teaching in Hawaii (where I was able to experience the elation of surfing, and of the energy and warmth of rolling waves), for which I had wonderful students from all over the world. Collectively they shared all the same passions, including surfing and art. Classes started after the first wave of the morning, and were quickly abandoned in the late afternoon to ride the last one before sunset. It was with all of them that I discovered surfing, and from where I was introduced to glass blowing. The theme of the wave is also a very positive and warm memory, unlike my previous experience of the tsunami in Japan. With *The Big Wave* I wanted to create a sculpture so monumental for the audience to experience those contradictory feelings. This sculpture became a contradiction in itself, since a wave is in essence entirely ephemeral, and as a homage to the

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 Jean-Michel Othoniel  
*Invisibility Faces*, 2015  
 Obsidian, chestnut carved wood base  
 Variable dimensions.  
 Artist's collection  
 View of the exhibition "*Géométries Amoureuses*" at the CRAC in Sète, from June 10 to September 24, 2017.  
 Photo: Marc Domage

>  
 Jean-Michel Othoniel  
*Invisibility Faces*, 2015 (detail)





*Indian glass blowers have a totally different technique. In 2009 thanks to the French Embassy in New Delhi, the European glass blower I often collaborate with and I went to India to learn from the glassmakers of Firozabad. In India Firozabad is the city of glass, and it is well known for its production of glass bangles. In the glass foundries of Firozabad, I discovered these craftsmen techniques, and created a new element as the bead and the glass brick. And as with the beads, the brick allowed me to build monumental sculptures, and to continue to explore the themes that have become fundamental to my work, such as the duality between the fragile and the monumental.*



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 Jean-Michel Othoniel  
 Black Tornado, 2017  
 Chrome painted aluminum, steel.  
 H : 450 x L : 260 x P : 250 cms  
 Courtesy Galerie Perrotin

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 Jean-Michel Othoniel  
 Black Lotus, 2016 (detail)  
 Black anodised aluminium cast, steel  
 H : 150 x L : 166 x P : 138 cms  
 Courtesy Kukje Gallery  
 Photo: Keith Park

devastation and delight of water, I decided to build an eternal wave that would forever be crystallized in glass.

**RP:** *It appears size for you is not necessarily about being monumental. How does fragility and intimacy exist in works of such scale?*

**JMO:** When in front of a work as high as The Big Wave I think the viewer is facing something that repels and appeals to them at the same time. The scale one wave strikes you as a tsunami, but you understand very quickly it won't crush you. As in a dream, the wave is crystallized, and you have this strange feeling of being able to be close to it, walk around it, look at it, and get lost in the infinite reflections of the glass bricks. It can be seen as a gigantic mirror, and thus reflects your own fears and desires. I believe this is how a work as monumental as this can best be described as both 'fragile' and 'intimate'.

**RP:** *When we met in Montpellier you spoke of India and Italy as key locations for glassmaking, can you explain more about that?*

**JMO:** Italy is where I first started working with glass. By the end of the nineteen nineties glassmakers were very reluctant to work with artists, trade was flourishing, and any new research was regarded as a waste of time and profit. Highly protective of their craft and manufacturing secrets, the glassmakers' studios were difficult to access and often housed modestly. Thanks to the help of artist Marie Brandolini, and to the expertise of the maestro Luciano Gaspari, I was initially able to access this very closed world. Among the small family workshops that share the glass production on the island, Oscar Zanetti was open-minded enough to let in a foreigner with great recommendations, and allowed me to integrate all the constraints that come with this ancestral artisan material. A glassmaker needs time to understand a new shape, to analyse it, to turn it and tune it, in order to make it. Once such steps become part of a series of gestures, it is easy for the artisan to reproduce these forms forever. From these principles were born the idea of an element that the glassmaker could master and multiply, and this modus operandus provided me with the possibility to combine the nature and analysis of glass in new combinations; specifically in large-scale works (which is impossible with one single piece of glass) applied with an infinite number of colour combinations.

Indian glass blowers have a totally different technique. In 2009 thanks to the French Embassy in New Delhi, the European glass blower I often collaborate with and I went to India to learn from the glassmakers of Firozabad. In India Firozabad is the city of glass, and it is well known for its production of glass bangles. In the glass foundries of Firozabad, I discovered these craftsmen techniques, and created a new element as the bead and the glass brick. And as with the beads, the brick allowed me to build monumental sculptures, and to continue to explore the themes that have become fundamental to my work, such as the duality between the fragile and the monumental. I was inspired by the real bricks one can find all along Indian roads, where the inhabitants make piles of bricks, waiting to have enough to build their homes.

To create the glass bricks Firozabad glass blowers have to manoeuvre long blowpipes, for which the molten coloured glass extracted from the furnace is blown to give it shape, and is further manipulated within buried brick shape moulds. The glass then cools in the mould and the glassmakers extract the glass bricks from the ground like small treasures. Here again, extraordinary and le merveilleux sensations that are so dear to me, are ever present even in the making of the glass bricks. The glass brick is then covered from the inside with mirror to get this reflecting and shimmering effect that you can find on my work Precious Stonewalls.



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Jean-Michel Othoniel, *Le Trésor de la cathédrale d'Angoulême*, view of the room dedicated to the Extraordinary, 2016.  
A public art commission from DRAC Nouvelle-Aquitaine  
Photo : Yann Calvez

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Jean-Michel Othoniel, *Le Trésor de la cathédrale d'Angoulême* (detail), 2016.  
A public art commission from DRAC Nouvelle-Aquitaine  
Photo : Jean-Michel Othoniel

**RP:** Another of the works that impressed me at CRAC was *Invisibility Faces 2015*, which when you explained as portraits really fascinated me; especially in relation to the history of portraiture, and their intention as a 'true likeness' of the sitter. Starting with your choice of material, you appear to fundamentally challenge what we understand of being and not being present. Did your choice of meteorites as a material determine your intention, of what for me are incredibly beautiful and brilliant sculptural forms?

**JMO:** Those mysterious meteorites created with obsidian stones that I brought back from a trip to Armenia are born of a complex desire. Even though obsidian was the key material that led to my use of glass, I have rarely used it in my work until recently. In 2015 while working on monumental projects such as Versailles, Angoulême and The Big Wave, I felt the need to work in parallel on a series of intimate almost secret works, bearing a meaning that only I could understand at the time; an escape you could say, like Dorian Gray's painting. I decided to keep these 'stern blocks fallen from a mysterious disaster' made of the black glass of volcanoes for myself. And these pieces are reminiscent of the polyhedron of Albrecht Dürer's *Melencolia I*, and impose gravity and mystery by their very presence. Similar to the tomb that Stéphane Mallarmé described, these black shapes evoke (Alberto) Giacometti's *Cube*, an object of intense solitude that Georges Didi-Huberman so rightly described as being 'a crystal of absence using the paradox of its own geometry'. But above all for me, these are self-portraits, invisible faces that look at the viewer and dominate them from their great heights. Placed on chestnut pedestals carved by anthro-philosophical carpenters of the city of Dornach, Switzerland, these black masses of the obsidian stones, which I have sculpted with the help of the glassmakers, absorb light and leave a pale reflection of one's own image, and the energy from the lava stone thus interacts with that of the wood.

**RP:** I am interested in the works having been shown at the Goetheanum in Dornach, Switzerland, and of the significance the concrete building had on the works, and the works upon the building?

**JMO:** I showed *The Invisibility Faces* for the first time at the Goetheanum near Basel in 2015. The sculptures installed in this great monument of architecture built by Rudolf Steiner in 1924-1928, resonated remarkably well with the unique setting. As Johannes Nilo, the director of Documentation Goetheanum, said: "The sculptures were present in the Goetheanum like earnest and timeless kings sitting on their wooden thrones". The concrete building acting as a jewelled case in dialogue with the works, since the large totems of obsidian and wood, with their angular and organic shapes, could be seen as reminiscence of the building that housed them. Concrete, wood and glass; the materials mingled in harmony in an almost carnal way, allowing for an awakening of the senses.

**RP:** It feels as if those works were meant for that space. As an artist is that when works really 'work'?

**JMO:** I believe so yes, but it is not a condition. Works that are completely different, that stand up and clash with their environments can also be really interesting works, because they force us to take a new look on this very environment, on the sculpture and on art in general.

**RP:** You mention him already, and in his catalogue text that accompanies your 2015 summer exhibition at Goetheanum, Johannes Nilo, director of the Goetheanum archives, discussed the definition of 'beauty', and the notion of the 'idea'. Citing that 'art makes the invisible visible and opens up a realm of endless possibilities'. What do you think he meant by that in relation to your works?

**JMO:** Beauty is not something unique and final. As an artist, if like me you accept a notion of creating artworks that are not hiding their inner beauty (because until recently beauty in contemporary art was taboo), you have a whole realm of possibilities that can become an endless quest.

**RP:** *What proved a privilege was to see so many of your drawings displayed together at CRAC, which you said was a first for you. How significant are your preparatory sketches in the creation of your physical works?*

**JMO:** Drawing is the first step to every project. When I have an idea I need to materialise it firstly on paper. It allows me to 'see' the sculpture, after I have imagined it. Drawing in a way 'forces' your imagination, since the idea you first had needs to become 'real' on paper. For which you have to build the first aspect of the sculpture, try colours, scales, sketch different points of view, so you can forecast how the viewer will see it, will face it. It becomes the first encounter with the artwork.

**RP:** *Included in that were models of your works for Château de Versailles, can you talk of those sculptures, and of the privilege of introducing a permanent work to Versailles?*

**JMO:** Creating a permanent work for Versailles comes once in a lifetime. The complexity of that project was situated in just such a dialogue with history, and the challenge was to ensure continuity. The Versailles gardens have always had one subject, Louis XIV. The figure of the King in his garden, chasing after nymphs or in a metamorphosed form, is omnipresent. I wanted to evoke that same figure, and I was interested in the way he used these gardens, his movement through them, and beyond that the way he used the environment as his own stage set. For there is a key to the way the Versailles gardens are displayed, and the key is the King. He had them designed to stage his movements through them, and the text *Manière de montrer les jardins de Versailles* (several versions between 1689 -1705) clearly indicates how he would move through the garden paths.

One of the themes in my work is of the body, and these gardens are about the body of the King. When I worked on the project I wondered if there was a connection between them and of dance, because Louis XIV was a dancing King. Which led to my finding a thesis written by Olivier Perrier that confirmed my intuition, and my research culminated in the realisation of the relationship between Le Nôtre's embroidered flowerbeds, and the choreographic notation developed by Raoul-Augur Feuillet in *L'Art de décrire la danse* (1701). Feuillet created a unique calligraphy, a system of notating space, for the King, so that he could record the Baroque dances, and send the book to the world for all the European courts to dance "à la Française". And in the lacing and arabesques of this notation I saw

a parallel with my own abstract sculptures inspired by Lacan's knots, and realized how my own visual vocabulary echoed the clarity of these baroque forms. So I decided to redesign my own alphabet to follow Feuillet's forms and created three fountain sculptures in gold Murano glass, evoking the choreographies of the dancing King on a mirrored staged, with water ponds designed with Louis Benech. When entering the garden today you are able to witness an evocation of the Sun King dancing again in the water theatre grove.

**RP:** *Where does your work take you now? And how much more can you achieve with glass?*

**JMO:** The very first artwork I created 32 years ago was a small photographs of 4 x 6 cm. I now create works of glass 6 metres high and 15 metres long. When I think about it, it makes me giddy. Glass opened up, as we discussed, a realm of endless possibilities, and today I am willing to go even further in the creation of pieces that see them as more than 'sculpture', in order they can become real glass architecture. This is quite a utopian view, but I am willing to continue and try to re-enchant the world with my sculptures. What was originally a credo in my work has now become a political statement, at a time when the world seems to be falling apart. A phrase by Paul Scheerbart in *L'Architecture de verre* (1914), still haunts me I must admit: "The face of the earth would be much altered if brick architecture were ousted everywhere by glass architecture. It would be as if the earth were adorned with sparkling jewels and enamels".

And I can't help but imagine creating works on such a scale, people could enter them, climb them, and live with them: whereby sculpture, architecture, site specific works, art and day to day life are porous notions that I am trying to split and merge.

> *Jean-Michel Othoniel portrait shot, in front of Le Trésor de la cathédrale d'Angoulême (detail), 2016. A public art commission from DRAC Nouvelle-Aquitaine Photo : Jean-Michel Othoniel*

