

SAINT-ÉTIENNE, FRANCE

Jean-Michel Othoniel
Musée d'art Moderne et
Contemporain

Jean-Michel Othoniel, who credits Saint-Étienne's Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art as a source of his artistic vocation, helped to celebrate its 30th anniversary with an exhibition that was equal parts introduction to his work and personal homage to the artists who influenced his imagination as a boy, including Robert Morris, Tony Cragg, and many others whose works form part of the museum's collection. For Othoniel, the museum was and is a living space of enchantment. Time and again, he referred to the artists in the Saint-Étienne collection who affected his development in the years before he left for art college, in Paris, in the early '90s. His experience stemmed from the museum's then-radical idea of allowing artists to live and work on site for weeks and even months at a time, in exchange for a work of art. He recalls the impression that Morris and minimal art made on him when he was seven, "their formal simplicity masking a whole thought process of the purity of contemporary art."

Othoniel has devoted his entire career to the project of giving gravitas to glass, the ancient colored compound that forms the transparent flesh and bones of his works. For him, "glass has opened up...a realm of endless possibilities," and his recent work attempts to go beyond sculpture to "become real 'glass architecture.'" Like the German author Paul (Karl Wilhelm) Scheerbarth, Othoniel aspires to illuminate the world with 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, "I can't help but imagine creating works on such a scale, people could enter them, climb them, and live with them: sculpture, architecture, site-specific works, art, and day-to-day life are porous notions that I am trying to split and merge."

In "Facing Darkness," he subordinated that ambition to a darker vision, creating just two large-scale, quasi-autobiographical works that draw on the history of his hometown to express an anxious vision of the world in the face of global change. (These were accompanied by *Self-*



CHARLOTTE PIÉROT, © OTHONIEL/ADAGP, PARIS 2018

portrait in priest's vestments [1986], a minute self-portrait depicting the artist facing an uncertain future, and an early video that transforms a Saint-Étienne slag heap into an erupting volcano.) *The Big Wave* (2018)—the centerpiece of the show—consists of hundreds of black glass bricks that come together in an engulfing, tsunami-style crush of darkness. Since its first appearance at the Regional Center for Contemporary Art (CRAC), Sète, *The Big Wave* has expanded, and is likely to do so again. Othoniel is intent on "giving a back to the work so that it can be experienced in the round." He says that "the marvelous—a theme very important in my work—can bring together notions as complex as beauty, astonishment, stupor, and dreams, while also instilling a disturbing, confusing,

Above and detail: Jean-Michel Othoniel, *The Big Wave*, 2018. Black Indian glass bricks and metal, installation view. Left: Jean-Michel Othoniel, *Invisibility Faces*, 2015. Obsidian and chestnut wood bases, installation view.

even overpowering aspect to the work. I love to play with such universal and yet very intimate feelings at the same time." In this iteration, allusions to dark matter and apocalypse are joined by the visual echoes of Saint-Étienne's coal-blackened walls.

The Big Wave cast a metaphorical shadow over the second major work—a remarkable series of abstract obsidian boulders mounted on chestnut wood bases that double as dark personal monuments to the town's coal-mining heritage. Explained by Othoniel as "self-portraits," these *gueules noires*, or black faces, entirely alter our understanding of portraiture, particularly our understanding of the bust as an emblem of power. Sculpted in vitrified lava, the nine *Invisibility Faces* (2015), which resemble meteorites fallen from the sky, absorb light while reflecting a pale ghost of the viewer's image. These mysterious anthropomorphic forms mark the pinnacle of Othoniel's practice to date and encapsulate his personal history.

—Rajesh Punj