

Othoniel: Pearl Charmer

Claude Arnaud

The Wonder

From his earliest days as an artist, Jean-Michel Othoniel has been counting on our desire for wonder. He worked tirelessly, in a state of waking dream, at a time when it was preferable for an artist to be conceptual or minimalist, appealing to the intellect rather than to the eye. It was up to the viewer to co-produce the works presented, sometimes reduced to a simple sketch. Far from the directives of *arte povera*, Jean-Michel Othoniel chose instead to respond to a desire for elsewhere, or perhaps to our unquenchable yearning for paradise. This is how he set himself apart, and this is how he continues to do so.

The Orient

He loves to recount the legend of an Indian princess who, upon breaking her necklace, scattered the pearls across all four corners of sky, thereby creating the stars in our galaxy. It would be no exaggeration to say that he aspires to bring the pieces of this incredible piece of jewellery back to Earth, via India, where he frequently travels to create his glass-blown pieces. Just as he had done when designing the *Kiosque des Noctambules* [Night Owls' Kiosk] above the Palais-Royal metro station, bringing to life the imagination of the Mughal pavilions of northern India, the chandelier he hung in the grand staircase of the Petit Palais appeared ready to be lowered to crown a maharani travelling to Paris to be married. Here again, his *Fontaines* implicitly refer to the bulbous *kalasham* atop Hindu temples, as well as the *stupas* crowning Buddhist temples, with their succession of concentric rings. They illustrate his fondness for the subcontinent's forms, just as his *Colliers* [Necklaces] and *Amants suspendus* [Suspended Lovers] recall the cascades of lapis lazuli and sapphires flowing from the coffer

of the maharajahs. But did he really need to go to the land of the elephants to bring this to mind? Like Pierre Loti before him, to whom he pays tribute, he may well have fantasised about this distant Orient even before he went there.

La Malmaison

Othoniel's dreams carry him as much towards the future as they do the past, spanning from America to Asia. His large *Nœuds miroirs* [Mirror Knots] are more futuristic than feudal and are inspired by genetically modified organisms and reconfigured DNA. This time, the legendary princess seems to have flown off to the United States, leaving her crown in Cannes, along with her earrings, which JMO languidly waves in the air after enlarging them tenfold. Seeing them dance in their plexiglas case as if in an oversized jewellery store, I was reminded of Audrey Hepburn dreamily gazing into Tiffany's window in the opening scene of Blake Edwards' comedy *Breakfast at Tiffany's*. I imagine she would have felt right at home here.

The gold in *Gold Lotus* and *L'or de J'adore* is also evocative of America, or perhaps the extraterrestrial origin of a metal that came from meteorites colliding with our planet. Usually offered in three options – white, pink and yellow – this precious metal seems to have a fourth variant here, a bright yellow tone that dazzles so brightly in *Passiflora*, it's almost blinding. The amber ingots that accumulate from the walls to the floors are reminiscent of the gold bars sleeping in the vaults of Fort Knox, where America stores its riches. Haven't the city of the Festival and the country that dominates cinema always had a mutual fascination?

The Colours of Childhood

I spoke of art that appeals more to the brain than to the eye. However, this art also speaks to our senses, through its sugar-coated pearls that make us want to touch and taste them. I could also have mentioned our delight at discovering the vibrant colours of the *berlingots* (sweets) at the funfair and the incredible mass of candyfloss, which inspired the "cellulose quilt" canopy bed created by JMO for his exhibition at the Cartier Foundation, *Crystal Palace*. Adorning all three floors of La Malmaison, these shades of turquoise, carmine and Indian green have the ability to reconnect us with our often neglected inner child. Robert Burton, who had a keen understanding of our propensity to succumb to melancholy, once said that colours are the best remedy for the winter blues. They help us rediscover the magic of the world, just as the dazzling colours of the Northern Lights save the inhabitants of Greenland from despair during the days when the sun only rises for four hours. There's nothing quite like an Othoniel glass-brick pool to give us that feeling that it will soon be time to dive into the Mediterranean and bask in the sun.