

Metamorphosis

When JMO dazzles us with gold, silver and stainless steel, it is not just to impress us. He also seeks to awaken memories of mythological metamorphoses, such as when Jupiter turned himself into a shower of gold to win Danaë's heart. He loves to liquefy solids, as well as vitrify tears in his work entitled *Amants* [Lovers], or blood, by erecting spectacular red crosses. Elsewhere, it is not the flower that becomes glass, but glass that gives way to climbing vines covered with an array of varying buds, like orchids coming into bloom. We sense Othoniel's temptation to turn all of nature to glass when he mineralises a lotus flower on a pool of water, then the water itself, revealing with a wave of his wand the glass tower in which he seems to inhabit. To give one example, the *kunstkammer* where Emperor Rudolf II accumulated the rarest objects produced by nature and art, helped him to flee ugliness and death.

Water

An expanse of solidified blue lagoon water, capturing all the hues of the South Seas. A turquoise glass river flows from the golden grills of the Petit Palais, echoing the water features of the Villa d'Este in Tivoli. It is impossible to tell whether these aquamarine pearls are water turned to glass or drops of liquid. Bulbs containing strands of coloured glass filaments dipped in water (*The Lagrimas*) are reminiscent of the glass jellyfish created by the Blaschka father and son, the master glassmakers of Vienna. Green and blue pools cascade from the caves of the Palais du Facteur Cheval, and now these *Fontaines – De vie* [Of Life], *La coupe* [The Goblet] and *La ciguë* [Hemlock] – evoke the gardens of Granada, where the delightful melody of rippling water is the only sound breaking the silence. Everything here reminds us that we would be nothing without water, that all things come from it.

In Situ

Othoniel likes to locate his works in the shelter of a park or a maze, to surprise visitors at every turn. This is reminiscent of the "follies" that the aristocracy of the past would have built on their estates. He takes great pleasure in merging his pieces with nature and seemingly seeks to emulate the natural world with his colourful blooms. When he installs his sacred bulbs and banners in the parks of the museum and chateau grounds that host him, he awakens a form of magical realism within us. We no longer imagine India when looking at these glasses, tapered like cucumbers or shaded in aubergine tones, but rather the heart of primordial forests, teeming with rainbow-hued birds and flowers; the temples of the First Peoples, where their totems hang from the trees like countless votive offerings.

Aesthetics

Jean-Michel Othoniel is addressing our Western imagination more here, within the brand-new setting of the Musée de la Malmaison. Nature and religion fade into the background, while the material takes centre stage. Everything sparkles and glitters in these *stardust* pieces, which seem to herald a return to minimalism. Far from being toned down by patina or distressed effects, the richness of the materials is boldly on show. Even the names of the colours – champagne, gold and amber – proclaim their affiliation with luxury. One could almost anticipate how they will wear over time, imbuing them with the melancholy that beauty sometimes needs to achieve its full effect.

Re-Enchantment

The medium of choice for JMO, glass is a prism. The world appears as fresh and astonishing through this coloured lens as it does through those of film cameras. In this sense, Othoniel's work is reminiscent of the Seventh Art as Cocteau envisioned it, where, between the artist's fairy-like fingers, a red hibiscus flower could emerge from an empty vase filmed in black and white. But wonder is more a miracle than the result of hard work. Both the creator and the viewer must possess a little of the innocence that gives credence to the wonders conjured up by *The Wizard of Oz* in Judy Garland's enchanting dreams. Without this naive propensity, fairy tales can leave us feeling sceptical, something we have all experienced. For me, this happened when I discovered *Donkey Skin*, the fairy tale by Jacques Demy that had such an impact on Othoniel, although I prefer *The Young Girls of Rochefort*.

It is no coincidence that I mention these names. Cocteau is one of JMO's sources of inspiration, whose *Rivières* sometimes bring to mind the liquid mirror into which Jean Marais plunges in the two *Orpheus* films directed by the poet, on his quest to reach the afterlife. Both Cocteau, who presided so often over the Cannes Film Festival, and Demy, who shot one of his greatest films nearby, stood halfway between "naive" art and sophisticated scenography, drawing heavily on the fairy-tale imagery inherited from the Kingdom of France, without hesitation.

These *Stardust* pieces convince me that Othoniel would be the ideal partner for a filmmaker. Ready to take up the mantle of Cocteau and Demy, they could shoot a musical in the streets of Cannes, with dancers moving from kiosks to parade floats in mirrored necklaces and giant earrings, before joining a crowded Croisette in song. We would see his lotus flowers dancing on their pools of amber, and his *Amants suspendus* scattering their pearls once again in an azure blue sky, in the heart of an Indian summer. Finally, the heroes would be united under the crown awaiting them in La Malmaison, just like in the best Bollywood productions. Cannes-sur-le-Gange...