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Jean-Michel Othoniel on being Versailles's first artist-in-residence in over 300 years

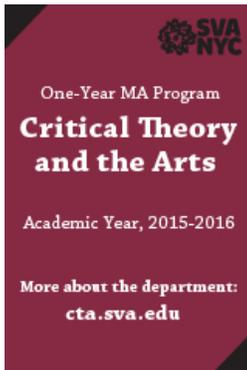
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"Soleil Politique"

Jean-Michel Othoniel

10.20.14



Jean-Michel Othoniel, *Les Belles Danses* (The Beautiful Dances) (work in progress), 2014, Murano glass, steel, dimensions variable. Photo: Philippe Chanceau.

Installed over the summer of 2014 as part of a major renovation of one of Versailles's gardens, the three sculptures in Jean-Michel Othoniel's *Les Belles Danses* (The Beautiful Dances), 2014, evoke King Louis XIV dancing on water. To realize the works, the Paris-based artist set up a makeshift studio in a vaulted ceiling chamber that once housed the Sun King's apothecary. Othoniel is the first contemporary artist to make a permanent mark on the royal grounds as well as Versailles's first artist-in-residence in over 300 years. The work will be previewed during FIAC this month before the grand opening in May 2015.

AS A FRENCH ARTIST, it is a special experience to add my work to a garden originally designed by André Le Notre for Louis XIV. Versailles is one of the most important historic sites in France; it is part of our national identity and collective past. Louis XIV's reign represents a key moment in French history because he was the first king who really made a connection between art—he especially loved dance and was himself an accomplished dancer—and politics.

The arabesque forms in *Les Belles Danses* were born out of a discovery I made while doing research during a residency at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum. In the Boston Public Library I found *L'Art d'écrire la danse par caractères, figures et signes démonstratifs* (The Art of expressing dance through demonstrative characters, figures and signs), a rare book by Raoul-Auger Feuillet—there are only three known copies in the world—filled with notations diagramming Baroque dance sequences. To help Louis XIV learn and remember dances, Feuillet had invented a unique written language, which struck me in particular because the curvaceous script-like notations resemble forms that I have been using in my sculptures for quite some time. Once I saw this book, the idea for the fountains at Versailles became quite obvious: the Sun King dancing on water. It was natural for me to relate to Feuillet's forms, to redraw them, to imagine them as sculptures, and give them a contemporary presence.

The sculptures are made of nearly 2,000 large glass beads and four blue glass orbs. Glass has a magical quality in the way it imitates water and I've been working with this material for many years. But what's new in this project for me is the element of movement. In addition to the jets of water that spray out from *Les Belles Danses*, the glass beads themselves have a sensual quality that evokes the once-liquid state of the glass. The material is also very appropriate for the setting because there is an important history of Murano glass at Versailles. The splendid mirrors in the Galerie des Glaces were made by craftsmen from Murano,

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the Venetian island known for its glassblowing workshops. Upon recognizing this historic link, I decided that the four orbs needed to be fabricated in Murano.

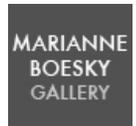
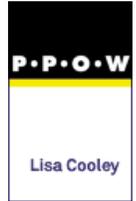
For the beads, I worked with an artisanal glassblower in Basel. The technique of glass blowing has not changed much over the past 2,000 years. But what has changed are all the technologies around the technique, which permit us to optimize the quality of the material—to make it less fragile and more stable in terms of color. When you see chandeliers from the time of Louis XIV, they appear yellowish because at that time they hadn't yet mastered true transparency. Today we can easily make glass that will not change color with age. We can also design a glass object using a computer that draws very specific, scientifically calibrated curves that make the glass pretty much unbreakable.

Before *Les Belles Danses* was installed, the most recent sculptures in Versailles dated to the seventeenth-century, so it's really incredible to add to that collection. I've worked on other large-scale, site-specific projects before: glass bead necklaces for a tree in the sculpture garden at the New Orleans Museum of Art or the entrance to Paris's Palais Royal metro station. But whereas in these cases I was not so concerned with the history of the site, at Versailles I was hyper conscious how my work would enter into a dialogue with the past. The focus became about much more than my own delights and obsessions.

With *Les Belles Danses*, I tried to create a link between the Versailles of Louis XIV and the Versailles of present day, all while looking towards the future. After this there may not be other opportunities for contemporary permanent art installations at Versailles. For me it's a bit like a fairytale; like the garden in *Beauty and the Beast* that opens once and then closes right behind you.

— Translated from French and as told to [Mara Hoberman](#)

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