

OTHONIEL COSMOS OU LES FANTÔMES DE L'AMOUR

LIEUX DANS LA VILLE - TEXTES LONGS _ENG.

Le pont d'Avignon

Jean-Michel Othoniel has brought his *Porte des Navigateurs* to Pont d'Avignon. The "Mariners' Portal" is a gold and red glass arch that welcomes visitors to the city and invites them to explore a new, cosmic and wonderful Avignon. It's inspired by the votive crosses that boatmen sailing the Rhône would build as a beacon or signal, a lighthouse whose presence radiated day and night. Saint-Nicolas Chapel and Saint-Bénézet Chapel stand on one of the bridge's pillars and both house two sculptures by the artist. The upper chapel's red Murano glass cross captures the mystical side of a contemplative space and honours the deceased boatmen, in a nod to the city's trading and papal history. The altar in the lower chapel sets the scene for another cross in red and scarlet, symbolising the sun and blood in a union between romantic passion and religious passion. These artworks echo the Rhône's portal.

La Porte des Navigateurs, 2025

La Croix des Bateliers, 2025

La Croix rouge, 2025

La Place du Palais

A colossal 11m high astrolabe stands in the very same place as the statue of Jean Althen, the 18th century Armenian botanist who brought dyer's madder to France. The astrolabe's golden beads sparkle in the light like the petals of a sun-kissed flower whilst the metal pole forms the stem and pistil's central sphere. This sculpture sees Jean-Michel Othoniel pay tribute to the history of the city that, with the help of Jean Althen in 1756, played host to the first madder plantations used to produce dye for the Provence silk industry. The Astrolabe brings together two of Othoniel's core subjects for his exhibition in Avignon: the cosmos and botany. The artist explores the madder flower elsewhere on the visitor experience, at the Requien Museum and pieces inspired by flowers and herbaria.

Astrolabe, 2025

Le Musée du Petit Palais — Louvre en Avignon

The Petit Palais Museum plays host to an extensive array of early Italian art from the Campana collection and 350 pieces loaned by the Louvre. The collection's unity inspired Jean-Michel Othoniel to work with the museum's artworks and create a series of circular gold glass sculptures in a masterful culmination of a project he's been planning for a long time. The artist's minimalist pieces use the halo motif glowing around the heads of Jesus, Mary, the saints and angels. The size and position of the circles is a painstakingly faithful copy of the halos in paintings by the great Italian masters, including Zanobi Strozzi, Francescuccio Ghissi and Sandro Botticelli. The artist brings his glass halos together with the museum's artworks with understated deference; as delicate as they are dignified and fragile. A dazzling star or sun glows in the middle of each gold circle as the artist sees these religious portraits as a connection with the cosmos, with every head creating a divine eclipse.

Auréoles, 2025

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Le Musée Calvet

The Calvet Museum exhibition is an opportunity for Jean-Michel Othoniel to unveil for the first time in France a new series of four abstract sculptures inspired by flowers. A gargantuan Lotus blossoms in the former Hôtel Villeneuve-Martignan's courtyard paved with pebbles from the Rhône. Its mirrored bead petals provide a never-ending reflection of the opulent building and by night, you can gaze at the glittering masterpiece framed by the gold wrought iron gate. Visitors can feast their eyes on a budding gold leaf Lotus in the sculpture gallery before gazing at a Rose in a small gallery. A silver Lotus seems to have burst from the garden in the internal courtyard. The light filters through Stendhal's beloved plane tree leaves and bounces off the gleaming mirrored flower.

Lotus, Rose

Le Museum Requien

Visitors to the Requien Natural History Museum and Library get to uncover the hidden meaning behind Jean-Michel Othoniel's paintings and sculptures on display at the Calvet Museum and Palais des Papes. The artist dialogues with the museum's collections and impressive library of countless plant specimens to present a selection of drawings, prints, paintings and mural sculptures. Roses, chrysanthemums, peonies, wisteria, passiflora, madder and passion flowers are the inspiration behind these pieces. This fascination with the botanical world and the beauty of nature has fed into his *Herbier Merveilleux*. Each of the 80 illuminated plates forming the herbarium includes a photograph of a flower or tree taken by the artist, alongside text he has written to detail its history and symbolism in different civilisations. The displays also present models and sketches. Othoniel sees this exhibition as an opportunity to learn about a new flower and pay tribute to Jean Althen, an Armenian agronomist who lived life to the full in the 18th century and introduced the cultivation of madder to Provence.

Le Musée Lapidaire

Like stellar guardians of the former Jesuit chapel, green and champagne obelisks stand in the alcoves on the Lapidaire Museum's façade. In the main lobby, visitors are greeted by a silent amber brick monument adorned by long beaded necklaces, reminiscent of the symbolic jewellery traditionally worn by virgins in Provence. Jean-Michel Othoniel was invited to India in 2009 and worked with glass blowers in Firozabad on this huge sculpture entitled *Precious Stonewall*, the first in a long partnership with Indian craftsmen. The artist has positioned two-tone sulphide glass monoliths amongst the Greco-Roman altars and headstones. The *Wonder Blocks* dialogue with religious sculptures, including a poignant headstone from the Cyclades depicting Prothymos, a young naked man in profile, lamenting not having a tomb. The headstone for the sailor who drowned at sea stands over an empty tomb that Othoniel interprets as the presence of a ghost of love. A gilded bronze jewel in the form of a miniature wonder block is set into the wall of one of the chapels, like an amulet to invoke the guardian angels and spirits haunting these ancient stones.

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La Chapelle Sainte-Claire

Jean-Michel Othoniel's adventure in Avignon is empowered by Petrarch's collection of romantic poems written in the 14th century: *Il Canzoniere*. Sainte-Claire Chapel is the gateway to the labyrinth of love that Petrarch himself described. On April 6th 1337 in this same chapel, the illustrious Italian writer first set eyes on Laura, whose flaxen hair interwoven with beads fluttered in the wind. For the rest of his life, the poet sang the praises of the young woman whose grace and beauty were the inspiration and focus of his sonnets. The ruins of this temple of love and place of love at first sight set the scene for one of the artist's signature pieces: a large red heart in tribute to this passionate tale. The title, *Kokoro*, is a complex Japanese word that means both the heart and affection. Protected by a golden grate, the impressive yet fragile red glass heart is an allegory for unrequited love.

Kokoro, 2012

Le musée des Bains Pommer

Water takes on a surprising role in the 19th century Bains Pommer, the recently opened museum. Its cool and bubbly waters take us on a deep dive into the carefree world of Jean-Michel Othoniel's childhood memories of public baths. The sound of crystal-clear water is the music of youth, an ode to the restless joy the artist has always tried to infuse into his work. In 1999, he began designing glass fountains at the Alhambra in Granada before making them even bigger in the Water Theatre Grove in Versailles, Doha and Sète ten years later. Othoniel conducts an orchestra of crystal-clear water bubbling from pink and gold glass fountains at the Bains Pommer. These understated pieces hide behind the changing room tiles and enchant us with their playful melody. Imagination replaces reality, the water of life heals us from the water of death, the trickles and splashes soothe us and break the spell cast by the pining ghost of love:

Make him a wounded man apart, for that once in this life he has seen the face of an angel.

— Paul Claudel, *The Satin Slipper*, 1929

Quatorze Fontaines, 2024–25

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La Collection Lambert

In the summer of 2025, the Collection Lambert is joining the major event “OTHONIEL COSMOS or the Ghosts of Love”, for which Jean-Michel Othoniel has been invited by the City of Avignon to take over 10 institutions and emblematic sites of the papal city with no fewer than 250 artworks, including 160 new, never-before-seen pieces.

At the Collection Lambert, the artist collaborates in the display of a selection of works from the permanent collection, highlighting some of the major figures who shaped the artistic revolutions of the 1960s and 1970s—artists whom Yvon Lambert championed as a pioneering gallerist. In the rooms of the Hôtel de Caumont, these works engage in a dialogue with a selection of pieces by Jean-Michel Othoniel, chosen for their formal or narrative affinities.

A long-time friend of the collector and gallerist, Othoniel is also a connoisseur and admirer of the works and artists that make up the Avignon collection. Born in Saint-Étienne in 1964, at a time when art was undergoing irreversible transformation, he spent part of his childhood in the Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art of his hometown, known for its collection of postwar American art.

There, he became familiar with an aesthetic vocabulary from which he would later draw a certain idea of simplicity and purity. Although he is often associated with monumental, baroque-like works that flamboyantly inhabit public space, it is often forgotten that the artist also employs a repertoire of simple geometric forms, drawn from everyday life, developed through collaborations with specialized artisans, and whose kinship with the works of his predecessors is clearly evident here.

As with the artists of the 1960s and 1970s who came before him, the human figure is absent from his work—yet the question of the body is ever-present: excluded, disappeared, loved, invoked, desired. His work invites us to invent a new, sensory experience of space and time—collectively.

But where his predecessors often paired formal reduction with a kind of aesthetic asceticism, Othoniel embraces a clear sense of beauty and seduction. These qualities infuse his work throughout and reflect across the exhibition on the entire Collection Lambert, whose formal rigor now reveals an undeniable visual beauty.

Starting April 19, Jean-Michel Othoniel's works will begin to appear throughout the Collection Lambert spaces like ghosts, symbolized by lines drawn on the walls or floor. They will be revealed to the public on June 28, at the official opening of the exhibition “OTHONIEL COSMOS or the Ghosts of Love.”

Artists

Carl Andre, Robert Barry, Andre Cadere, Nan Goldin, Donald Judd, Louise Lawler, Sol LeWitt, Robert Mangold, Brice Marden, Jean-Michel Othoniel, Robert Ryman, Fred Sandback, Andres Serrano, Richard Tuttle, Cy Twombly.