

Glass sculptures act as elements in Kew's landscape

Dale Chihuly's colourful creations at the Royal Botanic Gardens interact with plantlife

Tim Richardson APRIL 19, 2019

A dramatic exhibition of glass sculpture opened last week at the Royal Botanic Gardens in Kew, west London. *Reflections on Nature* is Dale Chihuly's second major display here — the first was in 2005 — and this time his incursion is even more vibrant.

In the Temperate House, the world's biggest Victorian glasshouse, Chihuly's colourful creations interact with the plantlife, while in the garden, large pieces have been deployed as dynamic components in the landscape. On a more intimate scale, the Shirley Sherwood Gallery — usually the venue for delicate botanical watercolours and drawings — is the setting for Chihuly's smaller gallery works, providing a quiet counterpoint to the high drama.

Chihuly is a Seattle-based artist who works predominantly with glass, creating colourful, amorphously shaped pieces, often on a large scale. Few visitors to the Victoria and Albert Museum in London will have missed his "Rotunda Chandelier", which hangs in the grand entrance hall. Over a career spanning some 50 years, he has developed series with names like *Macchia*, *Seaforms* and *Persians*, developing them in line with artistic impulses and technical innovations.



Dale Chihuly at work (1992) © Chihuly Studio/via AP

Chihuly's sculpture is displayed in museums and galleries around the world, and there is commercial demand for the work that emerges from his studio, where he employs up to 200 people at any one time. Chihuly has not blown glass himself since 1979 for health reasons, following a sports accident, but instead directs teams of glass-blowers. The technical challenge of creating glass pieces at this scale is considerable, with some members of his team perched on gantries while they work.

House & Home Unlocked

Chihuly began working in botanic gardens in 2001, with an exhibition at the Garfield Park Conservatory in Chicago. At first he was attracted by glasshouses and the concept of putting glass sculpture "inside glass", as he puts it, but as he extended what came to be known as the "garden cycle", he began to appreciate the power of his work when it is juxtaposed with living plantlife.



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Since that first show he has mounted botanic garden exhibitions almost annually, though he says the current display at Kew is “one of the biggest shows we’ve ever done — we sent over 11 40ft-long containers”.



'Temperate House Persians' detail (2019) © Scott Mitchell Leen

“Some pieces were made specifically for Kew — notably the Persian column in the Temperate House. It’s a ‘Persian’ form but it’s much larger than anything we have produced before [in that series]. It’s about 30ft high, and is related to the scale of the building. I wanted to do something fresh,” he says. The Persian column consists of cascading, petal-like forms, mainly in shades of blue, which descend from the centre of the glasshouse.

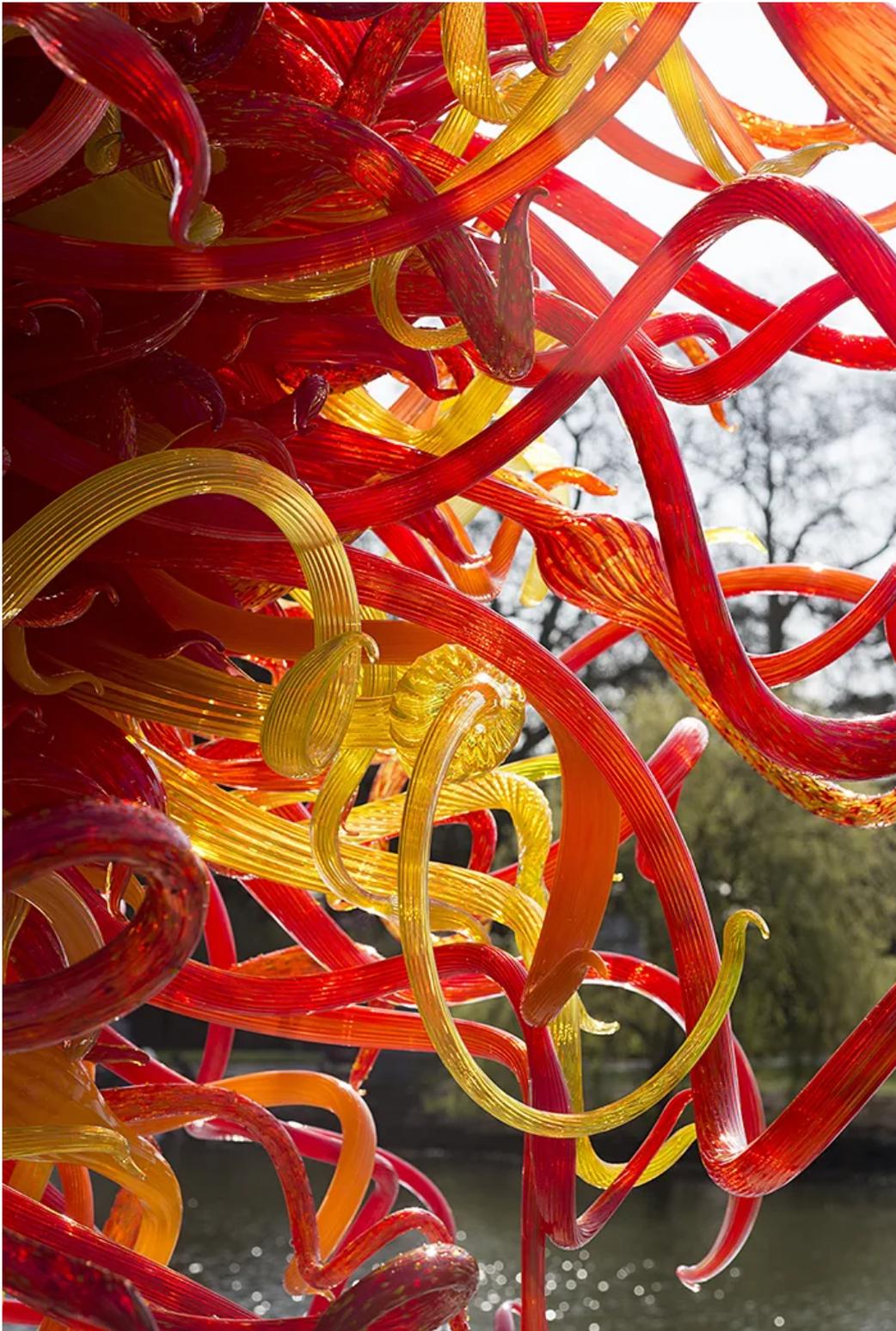
Chihuly’s sculptures act as elements in Kew’s landscape, not simply as standalone art objects. For example, the avenue of cherry trees that links the Temperate House with King William’s Temple is flanked by rows of curling red pieces from the “Cattails and Copper Birch Reeds” series, while the temple itself is complemented by the blues and purples of his “Neodymium Reeds” and “Turquoise Marlins”.



‘Cattails and Copper Birch Reeds’ (2015) © Scott Mitchell Leen

Outside the Water Lily House, a display from the “Red Reeds” series erupts, and “Paintbrushes” emerge around the Medici Urn near the Palm House pond.

The most dramatic pieces are the chandeliers and towers: huge agglomerations of writhing glass interlocked like burning suns or Medusa’s snakes. The exhibition opens with the cobalt blue “Sapphire Star” on the grassy slope below the Temple of Bellona near Victoria Gate. Similarly, the “Scarlet and Yellow Icicle Tower” suddenly comes into view partway along Syon Vista, which stretches from the Palm House to the Thames. “Summer Sun”, overlooking the Palm House pond, is a tangled ball of brilliant red and yellow glass tendrils.



'Summer Sun' detail (2010) © RBG Kew/Jeff Eden

Not all of Chihuly's work is made of glass. In 2000 he started experimenting with a lighter, plastic material he named polyvitro. "Lime Crystal Tower", next to the Temperate House Lodge, is a polyvitro piece with a chunkier appearance than the other large works. "It's got a dynamic landscape presence," he says.

Chihuly resists imposing a viewing order or a theme on the exhibition. ("I try to have a lot of variation," is the farthest he will be drawn on this.) But for many visitors the Temperate House will be the climax of the show. Flanking the entrance like frozen fireworks are a pair of "Opal and Amber Towers", while inside glass forms intertwine with plantlife: the "Turquoise Marlins and Floats" series and the "Hebron Vessels" in cobalt blue look like archaeological artefacts.



'Turquoise Marlins and Floats' (2015) © RBG Kew/Jeff Eden

There is a fecundity to Chihuly's work that complements the botanical environment. Delicate ikebana pieces hang from the trees like epiphytic orchids, while "Beluga Boat" consists of pure white, balloon-like forms nested together in a hull. In the Temperate House pond is the "Fiori Verdi" installation: curling white ribbon and wormlike forms clustered together as bouquets on the water.

Chihuly says the garden cycle fell into his lap: "The Chicago project was kind of a fluke — and then it just led from one [botanic garden] director to another. It's expensive to do these shows and they don't always have the budget, so they have to find it. Now, the garden cycle has become one of the most important aspects of my work."

Visitors to Kew may be tempted to start putting sculpture in their own gardens, but they should tread carefully. Many a garden has been spoiled by an ill-advised flower show purchase.



'Summer Sun' (2010) at the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew © Scott Mitchell Leen

For inspiration, there are good examples of sculpture in a garden setting at the Gibberd Garden near Harlow in Essex, and at Hamblyn's Coombe in Devon (opening this year for the National Gardens Scheme). In small gardens, the key is not to treat the sculpture as an ornament, but as an element in the garden that will alter its tone. That tone can then be extended across the entire space.

The best advice is old advice, from James Ralph, writing in 1734: "A statue . . . should, by its own nature, be suited to the place. To compleat an area, end a vista, adorn a fountain, or decorate a banqueting-house or alcove, is the just and natural use of statues: not to people a garden, and make a nuisance of what ought to be a beauty."

'Chihuly: Reflections on Nature' runs until October 27, kew.org

Tim Richardson is the author of an essay in 'Chihuly Garden Installations' (Abrams)

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