

THE PIONEER OF GLASS ART  
**ARTIST DALE CHIHULY**

By Rachel Vancelette



Ethereal White Persian Pond  
Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, London, England  
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Dale Chihuly



Macchia Forest, 2021  
Desert Botanical Garden, Phoenix  
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Photo by Nathaniel Willson

**D**ale Chihuly is a daring 'pioneer of glass' and has established himself as a larger-than-life voice in the field today. The artist continues to innovate and create new work daily with a distinct style of spectacular color saturation and organic beauty. Creating sculptures since the late 1960s, Chihuly is best known for his large-scale architectural installations, smaller structures inspired by organic forms, and monumental chandeliers comprised of dozens of curling glass arms that radiate from a central core. The artworks appear worldwide, from private and public gardens to ceilings, floors, and walls; the enormous-scale sculptures often burst at the seams appearing in homes, parks, museums, private collections, and institutions worldwide. Chihuly's unique emphasis on light, color, asymmetrical, and curvilinear shapes captivate and evoke an outer-worldly celestial quality.

I first watched a large-scale chandelier sculpture installation of Chihuly while working for the Marlborough Gallery, 17th Street Sculpture Gallery in New York City. I was an associate director when the 17th Street Gallery was under the helm of Dale Lanzone. With decades of championing sculpture, he was instrumental in activations of public art from the early 2000s and shaped the new division of sculpture for the Marlborough Gallery NYC at the time. This curated group sculpture show presented artworks by Louise Bourgeois (a large, magnificent fountain) and included other top gallery artists at the time, such as Alice Aycock. On this occasion, Chihuly's team flew in for a unique installation, spending days stacking each one-by-one beautiful glass twirls of colored red and yellow glass to create a secure and stunning glass chandelier tower from floor to ceiling. The lighting and presentation mesmerized audiences and repetitive questions.... how did he do it?





Golden Celadon Baskets, 2017-18  
 Tallesin West, Scottsdale, Arizona, installed 2021  
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 Photo by Nathaniel Willson

Many years later, it was an honor and pleasure to sit down for a Quickfire Interview to dive into the artist's creative process and take a closer look at the past, present, and future of the Chihuly studio.

**What inspires you each day?**

I find inspiration all around me, from objects to architecture, nature to classic film. Glass as a material has always inspired me...it's transparency, translucence...the powerful beauty of light streaming through it.

**What advice would you offer to your younger self?**

The life of an artist can be both challenging and thrilling. Not everything will work out the way you hoped, but the process of exploration and discovery is always interesting. If you're feeling frustrated, walk away and come back to the idea when inspiration returns. Trust your instincts and leave yourself open to the unexpected.

**Traveling on a Fulbright Fellowship, you saw work in the Venini factory on the island of Murano early in your career. How did this impact your creative process early in your career as a glass artist?**

It was at the Venini glass factory on the island of Murano where I first observed the team approach to blowing glass, which is critical to the way I work today. There, glassblowing is always a team process, with one lead gaffer being supported by others to create the ultimate vision. I feel fortunate to work with a very skilled and talented team of glassblowers, especially now that I do such large architectural projects

and installations. Glassblowing is a very spontaneous, fast medium, and one must respond very quickly. My team allows me to do that.

**Can you tell us something that would surprise us about your creative process?**

A lot of people are surprised to learn that I love to paint. I started drawing to communicate my ideas to my glassblowing team, and over time, the practice of painting became more and more satisfying. I paint on heavy paper and transparent materials such as acrylic and glass, and use pencils, paint, coffee grounds and anything else that works to convey the vision.

**How do you define your role in your studio process?**

I am an artist and the founder of the studio which supports my projects. When I lost vision in my eye, I lost depth perception and could no longer be my own gaffer, so I had to approach my work in a different way. That's when the team process I learned in Venice became so critical. With a great team in place, I am able to communicate my concepts and provide direction much like a director on a film set does.

Following significant museum institution exhibitions and large-scale projects throughout your 50 years of creating art, can you tell what is most important to you for the audience to remember about your artwork after viewing it?

I want people to see something unexpected and beautiful, and to carry that feeling with them. Exposure to the arts can be incredibly

White Tower  
 Denver Botanic Gardens, Denver, CO  
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liberating for one's imagination, and that is something I want everyone who views my work to experience. And maybe the experience will inspire others to pursue their own artmaking practice.

**Your enormous impact on generations in the glass community is undisputed. Can you speak to us about how scale in your artwork has been an important factor throughout your major installations in complex and dynamic public projects?**

Pushing the boundaries of glass has been a constant in my career ever since I saw the monumental glass sculptures of Libenský and Brychtová as a young man. The power of their work was undeniable, and that, combined with my experience as an interior architecture student, inspired me to create work that would change one's experience in a space. Over time, my work got larger, more technically challenging, more exciting to create, and the process drove me to pursue new opportunities to show it.

**Your work has been included in over 200 permanent art collections around the world, in a few words what legacy do you hope to leave for the world?**

Through art, anything is possible. As a child, I never imagined being an artist. It was only through my exposure to the arts in college, beginning with weaving glass shards into textiles, that I realized a passion for the material and for exploring its possibilities. Art is an amazing and healing practice, and whether you are creating gifts of art in your bedroom or museum installations in a studio, the experience is the same and it is liberating. Forget the rules, take risks, and invite others to see the world as you do.

**Art Critic Barbara Rose once described the historical relevance of black works in glass and your important influence in the medium. Could you speak about your wide use of color, incorporation, and importance of black in your hand-blown glass sculptures?**

When I first started working with glass, there were limited colors available, so the work was in muted, earthy hues. I incorporated more and more color into my work as new color became available and innovated new ways of adding color to achieve works that feature several colors – like the Macchia.

Black glass doesn't exist, so creating the visual impression of black required experimentation and it allowed me to explore color differently, accentuating contrast rather than translucency.





*The expressive qualities of form, light and expressions in your forms audiences have noted they communicate a wide range of emotions, how do they impact you as an artist in completing a work in your studio?*

Glass has always been a marvel to me—the fact that silica or sand can be transformed from a solid to a liquid to a solid just from fire. It endlessly inspires me to explore scale, transparency, and color in a way that no other medium allows.

**Quickfire Interview Tips:**

Chihuly's artworks can be found in top institutions including the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Whitney Museum of American Art, Dallas Art Museum, Victoria and Albert Museum, and Musée des Arts Décoratifs in Paris, among others. Chihuly has completed commissions for famous figures, including Bill Gates, Jerry Jones, Bill Clinton and many more.

Instagram @chihulystudio  
Website | <https://www.chihuly.com>

Instagram: @rvancelette  
Website: [www.vanglobalart.com](http://www.vanglobalart.com)

Calendula Persians, 2017  
Desert Botanical Garden, Phoenix, installed 2021  
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