

## OF ALCHEMY AND GLASS

Dale Chihuly's reputation has long been that of a boundary-breaker, risk-taker and solution-seeker. He's viewed as the artist who took contemporary glass art from the realms of craft to Fine Art. Does he agree? As his new show prepares to open at Kew Gardens, *Sue Herdman* finds out

Dale Chihuly has never been a man you could imagine sleeping in. An international artist with a searing curiosity for the world, he has taken his medium of glass and rewritten the rules when it comes to making contemporary art with that material. His work sits in some 200 museum collections worldwide. His art has reach: wealthy collectors avidly await new work, while Instagram reveals feverish snapping of his installations by followers of all ages and backgrounds. Now in his 78th year, and despite long-term physical and mental health issues, he still appears to seek new ways to work. A recent initiative has been his *Glass on Glass* work, painting with glass enamel on glass panes. But it is for his sculptural forms that he is known best. This year such structures feature in exhibitions of his work in the Netherlands, New Orleans and Kew Gardens. The latter will feature artworks – the majority not seen in Britain before – that follow the evolution of the artist's career over the past 50 years.

In that time Chihuly has placed blown-glass panels in landscapes dry and riparian. He has created soaring installations. His 1996 *Chihuly Over Venice* featured luminous giant 'chandeliers' installed around the city,



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hanging like globulous teardrops over canals and piazzas. Among his most ambitious was the 2000 *Chihuly in the Light of Jerusalem*: 14 large-scale installations in the city's Tower of David, one 46 feet tall. The work was viewed by a million people. His *Garden Cycle* (2001 to today) delves into his lifelong fascination with nature and glasshouses, and has led to this second exhibition at Kew (the first in 2005), where his forms will settle in surprising, sinuous fashion in their botanical setting. »

Left: Chihuly with *Isola di San Giacomo* in *Palude Chandelier* (1996). Right: *Thames Skiff*, which featured in Chihuly's 2005 exhibition at Kew





British aficionados will be familiar with Chihuly's 27-foot 2001 *Chandelier*, which dominates the Rotunda at London's V&A, writhing like Medusa's head of snakes. Made from 1,300 blue and green glass elements, it took a team of six five days to assemble the work (and a brave technician with a head for heights several early mornings to clean when necessary). 'It was quite the challenge,' Chihuly admits. The V&A has been one of his favourite places since his first visit in the 1960s: 'and that commission gave me a grand space where I could explore the relationship that interests me, that between light, space and form. Those are central to my approach. The power of light transmitting through glass is undeniable, and I like to create experiences that make a person see a space – or their world – in a new way.'

**FIRST STEPS**

Chihuly's first creative encounter with glass came in 1965. He had melted some stained glass, which he planned to weave into some wall hangings (textiles was one of Chihuly's early areas of study). He dipped a steel pipe into the molten glass and blew a bubble of glass. He was hooked. It was the start of something that might easily have not begun. Born and raised in Tacoma, Washington, Chihuly had come close to deviating from a career in the arts or academia. He lost his brother in a naval aviation training accident in 1957 and his father

from a heart attack the year after. It took some convincing from his mother, Viola, to ensure Chihuly went to college. Her insistence paid off. He studied architecture and interior design at the University of Washington in Seattle. Post his experiment with the melted glass, and eager to learn more, he went on to the University of Wisconsin to do sculpture, also studying under the studio glass expert Harvey K Littleton, on America's only glass programme at the time. Littleton was a major influence. 'He inspired me to break from traditional glassmaking and explore glass as a

**'CHIHULY'S 27-FOOT 2001 CHANDELIER DOMINATES THE ROTUNDA AT LONDON'S V&A, WRITHING LIKE MEDUSA'S HEAD OF SNAKES'**



Far left to right: Chihuly working on his *Glass on Glass* paintings in 2016; *Rose Quartz Soft* *Cylinder with Olive Lip Wrap*, 2014; the writhing 2001 *Chandelier* sculpture at the V&A's Rotunda

true art form,' Chihuly says. Chihuly started to teach others, at the Rhode Island School of Design (where he also gained a Master of Fine Arts in ceramics) and later, in 1971, he co-founded the Pilchuck Glass School in Washington, now an international centre for glass art education. It was there that his first major environmental installations began to gain attention. 'I found the natural light and backdrop of nature suited the work. I've always loved to work outside, which is something that came from my mother. She was a great gardener.' In 1976 three of Chihuly's vessels, inspired by the designs of Navajo blankets, were purchased by the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. 'That helped validate my work with other museum curators,' Chihuly says. Within a few years he left teaching to focus 'on the possibilities of glass'.

Today Chihuly is based at his Seattle studios close to the water (he loves water), at the head of a collective of some 100 people who work for him. It is a multimillion-dollar enterprise. Chihuly pieces range from some \$200,000 to millions. The artist himself, however, no longer blows glass. In 1976 a car accident in England left him with no sight in his left eye, which affected his depth perception. Another accident, when bodysurfing, caused injuries that left him unable to meet the physical demands of glass-blowing. His bipolar, of which he has spoken openly, has long had an impact. 'I have no idea how long each depression is going to last,' he has said on camera. He says he is not like Van Gogh (a huge influence), 'who could work when down'. But when he is in the hypomanic stage, the ideas and energy have flowed like fire. Even when physically able, however, Chihuly has always worked with a group, 'like a director creating a film', overseeing processes as artists like Rubens and Warhol once did. He has

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also long had an interest in how other artists live and see the world. 'People like Warhol, Jackson Pollock and Frank Lloyd Wright were fearless. From them I learned how to live like an artist: to embrace failure and to keep pushing.'

#### FAILING AND RISK-TAKING

Have there been mistakes? 'Many,' he says, pragmatically. 'Failure is part of the experience. When working with glass and pushing the medium, things break. When they do, start over. To get good you have to fail.' Some have claimed that Chihuly has pushed the grounds of conventional taste in his work. 'I have no idea about that,' he counters, although admits that he has questioned elements, including 'my aesthetics. I've made something that I liked, only to dislike it months later.' You have to take risks, too, he muses. '*Chihuly Over Venice* was a big one. It was a self-funded, two-year project. It took me and my team to locations around the world to work with other glass masters to explore different techniques. But it worked.' With risk-taking have come accolades for

Chihuly, as the figure who has elevated glass-blowing from craft to Fine Art. 'That debate between what is craft and what is art is boring,' is his response. 'Art is art.' What excites him are the developments that make current times right for artists wanting to explore the medium. 'Glass is more available to artists now. When I began, glassmaking happened mainly in factories; it was about production and function. Around the world there were only small groups of craftspeople working in the medium. That has changed. There are more programmes and schools on glass art; so many more artists can now redefine the future of the medium.'

He recalls the first time he saw the work of glass artists such as Stanislav Libenský and Jaroslava Brychtová at the 1967 Montreal World's Fair. 'It was an extraordinary installation of cast glass panels that must have been 20 feet high and 10 feet wide. I'd never seen anything like it; it opened my eyes to the possibility of working on a monumental scale.' In 2012 Chihuly realised a new scale of his own with a house of glass 'and everything

that goes inside it' – the 40-foot-tall, 4,500-square-foot glasshouse, *Chihuly Garden and Glass*, in Seattle. Inside it contains a 100-foot-long installation. Now come large-scale installations for Kew that he wants to keep under wraps until opening, saying only that 'the work will feel both inside and in nature. I have pushed myself and my team to make the glass form go bigger than we have done before.' Also at Kew will be selections from his challenging *Rotolo* series, and, for those curious about his 2D work, his drawings. This is an artist whose work continues to innovate and excite audiences ('Forget retirement,' he says, 'it won't be any time soon.'). And with his Kew exhibition, once again he gets to combine two of his passions, nature and glass, with signature zeal. 🍷

#### SEE

***Chihuly at Kew: Reflections on nature*** at Kew Gardens, London, **13 April–27 October**. [kew.org](http://kew.org)

***Chihuly*** at the Groninger Museum, Groningen, the Netherlands, **until 5 May**. [groningermuseum.nl](http://groningermuseum.nl)

***Chihuly*** at the Arthur Roger Gallery, New Orleans, **6 April–22 June**. [arthurrrogallery.com](http://arthurrrogallery.com)

#### FIND OUT MORE

At [chihuly.com](http://chihuly.com)

Left: *Green Hornets and Gold Waterdrops* (detail), 2010



Read more on Chihuly at [theartssociety.org/features](http://theartssociety.org/features)