

glass

The UrbanGlass Art Quarterly

Dale Chihuly Reflects on
the Pilchuck Experiment

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Mud and Guts

In 1971, **Dale Chihuly** wasn't thinking past the first-ever summer session of Pilchuck, where attendees built the glass furnace and their own housing in a rain-soaked experiment in alternative lifestyles. But as he relates in an exclusive interview with *Glass*, Chihuly saw the potential to turn Pilchuck into a world-class educational center for glass art, and he ushered in a singular focus on glass that laid the foundations for the beloved school with an international following to celebrate its 50th anniversary this year.

BY ANDREW PAGE

The now-legendary first years of Pilchuck were anything but easy, and that was no accident. As recounted in Tina Oldknow's definitive account *Pilchuck: A Glass School* (1996), published by Pilchuck for its 25th anniversary, Dale Chihuly rejected other potential sites offering shelter, electricity, and running water, instead choosing a rugged clearing on a hillside with spectacular views of Puget Sound and the Skagit River Valley but no infrastructure. In the spirit of the times, the school was an experiment in alternatives to traditional art education, and it quickly became a free-form gathering of countercultural explorations.

Chihuly, who at the time was the head of the RISD glass program, and Ruth Tamura, head of glass at the California College of Arts and Crafts, had won a \$2,000 research grant from an independent art college association, and John Hauberg agreed to let them camp out on his Pilchuck Tree Farm for the summer. Posters about the school, hung up at art departments around the U.S., drew 21 intrepid students for this radical adventure, which meant pitching in on building a hot shop in the near-constant rain

while vainly trying to find a dry place to sleep. Blocks and paddles were carved from wood, materials were salvaged, and batch was successfully mixed and heated to make molten glass, a testament to the determination and ingenuity of the assembled and the near-constant stream of visitors who'd come by to check it out for themselves. Though much of the glass blown was crude vessel making, Dale blew clear glass bubbles that he floated in the pond, in a precursor to future environmental interventions with glass.

It was, indeed, an intensely fertile period. On the occasion of Pilchuck's 50th anniversary, *Glass* spoke with Chihuly about what was on his mind at the time, and how his risk-taking, experimental summer of 1971 led to the creating of a leading glass art institution that is looking forward to its next half-century.

GLASS *Can you talk a bit about what you were doing in the year 1971 when Pilchuck's first summer session took place at the Haubergs' farm? Aside from the summer school, it sounds like an extraordinary time for your artistic development, as you were working with Jamie Carpenter on the neon and ice pieces, and you were able to make work like the Pilchuck Pond installation, where you floated clean blown-glass spheres in a natural setting. What was that period like for you personally?*

DALE CHIHULY That was an exciting time of creativity and experimentation. We were all trying new things, testing ourselves and the material to see what could be accomplished. What we learned individually, we shared with one another, so we all grew as artists from the experience.

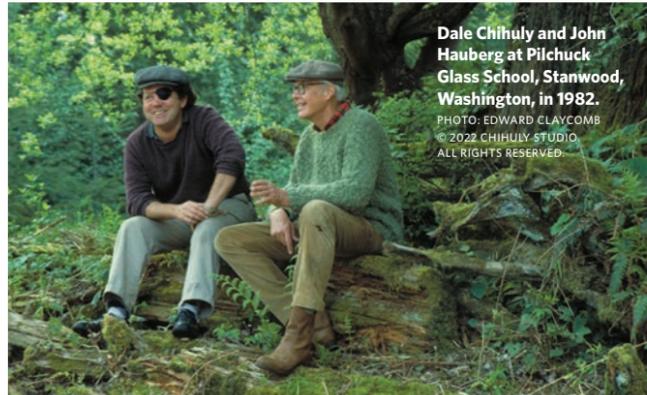
GLASS *How did starting a glass program deep in the Northwest woods figure into that time? Were you influenced by the "back to the land" movement, or was it more an interest in environmental intervention that drew you to the forest? What were some of the things going on in your life and work that made this opportunity, far from your work in Rhode Island, something you decided to undertake?*



Dale Chihuly at the bench during the 1973 summer session at Pilchuck Glass School, Stanwood, Washington.
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During the first Pilchuck summer in 1971, Dale Chihuly floats clear glass orbs in what has become known as the Pilchuck Pond installation.
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Dale Chihuly and John Hauberg at Pilchuck Glass School, Stanwood, Washington, in 1982.
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CHIHULY I was just coming off four years teaching at Haystack Mountain School of Crafts in Maine, during which I learned a lot by watching its extraordinary director, Fran Merritt. He was able to build such a diverse and rich curriculum for the school's students, and I wanted to try doing something on a smaller scale, closer to home.

GLASS *Were you imagining this would become a regular summer program, were you looking to build a glass center, or was it more of a one-off? I believe you had been given a grant for \$2,000. Did you imagine you might be coming back every summer, or was it more of an experiment?*

CHIHULY I never dreamed that it would go beyond that first year. We were simply looking to do things in a new way, to throw away the old rules and see what would happen that summer. Towards the end of the season, John Hauberg offered to fund the school for another year. The rest is history.

GLASS *I know you are careful to call yourself a cofounder of Pilchuck. Who are some of the other people who should also be given credit as founders?*

CHIHULY John Hauberg and Anne Gould Hauberg were critical partners in this experiment and great supporters of what we were trying to do at the school.

GLASS *Was there a moment when you first saw the tree farm where Pilchuck would be located, when you saw the possibilities? Was there a moment when you recognized that this unique site could be the place for what you imagined a glass school could be? Can you set the scene of a hike, perhaps with the Haubergs, or some other way you first experienced the view, the forest, the Northwest Coast temperate rain forest?*

CHIHULY John Hauberg took me up to his tree farm, which was enormous, and we scouted the land for a good site. I came across an area with a lovely pond and sweeping views of the Skagit Valley, and it just felt right. We both agreed that this would be the spot for the school.

GLASS *What were your fears for that first summer of 1971? I understand that you and a handpicked group of hardy glass students simply headed into the woods, building shelters and the glass studio. Were you afraid of things that could go wrong? Like bear attacks? An injury in the studio so far from medical treatment? Or even just the possible failure of the experiment itself? Did anything keep you up at night, or make you wonder whether it was a good idea to embark on this project?*

CHIHULY I really did not have any fears about it, I was just excited to spend time with other artists and students of glass in an environment where we could focus exclusively on our work. We were all excited about it.

GLASS *On a related note, with all the things going on in your artist practice as well as running the glass program at RISD, did you worry that you might be too busy to also start a glass workshop in the woods?*

CHIHULY I think it is because I was so busy at RISD that I saw the potential of this little glass workshop. At the time, none of us even knew how to build a furnace or an annealer. After one session at Pilchuck, one would have a good understanding about what was happening in the country with glass, and the realization that glass would be important in art, architecture, and design.

GLASS *Can you tell me about the Pilchuck Pond work in particular? Was it one of your earliest interventions in a natural landscape? How did you decide to undertake that project, and what was the production of those spheres like? They look very symmetrical and large scale—was it a challenge to blow them in Pilchuck's primitive facilities?*

CHIHULY Jamie Carpenter and I had already done some work in nature at Haystack, but this was still very early stage for me. So much so that the blown glass floats weren't even annealed. The idea was about placing glass where it wouldn't be expected, and water has always held a power over me. This first experiment with the dynamic between glass and water is one that I have continued to explore ever since.

GLASS *Who were some of the early inspirations for Pilchuck? I know some artists, such as Italo Scanga, were invited back every summer, and became fixtures. Was there something about Italo's Arte Povera approach that fit Pilchuck, or was it simply his personality?*

CHIHULY Italo was a great fit because he was an extraordinary artist, and he had a great personality. He could make art out of anything, which really inspired everyone, and he took the time to have conversations with students. Italo, Jamie Carpenter, and I shared a work ethic that you really cannot work enough. We would work seven days a week because we knew how important it is to practice, and we wanted to set that example for others.

GLASS *Who were some of the other figures that made a major impression on Pilchuck?*

CHIHULY It's nearly impossible to name those who have left an impression on Pilchuck because so many talented artists have come through as students or teachers over the last 50 years, and each has left the program stronger in one way or another. I'm really proud of that, because the school was always about artists teaching artists, and Pilchuck has seen a long line of artists go on to have successful careers.

GLASS *Can you talk a bit about Benjamin Moore, and his contribution as one of the early artistic directors who would play a pivotal role in bringing so many Europeans to teach at Pilchuck? I believe many of those, such as Libenský and Brychtová, or Anne Wärrff, were your connections, is that right? But of course Bennie brought Lino Tagliapietra to that first session in 1979. How much of an influence was Bennie on what Pilchuck became?*

CHIHULY I met Erwin Eisch, Libenský, and Brychtová on a European trip with my mother, Viola, in 1969, and it was an amazing experience to have them come out to Pilchuck in those early days. Bennie's influence at Pilchuck really cannot be overstated. He brought the Italian glassblowers into the mix, which had an enormous impact not only on the school, but on my own artmaking practice.

GLASS *What was the moment when you started to see that Pilchuck was having an impact and was becoming an institution? Did it influence your decision to step down from the RISD Glass Department?*

CHIHULY By the time I left my role at RISD, I had been teaching there for 10 years and felt that I had achieved as much as I could in



William Morris and Chihuly at the Pilchuck Glass School, Stanwood, Washington, in 1980.
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that role. I was ready to focus full-time on my work, so once I was able to earn a living as an artist, I was ready to make that change.

GLASS *Can you talk a little bit about the evolution of your philosophy of glass education? Between RISD and Pilchuck, you've had a pivotal role in two of the most important programs in the field. How did your experiences at RISD influence how you set things up at Pilchuck? Were you trying to duplicate or do very different things in each program?*



Harvey Littleton and Chihuly at Pilchuck Glass School, Stanwood, Washington, in 1974.
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Dale Chihuly with Pilchuck Baskets at the Pilchuck Glass School, Stanwood, Washington, in 1978.
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CHIHULY The RISD experience was intense. It is a hard-working environment, and those who studied and worked there became trained in that sort of work ethic. So, whether it was intentional or not, that same ethic became the norm at Pilchuck. We were blowing glass 24 hours a day.

GLASS In the first two years of Pilchuck, as it went from a one-off event to becoming an annual event, there was a tug of war as to what the culture of the school would become—a sizable portion of the attendees in 1973 were interested in alternative lifestyles and other issues besides glass. The countercultural movement in 1974 was very much in the air at this time, but I understand you came back to the helm at Pilchuck and established the sole focus on glass. I was impressed with your dedication to glass, and though you appreciate spontaneity and were exploring various media and approaches to art, you seemed to have a very strong idea that glass had to be the center. And I'm sure this caused a lot of tension with some of the people at Pilchuck, most notably Buster Simpson. Can you talk a bit about how you came to understand that you had to wrest control of Pilchuck and narrow its focus? Was it a difficult moment, and do you think things would have been different if you hadn't done that?

CHIHULY In the early days the school was not very structured and we had limited funding, so pressing for a focus on glass seemed like the obvious direction to follow. If we could earn a reputation for doing one thing really well, we could differentiate ourselves from other arts programs and become sought-after by artists with a desire to explore glass. I have found through personal experience—which is all I had to work with at the time—that specializing in a material, in this case glass, is the best way to truly understand and exploit its unique properties. One might have other interests, and I have had several through the years, but without true focus, one may never master a material nor realize one's artistic potential.

GLASS At this same moment in 1973 to 1974, you also defined that the structure of Pilchuck would be an artist-in-residence model. After a couple years of finding your way pedagogically, you established a master-apprentice dynamic where visiting artists were working and the students assisted as active players in the making of work. Can you talk about where you learned this approach to teaching, and how you decided to make that the centerpiece of the Pilchuck experience?



William Morris, left; Chihuly, center; and Flora C. Mace, far right, at the Pilchuck Glass School, Stanwood, Washington, in 1980.
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Flora C. Mace, Chihuly, and Joey Kirkpatrick at the Pilchuck Glass School, Stanwood, Washington, 1987.
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CHIHULY Watching how other artists live and how they work has been crucial to my own development. Seeing the personal process that each artist develops to overcome struggles around confidence and inspiration is fascinating. One can learn a great deal just by observing others. This became obvious to me while working at the Venini factory in Murano, Italy, in 1968. Glassblowing is a team process, with one lead gaffer being supported by others to create the ultimate vision. That same year I began teaching at Haystack Mountain School of Crafts, where this concept of artists working with other artists—whether teacher or student—was reinforced. I learned a lot from Haystack director Fran Merritt, and wanted to create a similar, collaborative approach at Pilchuck.

GLASS There seemed to be a need to create more structure and organization to the loosely organized event that Pilchuck was in the first couple of summers, according to Tina Oldknow's great book about Pilchuck. In some ways, it started with Mimi Pierce's appointment, and the changes coincided with the campus starting to take shape architecturally, with buildings replacing sheds and tents. Then Mimi was replaced by Thomas Bosworth, and later Alice Rooney. It seems that the administration professionalized, and so did the school. Would that be accurate, and how did you feel about the shift from a looser organization to the increasingly professional management of the Pilchuck operation?

CHIHULY For Pilchuck to last, it was going to need a level of organization that I wasn't interested in doing myself. I wanted to focus on my own artmaking practice, and by the fourth summer I was able to phase out entirely and rely on folks like Mimi, Fritz Dreisbach, and others to run the school. Without an organized administration, I don't think Pilchuck would have survived these 50-plus years.

GLASS In the glass art field, there remains to this day a tension between the technical mastery associated with functional work, and the more experimental, conceptual work associated with sculpture and installations in glass. How did you personally navigate these two poles in glass, and how did you guide Pilchuck to navigate between them? On the one hand, Italo Scanga and Libenský/Brychtová taught there, but so did Lino Tagliapietra and Fritz Dreisbach, who made vessels. Can you talk about your thinking about how these two somewhat opposite directions were reconciled at Pilchuck?

CHIHULY I learned early on in my career that following a strictly technical or formal approach with glass wasn't what I wanted to do. Yet I have always had great respect for traditional glass artists and their ability to manipulate glass to a level of perceived perfection. Both approaches lead to breathtaking results, and I wanted both to be represented in the curriculum.

GLASS Your direct involvement in Pilchuck has waxed and waned depending on your other activities over the past 50 years. How did you decide whether or not to spend the summer at Pilchuck, how did

your role evolve, and now, looking back a half a century later, how would you like your relationship to Pilchuck to be understood?

CHIHULY Looking back, I am grateful that there were so many talented and skilled people working at and attending Pilchuck. Their influence has enabled a responsive curriculum that evolves with the evolution of the medium. My own involvement has similarly changed through the years, as I moved away from teaching and focused more on my own practice. I am a cofounder and supporter of the school, and will continue advocating for innovation and expansion of opportunities to reflect the needs of the artists attending and in residence.

GLASS Why did you decide to donate such a substantial sum of money to Pilchuck's endowment? (Dale and Leslie Chihuly announced a \$2 million gift to Pilchuck earlier this year.) Have you been planning that for a long time, or was it a response to the challenges of the pandemic or some other reason that you decided to give it now?

CHIHULY Leslie and I felt that this was the right time to make this commitment, which we hope will ensure another 50 years of exploration and creativity at the school.

GLASS What are your hopes for the next 50 years of Pilchuck? What is there that has not yet been accomplished? Where does Pilchuck go from here? What are your hopes for the future of Pilchuck?

CHIHULY I am so proud of what has been accomplished at Pilchuck over the last 50 years. I hope they will continue making scholarships available to talented artists from around the world, because learning from other artists is so important. Right now, the school is in session during the summer and fall, and I think it would be wonderful to someday see the school season extend through the winter. ■

ANDREW PAGE is the editor of Glass.



Dale Chihuly outside his cabin at Pilchuck, Stanwood, Washington, 1988.
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