

# Through the Chihuly-Glass

## Dale Chihuly's sculptures colour both new and historic buildings

By Catherine Campbell Thomas

I have long admired the work of Dale Chihuly, which I first encountered in Seattle, his hometown and mine. Chihuly, born in 1941, is as synonymous with the Pacific Northwest region of the USA as coffee shops, salmon and Microsoft, and is world famous for the spectacular formations he renders out of glass. Singapore's cache of Chihuly's work has been recently enhanced by fabulous installations at the newly opened Resorts World Sentosa.

Chihuly studied architecture and interior design at the University of Washington while experimenting on his own, melting and shaping glass with other media. At the University of Wisconsin, he studied under master glassmaker Harvey Littleton and received a Master of Science in sculpture. He also earned a Master of Fine Arts degree from the Rhode Island School of Design. Awarded a Fulbright Fellowship in 1968, he became the first American to study Venetian glass-blowing techniques on the Italian island of Murano. In 1971 he established the Pilchuck Glass School near Seattle, where he has lived ever since.

When a bodysurfing accident in 1979 left him unable to handle the heavy glass-blowing pipe, he enlisted artisans to help. Ironically it was this 'setback' that spawned his increasingly bold explorations of

how far blown glass could be elongated, twisted and fused. Chihuly became the conductor of his gaffers, standing atop a raised platform. In a 2006 interview, he said, "Once I stepped back, I liked the view." He describes his role as "more choreographer than dancer, more supervisor than participant, more director than actor."

Chihuly creates a rough visualisation of each project with splashes of paint, the swish of a broom, or the dab of a mop. But the exact temperament of molten glass, argon and neon cannot always be predicted – and this is where the improvisation begins.

What is a Chihuly sculpture? A Chihuly glass creation is a profusion of colour – a crazy juxtaposition of dimensions and texture and shades of light. It may be the perfect size for a discerning art collector's shelf or it may be vast, making a breathtakingly bold statement strung between buildings lining a Venetian canal.

Dale Chihuly is controversial in several regards. Some say he is less an artist than a mass producer of commercial goods, a criticism that may stem from the belief that Chihuly's works are cheapened by being installed in casinos, office lobbies and hotels. Others claim he is less an artist than a conceptualiser – that it's the gaffers who are the artists. This



One of the displays in the Chihuly Gallery at  
Resorts World Sentosa; photo by Choo Yukshing

very criticism is countered by those who liken Chihuly to a master whose creations (whether fine furniture or haute couture) require additional hands to produce. My opinion? Chihuly's personal style has evolved through years of study, practice and experimentation. Without his vision, or his harnessing of talented gaffers and their unique and spontaneous collaborations, there would be no glass art as we know it today.

Chihuly has also been criticised for the secrets he keeps about his process. He has sued – and been sued – for matters of copyright, but there are no public records of settlement terms. Have less inspired glassblowers ripped off Chihuly's designs or are they simply re-interpreting his work? Has his influence been so powerful that it's impossible to make contemporary glass without following the precedents that Chihuly has established? These are issues to contemplate as one views Dale Chihuly's art.

On a spring day that, precipitation-wise, bore a strong resemblance to Seattle (rain, rain and more rain), I set out to view all that Singapore has to offer in the way of Chihuly.

I recommend starting at Chihuly's Gallery at Resorts World Sentosa. The Gallery offers a nice overview of Chihuly's work, including framed originals of the Chihuly paintings that serve as visual inspiration for his sculptures – to me, as striking as his glass. The Gallery employees are knowledgeable and go out of their way to educate visitors. While there, ask about the various series that form the building blocks of Chihuly's fantastical installations – *Seaforms*, *Persian Flowers* and *Floats*, for example – and look for examples of these series in the gorgeous coffee-table books for sale. Watch the ever-looping DVD to discover how the paintings are created, which one has part of Chihuly's footprint in it and how the footprint got there.

The good news is that the next display is just across the atrium in the lobby of Crockfords Tower Hotel. The bad news is that the hotel is for guests or by invitation only. The rest of us can only peer inside from the lobby entrance, which fortunately, provides a quite decent view of the four rose and gold-coloured *Armonia Chandeliers* that run down the centre of the lobby.



Sunrise – a part of Chihuly's Anemone Wall at the Ritz-Carlton Millenia; photo courtesy of Ritz-Carlton Millenia, Singapore



Sunset – another section of the Anemone Wall at the Ritz-Carlton Millenia; photo courtesy of Ritz-Carlton Millenia, Singapore

The brilliant reds and oranges of a second lobby installation called *Gioiosa Seaflowers* is spectacular even from afar and looks to me like an aquarium of oversized, undulating sea creatures.

The Casino is a few footsteps away. Whether or not you're the gambling sort, do go inside to experience the rush of seeing Singapore's most extensive installation of Chihuly art. (Those staying in Singapore on a tourist or work visa or a dependant's pass are exempt from the S\$100 entrance fee applicable to citizens and permanent residents. All must carry passports to enter.) *Buona Fortuna* is a rustic wooden vessel piled high with all colours of glass balls, gourds and spears. With just a glance, I am transported to the island near Seattle where I grew up playing in rowboats, collecting sea glass and making structures out of driftwood. Inside the casino are 17 more installations, including a wall display of framed drawings, a 10-metre-high glass tower and a series of chandeliers called *Otto Stelle (Eight Stars)*.

Meanwhile, at the Ritz-Carlton Millenia in Marina Bay there is an entire lounge named for Chihuly located just off the lobby. The airy, windowed expanse is a showcase for the two *Anemone Walls* installed here. The concierge will provide you with a

copy of the handsome 16-page booklet describing the hotel's collection of work by other prominent artists, including Frank Stella, David Hockney and Henry Moore. Ask to borrow the iPod Shuffle downloaded with a 38-minute podcast tour. Treat yourself to a proper English tea or glass of wine in the Chihuly Lounge while you listen.

The final Chihuly stop is the Singapore Art Museum. The ground floor Glass Hall houses 38 separate *Persian Flowers* mounted high within and outside the room. Unfortunately, on that rainy day, no sunlight danced through the glasswork. The *Persian Flowers* are gorgeous, no doubt, but I find their impact lessened by being displayed in a tidy row. Of course, this permanent installation was mounted 14 years ago. Today, Chihuly's use of space for his sculptural installations is markedly different and his commissioned works fill and enhance enormous spaces.

The day's outing testifies to the continuing evolution of Chihuly's artistry as he informs and thrills us with the possibilities of glass.

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