



OBJECTIVELY ART?

AN EXAMINATION OF THE CRITICAL RECEPTION OF DALE CHIHULY'S WORK

By

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“Innovative,” “Terrible,” “Spectacular,” “Tasteless,” “Businessman,” “Artist,” “Glass Celebrity,” “Craftsman.”<sup>1</sup> All these words have been used by critics to describe artist Dale Chihuly (b. 1941), arguably one of the most controversial figures in the contemporary art world. Well-known for his large-scale glass works, Chihuly has positioned himself as a recognizable brand name in the art industry, with hundreds of thousands of people viewing his work over the last fifty years. Since 1967, Chihuly’s objects have been showcased in over 197 exhibitions, many of them solo shows, and at least 230 museums own a Chihuly sculpture or drawing as part of their permanent collection. It can be difficult to imagine that Chihuly is such a polarizing figure when his career has resulted in these types of statistics, but an examination of the critical reception of his work reveals his controversial position in the art world. Criticism of Chihuly and his projects primarily takes the form of online short exhibition reviews, career overviews, and accounts of his techniques. The authors of these short critiques are often professional art critics, who generally work for newspapers, online art journals, or art magazines. Some longer critical essays exist in the form of book introductions published by Chihuly’s studio. These writers are usually art historians, curators, or museum directors who have been commissioned by the studio

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<sup>1</sup> Daria Daniel, “Pioneer Glassblower Dale Chihuly Brings New Work and Monumental Favorites to Marlborough Gallery,” *Artnet News*, March 24, 2015, accessed April 15, 2018, <https://news.artnet.com/market/dale-chihuly-marlborough-gallery-279964>.; Jen Graves, “Dale Chihuly Makes His Own Weather: Although He Doesn’t Make His Own Glass,” *The Stranger*, February 16, 2006, accessed November 1, 2017, <https://www.thestranger.com/seattle/dale-chihuly-makes-his-own-weather/Content?oid=30786>.; Barbara Rose, introduction to *Chihuly Projects*, by Dale Chihuly (Seattle, WA: Portland Press, 2000).; Sebastian Smee, “Glass Spectacular: The New Chihuly Exhibit at the MFA is Big and Beautiful – and Strangely Lacking,” *The Boston Globe*, April 8, 2011, accessed February 20, 2018, [http://archive.boston.com/ae/theater\\_arts/articles/2011/04/08/dale\\_chihuly\\_exhibit\\_at\\_mfa\\_is\\_a\\_glass\\_spectacular/](http://archive.boston.com/ae/theater_arts/articles/2011/04/08/dale_chihuly_exhibit_at_mfa_is_a_glass_spectacular/).; Mallika Rao, “Is Dale Chihuly A Legitimate Artist?,” *Huffington Post*, May 25, 2012, accessed February 19, 2018, [https://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/05/25/dale-chihuly-debate\\_n\\_1545694.html](https://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/05/25/dale-chihuly-debate_n_1545694.html).; Timothy Anglin Burgard, “Chihuly the Artist: Breathing Life into Glass,” Chihuly Studio website, 2008, accessed January 19, 2018, <https://www.chihuly.com/life/writings/chihuly-artist-breathing-life-glass>.; Jen Graves, “Glass Houses: Dale Chihuly Files a Lawsuit That Raises Big Questions... About Dale Chihuly,” *The Stranger*, February 16, 2006, accessed November 10, 2017, <https://www.thestranger.com/seattle/glass-houses/Content?oid=30734>.; Ezra Shales, “Time in Glasscraft,” in *The Shape of Craft* (London, UK: Reaktion Books Ltd, 2017), 223.

to write an essay for a new book. Not surprisingly, the authors of the book introductions praise Chihuly, while the professional art critics write scathing reviews. But why is there such a disparity? Why would accomplished, well-known art historian Barbara Rose or curator Timothy Anglin Burgard write laudatory essays about Chihuly if there is no substance to his work? Why do art critics Jen Graves and Sebastian Smee, the former a Pulitzer Prize finalist for criticism and the latter a winner of the Pulitzer Prize for criticism, deride his work and practices as tasteless and terrible?

Supported by an overview of his career, my meta-critical analysis examines the critical reception of Chihuly's work. I will argue that Chihuly is an artist whose glass sculptures, drawings, and paintings invite a discourse on our contemporary understanding of art, and that a study of his career encourages a discussion of what it means to be a contemporary artist. Some of the questions my thesis will answer are: Who decides whether Chihuly's objects are art and what is the criteria for the decision? How has Chihuly's career been influenced by the American Studio Glass movement? How has he positively or negatively contributed to our contemporary perceptions of glass as craft or fine art? I will end my examination with my own critical review of his most recent projects, the Chihuly Sanctuary and the *Glass on Glass* series. By analyzing this latest architectural endeavor and his newest object series, I can contribute to the critical response of the art world to his objects. I will begin by presenting the major arguments for and against Chihuly's work.

It is not uncommon for contemporary artists to receive both acclaim and criticism; however, Chihuly's name—like that of Damien Hirst and Jeff Koons—invites intensely negative comments about his artwork and his business practices. Some critics have said that his sculptures

looks like rock candy, that it makes them gag, and that it is embarrassing to view.<sup>2</sup> Others exuberantly praise his work. The disparity in criticism is acute, and, while reading Chihuly commentary can be comical at times, it provokes considering why Chihuly's work is considered laughable and tasteless by many, if not most, art critics.

Jen Graves, one of the most outspoken critics against Chihuly's sculptures, worked as the art critic for the Seattle newspaper *The Stranger*, from 2006 to 2017. A Pulitzer Prize finalist for criticism and a nominee for the Best Art Reporting Award from the United States section of the International Association of Art Critics (both in 2014), Graves has been vocal over the years about her opinion of Chihuly. Her acerbic criticism on his work was primarily published during the early to mid-2000s and focuses on Chihuly's activities located in the Seattle area, including: the creation of the permanent exhibition space "Chihuly Garden and Glass" at the base of the Seattle Space Needle, the construction of the *Bridge of Glass* in Tacoma, and two lawsuits. Graves's most common critique of Chihuly is that he is not an artist, but rather a director of a group of artisans who make mediocre objects. In her 2006 article, "Glass Houses: Dale Chihuly Files a Lawsuit that Raises Big Questions . . . About Dale Chihuly," Graves describes Chihuly as a "glass celebrity", who has negatively affected how glass is perceived by the art world through his aggressive self-promotion.<sup>3</sup> Graves's belief that Chihuly has negatively impacted the art world's perceptions of glass is a common conception held by many of Chihuly's detractors; however, her refusal to acknowledge him as an artist is unique. Most critics spend more time debating whether he makes good or bad art and gloss over whether he can call himself an art maker. Conversely,

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<sup>2</sup> Blouin ArtInfo Blog, "ARTINFO's Top 10 Favorite Mean Things That Have Been Said About Dale Chihuly," Blouin ArtInfo, May 18, 2012, accessed August 8, 2017, <http://blogs.artinfo.com/artintheair/2012/05/18/artinfos-top-10-favorite-mean-things-that-have-been-said-about-dale-chihuly/>.

<sup>3</sup> Jen Graves, "Glass Houses: Dale Chihuly Files a Lawsuit That Raises Big Questions... About Dale Chihuly," *The Stranger*, February 16, 2006, accessed November 10, 2017, <https://www.thestranger.com/seattle/glass-houses/Content?oid=30734>.

Graves avoids the term artist, and instead says he is “a guy that points at glassblowers” and an “organizer of something that can be interesting.”<sup>4</sup> Since Graves argues that Chihuly is not an artist, it only follows that she also does not believe Chihuly creates art. She equates his exhibitions with “synchronized swimming movies,” in which every person and object is precisely choreographed to create something “shallow but...spectacular.”<sup>5</sup> When describing a particular work in detail, such as the two blue forty-foot tall Crystal Towers (fig. 1) on the Tacoma Bridge of Glass, she derides it for resembling rock candy, saying that they are so sturdy that you could shoot them and the bullets would glance off.<sup>6</sup> Ultimately, Graves’s criticism of Chihuly is based on her argument that he directs people to produce gaudy, large objects that do not meet her criteria for the status of art. Her conditions for what can be an art object can be inferred from her comments about Chihuly: a contemporary artwork is conceptual and through its form, it invites the viewer to consider larger implications, such as social, political, cultural, or economic situations. For Graves, Chihuly’s work merely exists, without even being aesthetically pleasing. Graves is not the only critic to contend that Chihuly’s work is lacking the necessary elements to be considered art.

Kyle Chayka, author of the article “Dale Chihuly Mounts World’s Biggest Bong Retrospective,” also criticizes Chihuly for his failure to contextualize his work in exhibitions and seeming inability to create forms that are intellectually stimulating, regardless of their visual or aesthetic appeal.<sup>7</sup> Chayka, a freelance writer, who for a time was a senior editor at Hyperallergic and who has written for *ARTINFO*, *ARTnews*, *Modern Painters*, and *LA Weekly*, describes the 2011 Chihuly exhibition at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts as an “amusement-park glass

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid. and Jen Graves, “Dale Chihuly Makes His Own Weather: Although He Doesn’t Make His Own Glass,” *The Stranger*, February 16, 2006, accessed November 1, 2017, <https://www.thestranger.com/seattle/dale-chihuly-makes-his-own-weather/Content?oid=30786>.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Kyle Chayka, “Dale Chihuly Mounts World’s Biggest Bong Retrospective,” Hyperallergic, June 14, 2011, accessed August 30, 2017, <https://hyperallergic.com/26942/dale-chihuly-retrospective/>.

menagerie that too often looks like a 5 year old's acid trip," with "well-made but barely interesting sculptures."<sup>8</sup> His comparison of Chihuly's objects to bongos—pipes used to smoke tobacco or illegal drugs—is a derogatory assessment that equates the works with the popular and the kitsch rather than fine art. Incidentally, some of Chihuly's forms are reminiscent of hookah pipes with their brightly colored, long, skinny bodies and curving, hose-like tendrils. However, research into Chihuly's inspirations indicates that he is more interested in referencing nature and plant life than referring to drug use or the tobacco industry. Chayka's largest critique is of the show's failure to contextualize the works and to give viewers a sense of what influences Chihuly's forms. He is impressed by the gallery exhibiting Chihuly's Native American-inspired objects with Native American textiles and baskets (fig. 2) but laments the lack of comparison between object and inspiration in the rest of the show. Chayka has a point; the Native American-inspired room is successful because it provides context. Chihuly is aware of this and replicates the room in almost every indoor exhibition he has had in the last few years. Visits to multiple locations throughout the United States showcasing permanent or temporary exhibitions of Chihuly work reveals a systematic pattern in how certain objects are exhibited. Take for example the Native American-inspired room. I saw the same arrangement of the space with nearly identical objects in at least three locations over the course of three months. A visit to the Boathouse, one of three private studios and, at one point, the permanent residence of Chihuly, revealed the original Native American room, known as the Northwest Room (fig. 3). The next day, I visited the Chihuly Garden and Glass in Seattle and had a feeling of *déjà-vu*; I was exploring a nearly identical Native American-inspired gallery also named the "Northwest Room" (fig. 4). A few weeks later I again walked around a similar space at Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art (fig. 5). Such

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

reiterations are unusual in contemporary art. Why does Chihuly replicate rooms in exhibitions with similar, if not identical, layouts, colors, and objects?

It appears that Chihuly conceives of his exhibitions and installations as entire rooms, not just objects in a gallery space, due to his undergraduate degree in interior design. Chihuly received his Bachelor of Arts degree in interior design from the University of Washington in 1965. He has always been interested in the elements of design, resulting in his re-decoration of his mother's basement during his youth and his avid collection of Aston Martin automobiles, antique door stops, accordions, etc. as he grew older. When I visited the Boathouse in May 2017, I was given a tour by Director Paula Stokes, who said that each room was designed by Chihuly, and that the Boathouse is "a reflection of his heart."<sup>9</sup> The Boathouse is no longer Chihuly's private residence, but Director Stokes pointed out that he visits it nearly every day to swim in the lap pool, meet with clients, and confer with the glassblowers working in the hot shop. It is evident at the Boathouse that every detail has been arranged by Chihuly; each room is its own environment, and several of these environments are replicated in exhibitions (most notably the Northwest Room). From my observations, the "Northwest Room" is made up of several key objects, including: a wall of hanging Native American-inspired Pendleton blankets, a wall of Edward Curtis black and white photographs of Native Americans, a wall with shelves holding Northwestern Native American baskets with Chihuly *Baskets*, and a long, low table made from a tree trunk showcasing more Chihuly *Baskets*. The room must be painted a dark, smoky grey and the lighting is dramatic. Chihuly can replicate the room in multiple locations at the same time because he owns hundreds of blankets, dozens of baskets, and can have made as many glass objects of any series he desires. The consequences of his replications are intriguing. Chihuly is often criticized for his sameness

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<sup>9</sup> Caitlin Clay. Interview and tour with Paula Stokes. May 17, 2018. I decided not to interview Chihuly about the critical reception of his work due to my interest in examining the literature about Chihuly.

due to his use of similar forms. For example, on the wall of the hot shop at the Boathouse, Chihuly has hung examples of many different forms, such as straight, curling, or ribbed objects, that can be combined to create chandeliers or free-standing towers in various sizes and colors. Since he often uses the same shapes, but in different combinations, the sculptures can appear very similar. However, no one has said forthright that it is the overall galleries that are the same from venue to venue. The room varies slightly depending on the institution, but it is interesting to note that for Chihuly, the Northwest Room must consist of particular objects, meaning the *Baskets* series will most likely never be installed without its accompanying straw-woven Native American baskets next to them. This repetition implies a uniformity that also grants accessibility. A visitor to Chihuly Garden and Glass in Seattle can view the Northwest Room on permanent display at the same time someone in New York can see it at a short-term exhibition. This accessibility could be positive or negative; it contributes to the idea that Chihuly is repeatedly exhibiting the same objects but also providing more people with the opportunity to experience the work. However, the objects are never the same due to the hand-made nature of the glass elements. Chihuly instructs his glassblowers to make sculptures similar to one another, but they are never exactly the same due to how the colored glass melts, resulting in surface design that appears analogous to other works but is not an exact duplicate. Chihuly's sculptures are always one-of-a-kind, resulting in exhibition spaces with sculptures that appear completely alike, but are in fact, all unique works.

Chayka is not the only critic who criticizes the Boston MFA's exhibition. Sebastian Smee also wrote an extensive article about the show and its works. Former art critic for the *Boston Globe* and current art critic for the *Washington Post* Sebastian Smee wrote in his 2011 essay, "Glass Spectacular: the New Chihuly Exhibit at the MFA is Big and Beautiful—and Strangely Lacking"



that Chihuly's work is tasteless.<sup>10</sup> His opening paragraph lists several common critiques of Chihuly,

I have no quibbles with Chihuly's factory-style operation, his terrific rate of production, or his immense popularity. None at all. Nor am I bothered by the general absence of ideas in his work: I am all in favor of senseless beauty, and would prefer it any day to most of the brittle, air-filled intellectual meringue that goes by the description of conceptual art. It's the works themselves that I find so off-putting. And again and again I find the problem with them is that they are tasteless.<sup>11</sup>

Smee's characterization of Chihuly's work as tasteless is due to his belief that the sculptures are too big, too colorful, and, overall, too over-the-top. They lack a concept or a narrative.<sup>12</sup> This sentiment is reminiscent of Graves's argument. Like Graves, Smee is an award-winning and well-known art critic; he won a Pulitzer Prize for criticism in 2011 and has authored books on artists such as Lucien Freud and Mark Bradford. Given both Graves's and Smee's professional accolades and Chayka's years of writing for art magazines, their critiques are grounded in their years of assessing contemporary art. However, their arguments are not shared by everyone. Some art historians, curators, and museum directors praise Chihuly's work.

The criticism I have focused on thus far does not include mention of all the exhibition reviews Chihuly has received over the years, but they do touch on some of the most important issues. Is he an artist? Does he make art? Is it good or bad art and why? Graves argues that Chihuly

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<sup>10</sup> Sebastian Smee, "Glass Spectacular: the new Chihuly exhibit at the MFA is big and beautiful -- and strangely lacking," *The Boston Globe*, April 8, 2011, accessed September 5, 2017, [http://archive.boston.com/ae/theater\\_arts/articles/2011/04/08/dale\\_chihuly\\_exhibit\\_at\\_mfa\\_is\\_a\\_glass\\_spectacular/?page=2](http://archive.boston.com/ae/theater_arts/articles/2011/04/08/dale_chihuly_exhibit_at_mfa_is_a_glass_spectacular/?page=2).

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

is not an artist and, therefore, cannot be making art. Chayka views Chihuly as an artist, but one who makes bad art since it lacks context when exhibited and the forms are reminiscent of Indian smoking pipes. Smee also believes Chihuly is an artist, but one who makes tasteless art because it lacks an innate concept and overwhelms the viewer through bright colors and monumental installations. Art historians Henry Adams, Barbara Rose, and Timothy Anglin Burgard address some of these critiques of Chihuly through their essays.

Henry Adams is a distinguished art historian and one of Chihuly's greatest champions. Adams has taught as a professor of American art at Case Western Reserve University since 1997. His resume is extensive, and extends from teaching positions at the University of Kansas, the University of Missouri, and the University of Pittsburgh to positions in museums, such as Curator of American Art at the Cleveland Museum of Art, and the Samuel Sosland Curator of American Art at the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art. Adams wrote the opening essay to the 2016 book *Chihuly on Fire*, which begins "Dale Chihuly is widely regarded as the world's greatest living master in glass."<sup>13</sup> This is a bold declaration and it stands in complete opposition to Graves, who has said, "To this day, there has not been a modern master glass artist."<sup>14</sup> Later in the essay, Adams declares that Chihuly is not only a glass master, but also "one of the world's greatest figures in modern and contemporary art of any medium."<sup>15</sup> Adams's assertions are audacious; his argument is based on his claims that Chihuly's chief contributions to art include his role as a teacher—many of his assistants and previous students are well-known and monetarily successful artists—as well as his never ending re-invention of forms, interest in color, and devotion to scale. In his introductory

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<sup>13</sup> Henry Adams, *Chihuly on Fire* (Seattle, WA: Chihuly Workshop, 2016), 9.

<sup>14</sup> Graves, Jen. "Glass Houses: Dale Chihuly Files a Lawsuit That Raises Big Questions...About Dale Chihuly," *The Stranger*, February 16, 2006, accessed November 10, 2017, <https://www.thestranger.com/seattle/glass-houses/Content?oid=30734>. See CMS for repeated citations

<sup>15</sup> Henry Adams, *Chihuly on Fire* (Seattle, WA: Chihuly Workshop, 2016), 10.

essay, Adams' argument focuses on Chihuly's achievements throughout his career; it reads like a play-by-play of Chihuly's life, emphasizing his conceptual work while a young student and teacher at the Rhode Island School of Design and the art world recognition he received following the Metropolitan Museum of Art's acquisition of some early works.

Curator Timothy Anglin Burgard similarly argues for Chihuly achieving a place in the art historical canon. The Ednah Root Curator in charge of American Art for the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco and author of the 2008 essay, "Chihuly the Artist: Breathing Life into Glass," Burgard recognizes that criticism of Chihuly's work has focused on his techniques and not the concept behind his art-making.<sup>16</sup> Like Adams, Burgard provides the reader with a sort of overview of each series, offering information about when each was created and what inspired it. In doing so, Burgard gives context to the works. For example, he writes that the 1988 *Venetian* series was inspired by Art Deco Venetian glassware and are "defined by a baroque aesthetic of exuberance—or even excess—that is deeply rooted in the Venetian tradition."<sup>17</sup> He cites the *Gold Over Cobalt Venetian #166* from 1989 (fig. 6). Burgard is impressed by Chihuly's *Venetians* because he thinks Chihuly embraces the vessel form while also emphasizing color, surface, and size. For Burgard, Chihuly's *Venetians* pay homage to historical glass and a city that for decades was the mecca of glass making.

Barbara Rose is another American art historian and art critic who praises Chihuly for his sculptures. Rose wrote monthly critical essays titled "New York Letter," for *Art International* beginning in 1963. She is also famously published the 1965 essay "ABC Art" in *Art in America*, which analyzes the foundations of minimal art. Rose wrote the introductory essay titled "Dale

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<sup>16</sup> Burgard, Timothy Anglin. "Chihuly the Artist: Breathing Life into Glass," Chihuly Studio website, 2008, accessed January 19, 2018, <https://www.chihuly.com/life/writings/chihuly-artist-breathing-life-glass>.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

Chihuly's Paradise Regained" for the publication, *Chihuly Projects*. She notes that over the years, critics have dissected Chihuly's art-making in many ways. She views him as "an artistic Superman . . . a larger-than-life savior who revived an ancient and dying tradition by transplanting it from the Old World to the New" and who has created an art that uses easily comprehensible language and form.<sup>18</sup> Rose is enamored of Chihuly, characterizing him as the art world's bad boy, who has proved through his monetary success and public popularity that he does not need the praise of the art world to continue to create and exhibit. Rose's argument is that Chihuly's work is art, not craft, because the objects are nonfunctional and exhibit "a high level of discipline, experience, and knowledge, not to mention a direct connection to a historic tradition."<sup>19</sup> Rose contends that Chihuly's art appeals to viewers because it does not "speak in a subjective and elitist language the public does not understand," rather it presents audiences with the basic elements of abstraction—color, light, form, and space—while also providing some reference to the natural world.<sup>20</sup> Though Adams, Burgard, and Rose were presumably commissioned to write their essays, their literature contributes to public interpretation of Chihuly and his sculptures. The differences between the art critics' response to Chihuly's work and the art historians' contextualization of his projects is quite contradictory, leading to the question of how Chihuly responds to critical acclaim and denunciation.

In a 2017 interview with Ted Loos, a writer for *The New York Times*, Loos inquired how criticism affects the artist. Chihuly responded, "It bothers you for a while, and then you forget about it," adding, "I wonder how that worked in the Renaissance . . . I wonder if [the critics] were

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<sup>18</sup> Barbara Rose, "Dale Chihuly's Paradise Regained," *Chihuly Projects*, (Seattle, WA: Portland Press, 2000), n.p.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

as critical as the ones now?”<sup>21</sup> In this statement, Chihuly aligns himself with Renaissance artists, who were characterized by Giorgio Vasari as geniuses. Many of these artists had workshops, in which assistants would paint or sculpt preliminary elements of an artwork, and the artist would add the finishing touches and his signature. However, the workshop was somewhat different in the glass industry. This invites a brief overview of the glass making tradition and how it has changed over the centuries.

Glass has been used as a fine art medium for only a few of the past decades; however, glassblowing and creating objects from glass has occurred for centuries. Many contemporary artists still use techniques that originated in ancient civilizations. Scholars believe glass making began in Mesopotamia more than four thousand years ago.<sup>22</sup> Egyptian glasshouses then flourished from 1400 to 1000 B.C., producing perfume and oil bottles, small jars, jewelry, and amulets.<sup>23</sup> These objects could be made in molds or through a core process (fig. 7), in which ceramic slip was applied to a slim metal rod and after hardening, was dipped into hot glass. Glass blowing was most likely developed in Syria and takes two forms: free blowing and mold blowing. Artists today use a combination of both methods. Free blowing consists of blowing air through a blowpipe and into a gather of hot glass on the end of the pipe. The air creates a bubble, allowing the glassblower to create an opening within the piece. Mold blowing involves gathering hot glass onto a blowpipe and forcing it into a mold. The glassblower blows into the pipe while it is in the mold, resulting in the expansion of the glass into the shape of the mold. For thousands of years, glass was valued for

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<sup>21</sup> Ted Loos, “Are There Glass Snakes in Dale Chihuly’s Fragile Eden?,” *The New York Times*, April 26, 2017, accessed August 30, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/26/arts/design/are-there-glass-snakes-in-dale-chihulys-fragile-eden.html>.

<sup>22</sup> Phoebe Phillips, *The Encyclopedia of Glass* (New York, NY: Crown Publishers, 1981), 20.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

its durability, beauty, and ability to be shaped into functional objects, and these qualities are still valued in contemporary glass making.

Glass making in colonial North America began in 1608, when the London Company of Glass makers built a glass factory near Jamestown, Virginia. Early factories from the eighteenth century, such as those founded by Caspar Wistar and Henry William Stiegel, created functional objects, particularly bottles (fig. 8), window panes, and tableware.<sup>24</sup> The nineteenth century ushered in pressed glass tableware, which became extremely popular with the American middle class due to its affordability and beauty. Midwestern glass factories, such as Cambridge Glass (1873-1984), Fostoria Glass (1887-1891), and Heisey Glass (1895-1957), produced prolific amounts of tableware and stemware for consumers, as well as headlights, scientific research equipment, and small-scale figurines.<sup>25</sup> The nineteenth century also saw the introduction of art glass, particularly the works of Louis Comfort Tiffany, who became well-known for his stained-glass lamps, screens, and windows. America's long and illustrious history has both positively and negatively impacted glass-making today. Glass artists benefit from previous scientific discoveries and advances in equipment and melting formulas but are at a disadvantage in the art world due to glass's association with functionality and craft. The mid-twentieth century marked the beginning of the studio glass movement and efforts to advance glass from craft object to fine art object.

Dale Chihuly's career coincides with the development of the studio glass movement in the 1960s by artists Harvey Littleton and Dominick Labino. Littleton was originally a ceramicist, but spent his weekends and summers working at Corning Glass Works in New York with his father, a physicist in the company's research department. Labino began as an engineer working with fiberglass before pursuing an artistic career. Littleton's influence on Chihuly was profound, and

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid, 180.

he provided the knowledge and mentorship for Chihuly to begin working solely in glass, while Labino's technical expertise on building hot glass equipment provided the scientific knowledge for the movement to be successful. A brief historical overview of Chihuly's biography and developments in the studio glass movement reveals how closely they were linked.

On September 20, 1941, Dale Chihuly was born in Tacoma, Washington, to George Chihuly and Viola Magnuson Chihuly. Growing up, Chihuly was entranced by his mother's beautiful flower garden, which, as he has stated in interviews, inspired his own love of color. In 1960, he transferred from the College of Puget Sound (now the University of Puget Sound) to the University of Washington in Seattle, where he studied interior design and architecture. Around this same time, Harvey Littleton was in Europe on sabbatical from his position at the University of Wisconsin in Madison and decided to visit artist Jean Sala, a glass artist in France, and, later, the glass factories on the Venetian island of Murano.<sup>26</sup> Littleton took note of the small furnaces the Murano factories placed outside for glass blowing demonstrations. Upon returning to the United States, he decided to pursue glass blowing as an art form and to experiment with constructing small-scale furnaces for melting glass.<sup>27</sup>

Littleton and Chihuly were in Europe within four years of one another; in 1962, Chihuly decided to interrupt his studies and travel overseas. He began in Florence to focus on studying Italian art but eventually chose to move to the Middle East to participate in an American cultural phenomenon of the time: working for a short period of time in a kibbutz. He often says in interviews he was inspired by the commune's collaborative nature. Chihuly eventually returned to the University of Washington and enrolled in a weaving class with Doris Brockway, where he began to create tapestries with glass shards woven into the fibers. While Chihuly traveled and

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<sup>26</sup> Joan Falconer Byrd, *Harvey K. Littleton: A Retrospective Exhibition* (Atlanta: High Museum of Art, 1984), 9.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

attended school, Littleton was laying the foundation for the studio hot glass movement. Littleton was invited by Otto Wittmann, his friend and the director of the Toledo Museum of Art, to hold two glass-blowing workshops, one from March 23 to April 1, 1962, and the other from June 18 to June 30 of the same year. Littleton brought his own furnace and invited eight artist friends—including Labino—to experiment with hot glass. Labino initially provided a low-melting glass formula for the first batch of glass.<sup>28</sup> The first days of the workshop were difficult, and the glass melted incorrectly, resulting in Labino suggesting they change the type of glass they were melting and modify the furnace. This led to a melted batch of glass that achieved proper viscosity and temperature and was used for experimentations for the rest of the workshop. The second workshop was also highly successful and included more participants than the previous workshop. Littleton's interest in glass overtook his desire to create ceramics, and he began solely experimenting with glass blowing. In the fall of 1963, the University of Wisconsin at Madison's glass blowing program started to take shape when Littleton won a grant to build a student studio, the first hot glass program at a university in the United States.<sup>29</sup> Just a few years later, Dale Chihuly would enter this program as a graduate student.

Chihuly's interest in glass began at a young age, but it was not until after he graduated in 1965 with his Bachelor of Arts degree in interior design from the University of Washington that he began experimenting with glass. The story of his first encounters with glassblowing is legendary and not necessarily untrue. According to Chihuly, he was busy re-decorating his mother's basement and decided to melt down a batch of stained glass in a crude furnace and attempt to blow glass. Surprisingly, he was able to blow a bubble despite having never seen glass blown in person. His interest was sparked, and, in the fall of 1966, he received a full scholarship to attend Harvey

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid, 11.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid, 13.



Littleton's glass-blowing program at the University of Wisconsin at Madison. Littleton's energy and creative spirit were mirrored by his new student; Littleton and Chihuly would become collaborators and lifelong friends.

After graduating with his Master of Science degree in sculpture from the University of Wisconsin in 1967, Chihuly enrolled at the Rhode Island School of Design, where he began using neon and argon in his blown glass. In 1968, he received a Master of Fine Arts degree from RISD. After teaching in Maine for the summer, Chihuly was awarded a Fulbright Fellowship to study glass-blowing at the Venini factory on the island of Murano, which greatly influenced his art practice. He then toured Europe and met with various glass masters. He returned to the United States to head RISD's glass program for eleven years—an honor often disregarded by contemporary critics and an early acknowledgment of his talent and professionalism. The early 1970s were characterized by exciting collaborations between Chihuly and several RISD students, such as James Carpenter, Kate Elliott, and Flora C. Mace. Chihuly and Carpenter created several works made of ice, neon, and glass, such as *20,000 Pounds of Ice and Neon* (fig. 9) while Chihuly, Elliot, and Mace collaboratively developed the pick-up glass thread drawing technique used in the *Navajo Blanket Cylinders* (Fig. 10), *Irish Cylinders*, and *Ulysses Cylinders* series. In 1971, he founded the Pilchuck Glass School located at a tree farm north of Seattle. The school became a summer retreat for Chihuly and his students, as well as an exciting collaborative experience due to Chihuly's insistence on inviting world-renown glass blowers artists to visit and work with himself and the students from RISD. The school continues to feature prominent artists as teachers and artists in residence and is now considered a pre-eminent glass blowing institution.

In 1976, tragedy struck; while driving through England, Chihuly was involved in a serious car accident that resulted in loss of sight in his left eye and permanent damage to his right ankle

and foot. After recuperating, he returned to RISD, where he not only led the Program in Glass, but also became head of the Department of Sculpture. He discovered shortly after he began working again that his lack of depth perception effected his ability to blow glass. This same year, the Metropolitan Museum of Art bought three *Navajo Blanket Cylinders* for the museum's permanent collection. Despite the physical difficulties, Chihuly continued to make work, though he increasingly began to rely on fellow glassblowers and students for help. His 1977 *Basket* series was inspired by Northwest Coast Indian baskets (figs. 11 and 12) he saw at the Washington State History Museum and was originally made at Pilchuck with friend and fellow artist Benjamin Moore acting as head gaffer – the person in charge of directing the team of workers. The year 1979 saw the end of Chihuly blowing glass; a bodysurfing accident dislocated his shoulder, resulting in an inability to lift heavy gathers of glass on a pipe. To better communicate his ideas to his collaborators, he began drawing and sketching his designs using various materials. In 1980 he resigned his teaching position at RISD, to focus solely on his art-making, resulting in many new series. The *Seaform* series, *Macchia* series, *Soft Cylinder Series*, *Persian Series*, *Venetian Series*, *Putti Series*, and *Ikebana Series* (figs. 13-19) all began during the 1980s and have been repeatedly revisited throughout his career. In 1987, he donated artworks to the Tacoma Art Museum's permanent collection in memory of his brother and father and has continued to bequeath works to the collection in honor of his mother. The 1990s resulted in Chihuly buying and designing his iconic Boathouse private studio, which originally began as his private residence and a working hot shop. In 1991, he began a new series, the *Nijima Floats* (fig. 20), creating some of the historically largest pieces of glass blown by hand. In 1992, he began the *Chandelier* series (fig. 21) and in the following year, started the *Piccolo Venetian* series (fig. 22). He initiated his international project *Chihuly over Venice* in 1995. The goal of the project was to take his team and blow glass with

local artists in Nuutajärvi, Finland, the Waterford Crystal factory in Ireland, and Monterrey, Mexico. This international endeavor resulted in fourteen chandeliers that were installed throughout Venice in 1996. In 1998, he installed his iconic ceiling at the Bellagio Hotel in Las Vegas (fig. 23) and two large-scale sculptures at the Atlantis Hotel in the Bahamas. The *Jerusalem Cylinder* series (fig. 24) began in 1999, as part of plans for the exhibition *Chihuly in the Light of Jerusalem* were being made. The new millennium saw 10,000 pieces of glass in over 12 shipping containers make their way to the Tower of David Museum of the History of Jerusalem (fig. 25). Over 1,300,000 people visited the installation, breaking the world attendance record for a temporary exhibition during 1999–2000.<sup>30</sup> The early to mid-2000s were marked by several large-scale exhibitions and installations, such as *Chihuly at the V&A* at Victoria and Albert Museum, London (2001), *Chihuly in the Park: A Garden of Glass*, at Garfield Park Conservatory, Chicago (2001), installations for the Winter Olympic Games in Salt Lake City (2002), dedication of the *Bridge of Glass* (Fig. 26) at the Museum of Glass in Tacoma, Washington (2002), an exhibition at Franklin Park Conservatory, in Columbus, Ohio (2003), an exhibition at the Atlanta Botanical Garden (2004), an exhibition at the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, outside London (2005), and an exhibition at Fairchild Tropical Botanic Garden, Coral Gables, Florida (2005). While exhibiting around the world, Chihuly continued to create new series, such as *Mille Fiori* (fig. 27), the *Black Cylinders* (fig. 28) and the *Clear Cylinders* (fig. 29). The year 2005 also saw two exhibitions develop, one at the Missouri Botanical Gardens in St. Louis and an exhibition at the New York Botanical Garden. In 2007, Chihuly exhibited at Phipps Conservatory and Botanical Gardens in Pittsburgh and in 2008 at the de Young Museum in San Francisco, the RISD Museum of Art, and the Desert Botanical Garden in Phoenix. In 2009, Chihuly participated in the 53rd Venice Biennale with his

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<sup>30</sup> “Jerusalem 2000.” Tower of David. Accessed March 02, 2018. <https://www.tod.org.il/en/exhibition/jerusalem-2000/>.

*Mille Fiori Venezia* installation. The years 2010 and 2011 included temporary installations at Kennedy Center for Performing Arts in Washington, D.C., the Salk Institute for Biological Studies in La Jolla, California, the Frederik Meijer Gardens & Sculpture Park in Grand Rapids, Michigan, the Cheekwood Botanical Garden and Museum of Art, Nashville, the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, and the Tacoma Art Museum. From 2012 to 2017, he continued to create large-scale exhibitions featured at notable venues, such as the Dallas Arboretum and Botanical Garden, the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, The Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, the Clinton Presidential Library and Museum, the Denver Botanic Gardens, the Museum of Glass, the Atlanta Botanical Gardens, and the Royal Ontario Museum. Two major exhibitions at the New York Botanical Garden and Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art, also took place in 2017, as well as the opening of the Chihuly Sanctuary, a permanent space within the Fred and Pamela Buffett Cancer Center in Omaha, Nebraska. Chihuly's exhibition history is exhaustive and proof of extensive recognition in the art world of the importance of his work. He has exhibited in many different types of institutions, from encyclopedic to craft museums, universities to botanic gardens, and political administrative buildings to private homes. So why has he and his work generated strong negative criticism? From the critical writings of Graves, Chayka, and Smee, we see that the crux of their arguments lies with the lack of content and context. Therefore, to address their critiques, I will now examine the Chihuly object in detail and focus on the elements that make a Chihuly a Chihuly.

Personal branding, the signature, and the object's physical form are all key elements to answering the question of how we define a Chihuly object. Over the course of his career, Chihuly has become a brand and his artworks have spawned a money-making empire. In 1985, Chihuly

registered his studio/company as Chihuly, Inc.<sup>31</sup> It is run by his second wife, Leslie Chihuly, who is both president and chief executive of the company. The corporation has many purposes: paying Chihuly's glassblowing teams, employing full-time art handlers and installation preparators, and printing in-house (Portland Press) and distributing exhibition catalogs and books. Chihuly, Inc. also sells limited edition prints and sculptures, handles media inquiries, sets up fundraisers, and settles business transactions. At the rate Chihuly exhibits and sells work, many critics are skeptical whether Chihuly oversees the creation of every artwork sold through his company. In particular, Jen Graves wonders what will happen after Chihuly passes away.<sup>32</sup> Will the corporation continue to produce works with Chihuly's name on them? If so, does that make these works mass-produced objects instead of artworks? Chihuly has never explicitly stated what will happen to the company when he dies, but he insists each work must include his signature, implying that the empire he has built will end when he can no longer sign his works. He has also stated that his signature is what gives his objects monetary value. During a talk at Google in 2008, Chihuly was asked by an audience member what made a Chihuly artwork a Chihuly. Chihuly replied, "If it has my signature on it, it is a Chihuly piece. That's the one thing I don't let people do".<sup>33</sup> The response elicited chuckles from the crowd but has serious implications.

During the late 1970s, Salvador Dalí signed several large bulks of blank sheets of paper to prevent slowing down the printing process due to his constant travels. He quickly realized that

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<sup>31</sup> Susan Kelleher and Sheila Farr, "Inside the Glass Empire" *The Seattle Times*. August 06, 2006. Accessed February 02, 2018. [http://old.seattletimes.com/html/chihulyinc/2003178395\\_chihuly06.html](http://old.seattletimes.com/html/chihulyinc/2003178395_chihuly06.html).

<sup>32</sup> Jen Graves, "Glass Houses: Dale Chihuly Files a Lawsuit That Raises Big Questions... About Dale Chihuly," *The Stranger*, February 16, 2006, accessed November 10, 2017, <https://www.thestranger.com/seattle/glass-houses/Content?oid=30734>.

<sup>33</sup> AtGoogleTalks. YouTube. June 20, 2008. Accessed March 02, 2018. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m6M2y0YhhaU>.

these sheets were worth around \$40 even without an image.<sup>34</sup> It is estimated that before he died, he signed several thousand sheets, though forgers and printers took advantage of the artist's failing health to add to this number, resulting in such a proliferation of signed Dali prints or blank paper on the market, that most that are for sale now are considered fake.<sup>35</sup> Chihuly's signature has a similar effect, raising the price of an object by thousands of dollars. In the same talk at Google in 2008, he was asked where he draws the line at other artists being inspired by his work or believing they are stealing his ideas. He avoided answering the question, but did make an interesting analogy, comparing buying an original Ferrari at \$300,000 to buying a replica of a Ferrari for \$30,000. He noted that most people want to buy the more expensive Ferrari because they desire to own a real Ferrari, just as most people are interested in buying work from him, because "they want [my] signature."<sup>36</sup> Theoretically, Chihuly could sign a lot of objects in preparation of his death; he may even already do it today due to his failing health. However, Chihuly's past actions show that his signature is not the only key component of making an object a Chihuly artwork.

In 2005, only a few years before the Google interview, Chihuly filed a copyright infringement lawsuit against a former employee, Bryan Rubino, for blowing glass objects that look very similar to Chihuly's work.<sup>37</sup> The lawsuit also alleged that Rubino would give these objects to a man named Robert Kaindl, also a glassblower, who would sell them as his own artwork on a personal website and through galleries. The lawsuit was settled out of court by summer 2006, and the details of the settlement remain confidential. However, Rubino continues to blow forms with

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<sup>34</sup> Ian Shank, "Why Salvador Dalí Signed 60,000 Sheets of Blank Paper-and Spawned Countless Fakes" Artsy. April 18, 2017. Accessed February 10, 2018. <https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-salvador-dali-accidentally-sabotaged-market-prints>.

<sup>35</sup>Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> AtGoogleTalks. YouTube. June 20, 2008. Accessed March 02, 2018. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m6M2y0YhhaU>.

<sup>37</sup> Regina Hackett, "Chihuly settles copyright lawsuit" Seattlepi.com. March 19, 2011. Accessed February 02, 2018. <https://www.seattlepi.com/ae/article/Chihuly-settles-copyright-lawsuit-1210845.php>.

similar shapes as Chihuly objects, such as his handkerchief vases, while Robert Kaindl's website is full of Chihuly-esque works, such as the giant *Ostrea* he sells (fig. 30). The gallery selling Kaindl's pieces would not return my calls inquiring about the works. Chihuly's lawsuit proves that there is more to a Chihuly work than simply a signature—the form, colors, and the process of making the object are important as well. Graves notes that it was Chihuly, Inc.—not Chihuly as a private individual—who filed the lawsuit against Rubino and Kaindl.<sup>38</sup> This means that if the corporation won the lawsuit, then the company has rights to the particular shapes, color combinations, and titles of works signed by Chihuly and could therefore continue to produce works under the corporation's name after Chihuly's death. Chihuly is now being sued by a former contractor named Michael Moi, who claims he deserves millions of dollars in compensation for creating many of the artworks sold under Chihuly's name. The lawsuit states that Moi believes he should receive monetary reimbursement and artistic credit for several paintings and drawings, based on Moi's argument that he painted many of the elements of Chihuly's paintings and Chihuly added the final touches. Chihuly countersued for defamation and blackmail (Moi contacted Chihuly before he filed his lawsuit, demanding \$21 million dollars in exchange for not revealing to the media private information about the artist's health). The lawsuit is still in court but demonstrates Chihuly's continued fight for acknowledgment as an artist. Working with a team of fabricators is not unusual for contemporary artists and is an important part of the historical tradition of glass making. Collaboration is an inherent aspect of glassblowing due to the expenses associated with the practice, the physical demands required of the body, and—for Chihuly, in particular—the labor necessary to generate objects and keep up with the demand for his artworks. When listening

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<sup>38</sup> Jen Graves, "Glass Houses: Dale Chihuly Files a Lawsuit That Raises Big Questions. . . About Dale Chihuly," *The Stranger*, February 16, 2006, accessed November 10, 2017, <https://www.thestranger.com/seattle/glass-houses/Content?oid=30734>.

to Chihuly's interviews, it is not uncommon for him to use the term "we" instead of "I," when referring the glass making process.

The equipment necessary for a fully functioning studio hot shop takes up a lot of space and is very expensive. The monetary means to maintain a shop extends from the initial purchase of the equipment to using and maintaining the equipment. Furnaces, glory holes (ovens used to reheat glass objects), pipe warmers, annealing ovens, blow pipes (hollow pipes) and punties (solid pipes) are all required elements of a hot shop, as well as the materials needed to make glass. Hot shops normally include at least one furnace or melter, which holds the hot liquid glass and must be powered 24/7 unless all the glass is removed from the crucible inside, a process that can take several days. If the glass breaks the crucible, it ruins the furnace, or if the furnace is not properly cooled over many hours, it is destroyed. A single, standard sized furnace can cost more \$10,000.<sup>39</sup> The glory hole is used to reheat the glass during the production process. The temperature of a glory hole can be adjusted, but its temperature is normally maintained at 2100°F. It can also cost upwards of \$10,000 and its electrical elements are around \$600 each.<sup>40</sup> An annealing oven cools the glass slowly over a period of several hours. Annealing ovens on average cost around \$4,000.<sup>41</sup> Chihuly's sculptures are large; many of the tallest pieces are made up of hundreds of individual pieces of glass. Others are solid pieces and can be as wide as four feet and weigh up to a hundred pounds.<sup>42</sup> Assistants are required to wear full body protection, and I was told when I visited his hot shop at the Boathouse that his annealing ovens are custom-made so that they are large enough for people to walk into them. Other tools or materials used in a hot shop include colored frit/powdered glass

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<sup>39</sup> "Glass Melting Furnaces" Denver Glass - Glass Melting Furnaces. Accessed February 12, 2018. <http://www.denverglass.com/furn.html>.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> AtGoogleTalks. YouTube. June 20, 2008. Accessed February 02, 2018. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m6M2y0YhhaU>.



to create colored glass, a marvering table (used to roll or flatten glass), a gaffer's bench, and optic molds (metal molds used to create certain shapes or optic elements on the surface of an object). Chihuly has envisioned such monumental sculptures over the years that it would be impossible to create them without having a large team and custom-made equipment. Due to the nature of how quickly glass cools and how heavy it can become when being manipulated, Chihuly needs multiple hands working simultaneously to quickly and efficiently create his works. But are those works art?

The job of a contemporary art historian is not only to analyze contemporary art's ties to the historical canon, but also to act as an art critic, who decides whether the work is good or bad, high or low, fine art or decorative. The Chihuly Sanctuary at the Fred and Pamela Buffett Cancer Center in Omaha, Nebraska, (fig. 31) is one of Chihuly's most recent projects, and I had the opportunity to tour it a few months after its opening. Thus far, the only media attention the Sanctuary has received has been short newspaper articles about its opening; no art critics have addressed it yet and Chihuly, Inc. has not published any books or catalogs about the space. Since the Sanctuary includes well-known Chihuly installations, as well as a new series, it provides an excellent opportunity to review and add to the discourse on Chihuly. The Sanctuary was funded by avid Chihuly collectors Suzanne and Walter Scott and built onto the second-floor roof of the Cancer Center building. It extends from the second floor to the fourth floor and is made almost entirely of glass walls. The main building is organic with curving walls and a decorative chartreuse green line around its roof, reminding the viewer of Chihuly's *Macchia* series. There are only two access points into the Sanctuary, the second floor, which includes a sitting area and access to an outdoor garden (this space is unaffiliated with the Sanctuary), and the fourth floor. The brightly colored, amorphous building seems somewhat odd in comparison to the strictly geometric and unassuming

Cancer Center, but its purpose is paramount. The Sanctuary is open continually to staff, patients, and family members and was built as a safe-haven and retreat for the ill. The second-floor entrance to the sanctuary is located next to the surgery's waiting lounge, and the fourth-floor entrance is down the hall from patient recovery and diagnostic rooms. The walkways inside the space are wide enough for two wheelchairs to roll side by side or a hospital bed to be wheeled through. I was impressed by the soft music (chosen by Chihuly) and his choice of works for the Sanctuary. Many of the installations are a combination red, yellow, and blue (a nod to the primary colors) or monochrome. The most emotionally touching room was the central tower, located in the middle of the Sanctuary. The room is large enough for a hospital bed to be wheeled into it, along with its accompanying medical equipment. The benches curve with the shape of the wall, allowing for visitors to sit with a patient. The tower includes an oculus and six translucent, *White Chandeliers* (fig. 32). This room is meant to be a space for those wishing to spend their final moments somewhere other than a sterilized hospital room, but who may be unable to go outside or return home. It is a restive place, meant for rejuvenating the spirit, and it accomplishes this through its ethereal chandeliers that are suspended high above the viewer's head, its tall, narrow opening that ends by looking out on the sky, and its lack of any other embellishment, decoration, or artwork.

The only other installation that emotionally moved me was the *Glass on Glass* room (fig. 33). The series was created in 2017 specifically for the Sanctuary. Each work is made of three panes of glass; each pane has been painted in various shades of colors and then backlit. This results in artworks that are sculptures, drawings, and paintings all at the same time. Chihuly allows viewers to touch these works, and as I ran my hands over the thin layers of glass suspended paint enamel, I could not help but imagine myself as the artist. The works are smaller than most Chihuly installations and are installed at a height that makes them easily accessible. Chihuly's signature,

usually large and scrolled across a third of a painting, is small and neat, barely noticeable at all. I believe this series is one of the most formally successful of all Chihuly's works because it blends together different artistic practices and allows for a multi-sensory experience of the pieces.

The Sanctuary's staff has yet to develop a way of gauging the effectiveness of the space, but they have noticed people visiting it to sit or read or look at the works. Having experienced many of Chihuly's installations, I acknowledge the art critics' critiques of Chihuly's installations; sometimes his works seem out of place or gaudy depending on how they are exhibited. However, I believe his most recent projects, in the form of the Sanctuary and the *Glass on Glass* series, are highly effective installations due to their affective presence.

Chihuly's sculptures physically and psychologically impact the viewer, who can be overwhelmed or awed by their size and colors. The art critics and historians acknowledge the power of the sculptures to impress upon the viewer a range of emotions. For Graves, Smee, and Chayka, they are repelled by the works, but for Adams, Burgard, and Rose, they are enamored by them. Chihuly's installations are dynamic and immersive, qualities that differentiate him as an artist and speak to his creativity. Influenced by the American Studio Glass movement, Chihuly refused to make sculptures that were functional vessels and could be characterized as craft objects. Instead, he decided to create monumental, playful, and colorful sculptures that abstracted form and light. His works can be understood in terms of his inspirations but can also be seen and appreciated without any knowledge of art history, glass tradition, or glass making. His sculptures appeal and repulse viewers equally, because they are not objectively art, but subjectively art.

## Figures



Figure 1. Dale Chihuly, *Crystal Towers*, 1994-2002. Tacoma, Washington.  
Source: <http://destinations-northwest.blogspot.com/>



Figure 2. Dale Chihuly, installation view of Northwest Room at *Chihuly: Through the Looking Glass* exhibition, Boston Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Massachusetts.  
Source: <https://hyperallergic.com/26942/dale-chihuly-retrospective/>



Figure 3. Dale Chihuly, installation view of The Boathouse, Seattle, Washington.  
Source: <https://www.seattleyachtclub.org/events>



Figure 4. Dale Chihuly, installation view the Northwest Room of Chihuly Garden and Glass, Seattle, Washington. Source: [https://www.tripadvisor.com/LocationPhotoDirectLink-g60878-d3184389-i249364677-Chihuly\\_Garden\\_and\\_Glass-Seattle\\_Washington.html](https://www.tripadvisor.com/LocationPhotoDirectLink-g60878-d3184389-i249364677-Chihuly_Garden_and_Glass-Seattle_Washington.html).



Figure 5. Dale Chihuly, installation view of *Chihuly: in the gallery + in the forest* Exhibition, 2017, Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art, Bentonville, Arkansas.  
Source: <https://crystalbridges.org/blog/june-at-crystal-bridges-includes-chihuly-exhibition-architecture-summer-camps-and-more/>.



Figure 6. Dale Chihuly, *Gold Over Cobalt Venetian #166*, 1989.  
Source: <https://art.famsf.org/dale-chihuly/gold-over-cobalt-venetian-166-2005163134>.



Figure 7. Unknown Egyptian artist, *Core-Formed Vase*, 1400-1300 BC.  
Source: <https://www.cmog.org/audio/core-formed-vase-113>



Figure 8. Unknown artist, Wistarburgh Glassworks, *Bottle with the Seal of Richard Wistar*, 1745-1755.  
Source: <https://www.cmog.org/audio/richard-wistar-bottle-310>



Figure 9. Dale Chihuly and James Carpenter, installation view of *20,000 pounds of Ice and Neon*, 1971, Providence, Rhode Island School of Design.

Source: Dale Chihuly, *Chihuly Projects*. Seattle, WA: Chihuly Workshop, 2000.



Figure 10. Dale Chihuly, *Navajo Blanket Cylinders*, 1975.

Source: [https://blog.cmog.org/2012/08/10/in-memory-of-ben-w-heineman-sr/2007-4-142\\_cmyk-apd/](https://blog.cmog.org/2012/08/10/in-memory-of-ben-w-heineman-sr/2007-4-142_cmyk-apd/).





Figure 11. Dale Chihuly, *Tabac Basket Set with Oxblood Jimmies*, 1979.  
Source: <https://schantzgalleries.com/artist/chihuly-baskets-celebrating-forty-years/>.



Figure 12. Dale Chihuly, installation view of *Basket* series at The Boathouse, Seattle, Washington.  
Source: author photograph, May 2017.

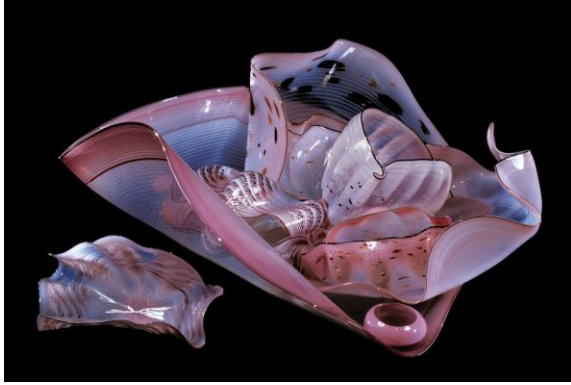


Figure 13. Dale Chihuly, *Macchia Seaform Group*, 1982.  
Source: <https://www.cmog.org/artwork/macchia-seaform-group>.



Figure 14. Dale Chihuly, *Wisteria Violet Macchia With Plumbago Lip Wrap*, 1982.  
Source: <http://www.stroemplecollection.com/dale-chihuly-macchia/>.



Figure 15. Dale Chihuly, *Indian Yellow Soft Cylinder with White Drawings*, 1988.  
Source: <http://www.dianefarrisingallery.com/artist/chihuly/available.html>.



Figure 16. Dale Chihuly, *Blue-Stemmed Form with Orange and Red Persians*, 1988.  
Source: <http://art.seattleartmuseum.org/objects/8287/bluestemmed-form-with-orange-and-red-persians-from-the-pe;jsessionid=E9F87F180A9C4BE045D33D3BEB673F47?ctx=0aa8fcc9-87ab-481e-8fe3-c4bc0118ebb4&idx=4>.



Figure 17. Dale Chihuly, *Purple Lake Venetian*, 1988.  
Source: <https://schantzgalleries.com/tag/chihuly-venetians/>.

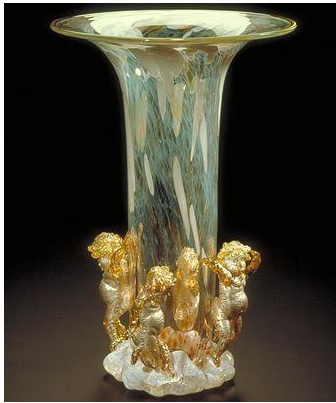


Figure 18. Dale Chihuly, *Payne's Gray Venetian*, 1989.  
Source: <http://www.stroemplecollection.com/dale-chihuly-venetians/>.



Figure 19. Dale Chihuly, *Silver Rose Ikebana with Pink Flower and Leaves*, 1992.  
Source: <https://www.chihuly.com/work/ikebana>.



Figure 20. Dale Chihuly, *Nijima Floats: Snow White and Gold Leaf*, 1991.  
Source: <https://americanart.si.edu/artwork/nijima-floats-snow-white-and-gold-leaf-33716>.



Figure 21. Dale Chihuly, *Orange Hornet Chandelier*, 1993.  
Source: <https://www.chihuly.com/exhibitions/colorado-springs-fine-arts-center/chihuly-colorado-springs>.



Figure 22. Dale Chihuly, *Silver over May Green Piccolo Venetian with Coils and Lilies*, 1993.  
Source: <http://www.stroemplecollection.com/dale-chihuly-venetians/>.



Figure 23. Dale Chihuly, installation view of *Fiori di Como*, 1998. Bellagio Hotel, Las Vegas, Nevada.

Source: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/merwells/8323326234>.



Figure 24. Dale Chihuly, *Linden Green and Yellow Jerusalem Cylinder*, 2001.

Source: <https://www.chihuly.com/work/jerusalem-cylinders>.



Figure 25. Dale Chihuly, installation views of *Chihuly in the Light of Jerusalem* Exhibition, 2002. Tower of David, Jerusalem.

Source: <https://www.chihuly.com/exhibitions/chihuly-light-jerusalem>.



Figure 26. Dale Chihuly, installation view of the *Bridge of Glass*, 2002. Museum of Glass, Tacoma, Washington.

Source: <https://www.eeace.com/case-studies/article/chihuly-bridge-of-glass>.





Figure 27. Dale Chihuly, *Mille Fiori*, 2003. Glass.  
Source: <https://www.chihuly.com/life/timeline>.



Figure 28. Dale Chihuly, *Black Cylinder #23*, 2006.  
Source: <http://arthurorogergallery.com/exhibition/dale-chihuly/>.



Figure 29. Dale Chihuly, *Clear Blanket Cylinder*, 2016.  
Source: <https://www.chihuly.com/work/cylinders>.

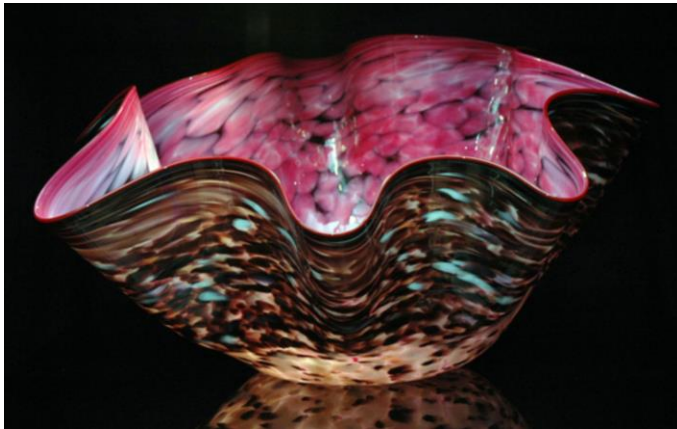


Figure 30. Robert Kaindl, *Giant Ostrea Bowl*, date unknown.  
Source: <http://www.robertkaindl.com/GiantOstreaBowlGallery.htm>.

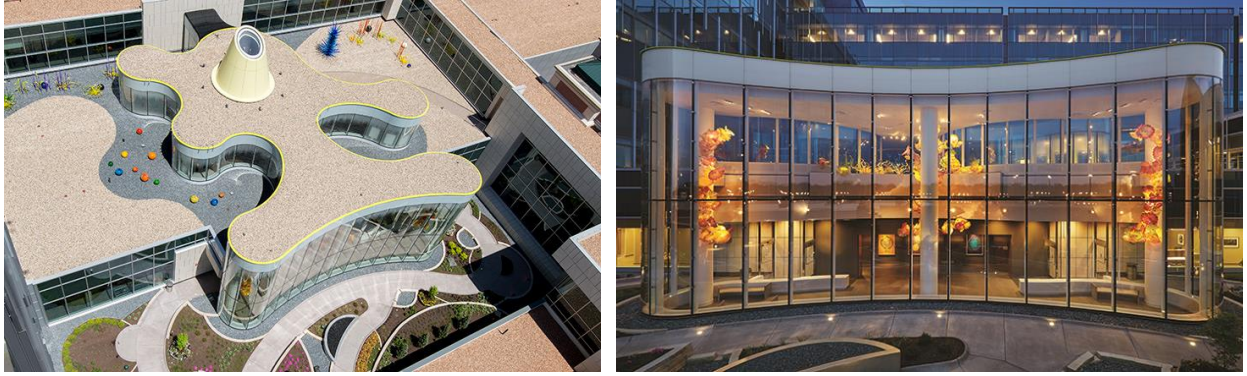


Figure 31. Dale Chihuly, exterior views of the Chihuly Sanctuary. 2017. Fred and Pamela Buffett Cancer Center, Omaha, Nebraska.  
Sources: <https://www.unmc.edu/publicrelations/media/press-kits/chihuly-sanctuary.html> and <https://www.healthcaredesignmagazine.com/projects/house-glass-chihuly-sanctuary-fred-pamela-buffett-cancer-center/>.



Figure 32. Dale Chihuly, installation view of *White Chandeliers* at the Chihuly Sanctuary. 2017. Fred and Pamela Buffett Cancer Center, Omaha, Nebraska.  
Source: <https://archpaper.com/2017/05/dale-chihuly-nebraska/#gallery-0-slide-0>.



Figure 33. Dale Chihuly, installation view of *Glass on Glass* series at the Chihuly Sanctuary. 2017. Fred and Pamela Buffett Cancer Center, Omaha, Nebraska. Source: <https://www.unmc.edu/news.cfm?match=20427>.

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## Vita

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## **Abstract**

Artist Dale Chihuly (b. 1941) is arguably one of the most controversial figures in the contemporary art world. Well-known for his monumental glass sculptures, Chihuly has positioned himself as a recognizable brand name in the art industry, with thousands of people viewing his work over the last fifty years. Since the 1960s, Chihuly's objects have been showcased in over 197 exhibitions and at least 230 museums own a Chihuly artwork as part of their permanent collection. It can be difficult to imagine that Chihuly is such a polarizing figure when his career has resulted in these types of statistics, but an examination of the critical reception of his work reveals his controversial position in the art world.

Criticism of Chihuly and his projects primarily takes the form of online short exhibition reviews and accounts of his techniques. The authors of these short critiques are often professional art critics, who generally work for newspapers or art magazines. Some longer critical essays exist in the form of book introductions published by Chihuly's studio. These writers are usually art historians or curators who have been commissioned by the studio to write an essay for a new book. Not surprisingly, the authors of the book introductions praise Chihuly, while the professional art critics write scathing reviews, resulting in a perplexing disparity.

Supported by an overview of his career, my meta-critical analysis examines the critical reception of Chihuly's work. I argue that Chihuly is an artist whose glass works invite a discourse on our contemporary understanding of art. I begin by describing how art critics respond to Chihuly's sculptures and compare their arguments to those written by art historians and curators. I then examine how Chihuly's practice was influenced by the American Studio Glass movement and the history of the glass making tradition. My argument ends with my own critical review of his most recent projects, the Chihuly Sanctuary and the *Glass on Glass* series.