



# GLASS ART

With the dazzling new exhibition by Dale Chihuly in full swing at Kew, arts editor Sue Herdman goes behind the scenes with this world-renowned glass artist to find out how and why he created this unique show  
*Photos by Jeff Eden*

When it comes to gardens and art, Dale Chihuly is on a mission. He wants art to be accessible to all. That drive has seen his eye-popping glass artworks placed in sites as diverse as Venice's piazzas and Jerusalem's Tower of David Museum (where they were seen by over a million visitors). But since 2001, as part of his *Garden Cycle*, he has worked with sites that people are especially drawn to: botanical gardens – from New York's urban oasis to the arid Desert Botanical Garden in Phoenix, Arizona. Now, for a second time (the first was in 2005), his other-worldly forms have taken root at Kew.

*Chihuly: Reflections on nature* features a wide range of his works displayed around the Gardens, the majority being seen for the first time in the UK. Chihuly's ambition for this show is clear. 'I always hope that people who love gardens will gain a deeper appreciation for art,' he says, 'and in turn I hope that those who love the art will find love and appreciation for our most historic and treasured gardens.'

Chihuly's work is beautiful and challenging. He is a master of the unexpected and of scale. Any sculptural work placed outside can look smaller than you'd imagine. Not so with Chihuly's work. There are soaring sights, and pieces – such as his *Fiori Verdi* – that buzz with the force of the fire that went into their making.

For months, Chihuly and his team deliberated over which works should be placed where in the Gardens. What should the Waterlily House hold? How could the Medici urn 'roundabout' at the end of the Broad Walk be transformed into an art space? Which spectacle should greet visitors at Victoria Gate? The project has fired the artist's imagination. 'I want my work to move people, to evoke a response, whatever that may be,' he says, 'but to get there, I focus on what excites me. The landscape is amazing, of course, but to me Kew stands out because of its glasshouses. They're among the greatest in the world.'

In particular, he is excited about the newly restored Temperate House. Several variations of his works feature here, from indigo *Hebron Vessels* to sinuous *Ikebana*. Centre stage, fluttering up to the light, is his giant *Temperate House Persians*. At installation stage this lay in carefully placed pieces on the floor, like a glossy giant jigsaw. 'When I'm working on a new installation,' the artist tells me, 'it may be reassembled more than once before I am satisfied. In the end, I'm pursuing a specific aesthetic. And I'm asking: how do I want this work to communicate in the space?'

So how did Chihuly make his choices for the works and placements at Kew? 'I start with the space – both interior and exterior opportunities,' he explains. As with any artist planning

Right: Go on a treasure hunt in the Temperate House and you'll find extraordinary works nestled among the foliage, soaring in the air or floating on the pond, including the fabulous bouquets of *Fiori Verdi*

Opposite: Chihuly created the stunning 10m-long *Temperate House Persians* specifically for this exhibition, to hang as the centrepiece in Kew's newly restored Victorian glasshouse

Previous page: Glowing above the Palm House Pond, *Summer Sun* comprises hundreds of individually blown, swirling tongues of fire, reflecting the dynamic element that helped to create them





Far left: The process of blowing glass often creates forms that emulate nature, which helps the works (here *Turquoise Marlins and Floats*) to integrate seamlessly with Kew's plants and landscape

Left: *Cattails and Copper Birch Reeds* sprouted vigorously from the ground near the Temperate House in late spring, rising sinuously above a multitude of tulips in complementary hues

Right: In the Shirley Sherwood Gallery of Botanical Art, you can explore a selection of pedestal works that trace Chihuly's progression as an artist and show how he has pushed the boundaries of glass as an art form



for the outdoors, he makes use of eye-catchers. 'I've worked with the team at Kew to determine the most interesting sight lines and the places where my work will have the most impact. I love the element of discovery, so I've chosen the pieces and places where that can best happen.'

He also loves light. It is its power when transmitted through glass that, he says, 'has been key to my experience and drive as an artist.' Light – and the way Chihuly understands then channels it – is used to powerful effect in the Shirley Sherwood Gallery of Botanical Art. This aspect of Kew's exhibition brings another dynamic altogether for visitors, particularly if they visited in 2005. At that time the gallery didn't exist. For this show it hosts the artist's works, spanning the evolution of his career, including his *Drawings*. During final preparations his team tested and re-tested how the light falls on each glass piece, exactly as the artist decrees. 'Chihuly wants the light to *perform*,' one of the team explains.

The effect is like swimming under water, in an exotic lagoon. Groupings of his blue and transparent *Rotolo* works ripple, while vibrant *Cylinders*, shimmering *Seaforms*, gilded, trumpet-like

*Venetians* (above right) and multi-coloured *Macchia* glow. You'll also find showcases of much smaller pieces. 'Here, Chihuly likes his works to be shown against black,' gallery manager Victoria Kew reveals, 'as it makes the works pop.'

This is a rare opportunity to review decades of work of this artist risk-taker, whose first encounter with glass came in 1965. Working with the medium hadn't been his intention. Early areas of study included interior decoration, sculpture, textiles and ceramics. But once the idea of weaving glass into a textile design led him to blow glass, he was hooked. He went on to study under pioneering studio glass artist Harvey K Littleton, on America's one and only glass programme at that time. Chihuly later co-founded the Pilchuck Glass School in Washington.

Every artist needs a turning point. In 1976, Chihuly's came when three of his *Cylinders* were purchased by the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. This validation spurred his focus on art with glass. Drawing on influences that range from pop art and installation art, designs of Navajo blankets, auto art and Van Gogh's canvases, he has pushed boundaries, realising

## Light – and the way Chihuly understands then channels it – is used to powerful effect in the Shirley Sherwood Gallery of Botanical Art

shapes, forms and sizes that many might not consider. Among his challenges have been two serious accidents (a car crash in 1976 saw him lose the sight in his left eye) and the impact of bipolar disorder. As all who are familiar with this disease know, the high times bring surges of unimaginable creativity, countered by periods of depression that, the artist says, can be of indeterminable length.

He has chosen to live and work close to an element that inspires him – the sea – in Seattle, where he directs his team. Nature has always been vital. 'Nothing is more restorative than time in a beautiful garden,' he says, 'and I've always loved to

work outside. My mother was a gardener, and her love of the natural world influenced me.'

So what does he urge Kew visitors to look for in particular? 'While I don't try to replicate nature in my work, the relationship is naturally there, so I play with that. The organic forms are often thought to come from nature, and when placed in a garden setting the result can be both complementary and contradictory. I like that duality. I hope it inspires visitors to look at both the art and the environment in a fresh way.' For Sandra Botterell, Kew's director of marketing and commercial enterprise, it is 'the lightness of touch in



DS AUTOMOBILES  
Spirit of Avant-Garde

H A U T E - C O U T U R E

# ELECTRIQUE

DS 3 CROSSBACK  
E - T E N S E



WHERE SAVOIR-FAIRE MEETS ADVANCED TECHNOLOGY. DISCOVER THE NEW BRAND DS ON [DSAUTOMOBILES.CO.UK](https://www.dsautomobiles.co.uk)

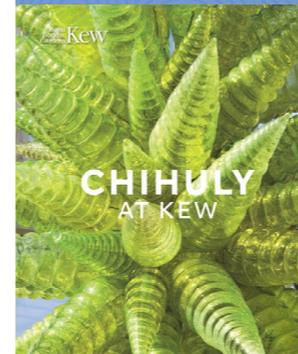
DS prefers **TOTAL** - FUEL ECONOMY AND CO<sub>2</sub> RESULTS FOR DS 3 CROSSBACK E-TENSE. MPG (L/100KM): NOT APPLICABLE. CO<sub>2</sub> EMISSIONS: 0 G/KM. ALL ELECTRIC RANGE\*: 186 MILES.

\*The electric range you achieve in real life conditions will depend upon a number of factors including the starting charge of the battery, accessories fitted (post-registration), variations in weather, driving styles and vehicle load. Only compare fuel consumption and CO<sub>2</sub> figures with other cars tested to the same technical standard.

## Exhibition guide and gifts

The exhibition catalogue *Chihuly at Kew* is out now from Kew Publishing, packed with stunning photos of the artworks in the Gardens and gallery. Get your copy in Kew's shops or at [kew.org/shop](https://www.kew.org/shop). The 120-page softback edition is exclusively sold by Kew, with a special on-site price of just £12 (RRP £15). A hardback edition will be published at the end of June – Kew price £20 (RRP £25).

Discover lots of Chihuly-inspired gifts on p18 and visit Kew's shops and gallery for more. You can also browse the whole range at [kew.org/shop](https://www.kew.org/shop).



Eye-catching and monumental, *Scarlet and Yellow Icicle Tower* certainly earns its prime position on Syon Vista

Chihuly's work that makes such a deep impression. Even as the final works were still being placed, it was already obvious that visitors of all ages were mesmerised by them. We are always alert to what we can offer our visitors and aim to bring them the most exciting experiences. What Chihuly has done is to create hero pieces of electrifying beauty for our visitors, that are also celebratory, joyful and uplifting.'

Chihuly has the last word: 'I hope those who have never visited the Gardens will use this opportunity to do so,' he says, 'to experience it at different times, including the Chihuly Nights. I am curious as to how people feel when they experience my art in this extraordinary garden.'

[Chihuly: Reflections on nature](https://www.kew.org) runs until 27 October – see [kew.org](https://www.kew.org) for details. Go to p63 for information on our free Chihuly tours and the family trail.

See overleaf for details of Chihuly Nights this summer.

KEW.ORG



# HAVE A SPARKLING EVENING

Experience this must-see exhibition in a completely new light, as Dale Chihuly's stunning artworks are illuminated under the evening sky

## CHIHULY NIGHTS

Enjoy a once-in-a-lifetime experience as you stroll around Kew's spectacular exhibition **Chihuly: Reflections on nature** after dark.

As the sun goes down, the breath-taking glass artworks will be illuminated to bring out their radiant colours and extraordinary forms. To add to the vibrant atmosphere there will be live music from Guest Artists, including the UK's only glass harmonica player, Alasdair Malloy, as well as a soundscape by composer Nico Muhly.

The new Pavilion Bar and Grill (see p40) will be open, serving a range of drinks, meals and snacks, as will the Victoria Plaza Café.

### Book your tickets now

Chihuly Nights runs from 15 August to 26 October, every Thursday, Friday and Saturday, 7.30–10.30pm. Adults £18, Kew members just £12. For more details, including entry gate, ticket options and prices, go to **kew.org** and search for 'Chihuly Nights'.

