

Contemporary Glass: Seattle and Beyond

Notes from Ken Clark, Chihuly Studio, March 10, 2016

What I will do in a few minutes is briefly show you what Chihuly does at the building where we work, and then give you an idea of what the studio of a living artist has me doing.

We don't work at the more well-known Boathouse [\[picture\]](#), although most of the Studio was there until 1999. The Studio was growing rapidly in the late 1990s and most of the employees, except for the hotshop team, moved to what we call Ballard Studio, a non-descript building, [\[picture\]](#), in Seattle's Ballard neighborhood, about 3 miles from the Boathouse. A primary activity in the Ballard Studio is mock-up. [\[picture\]](#) Here is where the larger, multi-piece installations are built and photographed before being taken apart for shipment. An in-house metal shop builds the armatures over which the glass parts are attached.

What else happens at the Ballard Studio? Project development. [\[picture\]](#) Museum exhibition coordination. Gallery shows and sales. Accounting. Mockup photography. Registration, where artwork is cataloged and tracked. And Chihuly Workshop, the publisher that works directly with the artist, is also at this location for a couple reasons: In addition to having the artist nearby, the graphic designer has easy access to the room full of slides and 4 x 5s.

For the first years of working at Ballard Studio I was in this slide room [\[picture\]](#) which likely has over a million slides and 4 x 5s combined. I dealt with and organized about a third of this photography collection—the images of the older work, of Chihuly's history, such as at Pilchuck and his years in Rhode Island—and the commission work. Photography has been important to Chihuly throughout his career. He taught his own students at the Rhode Island School of Design in the 70s and 80s that their artwork should go out into the world, and that they should “take good photos of it before it does.” That's what Dale himself did, and he kept hold of many slides, like this one of blown glass with neon, that he and fellow artist James Carpenter did in 1971. [\[picture\]](#)

The job as archivist at the Studio changed over the years. When I started, for example, I handled outside photography requests and rights and reproductions. I duplicated slides so that originals wouldn't leave the building, and sent the slides to magazine and newspapers, museums, galleries, and asked them to send back a copy of a clipping or a couple copies of the brochure, announcement, or exhibition catalog. We had a clipping service and I saved articles in archival sleeves and made a catalog record for each article in a Microsoft Access database [\[picture\]](#). Title, author, dates and keywords can be searched. The clipping service was discontinued several years ago when many newspapers either folded or went online only, and a Google Alert was giving the same results.

Around twelve years ago, the Studio made the transition to digital, and fellow librarian and colleague Kavonne Wynn—in the audience—has done marvelous work with the digital asset management system, among many other things.

Kavonne and I often share the hat of in-house reference librarian: she takes questions about where to find certain images, and I take questions about Chihuly's history and the work. I'm on the small team, along with Kavonne, that helps write and double check captions appearing in books, calendars, and exhibition catalogs. I also read over text the Studio is publishing, or I'll be another pair of eyes on writing generated by museums and galleries, text that will appear on exhibition walls, and brochures. I answer questions by essay writers and read over their drafts for factual accuracy. I work on Dale's chronology and other biographical documents. The job of reference librarian is about to enlarge considerably as we've just begun to work with a writer who will tackle a book-length biography on the artist.

Besides the newspaper-periodical articles, another collection in the archives is Chihuly's faxes. Throughout the 90s and the beginning of the 2000s, Dale carried with him, while traveling mostly, a combination sketchbook and letter writing pad. [\[picture\]](#). He would sketch ideas for projects and send them out by fax machine to several people on the team at once. Or he might write short letters to clients with a doodle on the side of the page. Emailing never appealed to him. The act of drawing and writing with a pen in hand helped him think, and he made hundreds of these faxes each year for well over a decade. We have most of the original pages, and this collection is now an unusually rich source of information about the artist, what he was doing, and what was on his radar at the time. The fax collection has been cataloged and can be searched by name, date, and keywords.

Chihuly's archives also has a collection of videotapes [\[picture\]](#), the older raw footage that was used to make various films over the years. Many of the tapes are Betacam, and VHS. Fewer are U-matic, Hi8, and MiniDV. Several years ago I transferred many of the VHS tapes to DVD, just in time, it now seems, for DVDs to fade out of use. As far as transferring the Betacam and U-matic and Hi8, I am trying to assess which tapes have the better footage, or might have the better footage, since I can't view the U-matic, for example, and have only what's written on the cases to go by. We would like to transfer many of these tapes to digital. For the moment all the tapes have a record in a database, so we know what we have, and keyword searching has proven useful to the filmmaker who currently works on the films that are made into DVDs and sometimes broadcast over PBS. [\[picture\]](#) Here is screenshot from a video. Dale visited this glassblower from Hokkaido, Japan, who was evidently the last person to hand-blow commercial fishing floats.

Also in the archives are the books and exhibition catalogs that are either solely about the artist, or have a page or a paragraph about him. And there is a collection of ephemera—brochures, gallery announcements, invitations and the like. [\[picture\]](#).

If you asked which tools I maintain that have proven most useful for the Studio on a day-to-day basis I would mention two things: the so-called "Installations database", and the Quotes Database.

The first one I'll mention just briefly. It's a tool—a database with images attached to the records—that brings together information on Chihuly's multi-piece installations over the years. These are the large assembled works such as Chandeliers, Towers, Persian Walls, and the early installation work that was never cataloged. The Installations database is used by a number of people throughout the Studio, as a ready reference for titles, and dates, to see and/or send an image, and as a source to see what assembled artwork was shown where over the years.

The second tool I will mention is the Quotes database. This was begun before I arrived at the job. In the mid-to-late 1990s Chihuly was getting a good deal of press with the international project Chihuly Over Venice and other large projects such as the ceiling at the Bellagio in Las Vegas. He liked doing interviews with reporters and writers, but he found that the press would often ask the same set of questions. So he had an assistant begin to transcribe and save his best answers. This began as a paper file until someone designed a keyword-searchable database. In 1998 Dale did a multi-day interview in his own kitchen, recorded on video, in which he talked about all aspects of his career, how he likes to work, the various series, working with the Italian masters, and many other topics. These taped interviews were transcribed, broken into bits by subject, and entered into the Quotes database. Soon the database had hundreds of statements. His assistant could, by this time, do a pre-interview by email and answer several questions before Chihuly began. So Dale would still talk with the reporter or writer in person or over the phone, but his interviews would be streamlined, tackling only those questions not already answered.

Before long the quotes database was being used in other ways: museums and galleries working on a Chihuly brochure would request quotes on the series or installations they were exhibiting, say the *Venetians*, or a *Persian Ceiling*. Essay writers asked for quotes to support a point they were writing about, and the quotes often made it into the writers' published essays. One book, published by Abrams—and one of my favorites because Chihuly's thinking and personality come shining through—has one quote and one image on every two-page spread for the entire volume. [\[picture\]](#)

The quotes database has grown as I've added quotes by other people about the artist. For example, Chihuly's favorite description about his Seaform series was made by a newspaper writer, Susan Zinger of the Santa Fe Reporter, who wrote "Chihuly's best pieces imply pure movement. It's as if his Seaforms will surface to the top of the gallery room as soon as night comes."

One last example of a kind of quote that I've added: nuggets that come through in-house email, such as a description of the challenges of attaching the solid glass chunks onto the Jerusalem Cylinders. [\[picture\]](#) A glassblower on the team was asked to describe the difficulties they had in getting the chunks to properly adhere—using heat only, no glue—to the Cylinders. I was cc'd on the email and instead of his paragraph getting lost in eventually-deleted emails, I saved it in the quotes database, where someone I think, years from now, will find it useful.