

## Dale Chihuly's Road Not Taken

Chihuly may be a nature sculptor but his shiny maximalist aesthetic is far from naturalistic.



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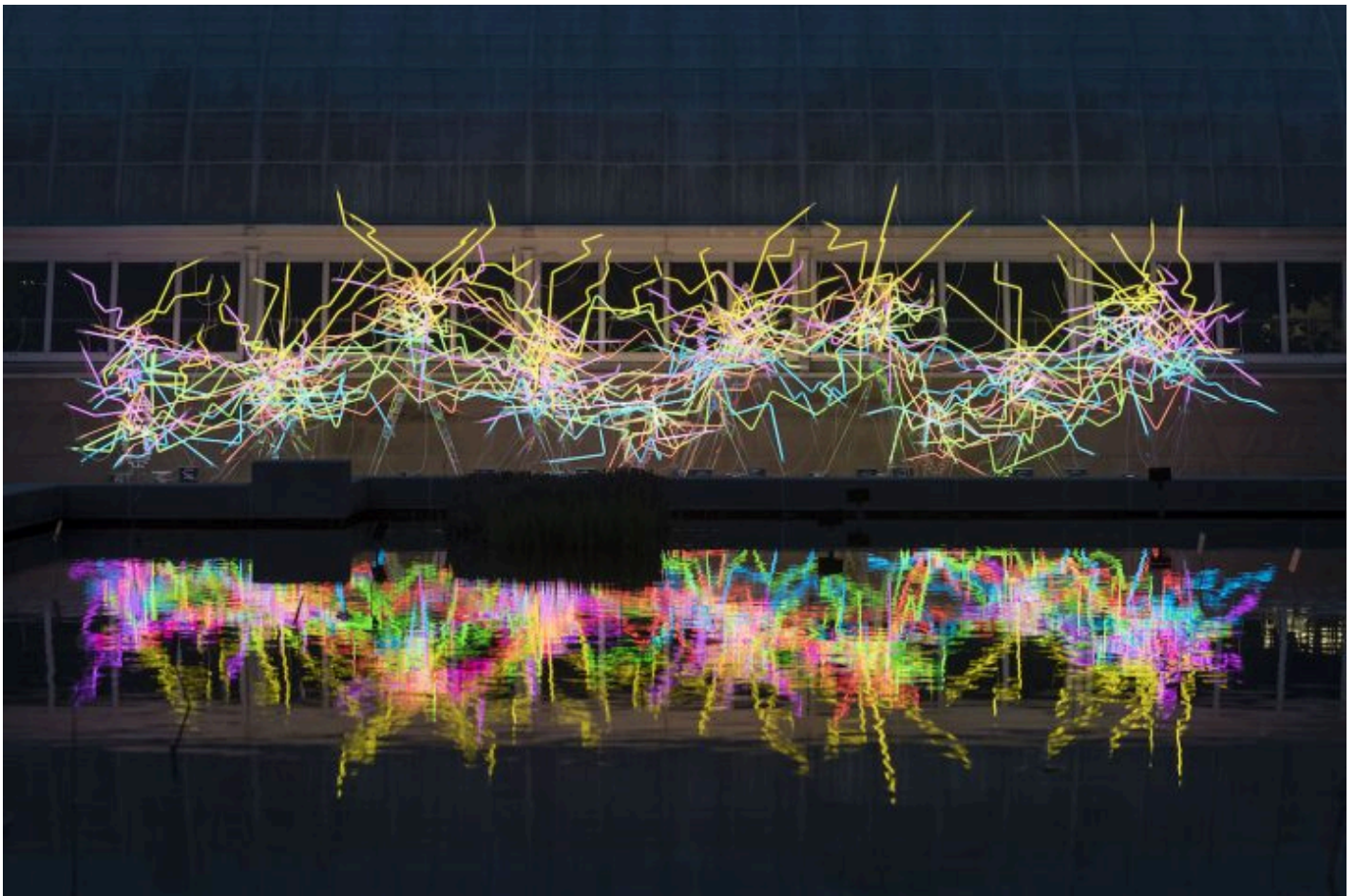
Dale Chihuly, "Koda Study No. 3" (2017) (photo by Marlon Co.)

Dale Chihuly's crowd-pleasing glassworks inspire a remarkable degree of critical consensus. While the most hostile critics assail Chihuly as a craftsman rather than an artist, the majority grant the work its visual impact and technical mastery while acknowledging that it lacks restraint and a sense of purpose beyond art for art's sake. The prevailing opinion is that the sculptures contain more dazzle than depth.

I'm not going to break rank with the critical consensus in my own assessment of the latest ***CHIHULY*** show, the second in the past dozen years to be installed at the New York Botanical

Garden. The sculptures, while at times compelling, tend to be overcooked and underthought. Instead, I'm going to focus on a work in the show, "Koda Study No. 3" (1975). In its contrast to Chihuly's characteristic style, "Koda Study No. 3" illuminates the other works' limitations and allows us to perceive, with the benefit of hindsight, a missed opportunity in the trajectory of his work. It also accounts for Chihuly's lukewarm reception in the realm of high art.

The current iteration of *CHIHULY* at NYBG is something of an unofficial retrospective. Dispersed amid the garden's picturesque grounds, diligent visitors can glimpse sculptures from every decade of the artist's forty-plus-year career. The LuEsther T. Merz Library displays his earlier work, such as the Native American-inspired *Fire Orange Basket* series from 1977, the shimmering and ethereal *Seaforms* series from the 1980s, and the sinuous nest of glassy forms that comprise the *Palazzo Ducale Tower* from 1996. More recent examples of Chihuly's signature combinations of curlicues, icicles, rods, and flowers fill the Haupt Conservatory and dot the garden's outdoor grounds.



Dale Chihuly, "Neon 206" (2017) (photo By Ben Hider)

"Koda Study No. 3" revisits the style of Chihuly's 1975 installation at upstate New York's Artpark. Located on a pond in the Haupt Conservatory's courtyard, the study consists of medium-sized translucent monochrome rectangles standing upright and arranged in pairs that tilt against one another and let the sunlight speak through them. In their unassuming simplicity, the rectangles recall the work of the 1960s Light and Space movement. It's as though Chihuly took



John McCracken's leaning wall planks, shortened and widened them, and gave them the translucent quality of Larry Bell's smoky glass boxes.

While Chihuly's rectangles do not break new artistic ground, now or in 1975, their arrangement on the pond is pleasing, subtle, and evocative. Tinted in primary colors that are faint at times and dark at others, depending on the light, the glass panes play well off one another and the pond plants. The panes' flat, rectangular shapes visually echo the pond's many lily pads. With their hard angles and symmetrical positioning, the rectangles are not trying to pass as organic and yet they suit — enhance, even — the pond's environs. It's a thoughtful and well-conceived arrangement.

But the most striking thing about "Koda Study No. 3" is how starkly it contrasts with the rest of the show. Alongside the bold colors, baroque forms, and showy gestures of Chihuly's mature style, the subdued Minimalism of the "Koda" rectangles seems the work of an entirely different artist. The large scale and visual intricacy of sculptures such as "Sol de Citrón" (2017), a fifteen-foot diameter lemon yellow glass koosh ball that greets visitors at the conservatory entrance, and "Neon 206" (2017), a long briar patch of glow sticks that light up at night, is undeniably eye-catching. But eye-catching is not the same as appealing. Much of Chihuly's work is the sculptural equivalent of the sartorialist who dresses head-to-toe in statement pieces: it's bound to attract attention, but not always in a flattering way.



Dale Chihuly, "Sol del Citrón" (2017)

The comparative aesthetic subtlety of the “Koda” rectangles evinces greater conceptual subtlety. One hallmark of Chihuly’s sculpture is its use of biomorphic forms such as plants and flowers, as well as abstract shapes that evoke stems, leaves, petals, and twigs. Many reviewers go so far as to suggest that some sculptures could pass as actual plants. “Glasshouse Fiori” — a series of glass reeds, plants, and flowers convincingly interspersed among the flora in a conservatory arcade — is representative in this regard. But even the most realistic Chihuly sculptures contain elements — be it their color, scale, materials, or on-site placement — that exaggerate nature’s characteristics past the point of credibility.

In the way they echo, rather than mimic, nature, the geometric forms of “Koda Study No. 3” demonstrate how artifice becomes less convincing the harder it tries. Chihuly may be a nature sculptor but his shiny maximalist aesthetic is far from naturalistic. “Koda Study No. 3” takes the measure of its own artifice, and does something thoughtful with it. It makes you wonder what his body of work could have become had he pursued the more understated aesthetic pathways opened up by his 1975 Artpark installation, in which he incorporated simple sheets of stained glass into the park’s landscape in a manner redolent of Land Art.

It also makes you wonder whether Chihuly would have attained the same level of popularity had his work trod subtler aesthetic paths. But playing that sort of *what if?* game with the past is, in art as in life, a fool’s errand. What’s most interesting about “Koda Study No. 3” is not the questions it raises of what might have been, but its reminder that deeper aesthetic inquiry has been within Chihuly’s range since the start of his career. That he chose another path confirms much of what critics have said about the oeuvre he has in fact produced.

**CHIHULY** *continues at the New York Botanical Garden (2900 Southern Boulevard, Botanical Garden, Bronx) through October 29.*