

December 3, 2004
AROUND THE GALLERIES

Chihuly's delicate garden of blown glass

The artist's colorful, oceanic forms appear ever more dynamic and virtuosic at L.A. Louver Gallery. Also: Dan McCleary, Jean Lowe.

By Holly Myers, Special to The Times

Of all the reactions likely to be observed among visitors to an exhibition of contemporary art — quiet contemplation, hushed commentary, a smile or a chuckle — a genuine gasp is surely among the most rare. Good art can be beautiful, intelligent, humorous or moving, but it takes something pretty spectacular to cut through the refined atmosphere of your typical gallery and evoke a real, spontaneous expression of astonishment.

The glasswork of Dale Chihuly is just such a something and elicited just such a reaction several times on the afternoon I visited his exhibition at L.A. Louver Gallery, shortly after the opening. Undoubtedly the most famous name in the field of glass blowing today — the only such name most Americans are likely to recognize — Chihuly embodies a sort of populism that tends to arouse suspicion in an art world context, where accessibility is all too often associated with superficiality and a lack of sophistication.

The presumption doesn't hold in this case, however. Far from stalling in the spotlight of popularity, Chihuly's colorful, oceanic forms appear ever more dynamic, ambitious and virtuosic. The three large-scale installations that make up this exhibition — each drawn from the artist's recent "Mille Fiori" series ("a thousand flowers" in Italian) — are simply dazzling creations, as technically masterful as they are aesthetically graceful. Walking into the gallery's darkened main space is like walking into an enchanted garden.

An immense, shrub-like mass of curling red and yellow tendrils greets you near the entrance, dominating one end of the low, 16-by-40-foot platform that provides the base for the largest of the installations. Beyond lies a grove of slender, free-standing, blue and lavender stalks, some up to 9 feet tall, scattered among which are several squat, green, yucca-like creations and smooth, globular forms emblazoned with various organic patterns. Another explosion of coiling tendrils — this primarily yellow and green and roughly the shape of a Christmas tree — holds down the far end, alongside a cluster of mid-size stems resembling swaying champagne flutes.

The two smaller installations, each about one-third the size of this one, are less extravagant but equally delightful, with a similar repertoire of forms drawn into tighter, more coherent configurations.

One consists primarily of tall, green, slightly curling, grass-like stems and slender yellow flutes with yawning, buttercup mouths. The whole cluster, nestled in the darkest corner of the gallery's ground floor, seems genuinely alive to the spotlights above, as though unfurling luxuriously in a beam of morning sunlight.

The other work, installed in the open-air patio on the gallery's second floor, enjoys the actual seaside sunlight of Venice. It responds with an appropriately playful attitude, the dominant form being a slender, hooked stem resembling the head and neck of a swan, festooned in gorgeous green and purple stripes.

The L.A. Louver show is one of two gallery exhibitions mounted to accompany a survey now at Pepperdine University's Frederick R. Weisman Museum of Art. The other, at Frank Lloyd Gallery, contains smaller, individual works dating from the early 1980s through nearly the present day.

Though far humbler in scale than the installations, the works at Frank Lloyd are equally impressive. Elegant and sensual, they are characterized by an innovative manipulation of basic, organic forms and an often breathtaking delicacy.

LA Louver Gallery, 45 N. Venice Blvd., Venice, (310) 822-4955, through Jan. 15. Closed Sunday and Monday.

Frank Lloyd Gallery, 2525 Michigan Ave., Santa Monica, (310) 264-3866, through Jan. 8. Closed Sunday and Monday.

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