

QWALALA, VENICE

Qwalala's 3000 hand-cast glass bricks recreate the ebbs and flows of California's Gualala River

In 2017, a curving wall of coloured glass appeared on the island of San Giorgio Maggiore in Venice.



Qwalala, a Native American Pomo word meaning “coming down water place”, designed by artist Pae White and commissioned by le stanze del vetro, uses hand-cast glass bricks, by Poesia Glass Studio, to make reference to the course of the Gualala River in Northern California, in structure and layout.

At 75m long and 2.4 metres high, behind what appears a simple structure was an incredible feat of engineering to make and install this architectural sculpture for the 2017 Venice Biennale.

Using just under 3000 hand-cast solid glass bricks, weighing 25-26kg each, the wall's ever-shifting play on light recalls the way a river water's colour and temperature changes minute to minute.

But more so, it explores the limits of solid glass as a construction material, and shows Pae White's interest in combining common materials and technologies, traditional craftsmanship and advanced engineering, and using the manufacturing industry to test the limits of each.

Poesia's solid hand-cast glass bricks more than passed the test.

Arriving at the colour scheme and construction was a collaborative process. While half of the bricks are clear glass, the remainder span a palette of 26 colours—blues, greens, pinks, greys and browns—drawn from those used in first century Roman glassmaking and reflecting the material richness of the earth around Gualala.

“Inside each brick, Pae wanted to capture a storm, so we call it the ‘cloud effect’. It effectively captures a storm by putting colours into the low iron clear glass bricks. And the way the cloud mixes around in the glass is completely



unique, so no brick is the same. We can use the same colours, but can't ever replicate the same bricks, so every piece is unique and individual," explains Pietro Guarino, Director, Poesia Glass Studio.

What's more, the colours developed for this installation are exclusive to Pae White, and have not been used on any other installation to this day.

Poesia worked intensely and tirelessly with Pae to bring the project to fruition, involving extensive research and development, and testing. Each brick took three to four days to cook and cool, all due to the size, scale and mass of the glass. A labour of love that was well worth the effort.

"Production of the glass bricks was extremely intensive – there were lots of trials undertaken, and we designed a number of pieces of custom kit to produce the glass bricks, because not only are you handling glass at the temperatures you're handling them at, but you're handling a massive size and you have to de-mould it in a red hot state," reflects Pietro.

Once complete the bricks were installed on site onto a steel base, creating a solid foundation to take the weight of the bricks. The bricks were bonded using a special silicone, and the design included two doorways to enable people to walk in and around the pieces. The doorways were unique because unlike all of the other bricks, the doorway bricks weren't cut and polished on the edges. Unique moulds were made for these bricks so the clouds could be suspended, with clear glass wrapped around it.

"It was a very intensive project, but so thoroughly rewarding when you see it and walk around the event, it really was a magical installation," concludes Pietro.

Robertson's Building Products is proud to be the exclusive Australian distributor for Poesia glass bricks. For more information on Poesia glass bricks, please visit our Glass Brick page or, better still, visit our showroom to see the full range of glass bricks available.

Artist: Pae White

Engineers: Schlaich Bergemann

Product: Poesia solid hand-cast glass bricks, custom size, 330mm x 160 x 160mm, polished edges

Images: Daniel Root

