

The Architect's Newspaper

Partly Cloudy

Sanford Biggers mounts an installation inside Brown University's Sayles Hall

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Unsui (Cloud Forest) adds an element of whimsy to the historic Sayles Hall. (Michael Vahrenwald/Brown University)

A dreamy site-specific installation by New York-based interdisciplinary artist Sanford Biggers illuminates the main chamber of the historic 1881 Sayles Hall at Brown University. The installation, *Unsui (Cloud Forest)*, features 10 lighted cloud sculptures that are constructed out of aluminum, acrylic, and LED lights.

Unsui, a Japanese word that translates into “cloud, water”, is used in Zen Buddhist tradition to refer to the wanderings of novice monks in search of their next teacher, or to any Zen practitioner who moves through life like a cloud, without being limited by attachments. The piece takes inspiration in part from Biggers’s time studying Zen Buddhism in Japan. The cloud motif is something he frequently incorporates into his work. The theme will also appear in a new installation by Biggers debuting at Desert X this March.

“One of the impulses behind the installation was to create something that people can experience without any background information,” said Biggers. “They can make up their own impression and have their own experience that they can share with others.”

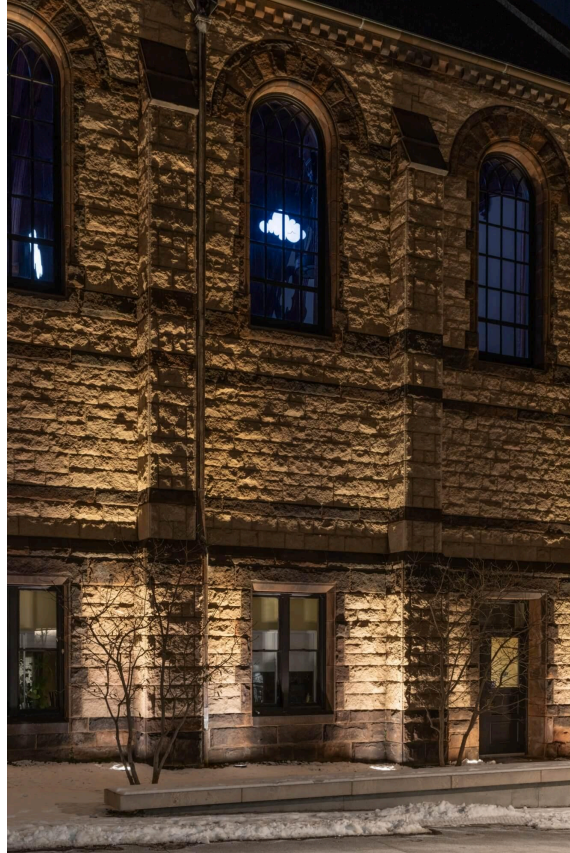
Biggers, who was a graffiti artist in his teens, has stylized the smooth faces of the clouds like an illustration. As light projects outward from the sculptures, shadows evade their flat surface. The effect is an almost cartoonish sky juxtaposed against the tangible history engrained in the wood rafters and stained glass windows surrounding it.



The sculptures—made of constructed out of aluminum, acrylic, and LED lights—hang from the ceiling rafters. (Michael Vahrenwald/Brown University)

Biggers was invited to create the work by artist and activist Carrie Mae Weems, who completed a campus residency with the Brown Arts Institute in 2023. Together, Biggers and arts leaders at Brown selected the 144-year-old Sayles Hall. “I was thinking a lot about how bodies would move through the space and how it’s sort of a multi-purpose, multi-event space used by students, faculty, staff and visitors,” Biggers said.

Sayles Hall, a memorial to William Clark Sayles designed by Alpheus C. Morse, drew Biggers for many reasons including its history, patina and central location on Brown’s College Green. The space is most notable for two elements within: its housing of the oldest extant Hutchings-Votey organ in the world; and its display of a portrait collection of past university presidents, faculty members, and major benefactors. Through the installation, Biggers invites viewers to contemplate who is represented on the walls and who isn’t.



From the exterior of Sayles Hall, passersby can catch a glimpse of shape and light. (Michael Vahrenwald/Brown University)

The Brown University Public Art Working Group, who reviewed Biggers’s proposal, appreciate how the installation engages with the historic space without interfering with viewers’ experience of the portraits and other elements within it. “We appreciated that Sanford was able to create a piece that is true to his artistic point of view but also resonated with the way the space has historically been used over many decades,” shared Kate Kraczon, the Group’s chair and chief curator for the Brown Arts Institute.

Unsui (Cloud Forest) is expected to be on view through the end of 2025.