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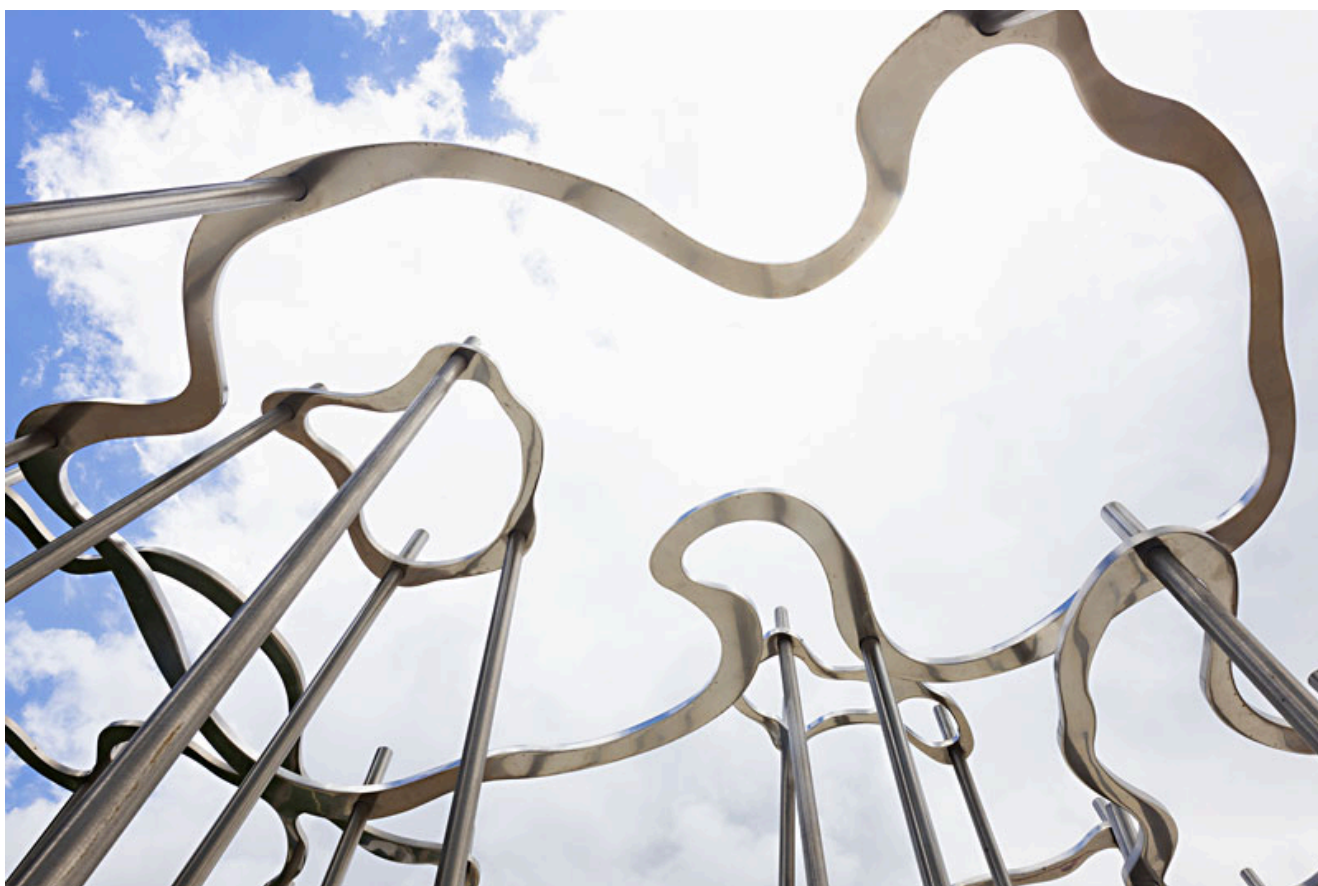
Beili Liu's Sculpture *Cloud Pavilion* Shimmers at Seaholm

How this glistening steel sculpture by the Austin-based artist became a permanent fixture of an evolving Downtown

BY VIVIE BEHRENS, FRI., MAY 28, 2021

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Cloud Pavilion seen from below (Photo by Jana Birchum)

This summer, Austin will unveil an ethereal steel sculpture that will bejewel its streets for the next 50 to 100 years. Made by Austin-based artist Beili Liu, the work offers a rare moment of stillness in a bustling hub of city life.

Perched on a street called Electric Drive in the walkable Seaholm EcoDistrict, the 14-foot-tall *Cloud Pavilion* features a grouping of amorphous, puddle-shaped rings supported by long, tilted poles that point your attention skyward, like the angled falling of rain in the distance. The work shimmers in the urban landscape, so that even as a freight train rumbles above it, cars whoosh along nearby Cesar Chavez, and Lady Bird Lake trickles in the distance, it creates the illusion of people, nature, and infrastructure in peaceful coexistence.

Public artworks are often designed to be symbolic of the values of the surrounding community, prompting passersby to consider a location's history and civic identity. Although abstract, *Cloud Pavilion* speaks to many of the considerations that have risen to the forefront in 2021. The sculpture is made from a mirror-polished stainless steel, which not only gives it a physical resilience but also allows it to transform visually according to weather conditions. The artist observes that "on different days, the work changes and responds differently. So when it's blue sky, it's one look, and when it's cloudy, it's completely different." It feels fitting that this protean sculpture will be installed during a time of profound change, adaptation, and innovation in public life. As folks begin to enjoy a more immersive, in-person experience of the city again, the work moves us to think about how we can reshape Austin to better reflect our newfound needs and interests.

While the sculpture may be stocked with illuminating metaphors, its site provides a glimpse into the real possibilities of creating a more serene, sustainable future. *Cloud Pavilion* is located on the property of Austin Energy's District Cooling Plant No. 3, a highly innovative piece of environmentally friendly engineering that will significantly reduce the strain on the state's power resources. The plant will produce chilled water in order to lower the temperature of multiple Downtown buildings, increasing the overall efficiency of Austin's energy infrastructure. After nearly a decade of planning, the equipment is scheduled to become operational this summer.

Especially after a historic winter storm that nearly collapsed Texas' electric grid, an extra 10,000 tons of cooling capacity is a much-needed asset. And as dazzling as "District Cooling Plant No. 3" sounds on its own, the installation of *Cloud Pavilion* adds an element of *je ne sais quoi* to an otherwise overlooked but essential feature of a developing Downtown.

The sculpture was made possible by a city of Austin ordinance called the Art in Public Places (AIPP) initiative, which requires certain city-funded improvement projects to allocate 2% of their total budgets to purchase or commission a public artwork. To the delight of art lovers across the U.S., similar percent-for-art programs exist in many cities, including Dallas and Houston, though they are increasingly a target for pinchpenny developers who see the programs as an extra expense. Austin, however, mandates a higher percentage of funding for public artworks than other comparable urban centers (including both of the aforementioned Texan cities), which significantly increases the resources available to enrich Austin's art landscape.

It was through AIPP that Liu was hired to produce *Cloud Pavilion*. Her association with the program granted her access to roughly 2% of the cooling plant budget – a substantial \$202,500 – for executing the project. The program additionally provided assistance with budget management, gave recommendations for fabricators, and paired Liu with a paid artist mentee from the AIPP LaunchPAD program, Teruko Nimura, who observed and assisted with the project from start to finish.

What distinguishes AIPP from merely a generous funding operation is its commitment to educating both the community and its hired artists about the production of public art. Marjorie Flanagan, the senior project manager of AIPP, explained that the program involves "over 30 city departments" and numerous stakeholders throughout Austin – "from neighborhood associations to arts organizations, to small businesses" – and it hosts public artist lectures and events in tandem with their current commissions.

As meaningful as *Cloud Pavilion* may be to Liu as an individual, she sees this sculpture foremost as an act of community service. "One thing I really love about a public art project is that it's all about the people, their engagement and experience, and who made the work doesn't really matter."

AIPP staff also counsels its selected artists – who may or may not have experience producing such large-scale or high-budget projects – through logistical challenges, like how to plan for insurance expenses and work with materials that have a 20-year longevity. Flanagan says, "One of the things that we strive for is making sure that our local artists are able to move forward with their art careers and compete for projects outside of Austin. We want them to be economically self-sustaining artists beyond just their commission with us."



Cloud Pavilion artist Beili Liu poses underneath her work (Photo by Jana Birchum)

Liu's proposal stood out to AIPP's independent jury not only because she's Austin-based, but also because her design directly referenced the function of the cooling plant. Liu drew inspiration from the way the site harnesses the natural workings of the water cycle to perform another useful, life-sustaining purpose. The artist says, "I think this cooling technology is a really wonderful metaphor to think about what the city of Austin is committed to, and how we can look at the future of city life, city planning, and how we engage with our environment."

Ecological preservation is not a new trope in Liu's work. In one of her previous public art projects, *Thirst* (2013), she installed a 38-foot-tall lifeless tree, a casualty of recent droughts, over Lady Bird Lake. The transfixing image of a tree that appears impossibly suspended over water not only stood out for its mysterious beauty, but also for the way it highlighted the effects of climate change. Located less than a mile from this former feat, *Cloud Pavilion* also testifies to Liu's uncanny ability to visualize opposing forces. Her ambitious design integrates the tensions between strength and vulnerability, conservation and consumption, and durability and decay.

When Liu embarked on the *Cloud Pavilion* project, she questioned how she would imbue this permanent piece with her trademark sense of delicacy and temporality. She wrestled with the challenge of visualizing a topic as ephemeral as the water cycle with a rigid, manufactured substance like steel. She asked herself, "How do you talk about something that's fleeting? Or something that's so fragile with something permanent? And how do you infuse a sense of vulnerability in this material that's industrial and extremely sturdy?"

Liu began to answer these questions with the help of a large team. She worked with a local fabricator, John Christensen, and installer, Blue Way (who also happens to be her life partner), to create the towering steel structure. After many years making art alone in her studio, Liu felt exhilarated by the experience of collaborating with others. "Being a solo artist is wonderful. And in many ways, it's less challenging because I'm making decisions. I'm asking myself questions, and I'm answering them." But Liu also emphasizes how surrendering total artistic control expanded her thoughts about the space, process, and scope of the work. She stresses, "It's almost like when we let go, we gain more in a way."

Liu's artwork usually appears and disappears according to the rotating exhibition schedules of galleries and museums, which makes her especially proud to have contributed a permanent artwork to Austin, the city she calls home. Liu immigrated to the United States from China when she was 21, but as the city she's lived in the longest in America, she lovingly calls Austin "a really special place." "I've spent more than half of my life here in this country," she says. "For me, home is always this duality of place where I feel like I'm constantly trying to be here, to get to know here, and to belong here. And then I'm losing that sense of belonging back home [in China] because when I return to visit, I feel like a guest." The process of making a long-lasting work satiated Liu's desire for rootedness, which makes her consider *Cloud Pavilion* a formative moment in both her career and her personal life.

As meaningful as this project may be to Liu as an individual, she sees this sculpture foremost as an act of community service. "One thing I really love about a public art project is that it's all about the people, their engagement and experience, and who made the work doesn't really matter." Although *Cloud Pavilion* demonstrates her unique thought process, Liu asserts that "this is a piece for the city, this is a piece of Austin." She relishes her ability to experience *Cloud Pavilion* much like any other pedestrian, a position that allows her to absorb the sculpture as a maker and viewer at once.

Cloud Pavilion may embody one artist's vision, but it also reflects the voices and contributions of a diverse and engaged community. Similar to a city itself, the sculpture is a symbol of a collective apparatus at work; it is a summation of many individuals' efforts to sustain a shared infrastructure that allows life and art to thrive. *Cloud Pavilion*, like the water it emulates, provides hopeful and satisfying sustenance. Its silver beams point to bright possibilities, and luckily for us, it is here to stay.

*A version of this article appeared in print on May 28, 2021 with the headline: **A Piece for the City, a Piece of Austin***

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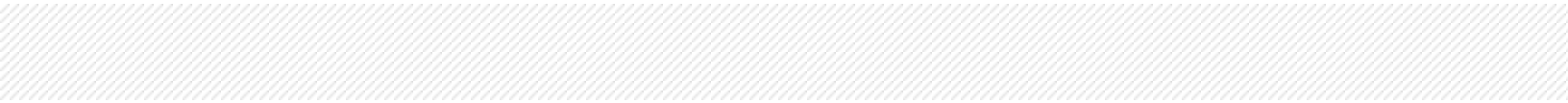
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