

PROOF

THE GEOGRAPHIC



With water misters and smoke machines, Dutch artist  
LOOKING AT THE EARTH FROM EVERY POSSIBLE ANGLE

# CONJURING CLOUDS

Berndnaut Smilde creates the vaporous puffs—and poses them.

VOL. 235 NO. 3



Smilde  
poses to  
in odd  
in China's  
Malayas  
ing smoke





The artist's creations in gallery spaces include a sky-grazing cloud at the De Groen Fine Art Collection in Arnhem, the Netherlands (top), and a low-hanging cloud in the Visual arts center in Carlow, Ireland.



Smilde's settings range from the ornate—the Green Room in the San Francisco War Memorial & Performing Arts Center (top)—to the spare: the Hotel Maria Kapel exhibition space in Hoorn, the Netherlands.

PHOTOS FROM TOP: R.J. MERRA; CASSANDRA; EDITOR: SCHATTSCHKEER





In Cologne, Germany, a cloud hovers in the Sankt Peter Köln, a late Gothic church that's also used as a center for spirituality, art, and music.

PHOTO: CASSANDER EPTINEK SCHATTENEKERS

## THE BACKSTORY

CLOUDS ARE AN ORDINARY SIGHT. BUT THIS ARTIST MAKES HIS OWN—SPARKING APPRECIATION OF THEIR FLEETING BEAUTY.

**BERND NAUT SMILDE CREATES** fluffy clouds in locations where nature never would place them. The Dutch artist's sculptures last five seconds—10 seconds tops—before they disappear.

Smilde's ongoing project, called "Nimbus," explores the visual effects of clouds. A church or museum interior looks different behind a cloud, and an everyday cloud is peculiar in a castle or a canyon. Each scene is made more intense by lasting only moments.

The ingredients for Smilde's clouds: just smoke and water vapor. He requires a cold and damp space with no air circulation, lest the clouds never form or fall straight to the ground. He mists an area with a spray bottle to put water vapor into the air. Then he turns on fog machines that spout tiny particles, and the vapor condenses around them.

Smilde runs around the forming

cloud, coaxing it into a shape about 10 feet across and six feet tall. Then he steps back long enough for a photographer to snap several images. Once the air clears, he'll start over, repeating the process dozens of times until he's happy with the results. Later, he'll retouch the photos to remove his tools.

The artist regularly fields invitations to create clouds on command, like a tropospheric party trick. Often he declines. He says he only attempts new images when the setting offers him something fresh as an artist. To him, the crucial takeaway is not the wonder of a fabricated cloud but its transience—that it exists for a moment and then is gone forever.

Each creation is "about being at the right place at the right time," Smilde says. "If you're seeing a photo, you already missed it." —DANIEL STONE



Photographer Cassander Eeftink Schattenkerk captures an image of a cloud that Smilde created in the Baths of Diocletian, part of the National Roman Museum.