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## A Changing Climate Inspires ‘Restoration’ at Arnold Arboretum

By **Sheryl L. White** | June 28, 2022

Artist Ethan Murrow grew up on a farm in Vermont, working the land and experiencing both the natural world and the impact humans have on it.



([https://www.bostonbuildingresources.com/kitchen-](https://www.bostonbuildingresources.com/kitchen-bath)

[bath](https://www.bostonbuildingresources.com/kitchen-bath))

Collaborating with the Arnold Arboretum through the climate advocacy group [ActionPact Boston](https://www.actionpact.boston/) (<https://www.actionpact.boston/>), Murrow brings his passion and concern for the environment to an art installation in our landscape that evokes our relationship with ecology both here and, more broadly, around the world.



Nick Papa and Ethan Morrow assembling *Restoration* on Peters Hill. Sheryl L. White

Action Pact Boston invited six local artists to create temporary artworks that reflect their own interpretation of climate change. Murrow's *Restoration* sprawls across a gentle slope on the south side of Peters Hill, just within the entrance at Mendum Street Gate. Assisted by the Arboretum's horticulture crew, ActionPact Boston's Jim Olson and Annie Lundsten, and assistant Nick Papa, Murrow assembled a new tree from mismatched parts—logs and limbs from trees that have been pruned or removed from the world-renowned collections at the Arboretum.

Murrow cradled these disparate pieces on wood supports, carefully joining them with tape, rope, twine, sensitivity, and even humor. The resulting installation calls out to us on many levels. First, and perhaps most simply, it shows us that trees can't be truly reconstructed or restored once lost. Yet it also asks us to consider the amount of care and attention each individual plant receives at the Arnold Arboretum, where the goals are to preserve, conserve, and educate. It highlights the life and death of a tree—events that often go unnoticed and unremarked by the casual observer—and subtly messages, through the cradles and connective materials, the responsibility we have for the well being of other organisms.

Art is a valuable and useful way to make climate change more accessible and relevant. Murrow's *Restoration* brings an artist's aesthetic to the pursuit of showing climate change as more than simply facts. *Restoration* is his personal vision: abstract perhaps, but charged with care, concern, and the intention to spark and facilitate conversation. Looking at the installation and considering its pieces—the life they once held, the importance of each tree—offers pathways to think about climate change through their loss, as well as through their lives.





*Two mismatched trunk sections are joined in Restoration. Bob Packert*

**Q: Talk about your creative process and the thinking behind utilizing fallen trees for an art project that comments on climate change.**

**A:** I worked at a museum on a huge mural that depicted a fallen oak tree, an attempt to tie the content in the show back to an old growth forest. A series of logs were cobbled together and depicted an attempt to reconstruct the tree. It was meant to be kind of farcical and an absurd image of people trying to fix a tree, which of course in some ways is a reality in terms of the arborists at the Arboretum trying to tend to the trees and take care of them.

[That mural] was an interesting idea to tempt people into looking closer. I wanted to try something like that again at the Arboretum. I built something that is somewhat recognizable—it does look like a fallen tree in some ways—but when you come closer there's clearly something wrong with it. It's stitched together with bandages, nails, and screws. I'm hoping that people will come to the sculpture at the Arboretum and ask questions about the kinds of trees that are in the environment around them, or ask why someone might tend to a tree so carefully, worry about it so much, or try to fix it.

**Q: How much do you think your initial design informed the final piece?**

**A:** The piece came about because of the generosity of your team (at the Arboretum) showing me this pile of wood. It seemed really appropriate to take the most tempting and dynamic material and find a way to utilize it. The design really came about from knowing the Arboretum well. It's a space I know and love.

I also really loved the idea that the wood, at the end of the day, will probably be chopped up and popped into mulched paths or something like that. There's a natural, cyclical process that will happen after the installation is completed.

When you approach the sculpture, you come through the Mendum Street Gate, and the road forks. I really wanted to set up the tree so that it pointed in both directions, and I wanted to make sure that the tree was spreading itself visually and not just moving toward one part of the Arboretum. The changes are perhaps subtle from the original proposal, mostly in relationship to the ground it stands on.





*Restoration at the Arnold Arboretum. Bob Packert*



**Q: Does the wide variety of materials you used contribute to what you wanted to convey?**

**A:** It is really a piece in multiple, intended to be a mixture of something really organized, with the wooden cradles holding the tree up. *Restoration* is meant to impress upon viewers this idea that the tree is being tended to or cared for and supported, and then something a little bit more chaotic or organic. The Arboretum is really preserving things and protecting environments. However, I'm hoping that sense of playfulness, that I certainly find among trees, is a part of the piece too. That's part of why I kept it bouncing around and doing lots of different things so that people would perhaps get that sensibility.


**Q: How do you think art can be a vehicle to help make the ideas of climate change more accessible?**

**A:** Climate change can be kind of daunting to people. I think art is a way in, and it can be a fun way, and it can be serious in its own right. But it's also a visual way of looking at something and conveying it.

I've tried really hard in my own work that deals with landscape and the environment to remember we have to balance this responsibility to do something thoughtful with just spending time enjoying the spaces we have around us. I think connections that we can build, by spending wonderful time outside, can help build a stronger sense of purpose.

Artworks, in some small way, can help to infuse environments not only with the tough questions, but also with the joy and playfulness that I think has to come along with it.

*This article was originally published on the [Arnold Arboretum's website \(https://arboretum.harvard.edu/stories/a-changing-climate-inspires-restoration/\)](https://arboretum.harvard.edu/stories/a-changing-climate-inspires-restoration/) and has been republished on Jamaica Plain News with permission from the Arnold Arboretum.*

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