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The Boston Globe

An artist evokes the oaks of Cape Cod's past

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KYUNG MI LEE



Ethan Murrow's 75-foot panoramic mural at the Cahoon Museum of American Art honors the region's natural history. CHRISTIANA BOTIC FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE.

Before European settlement, Cape Cod was flush with towering pine-oak forests. Wide open landscapes covered much of the shoreline scenery. And patches of hickory beech, red maple, and birch trees sprinkled the heathlands.

Boston artist Ethan Murrow and his team of artists evoke the memory of this past with a 75-foot panoramic mural at the Cahoon Museum of American Art. The mural is the centerpiece of a brand-new exhibition called "Ethan Murrow: The Greenhouse," on

Winston Wächter Fine Art, Inc.

530 West 25th Street, New York, NY 10001 TEL [212] 255 2718 FAX [212] 255 2719 EMAIL nygallery@winstonwachter.com www.winstonwachter.com

Winston Wächter Fine Art LLC

203 Dexter Avenue North, Seattle, WA 98109 TEL [206] 652 5855 FAX [206] 652 5856 EMAIL gallery@winstonwachter.com www.winstonwachter.com



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display through Oct. 3.

The painting features a large fallen oak tree, “an homage to the massive oaks that once stood on Cape Cod before being cut wholesale,” Murrow said in a statement. It also features a treehouse with windows bathed in blue light — painted to match the actual light entering the gallery — as a portal to the natural world.

“I look at the plant life around us almost as if they’re looking at us with a cynical view, rolling their eyes at our ridiculous behavior,” Murrow said in a follow-up phone interview. “At the end of the day, plants have an ability to outlast us. I see them as part of a longer cycle.”



The mural features treehouse windows that are painted to match actual light filtering into the gallery. CHRISTIANA BOTIC FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

Fallen trees create opportunities for new growth and diversification. Through “The Greenhouse,” Murrow and his team hope to highlight the effects of colonization on the natural environment and encourage new conversations about how we can restore nature’s former glory and encourage its regeneration. “How do we use and abuse

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resources?” asked Murrow in a statement. “How can we work closely and collaboratively with plants to build sustainability?”
Accompanying the exhibit are gallery talks with creators of the mural. Discussions will address the history of Cape Cod’s forests, not to mention the work’s installation process and its important environmental message. During the show’s run, Murrow will also plant a live oak tree in the middle of the gallery and a few others around the museum property. While the mural will be painted over at the end of the exhibition, the trees will remain with the Cape long into its future.

ETHAN MURROW: THE GREENHOUSE

At the Cahoon Museum of American Art, 4676 Falmouth Road, Cotuit, through Oct. 3. 508-428-7581, cahoonmuseum.org

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