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Mural of Enormous Tree Takes Center Stage at Cahoon

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JOANNE BRIANA-GARTNER



Artist Ethan Murrow will present a gallery talk ahead of the opening of his show “Ethan Murrow: The Greenhouse,” on view at the Cahoon Museum of American Art through October 3. *Sarah Peters.*

“The Greenhouse,” a panoramic mural by Boston artist Ethan Murrow, is now complete at the Cahoon Museum of American Art in Cotuit. The mural, which is bound to stop visitors in their tracks, shows a massive felled oak tree. The recumbent tree is adorned with dappled bark, furry mosses and tiny seedlings sprouting from its trunk. Mysterious ropes carry off branches of the tree; precarious stands and stanchions at odd angles prop the tree up off the ground. At the top of the tree is a wooden structure, perhaps an old treehouse or observation tower? While moss and seedlings would indicate the tree has been on its side for some time, the bottom of the tree seems to be in freefall mode, indicating energy and movement.

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Using high flow acrylic paint and refillable pens, Mr. Murrow and his three assistants created the site-specific work in four days, drawing directly on the walls of the museum's Trustees Gallery, spanning 75 feet and covering three walls of the gallery. "The Greenhouse" will be on view through October 3, after which the artwork will be painted over, the walls returning to their usual, more-neutral state.

And while the image is arresting, Mr. Murrow and museum director Sarah Johnson both hope visitors to the museum will get up close in order to experience the art. "Maybe someone will remember drawing on their own walls when they were a kid, seeing graffiti or scratching initials into a tree," Ms. Johnson said. "Whatever their association might be we are hoping people will relate to the work."

"This is a first for us, to have something this site specific, that's going to disappear at the end," Ms. Johnson said. "It's amazing to think this was created in just an intensive four days."

Ms. Johnson said Mr. Murrow was a natural fit for the Cahoon because much of his work is based in history and historical references. "One of our ongoing themes that we've been working with is to invite contemporary artists to work with historic themes," she said. Mr. Murrow was originally invited to the museum to create a wall mural featuring the ocean to complement the scrimshaw exhibit that was planned for last summer. With COVID, that exhibit had to be rescheduled and Ms. Johnson asked Mr. Murrow if he would like to use the space himself. "Luckily his schedule was open," Ms. Johnson said, adding that "The Greenhouse" is Mr. Murrow's first project "back on a wall since the pandemic." In addition to being a working artist, Mr. Murrow is the chairman of the art department at School of the Museum of Fine Arts at Tufts University. His work is represented in galleries in Paris, Los Angeles, New York City and Seattle.

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While the physical creation of “The Greenhouse” happened over the course of four days, more than a year of preparation went into the mural. “Ethan visited the museum, saw the space and came up with some ideas, landing on this,” Ms. Johnson said. “He creates a digital collage as an initial sketch and then projects the outline of the drawing on the wall.”

“I wanted to create a piece that was related to flowers, gardens, trees, vegetative life and life cycles,” Mr. Murrow said, adding that when he first visited the Cahoon two years ago, having not been on the Cape for a year or two, he was struck by all the trees that had disappeared.

Mr. Murrow said he was also influenced by the work of Martha Cahoon, especially her embellished furniture and the plant life she depicted on them. “Sarah also told me what a voracious gardener Martha was,” he said.

After seeing the space, Mr. Murrow landed on a large tree being the best way to physically occupy it. “I started thinking of the tree as a stage and then I had to figure out what was on the tree and what I thought was to have it be a memorial for a tree, it’s a dying tree but its falling creates all this new growth,” he said.

Mr. Murrow then explained the concept of the nurse tree—a tree that’s fallen in the forest and starts to grow moss: “Bugs start to help it to decompose and it spawns these new little tendrils.

“It’s meant to be a death and a rebirth and also to show that humans at least once occupied the tree. Perhaps a failed experiment since the tree fell. And then perhaps they are also working to support it, fix it and tend to it.

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"A lot of my work settles somewhere between natural life cycles of the landscape and ecosystems, and ways in which humans intervene with that."

In addition to Mr. Murrow, Shai Messer, Karli Janell Tucker and Nick Papa assisted in rendering "The Greenhouse." The more-detailed line work on top of the larger areas of color create an image with multiple layers. "My team is amazing," Mr. Murrow said. "They bring a huge amount to the table."

When it comes to the meaning of the work, Mr. Murrow is hoping visitors to the museum will "come in and finish the story themselves."

Mr. Murrow said it was also important to him that the installation be "highly playful." Evidence of this can be found in the several rickety devices that are propping up the tree; several are leaning at odd angles and looking rather Dr. Seuss-like.

"The Greenhouse" unintentionally complements Konstantin Dimopoulos's 2019 exhibit "The Blue Trees" (which can still be seen outside on the grounds of the Cahoon), large trees painted an electric blue in an effort, as Mr. Dimopoulos said in an interview, to draw attention to the trees and make people think about them and their role in the world. Like Mr. Dimopoulos, Mr. Murrow understands that, while people notice trees when they are gone, we don't always notice the trees that surround us.

Growing up on a farm in Vermont, Mr. Murrow said, he was highly aware of the trees on his family's land. "As a little kid I remember thinking that the trees were ancient but as I got older I realized that they were just a generation or two old and that there was a whole history on our land concerning colonialization, and the many different cycles of farming on the same land. There's a similar change going on all across the country and I think it's really incumbent on all of us to be thoughtful about how we are working

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within our ecosystem. I'm hoping the drawing might start some of those conversations," he said.

In addition to "The Greenhouse," Mr. Murrow created two smaller drawings for the Cahoon show. Both are in a second gallery on the first floor of the museum. "Gambler" and "Interloper" show a mysterious character—we can't see the face—moving through the forest with a platter held high above the person's head containing different tree species in glass bottles. Is the person stealing the plants from the forest? Returning specimens to their natural habitat? The viewer will have to decide.

Several programs related to Ethan Murrow's "The Greenhouse" are planned, beginning with a gallery talk with the museum's education and programs manager, Michael MacMahon, on Saturday, June 19, at 1 PM and again on June 24 at 11 AM. Registration for the talks are through the museum's website. Mr. Murrow will give a virtual talk on Thursday, August 5, and a closing reception for the show is planned for September 18.

Hours at the museum are Wednesday through Sunday from 10 AM to 4 PM.

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