Of Fog and Frederick

Fog × FLO Exhibition brings Fujiko Nakaya's atmospheric art to the Arboretum

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Pioneering landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted and Founding Director Charles Sprague Sargent designed the Arnold Arboretum as a work of art—a beautiful and naturalistic tapestry of rolling landscape and winding pathways created to showcase one of the world’s finest collections of living trees, shrubs, and vines. Walking through the landscape elicits one delight after another, as piquant combinations of colors and textures meld with the sounds, scents, and atmosphere of nature. For more than a century, the bucolic masterpiece Olmsted and Sargent brought to life has inspired many to create artworks of their own that reflect upon and respond to its transformational allure. Now, one artist has created a work for the Arboretum that speaks with nature in its own vocabulary.

As summer transitions to autumn, look for billowing plumes of intermittent fog to envelop the landscape near the Hunnewell Building, beckoning you to immerse yourself in its beautiful, evocative, and ephemeral mist. From August 11 through October 31, visitors to the Arnold Arboretum and four additional parks in Boston’s Emerald Necklace will experience some of Frederick Law Olmsted’s most beloved urban landscapes transfigured by site-specific, climate-responsive installations of pure water vapor created by Japanese artist Fujiko Nakaya. Just as the Arboretum and its sister parks in the Emerald Necklace may at first appear as “nature untouched,” Nakaya’s rigorously planned works yield artful outcomes that appear spontaneous, enhancing and reinforcing their natural settings.

The first city-wide exhibition in the artist’s fifty-year career, Fog × FLO: Fujiko Nakaya on the Emerald Necklace was commissioned to honor the twentieth anniversary of the Emerald Necklace Conservancy—a private, non-profit stewardship organization founded to maintain, restore, and protect Olmsted’s titular chain of Boston parks. Organized by Boston-based guest curator Jen Mergel, the exhibition places five of Nakaya’s “fog sculptures” in conversation with five of Olmsted’s historical landscapes: the Arnold Arboretum, Franklin Park, Jamaica Pond, Olmsted Park, and the Fens. The shape-shifting, cloud-like forms of fog generated by her works delight the senses and harmonize with Olmsted’s naturalistic constructions. More so, as technical installations comprising high-pressure water nozzles, electric generators, and computerized controls, the works also acknowledge Olmsted’s engineering genius of preserving the integrity of natural systems and hydrology in his parks.
At the Arboretum, Nakaya created Fog × Hill on the hillside adjacent to the Hunnewell Building, stringing a series of her patented nozzles in midair between two massive accessioned conifers, an eastern white pine (*Pinus strobus* 50-2014*A*) and a Carolina hemlock (*Tsuga caroliniana* 19447*F*). The fog created between the two trees floats down the hillside to mingle among the magnolias planted below in a waterfall effect, or what Nakaya calls a “fog fall.” The vapor rhythmically gathers and dissipates in shifting air currents and natural light, enveloping the trees and shrubs gracing the hillside and inviting visitors to interact with it in a familiar, yet awe-inspiring experience.

Part of her creative process involves spending time getting to know the physical spaces that will host her sculptures, including researching climatic conditions and observing the interplay of trees and topography. “Professor Friedman [Arboretum Director William (Ned) Friedman] took me all around the Arboretum,” Nakaya said of her visit to Boston last winter. “He explained the life history of each tree, each plant in the Arboretum with passion.” After first considering a spot in the Arboretum’s conifer collection, Nakaya selected the sunny field next to the Hunnewell Building Visitor Center, envisioning the delight of children who gather there to run and play. “I thought fog can make this spot a place of extraordinary experience,” she said. “Not a spectacle, but a place of deeper inner emotions. Fog will transform instantaneously an ordinary, everyday spot into an elusive time and space.”

Calling fog “the most generous of mediums” as an art form, Nakaya has a long history of collaborating with musicians, dancers, light and performance artists, and more to catalyze the aesthetic possibilities that her installations evoke. With this in mind, the Arboretum has partnered with a number of artists and art organizations to present free “fog performances” in conjunction with Fog × Hill during the run of the exhibition, including solo and ensemble music performances, family drop-in activities, and even highlights from Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* (see full program on the inside front cover). With dynamic and ethereal fog as both setting and inspiration, Nakaya’s work offers a highly visible platform for artists of diverse fields to experiment, create, and debut their own original art for the public.

Performance seems perfectly suited as a complement to Nakaya’s art. Part of the beauty of the Arboretum installation and the other works comprising the Fog × FLO exhibition is the singularity of the experience, as the topography of each site and the ever-changing conditions of light, weather, and wind make each occurrence of fog a unique and unrepeatable “performance” of its own. As such, the experience bears repeating, and visitors are rewarded by viewing and interacting with Fog × Hill at different times of the day and under various conditions.

“Atmosphere serves as a mold and wind is carving the sculpture in real time,” Nakaya says, describing the kinetic interplay between fog and environment that characterizes her work. “Fog is positive and negative, living and dying,” she explains. “It condenses and evaporates simultaneously, with dynamism and vulnerability. There is no point of focus, only in the mind.”
At left, the fog created at Fog × Hill rhythmically gathers and dissipates on the hillside next to the Hunnewell Building, floating down to the wide expanse of lawn carpeting its base. Plumes of vapor beckon visitors inside the cloud, interacting with the vapor as it glides through the trees and over the grass, as well as on the hillside itself via a mulched path running behind and through the spray zone (top, photo by Jen Mergel). “I thought fog can make this spot a place of extraordinary experience,” explained Nakaya. “Not a spectacle, but a place of deeper inner emotions.”