Man’s inflictions upon the desert take center stage at UAMA

Scorched Earth

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El Niño has been canceled, and the desert winter looms before us hot and dry.

Forecasters had predicted a cool, wet winter, but a month ago, the National Weather Service gave up on El Niño. The drought will continue; Arizona’s December rains will not fall.

To mourn this distressing development—and to meditate on climate change—you might want to pay a visit to the work of photographer Mary Mattingly, now on view at the University of Arizona Museum of Art. Mattingly, a Brooklyn, N.Y., artist, starkly conjures up environmental Armageddon.

In her “Dry Season,” a bleak photo colored in dun and gray, a flat sweep of sand stretches out toward a low sky. The sand is rough and tumbled—as though a thousand travelers had walked through it—and very, very dry. In the distance, a lone figure trudges toward the horizon, in search of water, perhaps. Draped in a biblical white veil and a long dress, she’s a woman who seems to hail from both a harsh past and a grim future.

“Aqua 2000” shows Arizona in the here and now, and the sight is hardly encouraging. Mattingly found, then photographed, a water station in the remote desert. This “Aqua” station has nothing to do with the blue water tanks Humane Borders plants in Arizona’s arid backcountry to save the lives of thirsty migrants. No, Aqua is a commercial enterprise, like a gas station, with its coin-operated slots spilling out onto two adjoining walls.

“Aqua 2000” fills the downstairs gallery with paintings by Greg Lindquist and Chris McGinnis, along with Mattingly’s large-scale photos and a looping video by William Lamson.

Broken Desert is UAMA’s contribution to the season-long Desert Initiative series. With its environmental focus, the UAMA takes a different tack from Pima Community College, which opened the series with a knockout photography show about migrants crossing Arizona.

Interestingly, though Broken Desert is mostly about the West, three of its four artists live in Brooklyn. (The outlier is McGinnis, a recent MFA grad of the UA, who is now teaching in Pennsylvania.)

The subtitle, Land and Sea, is a tad puzzling, since there’s little about the ocean, though Lindquist has painted some lovely near-abstractions that seem to hint at the water’s edge. He may have been painting New York’s shores—as Hurricane Sandy reminded us, the city’s boroughs are mostly low-lying islands. But Lindquist’s major painting in the show, the impressive “Lavender Pit Innescapes,” is an unmistakably Western work. Enlisting a team of UA students, he reproduced Bisbee’s Lavender Pit mine, a great gaping hole in the Earth, by painting its crevices and cliffs directly onto the walls of the museum.

He used lovely Easter-egg colors, violet and gold and spring green, to mask its toxic impact, and its burn is traced out on the soil in a lovely contrast to the prettily colored mine wall, this sickly underground is a coppery landscape infected by contaminants floating in darkness.

Painter McGinnis goes back to the 19th century for inspiration, to the U.S. Geological Survey’s mapping of the West that paved the way for railroads and mines to be blasted into the once-untamed landscape. McGinnis takes the now-famed photos of the expedition photographers, Timothy O’Sullivan and J.K. Hillers, and uses them as the base for before-and-after mixed-media works.

“Survey Studies,” for example, is an acrylic, oil and image transfer on wood panel. Underneath the paint is an old black-and-white photo of an unnamed canyon. (It would have been nice if McGinnis had identified images and photographers.) Atop this pristine landscape, McGinnis has painted what that land would become: Railroad tracks curve through the canyon bottom, and buildings are painted against the cliffs. And as he does in most of the 15 or so similar works, McGinnis draws a surveyor’s marks on top, turning the tools of development into candy-colored kite-like triangles.

“Survey 1 (Glen Canyon Dam)” is pure painting, an oil on canvas, that also joins past and present. An expedition photographer is poised on a cliff ledge, with tripod and camera aimed at the giant canyon. But the whole clanging apparatus of the modern dam is superimposed in paint on the ancient formation: ladders, platforms, walkways and sheets of concrete.

McGinnis’ series is reminiscent of Arizona photographer Mark Klett’s re-photographic survey, if less elegant than Klett’s project. McGinnis’ work is serious, but it’s overly crowded, with those survey marks and some strange black-and-white swirls squeezed into canvases already picturing multiple epochs.

The fourth artist, William Lamson, takes us back to the blazing deserts that photog Mattingly explored. For his double-screen video, “A Line Describing the Sun,” Lamson went to the Mojave, and taped what he describes as a day-long performance under the burning sun.

Lamson put together a harum-scarum apparatus on wheels to carry his large Fresnel lens—a lens buggy not too different from the rolling darkrooms that O’Sullivan and Hillers once hauled into the wilderness.

Lamson’s purpose was different, though: He aimed the sun’s rays through his lens in order to melt the cracked, dry soil below into mud. The lens, he tells us, achieved a temperature of 1,600 degrees and easily burned the soil. Thanks to the sun’s trajectory across the sky, the burn is traced out on the soil in a lovely giant arc.

The lesson? Humans can indeed play with the heavens, change the weather, and even scorch the earth if they want. Sometimes, the havoc they create is pretty—like that ash pic now carved into the Mojave, or the chemical pastels in the Lavender Pit—but as Yeats would have it, it’s a terrible beauty that’s born.