

Heat Strokes

A visiting artist indulges in a frenzy of desert art-making
by Margaret Regan

What do you get when you put a Dutch abstractionist in the Sonoran Desert? If the artist is Gerben Mulder, what you get is *The Tucson Work*, an explosion of crayon-bright paintings that evoke everything about our dry landscape, from its dense vegetation to its spring blooms to its monsoon storms.

During a Tucson sojourn earlier this year, Mulder painted the desert in wild abstractions, conjuring night-blooming cereus and lightning bolts through an energetic shorthand of short "strokes" of color and layers and layers of paint.

Prickly flowers ("*Night Bloom*") and electrical storms ("*Strokes*") riveted Mulder the most, but he didn't neglect the local wildlife. The uplifting "*Untitled (Ascending Butterflies)*" paints our mariposas as a swarm of curved wings, rising upward in primary colors on canvas. "*Bird (Tucson No. 21)*" is a cockeyed roadrunner, suggested by a few scribbles of gold and gray on paper.

The beneficiary of an artist's residency at the Muesum of Contemporary Art Tucson, Mulder was in town from April to late June, from wildflower season to the beginning of the monsoons. The museum lent him a Harley-Davidson to cruise among the cacti, says MOCA's Anne-Marie Russell, and he went into a frenzy of art-making, creating more than 30 paintings and 60 drawings in three months. Born in the Netherlands in 1972, Mulder normally lives in crowded New York and Rio. Tucson's wide-open spaces freed him, he says.

"The urban centers that I occupy are dense and limiting," he notes in an artist's statement. "The magical light, exquisite atmosphere and tortured extremes of the desert have altered my painting. This work is a result of that freedom."

Two of the freest paintings in his 31-piece MOCA show are the gigantic murals he painted directly on the walls of the Great Hall—an enormous space that once upon a time housed a platoon of fire trucks. (MOCA occupies a former firehouse.) Painted late in his Tucson stay, both murals celebrate Arizona's summer's storms.

"*Strokes*," about 15 feet wide and 10 feet high, is a magnified close-up of the tumult in a monsoon sky. The background is a velvety midnight blue, the exact color of the clouds when the storms roll in for real. Wide white bands of paint are rolled on hither and yon over the blue, and three starbursts in blue, pink and red explode across the white. Curving bands of white, yellow and red swoop below, their curling arms turning the whole paintings into a sky dance. In fact, Mulder was doing semi-realistic figurative paintings a few years ago, and these big strokes hint at human figures, narrowing the gap between his realism and abstraction. "*Untitled*," is even bigger, maybe 30 feet wide. Its background is the white of the wall, not the blue of "*Strokes*," and its strokes are narrow sticks, not wide bands, tossed every which way in the whirlwind. Still, it's more or less the same scene. In the untitled mural, though, Mulder is taking the long view, seeing the storm from a great distance. He has a penchant for switching scales like this, painting a scene close up, then again from far away, as though he's zooming in and out on a digital camera. In his regular paintings, thick oils on cardboard or canvas, Mulder combines the surface marks with thick layers of paint underneath. Roberta Smith of *The New York Times*, reviewing a Mulder show in New York last December, aptly noted that the artist "seems to be mining the heretofore unnoticed gap between Raoul Dufy and Jackson Pollock."

In "*Untitled (Tucson 2011 Series 1)*," the Dufy-like surface figure is an intricate nest made of irregular linked circles in blue and white. White bars shoot out from this desert crown of thorns, and in between and below the white bands, the dense congregations of color suggest a Pollockian depth, and an infinity of space, deep within the canvas.

Closer to home, these complex layerings of lines and color remind me of Lee Friedlander, whose mid-'90s photos of the Sonoran Desert were claustrophobic views of dense thickets of plants and underbrush. In the Mulder painting "Tall Grass," for one, you can get lost in the infinity of twisting stems and blades. But where Friedlander's photos were black and white and flat, Mulder's paintings are thick and juicy and colorful. "Tall Grass," a long horizontal painting 104 inches long and 51 inches high, vibrates with bright leaf-green, yellow, red and blue.

Mulder even indulges in a little abstracted still-life, perhaps in a nod to the Dutch still life tradition of centuries past. "Still Life of Fruits (1)" is a relatively well-behaved vase of flowers. Its pink-blue and pink circles are set against strokes shooting out against a pink-gray background. In a companion piece, the fruit bowl has shattered, and the hostile, darker background is moving in on the vase's turf. The show has as many drawings as paintings, most of them pastel, graphite and charcoal on paper. The abstracted landscape "Tucson No. 18" renders the city's big skies in a very small format—just 14 by 17 inches. It takes a long view, with bundles of scribbles clashing overhead, a few strokes of gold and green. In "Tucson No. 22," the tempestuous skyworks are closer by, and closer to the ground, where a few unruly lines stand in for the built city.

In the quickly dashed lines of "Still Life," a nice contour drawing of a late-night watering hole, one can discern a lightbulb dangling down over a bottle and a glass on a tabletop. The colors are warm—gold glowing onto brown—but something disturbing intrudes. Cheerful as many of his works are, Mulder often turns edgy, catching the unease in the wee hours—or the prickles amid the flowers. The show does get a little repetitious. Mulder was trying out something new—the stroke language for the desert—and he understandably experiments with it again and again. Still, it's interesting to see how he worked through his Sonoran shorthand.

Mulder shows internationally, and The Tucson Work will be labeled with the city's name when the artist travels it in the future. Discussions are under way about the fate of the lightning murals painted directly onto the museum walls. For now, they preside like a fireworks display over the Playa, a summertime installation of sand and beach chairs right in the middle of the Great Hall, by the architects' collective DUST.

The hall's great windows face north, with a view of cathedral, mountains and sky. If you're lucky, as I was, you might catch Mulder's lightning paintings—flashing white, pink and lavender against that deliciously velvety blue—at the same time that a real monsoon rolls in over the Catalinas, a clear-cut case of life imitating art.

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