

David Mas Masumoto: The art of the drought



A single image, like Dorothea Lange's famous photo "Migrant Mother," can become the icon of the Valley's great drought, forcing us to address the dramatic situation we face.

ILLUSTRATION BY THE BEE'S STEVEN W. PARRA

What does art have to do with the drought? Pictures of dried-up lake beds? Drawings of parched, snowless mountains? A poem about thirst?

I have a favorite example of the art of drought. Dorothea Lange's famous photograph, "Migrant Mother," symbolized the hardship of the Great Depression and the plight of migrant workers, many who were displaced from their farms. We forget the cause of the Okie exodus: a drought in the dust bowl of Oklahoma and Arkansas.

This photograph became an icon of the upheaval of being poor and out of work during the 1930s. The image captured the struggle of people trying to find some hope in the world. This is the art of the drought from 1936.

Art helps explore meaning and emotions. Art can expand our comprehension of situations, burn into our minds and memories the significance of a disaster and inspire us to action. Art expands our sensibility beyond a dollars and cents interpretation. When I look at the photograph, "Migrant Mother," the economic hardship takes on a different meaning: the despair of the Great Depression becomes personal and real, I am moved to care and act.

I challenge artists throughout the state and especially our Valley to create art of the drought in order to advance our understanding and explore a new social and emotional context of our great drought.

We need to broaden our perspective beyond the political rhetoric and the narrow economic analysis of the impact of the drought. Public policy too often ignores the human element. Environmental degradation is lost in the current debate over water rights. We act as if the drought carries little emotional impact.

Imagine a great poem or creative prose piece that intensifies our awareness of the drought. I long to hear a song of the drought — a blues piece about the thirst in everyday life. A painting could capture the bleak, lifeless vista of a land and her residents without water. A sculpture helps us visualize in three dimensions the impact of no water for life. A play can probe the clash of economic forces as families confront an invisible calamity. A dance or spoken word performance forces us to feel the physical toll of the drought on a place and her people as communities wither away. I dream of an exhibition, a book, and series of public programs with the art of the drought forging a new wisdom in a land with less water.

Art helps crack open our hearts. Art humanizes the tragedy we're living. Art shines light onto the dark canvas of a land that's turning to dust without water. Art can bring us together, urban and rural, rich and poor: we're all short on water these days.

A drought is democratic in its pain. The wealthy may find ways to shield themselves from thirst and some geographic areas are impacted less than others, but this drought does affect us all. Money can't make it rain. Technology can't create new water. Drought collides with all aspects of life: economic, environmental and our social community. This drought is not just about money.

Some scoff at the idea of art: what good is it in the real world? Art can make visible the invisible. For example, on the November ballot is a major water bond that can begin to address some of the growing crises of the drought. But what will move the typical voter to approve this initiative? More political ads and hyperbole? A single image, like "Migrant Mother," can become the icon of this great drought, forcing voters to address the dramatic situation we are facing. The water bond on the ballot is not just for farmers or select municipalities. It questions our political will to address an emergency.

Great art moves us to action. We forget how art, in the past, was used to mobilize the public to act during other catastrophes of war or natural disasters. We are inspired and motivated: art makes us think. The art of the drought can become a vehicle to create a shared common bond. In order to survive, we will have to act collectively, join together in the management of this suddenly highly-valued, scarce and precious resource called water.

The art of the drought opens the door to a new perspective of the arts in everyday life. Art belongs in the public eye, not just in museums or for the privileged. Art is practiced by many and in multiple locations and venues. I hope a popular image or art form will gain traction and symbolize this drought.

Finally, art can inspire creativity and innovation by encouraging new and novel ways to examine situations and conditions. The brightest thinkers will need encouragement as we end a golden era of consistent rainfall and enter into a new world of deficits.

For example, we may soon need to organize ourselves by watersheds as we move to monitor water use. A regional

perspective will require creative mapping of our communities and lands. We no longer are defined by traditional topographies. What will the future digital map of our state look like with a groundwater overlay and crisis of overdrafting?

The art of the drought inspires us to believe in the human capacity to innovate and overcome. We will adjust and adapt and find the will to cope with less water. I believe art can make us neighbors.

And I'm open to hear your ideas and plans about the art of the drought.

Award-winning author and organic farmer David Mas Masumoto of Del Rey writes about the San Joaquin Valley and its people. Email: masmasumoto@gmail.com.

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