

Art Review:

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Miller Updegraff

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Michael Benevento, Los Angeles
15 September - 27 October

On the visual spectrum, the colour purple vibrates at the highest frequency. The ancients found spiritual resonance in this fact. Catholic clergy use purple vestments during their holiest times of Advent and Lent, and in Buddhism, purple resides in the seventh chakra, right at the top of the head, and connects to the metaphysical. In Miller Updegraff's art practice, the use of purple is a way of accessing departed worlds, a way to talk with the dead. He paints washy old photographic images in purple, the particular tone registering along the lines of sepia or tungsten. The suggestion is that his paintings are imprints of spirits, messages from the great beyond.

Updegraff receives obvious joy from exploring the metaphoric potential of painting and photography as a 'medium'. Operating in Benevento's two Sunset Boulevard spaces, his painting and drawings are packed with doubled imagery, palimpsests and layered meanings. Visually, they reside between the allegories of Mark Tansey and the aloof images of Luc

Tuymans or early Gerhard Richter. Separate bodies merge and strange electric charges appear from nowhere. Faces turn away in lost profile, stay in shadows or behind masks. At one point, a wall space where one expects to find a painting is left blank; in its place is a keyhole through which a video of a seance can be watched.

The lesson seems to be that representation requires a leap of faith. At its best, what is represented appears to knock from the other side of a thin piece of glass. Updegraff is not cynical about this often-talked-about limitation of mimetic art, but instead seems thrilled that it can perform this bit of light magic. Many of the titles in the show are quotes taken from the script of Jean Cocteau's *Orphic Trilogy* (*The Blood of a Poet*, 1930; *Orpheus*, 1950; and *The Testament of Orpheus*, 1959), and one image, *Reading Things into Things* (2012), features a message from *Orpheus* that must be read through a mirror. Updegraff wants from painting what Cocteau's character Heurtebise wants from the mirror: that it be "the secret of all secrets..., gates through which death comes and goes".

What starts as an elegant proposal and a tight concept of a show falls, unfortunately, into a bit of confusion. The ghosts to whom Updegraff is attempting to speak are disparate and obscure: Thomas Mann, Koloman Moser, George Grosz, Konstantīns Raudive, Barbara Follett, Charles Bukowski and Oscar Wilde join Cocteau as but a portion of the spiralling, scattered network of characters and loosely regulated concepts populating the exhibition. As if the artist was caught up in the rapture of an Internet research spree, the content registers not unlike the mangled Electronic Voice Phenomenon recordings of Raudive - white noise ripe for meaning-projection. The invitation for our own projections is implicit and interesting, but one is left with the suspicion that the artist is trying to do too much, to wrangle too many references better left for future efforts and a slower, more methodical study.



Miller Updegraff
Never Tired, Never Sad, Never
Guilty, 2012, Mongol watercolour
pencil on Arches paper, 48 x 41 cm