

CLIFTON BENEVENTO

LOCATION: 515 BROADWAY NEW YORK NY 10012 PHONE: 212 431 6325 FAX: 212 334 4703
EMAIL: INFO@CLIFTONBENEVENTO.COM WEBSITE: WWW.CLIFTONBENEVENTO.COM

ARTslant Los Angeles

The Paintings of Miller Updegraff by Ed Schad

MILLER UPDEGRAFF

Miller Updegraff

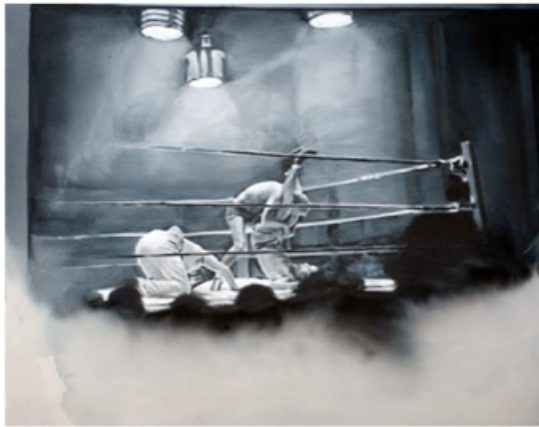
Michael Benevento

7578/7556 Sunset Blvd., Los Angeles, CA 90046

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A critical shortcoming of mine is to be so overwhelmed by what things look like and what they remind me of, that I forget what they are. What's worse, is that I burden younger artists, who are just trying to get their toe in the door of this impossibly silly but important artworld, with the weight of those that came before them – I perhaps unfairly went after Steven Bankhead at Circus because he couldn't live up to his Barnett Newman references in a clear manner; I unleashed the mastery of Jasper Johns on Dan Bayless at Francois Ghebaly. Another part of me, however, thinks that this is exactly what I should be doing, that we are after all, aiming for mastery and further depth, that we all should be aiming at history. The poet Donald Hall tells his students in workshops simply this, "Try to be as good a poet as George Herbert." I guess I am of the same school. I wish I was as good a critic as Randall Jarrell. I'll keep working at it and tell you how it goes.



So when I look at Miller Updegraff's work at Michael Benevento, I absolutely had to think of Gerhard Richter, Luc Tuymans, and Johannes Kars. In other words, the new image painters of Germany using washing, fading images to speak of a tortured history they have difficulty (and rightly so) staring right in the face. For painters like Richter, Tuymans, and Kars, history is such a place that, on one hand, cannot be grasped in a totality and, on another hand, loses its effect is rendered too overtly. To stare unfettered at war, torture, murder, and death is like staring at pornography, and one of painting's chief virtues is that it can displace the unholy directness of photography. The bluntness of the gratuitous looking deadens exactly the part of a person that needs to be developed to cope with trauma and horrible history. This is the prayer of these painters.

Updegraff too shows history in a fog, barely visible on unprimed canvas and bled through with medium and washes. Updegraff's pictures flicker in and out of view. However, Updegraff shows the history of America and the masculine spaces of the early 20th century – the heavy set, cigar-laced aristocratic perches of Evelyn Waugh and the blood-stained boxing rings of George Bellows. Some of Updegraff's paintings appear like police snapshots of the underworld, others show secret parties like Weegee's voyeuristic snaps, but all come across as takes on photographs. I currently have no doubt that like Tuymans, Richter, and Kars, Updegraff is comfortable putting paintings up against photography as a manager and interpreter of history.

And it would be easy to feel slightly insecure about the weight of our own American history in the face of what the Germans have to cope with in their work. It would be even easier to write Updegraff's work off as having the mere fantasy of depth, of aping off the styles of more distinguished and embedded masters. However, I hesitate to go so far. While Updegraff can be accused of generalizing masculinity and reducing it down to a series of historical tropes and clichés, his manner of presentation is on to something. It certainly is valid to stare into dark hidden spaces of the past and to watch them appear as incomplete specters in front of us. It is enjoyable and productive to stare into those distant places.

Work of this nature has a lot to live up to, however. It takes mastery on the level of a Karin Mamma

Andersson to muse on the particular traumas of Sweden, a Cormac McCarthy or Don DeLillo to revive the blood soaked origins and structure of the United States, a Richter or a W.G. Sebald to process the complexity of Germany. I would love to see Updegraff go deeper, focus on the masculine as a compulsion and legacy whose fat fingers still soils us today. I would love for the proceedings to be more studied, focused, less evocative of other masters and more personal. I'd love to say an Updegraff looks like an Updegraff. He'll get there -- there is much talent here.

- Ed Schad, writer living in Los Angeles

(Images courtesy of the artist and Michael Benevento, LA)
All images courtesy of the artist and Benevento Los Angeles.

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