

**CLIFTON BENEVENTO**

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# Los Angeles Times

ENTERTAINMENT



Culture Monster

ALL THE ARTS, ALL THE TIME

## Art review: Miller Updegraff at Michael Benevento Gallery

April 16, 2010 | 7:00 pm

The modern tension between painting and photography is an established theme in art. Miller Updegraff draws on it for his fine solo debut at [Michael Benevento](#), which is as much an installation as a painting show.

In a dimly lighted maze of corridors and small rooms, Updegraff's palette of black and silvery paint subsumes both painting and photography within a nostalgic reverie. Color is just a gleam and faint sparkle — a very light dusting of glitter on the paintings, which adds to the general air of dreaminess.



Given the claustrophobic spaces in the gallery, that reverie is literally in your face. Two paintings are seven or eight feet on a side, so the only way to take them in is to step back into an adjacent room or hallway. A sense of eavesdropping or voyeurism is made integral to the experience of looking at the work.

Updegraff's images derive from period photographs showing men who sit, wait, wrestle, smoke and embrace or light other men's cigarettes. At a breakfast table, one man shaves his face as he peers into a hand-held mirror, an action oddly echoed by the man next to him scraping jam (or maybe honey) from an open jar. Another shows a shadowy, ill-defined interior where garments appear to hang on a back wall. A grinning, portly older man wearing a homburg ignites a match to light the cigarette of a younger, incongruously naked man; the sulfurous flash of illumination doubles as an

erotic charge.

A group of three paintings shows wrestlers in a ring, their sweaty grappling coming across as sexual interaction as much as sport. Updegraff has apparently worked from old photographs as battered as the protagonists in the ring, their stained emulsions faithfully replicated on the canvas and adding to a general aura of expiration and loss. The three wrestler paintings share the title, "The lost religion of masculinity." Wrestling and boxing were common subjects for American art a century ago, in part to compensate for a social prejudice that art was not a masculine pursuit.

A gallery handout says that many of the source photographs are related to D.H. Lawrence, Humphrey Spender and Evelyn Waugh, British writers who came of age before World War II in a society marked by the confusions of lost empire. They also regarded sexuality as something indistinct and fluid, rather than clear-cut and defined. Updegraff deftly uses the categorical blurring of painting and photography to pry apart a similar sense of sensual nebulousness, lost but not forgotten.

– Christopher Knight

**Michael Benevento Gallery**, 7578 Sunset Blvd., Hollywood, (323) 874-6400, through May 1. Closed Sundays and Mondays. [www.beneventolosangeles.com](http://www.beneventolosangeles.com)

*Image: Emmanuel & Herbulot (top) and Bastard, 2010. Courtesy of the artist and Michael Benevento Gallery.*

