

SAN FRANCISCO

Brian Ulrich

ROBERT KOCH GALLERY

The ubiquitous Big Box is an irresistible, though problematic, subject for contemporary artists. In documenting these bloated retail havens (eleven such images made up this recent exhibition at Robert Koch Gallery), Chicago-based photographer Brian Ulrich sets himself the not uncomplicated task of addressing the perils of rampant consumerism without lapsing into simplistic, knee-jerk condemnation.

All but two of the pictures, culled almost entirely from the series "Copia," 2002–2006, were taken in the American Midwest and are titled after their locations: *Black River Falls, WI, 2006*; *Minneapolis, MN, 2004*; *Gurnee, IL, 2003*, to name a few. (The remainder were shot in Edinburgh.) Ulrich focuses on emporiums that cater to the white middle class, and he alternates between showing them with and without shoppers. Either way, the pictures feel forlorn and lonely. The candid portraits capture moments of contemplation of coveted objects: A man in one cavernous store holds a fishing rod as if it were a divine artifact; a young blond woman in a supermarket talks on her cell phone while pondering a bottle of Chardonnay; a gangly teenage goth girl awkwardly eyes a pair of black sneakers being handed to her by a floral-dress-clad mom. Only one portrait diverges from this dynamic: *Minneapolis, MN, 2004*, shows a dowdy male-to-female cross-dresser seated alone in a drab fast-food joint, longing for a burger, or perhaps a companion. It suggests that even transgressive personalities may be subsumed by the consumer desires of generic middle-class America.

The pictures are carefully composed, but eschew the theatricality of, say, a Philip-Lorca di Corcia. It's difficult to tell whether Ulrich's subjects, bathed in the flat but mildly merchandise-flattering lighting of discount stores, are aware of the camera—their focus on shopping is that intense. And they have plenty to choose from: Ulrich's unpeopled interiors immediately recall Andreas Gursky's *99 Cent*, 1999, his iconic depiction of the parti-colored dazzle of off-brand bargains and the fruits of Third World sweatshops. In *Kenosha, WI, 2003*, Ulrich depicts a supermarket interior full of shipping pallets piled high with bright twelve-packs of a noxious soft drink called Faygo. These are stacked near a refrigerated case of gallon jugs of milk, some of which has splattered on the faux wood linoleum in an accident that almost looks deliberately engineered.

Granger, IN, 2003, is perhaps a more effective play on Gursky's theme. A photograph of the antiseptic and seemingly infinite interior of a Target store, it focuses on the cherry-red checkouts, which contrast with the gleaming

white floor in the foreground. The angled grid of the acoustical tile ceiling is interrupted only by fluorescent lights and a line of surveillance cameras in smoked plastic domes. It's difficult not to wonder if Ulrich required or obtained permission from the corporate officials to shoot in this area, which suggests airport immigration after a colorful makeover or the sterile corridors that usher arrivals from plane to terminal. The image emphasizes that Big Box stores are another non-place/anyplace, like airports, and one furthermore where consumerist "freedom" (like an airplane passenger's ostensible mobility) is actually highly controlled via surveillance and architecture that carefully determines one's path through the space.

The exhibition also included one picture from a current series depicting thrift stores—the secondary market for the objects obtained in the aforementioned emporiums. *Chicago, IL, 2005*, shows a thrift store aisle strewn with toys and shoes. What we're presented with is an aftermath, tall shelves stocked haphazardly with old stuffed animals and plastic bags of toy soldiers. Ulrich is wise to follow the cycle of consumption one step further. This setting is less a gold mine for kitsch-hunting bohemians than a trickle-down retailer for the poor and disenfranchised. Those customers here remain unseen, suggesting that Ulrich's next formidable challenge will be to portray them with dignity.

—Glen Helfand

PHOTOGRAPH BY BRIAN
ULRICH © 2006

Brian Ulrich, *Kenosha, WI, 2003*, color photograph, 40 x 52".

