

## ARTS&amp;CULTURE

# Consumerism culture caught on film in documentary show

By Maria Connor  
LA JOLLA LIGHT

Just in time for this season of shopping madness comes the opening of a photographic documentary of the American culture of commercial consumerism.

The Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego in La Jolla is now showing "Copia," a collection of 14 large-scale photographic prints by Chicago-based photographer Brian Ulrich.

The project began in 2001, when, in response to the financial impact of Sept. 11, 2001, and the ensuing military conflicts overseas, citizens were encouraged to take to the malls to boost the U.S. economy through shopping. The artist set out to document contemporary consumers and the shopping culture.

Before taking any photographs, Ulrich studied the psychology of shoppers. He observed where shoppers linger, what they touch, how they compare products. He later learned market researchers do the same thing, tracking shoppers from the moment they enter a store until they leave, then sell the information to retailers.

Using a medium-format film camera with a waist-level viewfinder, Ulrich covertly observed shoppers in big-box retail and warehouse stores. His photographs capture the human element of consumerism, as well as the stark, sterile

atmosphere that is becoming more common in retail spaces.

"There is a certain openness to the figures, to the people in those spaces that allows us a view into their desires that we wouldn't normally get," said Lucia Sanroman, assistant curator at the Museum of Contemporary Art.

Shortly after beginning the project, Ulrich realized his perspective had shifted. His role as documentarian changed as a feeling of kinship with his subjects developed.

"In the early stages, it was very easy to be kind of cynical about this and ... make photographs that were indicting people who were shopping there," Ulrich said, "until self-reflection raised the question, 'If I'm going to say this about these people, what about me and the things I buy?' I'm just as much in the game as they are, as everyone is."

No longer driven to document the mindless retail addiction of Americans, Ulrich said he wanted to create elegant, compassionate, beautiful photographs with a sense that the subjects were no different from the artist and audience.

"I feel very familiar with the people represented," Sanroman said. "I feel that they could be me. I have been that person looking a little bit lost or a little bit overwhelmed."

Ulrich's series has evolved into a long-term work of art with four chapters.



COURTESY

"Copia," an exhibit exploring consumerism, is on display at the Museum of Contemporary Art.

"Copia" explores the big-box stores and middle-class retail shoppers. "Thrift" examines the afterlife of purchased goods, how products are reused in their secondary life and where they end up. "Backrooms" focuses on the retail work space and corporate mentality. Chapter four of the series has yet to be named but will showcase high-end shopping venues, visible only to the high-class, elite consumer.

Discoveries about human nature have prompted the ongoing nature of this project, Ulrich said. He has observed people getting depressed and overwhelmed when they enter stores, looking dazed, and making seemingly mindless purchases.

"The easiest way to fill that depression ... is to not leave empty-handed," he said.

Ulrich has pursued this project and believes it hits a lot of buttons with people because it asks us to question something

which is very subliminal in our society. Ulrich compares his photographs to the Impressionist art that documented turn-of-the-century, industrialized society.

"As things were modernized, there was a tearing down of the old to put up the new," Ulrich said. "As the result of that, you see in a lot of Manet's paintings this kind of vacancy in people's portraits and stares. I think he's suggesting that we're losing something with that."

Ulrich believes that shopping is an indelible part of American culture.

"That's what we do with our free time," he said. "We shop."

"Copia" is a Latin word that conveys abundance. He hoped to raise in viewer's minds the notion of the dangers that can come with affluence.

"Copia" will remain on display through May 13, 2007. Call (858) 454-3541 or visit [www.notifbutwhen.com](http://www.notifbutwhen.com).