

art

EYE EXAM

Consumer Culture Clash

By Burt Michaels



AS A BMX BIKER, BRIAN ULRICH CAREENS DOWN STAIRWAYS AND SOARS OFF RAMPS TO FLIP AND TWIST TWENTY FEET ABOVE GROUND—extreme stunts few of us would attempt. As a space rocker playing grunge clubs across the northeast and Midwest, he claims he and his band “regularly blow up sound systems with extreme volume, volume for its own sake”—again, a feat few of us are likely to perform. As a fine-art photographer, Ulrich again traffics in youth-oriented pop culture but this time, in the series “Copia” (which means “abundance”), he takes us on a romp where we’ve all been: through the malls and big-

box stores of middle America. And he does so without extremes, but rather with surprising subtlety and restraint. His large-format, often humorous photos of retail shoppers and the stuff we buy are finely crafted, formally composed and elegant, with clever allusions to classical art and a warm intimacy with, and empathy for, his subjects. In his new series, “Thrift,” at Rhona Hoffman Gallery, he turns his attention to the detritus of consumerism—used goods in thrift stores and yard sales, and the less-affluent people who work and shop there—with comparable finesse.

Stunt bikers fall, and it was a concussion he sustained from a fall that propelled Ulrich, now 35, into photography. “When I came to, the world was silent, dreamlike, a series of still images. I made photos to recreate the event,” he reports. After earning a BFA at the University of Akron, the native New Yorker worked in a vintage-photo gallery in Manhattan, spending most of his waking hours with undiscovered photos, including many from the leftist Photo League. “These photographers weren’t working for fame or money, but for political and social ends,” he says. “Walker Evans died poor even as a lecturer at Yale.” He moved to the Cleveland Museum of Art, designing and installing galleries for four years, but was drawn to Chicago’s art community “because there are so many opportunities here for young artists to exhibit compared with Cleveland, and Chicago is so much more affordable than New York.” He made intimate portraits of friends and family until 9/11, his registration day in the Columbia College MFA program. “Suddenly you made eye contact with strangers; everybody was going through this same tragedy,” he says. He began photographing strangers—commuters, Columbia students—trying to maintain intimacy. “Then Bush called on the nation to go shopping to fight terrorism. I thought ‘No way.’ I want to put out a different message, rethink the consumerist agenda and the politics it represents. Shopping,” he adds, “presents the illusion of choice, but it’s not our choice—it’s what’s presented to us, what Kraft and Conagra want us to own. We go into stores with elation, hoping for something to relate to emotionally, and come out from the ordeal depressed and depleted.”

Ulrich uses medium- and large-format cameras and available light, shooting from the waist as unobtrusively as possible to capture details in subjects’ faces and hands that “help us see these consumers as reflections of ourselves.” He focuses on a sign at a gas station, “Homeland Security Threat Level Today—Please see cashier for details” to establish the connection between the “war on terror” and our consumption addiction. His landscape of Sunday shoppers strolling through Costco’s fluorescent-lit aisles alludes to “Sunday Afternoon on the Island La Grande Jatte,” contrasting Seurat’s era to ours. Older people, caught up in the youth-oriented marketing maze, seem particularly victimized by it all. In Ulrich’s new series, the calculated, orderly displays of mass-market stores give way to messy piles of castoffs that the lower rungs of our society get to sort through. Weary thrift-store workers replace weary middle-class shoppers as the victims of consumer culture. But it’s still presented as beautifully as a Dutch landscape or Renaissance portrait. In part three of his project, “Backrooms,” he plans to investigate aspects of stores that are hidden from the public.

Ulrich’s photos, issued in editions from five to nine, have been well received. He’s represented by galleries in Chelsea and San Francisco as well as by Rhona Hoffman. His work is in the permanent collections of the Art Institute of Chicago, the Houston Museum of Fine Art, the San Diego Museum of Contemporary Art, the LaSalle Bank and the Museum of Contemporary Photography, which this fall published his book in conjunction with Aperture magazine. Ulrich teaches part-time at Columbia College and the School of the Art Institute, and does editorial commissions for periodicals including the New York Times Magazine and Wired. “It’s a modest living,” he says. “But it lets me go shopping—for images—the way my subjects go shopping for stuff.”

Brian Ulrich shows at Rhona Hoffman Gallery, 118 North Peoria, (312)455-1990, through January 6. See Art Break for more on this show.

Brian Ulrich's Thrifty Ways

THE PROFOUND DISCONNECT BETWEEN ARTIST AND COLLECTOR BECAME A GAPING CHASM AT BRIAN ULRICH'S GALLERY WALK WITH MEMBERS OF THE ART INSTITUTE'S DONOR GROUP—the Photography Society—to “sneak preview” his new “Thrifty” series of color shots documenting the disarray of items available at thrift shops.

For Ulrich, his images represent a coming-to-terms with his own implication in consumer society, which leads him to self-criticism and disquiet—he does not hate himself for the consumer that he is and, in consequence, loves the people and places he shoots; yet he knows and deplors the waste, excess, destruction and exploitation that are concomitant with consumerism.

Ulrich makes his ambivalence plain in his comments to the group, but when it comes time for questions his audience avoids all the concerns that motivate him. “How do you control for depth of field? Do you use film or have you gone digital?” asks one older man. “It looks like a wall in grandpa’s basement—every grandpa has one,” a younger man says about an image filled with an indiscernible jumble of things. “Did you buy anything at the stores where you took the photographs?” asks a middle-aged woman.

Gallerist Rhona Hoffman, who represents Ulrich, understands him, saying that she has taken him on because he shares her concerns about the shopping mania that has “substituted for religion.” Hoffman responds to the images with “sadness” and reflects on the “disparity of incomes” that produces excess for some social classes and scrounging for “detritus” for others. Ulrich is a young rising star in the photo world, having exhibited at the Art Institute and done a spread for the New York Times Magazine, among many other successes in the two years since he received his M.F.A. from Columbia College. He is not scamming anyone and is deeply serious about his intent to make people question themselves and their lives. That his audience did not get it testifies to the depth of the “problem” that Ulrich so directly and pointedly exposes. *(Michael Weinstein)*

Brian Ulrich shows at Rhona Hoffman Gallery, 118 North Peoria, (312)455-1990, through January 6. See Eye Exam for more on this show.

