

# BRIAN ULRICH

The increasing number of bankrupt retail complexes, or “dead malls,” on the American landscape are markers of our economically challenged cultural moment. These sites, as a subject for art, also have art historical precedents, like the neo-classical canvases of crumbling Roman columns or late 19th-century photos of the collapsed Greek shrines. Brian Ulrich’s recent series of photographs, *Dark Stores*, depicts derelict consumer temples. His richly atmospheric color images, shot with a large format (8x10) camera, depict shuttered shopping centers that have lost their leases on life, not to mention their customers (there’s not one visible in the series). Weeds reclaim the decaying parking lot of *Dixie Square Mall*, 2008, while ghosts of removed signs still convey chain store identity in pictures like *Circuit City*, 2008.



This isn’t the first time the Chicago-based artist has probed capitalism and cultural crisis. The post-9/11 patriotic call to shop—“America Open for Business”—provided the inspiration to photograph ordinary folk strolling the aisles of big box stores, lost in public acts of consumption. For this series, part of a larger group of works titled *Copia* (which includes *Dark Stores*), Ulrich employed a form of street photography, with dairy case sections and cash register queues serving as promenades. (These works were first published by Aperture in 2006.) These works were followed by images of thrift stores and their employees, following the narrative life of our retail-based economy.

As the issues at the core of Ulrich’s work have grown more pronounced, so has the strength of the pictures. In 2007, he began getting editorial requests for “pictures of the recession,” a not unlikely assignment, but one that was cause for reflection. “I was skeptical,” he recalls. “Was this fear-mongering or actual experience? So much of our economy is illusion-based. It really wasn’t until the prevalence of so many retail giants going down that I started spending late nights behind the camera.”

Turning to websites that track the phenomenon, real estate reportage, and retail news sites, Ulrich takes extensive location-scouting road trips. “While it’s not too difficult to find closed stores these days, finding ones that will lend themselves to good pictures takes a lot of research,” he says. “Sometimes it’s a race to get there before the bulldozers; there have been many times when I made a six-hour drive and the picture—or space—was gone.”

He uses an 8x10 camera because, he says, an “epic subject demands an epic approach.” The large format allows him to create more dramatic effects with lighting—some of the photographs are straightforwardly shot, others are half-hour exposures during which he more actively manipulates the exposure with flashlights and a police light that plugs into his car.

Ulrich grapples with the function of these pictures, which are equal parts documentary, art, and propaganda. There’s also activism in Ulrich’s project. “I honestly could not be more ecstatic to see some of these [places] go down,” he admits, noting that the buildings have little concern with environmental, social or economic sustainability. “I am, however, pained by the effect on people and communities when these spaces fail. I have not figured out a way to make pictures with people in them for this reason.”

Still, Ulrich is very much aware of his field, acknowledging numerous art historical debts, in particular to Eugène Atget’s pix of fin d’siecle Paris. “Atget was pained to see his old world slip away in a commerce-based and alienated Paris,” Ulrich explains. He has photographed Richland Mall in Mansfield, Ohio, a site that Stephen Shore shot in 1973 as part of the *Uncommon Places* series. A ray of light in *Dominick’s I* echoes Gregory Crewdson’s suburban surrealism, and Todd Hido’s barren night photographs.

A Walker Evans repro print Ulrich ordered from the Library of Congress lead him to conceptually apt gestures in regards to printing. “I received a contact print, and to my amazement it had more information in it that one could really process. The kind of reading of a small print with a huge amount of fidelity was a very unique narrative and a different kind of personal investment than the larger prints.” So in addition to the more ubiquitous 48x60-inch prints, he’s also been making 11x14s in the series. This form of downsizing also has interesting implications in terms of the whole notion of the market, making the work more affordable and, one would presume, more easily distributed reminders of history as it happens.

—Glen Helfand

## ■ PRINT AND CONTACT INFORMATION

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CIRCUIT CITY—2008



CHICAGO, ILLINOIS—2003



GRANGER, INDIANA—2003



BLACK RIVER FALLS, WISCONSIN—2006



BLOOMINGTON, MINNESOTA—2004



CIRCUIT CITY, PONDEROSA STEAKHOUSE—2008



DOMINICK'S 1—2008



TARGET—2008



DIXIE SQUARE MALL—2008