Brian Ulrich's current show at the Cleveland Museum of Art, “Copia: Retail, Thrift, and Dark Stores, 2001–11,” encompasses nearly sixty photographs that depict mass consumerism and its by-products in the United States in the wake of 9/11, during a decade in which American politicians routinely equated buying things with patriotism. Part of the overarching series “Copia,” 2001–11, these segments are loosely chronological. Beginning with shoppers in malls and big-box stores, Ulrich next turns to thrift shops, with their accumulated goods and alienated employees, before finally revealing “dark” (closed) retail locations, melancholic memorials suggesting the end of an era. Through this narrative, Ulrich presents not only objects of consumption but also the architectural forms in which they are (or once were) contained as well as the states of mind their consumption engenders.

As pictured here (and in the accompanying catalogue, Is This Place Great or What? [Aperture, 2011]), the past decade was devastating. Of the three groupings, the images in “Retail”—taken between 2001 and 2007—are the only ones to appear even superficially optimistic. In places such as Miami; Flushing, New York; and Lyndhurst, Ohio, zoned-out consumers, surreal product displays, and modestly abstract architectural detailing ironically but not unsympathetically convey the oversaturated environments and burned-out affect that has so aptly characterized the American shopping experience in recent years. Ulrich’s subjects appear distracted, displaced cogs in a larger system, whose unrelenting production of the banal, the superfluous, and the overwhelmingly has pushed them to extremes.

Thanks to crisp detail, flat lighting, and abstract framing, the exhibition’s architectural images have a deadpan, analytic quality that recalls the Düsseldorf School. So too do Ulrich’s arrays of cheap, mass-produced tennis shoes, shelves full of dead computer equipment, and rows of checkout aisles, which inevitably evoke some of Andreas Gursky’s most famous images, albeit with none of the German photographer’s digitally manufactured hyperrealism and sense of spectacle. As opposed to Gursky’s work, Ulrich’s photographs could never be read as celebrations of the global flows of capital and goods that characterize the current age. Rather, Ulrich’s evocation of globalization, mass production, and an increasingly networked consumer economy is tempered by humor and the shabbiness of the spaces he frames.

Shot between 2005 and 2008, the second chapter, “Thrift,” follows the downward trajectory of retail items in various stages of use via intimate portraits of salespeople and their customers often surrounded by huge accumulations of goods. Like those of fellow American photographers Alec Soth and Katy Grannan, Ulrich’s subjects tend to be strangers and his locations economically distressed. But his subjects—people whose bodies, clothing, and surroundings specifically bespeak the underside of overproduction—always appear amid the trappings of commerce. Various fragments of signage and commercial architectural design round out Ulrich’s representation of the mid-2000s thrift economy, revealing an appreciation of and an indebtedness to the work of Walker Evans and Robert Adams. As did these earlier masters of the American landscape, Ulrich too both documents and allegorizes.

In the latest segment, “Dark Stores, Ghostboxes and Dead Mall,” 2008–11, light is scarce and mostly artificial. Suddenly, spaces are vacated, devoid of product and, more significantly, of human beings. In one striking sequence, made with an eight-by-ten camera, Ulrich presents a grid of four identically framed facades of disused Circuit City stores. In these images, the result of long exposures, electric-plug-shaped buildings appear to glow from within, having been photographed at night and made visible by their own fluorescent fixtures. As do many images in this section, these photos suggest some strange postliquidation afterlife in which the skyline remains branded long after the companies behind the logos have failed.

But however dismal, Ulrich’s project is determinedly fresh, a viable antidote to the type of boardroom-ready, large-scale photography—blue-chip works by Gursky, Thomas Struth, Candida Höfer, et al.—that has, since the ’90s, become a staple of big-money auction sales. Unlike Gursky, however, who can have a Koons-like tendency to fetishize consumer commodities, Ulrich favors an aesthetic more akin to the abjection of Mike Kelley. And in Ulrich’s recession-era panorama, anchored by the abandoned malls that once marketed the style to death, grunge, it would seem, is the only thing emerging from bankruptcy.

—Matthew Biro