

Penelope Umbrico: From the series "Broken Sets (eBay)," 2009-10, digital C-print on metallic paper, 30 by 40 inches; at LMAK Projects.



PENELOPE UMBRICO

LMAK PROJECTS

Penelope Umbrico scours eBay, Craigslist and other online shopping sites for pictures of goods broken, flawed and outmoded to capture and print. Her fascination is with the kind of sub-rosa, generic photography—nearly invisible as a genre—that has evolved in service to the late capitalist trend toward “goods and services . . . exchanged at a prodigious rate” (as Jean-François Lyotard wrote 30 years ago). In the marketplace’s process of natural selection, Umbrico’s subjects are on their way out.

In “Broken Sets (eBay),” 2009-10, a forms images of damaged LCD monitors into dreamy color abstractions. Vendors of these busted TVs advertise them switched on so that buyers will know they “work.” Light leaks through cracks and holes in striated spectrums, drippy horizons and clouded pools. Since Umbrico uses metallic paper, the prints also have a sheen. In an earlier body of work, she collected images of intact TVs for sale, always with the monitors mirroring both the camera flash and strangely intimate, shadowy reflections of the sellers. You can’t help but wonder what private drama produced the destruction in “Broken Sets”—the five holes in one set look as if shot out by bullets. In another, diabolically fractured images of wide-eyed Power Puff Girls materialize in the ruins as witnesses to whatever event did them in.

Umbrico’s prints are varied in format and technology; she chooses her matrix with a thoughtful sense of what fits the subject. For “Desk Trajectories (As Is 20 Desks),” 2010, 20 black-and-white images (all 8½ by 11 inches) are produced in a medium called Risography, which generates digital prints in great number from a drum-shaped apparatus. (This is an edition of just five.) Umbrico wanted her pictures velvety and dark because they show built-in cubicle desks for sale “as is” on the Internet, and she liked the idea of pairing desks and inkiness. (In conjunction with the show, she also produced a handsome little black-on-black Troy Brauntuch-like artist’s book of the desks, in which the pages actually smudge your fingers as you turn them.) Whoever was selling the goods cropped the initial images close so that the furniture barely fits inside the frame, let alone into its architectural niche. The series presents a suggestive obsolescence reminiscent of that of the Bechers’ towers and silos.

More humorous is *Zenith Replacement Parts—eBay* (2009), a 13-square-inch grid of 20 powdery-looking digital C-prints showing sealed, dusty boxes presumably containing components for sale. Hard to tell, though, what’s on offer, since all we see is the closed boxes. Why anyone would want to take a risk on parts for obsolescent TVs is a mystery, to be sure, but Umbrico forces us to recognize our desire to see and understand, itself a kind of consumption, as something deep and essential, and equally impenetrable. We are all too willing to jettison common sense in order to indulge.

—Faye Hirsch