

Chicago Tribune

A&E

Art review: Michael Ruglio-Misurell portrays a real disaster

September 11, 2009 | By Lori Waxman, special to the Tribune

The wreckage is everywhere. Palm trees lie twisted and broken. Shredded shorts and shirts hang from shattered buildings. Broken urinals pile up in the open. Cafe tables sit askew, their chairs overturned and tangled. Even the jaunty “Paradise” sign is smashed in half, a metaphor for what has happened in this tropical Shangri-La.

But wait. This scene isn’t located in Phuket or Bali or even New Orleans. The catastrophe described here sits near the coast of Lake Michigan, on the campus of the University of Illinois at Chicago, in Gallery 400. It’s not a natural disaster, nor even one of the many manmade varieties currently on offer—terrorist attack, chemical spill, nuclear reactor fallout, global warming meltdown.

No, this paradise lost is the work of artist Michael Ruglio-Misurell, and it isn’t even meant to depict the tropics. Rather, *Project #12* is a sprawling, ambitious installation that imagines a shopping mall after some kind of apocalypse has taken place. Hence the (fake) palm trees, (food court) tables and chairs, Paradise (Pizza) sign, and (on sale) clothing.

And more. From disintegrating storefronts to mangled display cases, torn-up flooring to rubbish piles, Ruglio-Misurell proves himself a master of disaster, able to plan, structure and build the overwhelming chaos necessary to create a convincing ruin out of salvaged, purchased, altered and even handmade materials.

The crushed beer cans and empty soda bottles? Found. The standard-issue fast-food trays? Bought on eBay. The palm trees? Store-bought plastic tops with taped-up carpet trunks. The urinals? Carved and painted pink foam.

Do they teach this at art school? Apparently so. Ruglio-Misurell graduated with a master’s from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago in 2008. While there he meticulously set about destroying his officelike studio, turning it into a stand-in for so many corporate disasters.

Project #12 may represent some sort of corporate disaster as well, though of the dead-mall type. A dead mall, for those not up to snuff on the trend, is a shopping center that’s dated, deteriorating, and suffering from high vacancy rates and low consumer traffic. Gallerias have been kicking the bucket for decades across the country; the Brickyard Mall on Chicago’s Northwest Side and the Lakehurst Mall in Waukegan are just two examples of local victims.

If *Project #12* illustrates a dead mall, it’s one that endured a particularly traumatic and horrific end. And the viewer, disaster fetishist or not, is compelled by Ruglio-Misurell’s engrossingly staged scene to investigate at length. Close looking reveals a still life composed of three carefully balanced food trays, a soda lid and straw, two crumpled paper plates, a piece of knotted fabric and a wine bottle—a 17th Century Dutch vanitas for today. Further examination reveals a torn expanse of off-white rippled foam lining, and a floor-to-ceiling grid of brown and red plastic trays that seem to riff off Minimalist painting.

Elsewhere, a lifelike assemblage of a torn button-down shirt, its left arm draped over a small stack of empty wood boxes and its right about to grab a foam soda cup, calls attention to the fact that human remains are, thankfully, not part of this disaster field. That said, evidence of human intervention is everywhere, from the cutoff shorts hung on an ad hoc laundry line, to a decorative string of Pabst cans strung up around a column, to a towel neatly draped over the back of an upright chair.

Additional exploration reveals the probable source of these manifestations. Tucked behind a banged-up serving counter is a sleeping fort complete with pillows, blankets, and a night light improvised from an empty Cafe Bustelo tin and a broken chandelier. A narrative begins to emerge, a story about the desperate but resourceful people who find shelter in a mall after this-or-that cataclysmic event. The artful vignettes must be their work, small aesthetic gestures made in a modest attempt to humanize an inhuman environment. But what do they do for food? Are there more of them in other parts of the complex? Is the world outside the mall finished for good?

Other viewers will no doubt spin their own accounts of *Project #12*. Such is the nature of tragedies: When the victims aren't around to give their explanation of the events, and the survivors are in hiding, outside observers inevitably come up with a scenario that seems plausible based on their own understanding of history and its remains. Visit Ruglio-Misurell's disaster and discover your own.

More from Gallery 400

Also on view at Gallery 400 are two additional exhibitions, a mini-survey of Kay Rosen's witty, language-based constructions and *Reflection*, a video program about artistic agency featuring the work of five national and international artists.

Anyone who's been to Gallery 400 before will be wondering how they've managed to accommodate three exhibitions at once. With an expansion, naturally, but one perfectly suited to the scaled-back budgets of the times. Instead of building out, Gallery 400 has built in, literally, constructing three permanent walls to divide their sometimes awkward L-shaped space into a series of galleries, plus a small reading room. The new setup allows director Lorelei Stewart and assistant director Anthony Elms to simultaneously mount commissioned projects and exhibitions tied to UIC classes; work by local and international, known and unknown artists; and new and existing work. All of which they've done this summer, with invigorating and exciting results, and a promise of more to come.

Michael Ruglio-Misurell: Project #12 runs through Oct. 3; *Kay Rosen* and *Reflection* run through Nov. 21 at Gallery 400, 400 South Peoria St., 312-996-6114, gallery400.aa.uic.edu.