Josephine Meckseper’s Installation The Fall Into Time borrows its name from E.M. Cioran’s book of the same title. The text, originally published in 1964, questions the Christian concept of Progress, which the French-Romanian philosopher argues is the equivalent to modern Fall and Decline. Cioran reads History as the disaster of man evolving “toward a complexity which is ruining him”. He is predicting a society defined by ritualised consumption, in which the “overcivilised man” floats with a “Negative Eternity”.

This theme is echoed in the artist’s work by offering a pointed look at US imperialist and economic strategies. Meckseper casts a doubtful shadow on glorified oil production and 1980s Reaganomics, as defined by “supply-side economics”. In her film Dynasty and Dallas are juxtaposed with an acid-house soundtrack from the same decade, creating a context for a renewed debate on offshore oil drilling; and the recent catastrophic explosions of the Deepwater Horizon drilling platform in the Timor Sea.

The exhibition space in the Collections Building is activated as a showroom, or oversized display vitrine, by reflecting its contents on the mirrored ceiling spanning over the entire installation. Chromed car wheels and prosthetic-like legs on mirrored pedestals, oversized posters of luxury watches, cars and oil rig explosions are presented as commodity surrogates. The faux display installation evokes an apocalyptic retail environment, while the dark fluorescent lighting casts a discomfiting artificial twilight. Large-area rugs serve as seating arrangements from which to view the artist’s films. The carpets depict engravings of traditional Arabian keffiyeh scarves and reference the prayer rugs used in the outdoor area of the mosque near the exhibition space. In an analogy with Cioran’s writing, materialistic excess and capitalist salvation are deconstructed and exposed as an existential human flaw.

JM: I was a student at Cal Arts during the onset of the first Gulf War. The school campus was suddenly invaded by local, right-wing residents waving American flags, cars on the freeway rushed by with “Kill Saddam” stickers, and the news seemed very propagandistic compared to European television. I became interested in Situationist strategies and collaborated on actions with other students that revolved around those techniques. The last “happening” accidentally merged with the Rodney King riots. That, of course, forced us to interact with reality – I ended up filming the fires and the riots. During the Bush administration, events in the United States presented a different political challenge. My work started to reflect on the experience of living in a country that foments global wars for oil and that violates its own Constitution. New York at the same time had become an incarnation of consumption at its most extreme. Its countless showcases and advertising posters, which I walked by daily, appeared more and more in my works!

RH: Your work is primarily based on a critique of capitalism. Do you think the current economic crisis has altered the public’s perception of your artwork from 2005 to 2008? Has the crisis affected the work you’re currently creating?

JM: I am deliberately taking the risk of confronting the radical indeterminacy produced by the capitalist system on its own terms. Contemporary art doesn’t possess a universal language yet because it’s economically tied to an elitist structure. By addressing timely subject matter [like the Iraq war], I point out how capitalism creates an unequal imbalance of power, down to the very form of commercial products. I look for cultural and sociological ‘end points’ as a platform from which to subvert reality into fiction and vice versa. When you address current issues and topics in an art context, the work always runs the risk of appearing too literal or becoming quickly dated. On the other hand, it has the potential to capture and preserve a perspective on the present for a future viewer. George Grosz or Otto Dix’s paintings are good examples to consider in this context.

RH: American politics is a major theme in your recent exhibitions. Is there an identifiable moment or event in the past that motivated you to address US politics in your work, or has your interest gradually evolved over time?

JM: The current crisis is only a symptom of the ups and downs of the free market system, not an indicator of its total demise. Nothing has really changed; it’s just more of what it already was. I’ve explored the downside of capitalism for many years by means of a non-affirmative usage of slick surfaces and imagery. The reading of the work, though, remains circumstantial, as it reflects the respective degree of criticality that the viewer brings to it. The fundamental principle of my art is a conceptual means of thinking and formulating ideas. I’m interested in a language that can articulate concepts in diametrical, abstract and fictitious ways. It’s a way to process and reflect on the world without being tied to overly determined forms and meanings.