

GOLDEN YEARS

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In Jack Pierson's first solo show, in the back room of Simon Watson's space on Lafayette Street in 1990, he hung a bunch of color photographs all over the walls, but it wasn't salon style: Some were high up, others in a corner. The photographs were dispersed, in an allover way, and there was a lot of white space. I remember hearing from a friend how Jack and Simon had been up late working on the installation, trying different arrangements and taking Polaroids to record them and test them out. The result may have looked casual or offhand, but it took a lot of work to get it that way (fig. 1).

Many of the prints were grainy and sort of out of focus, with dust on the negative and odd glitches. Pinned to the wall with straight pins, they had a memento-like fragility that was completely

Fig. 1 Jack Pierson installation view, Simon Watson Gallery, New York, 1990.



counter to the giant framed C-prints that had become so popular in the art world by that time. The images' amateur, snapshot feel gave the sense that they could have

been made by almost anyone. Pierson describes them as shots of "the open road thru a car windshield, some fruit and a quart of milk on a kitchen table, a guy in a wheelchair watching TV in a motel room, glorious red roses crawling over a chain link fence, a view looking up at a sign against the blue sky that says Angel Youth. They were hung low, high and too close to the corners at times. I considered it a sort of Family of Man-ish installation."¹

The 1955 Museum of Modern Art exhibition Pierson refers to is mostly remembered as a landmark of postwar liberal humanism, and thus his mention of it may come as a surprise—until one recalls that Edward Steichen's famous show was also a milestone in exhibition design that carefully orchestrated the compiled photographs to compose a larger space and

narrative. Pierson's own unorthodox hanging style reflected a graphic-design sensibility, where the space of the exhibition could be seen as an extension and activation of the space of the page: distributing images across the field, using the corner and edge, and so forth.

Aspects of this approach resurface in the book *Jack Pierson: Angel Youth*, published by Aurel Scheibler in 1992. Many of the images are grainy, overexposed, and out of focus, with strange or garish color as if shot with the "wrong" stock or oddly processed (figs. 2 and 3). They range from seemingly banal shots—a two-lane road through lush fields, a woman in sunglasses lifting her skirt to show off white underwear, a parking lot washed out by glare—to more resonant images of what feel like personal, sentimental moments, such as a studio wall with photos pinned up, a view out a window to a verdant garden, a beautiful young man asleep on a bed. Fragments of a narrative accrue, of downtown New York nightlife and a trip to somewhere warm, with palm trees.

But unlike the more conventionally documentary photos of Nan Goldin, Pierson's photographic work is not about a specific referent. Instead, it hews more closely to the found-photo aesthetic of Richard Prince, who in the late 1980s produced a series of artist's books that juxtaposed amateur snapshots, printed matter, and works by artists such as Man Ray, Francis Picabia, Andy Warhol, and

¹ Unless otherwise credited, comments by Jack Pierson come from my discussions and e-mails with him in fall 2005. My thanks to Lutz Bacher, the late Pat Hearn, Marlene McCarty, Eileen Myles, and especially Simon Watson for discussing Pierson's work with me.

Cindy Sherman. While Prince's compilations were often read as analyses of aggression and sexuality in the media, they quickly revealed something more personal and emotionally driven: fragments of stereotypes and clichés that, for all their familiarity and overuse, still provoke longing and desire.² This territory links Pierson's project to Prince's, as does Pierson's use of full-page bleeds and willingness to treat his photographs as elements of a larger concept. *Angel Youth* assembles images into diptychs, with occasional triptychs and groups of four and the gutter of the book repeatedly breaking a single image into two halves. The constant color



Fig. 2 Double-page spread from Jack Pierson: *Angel Youth*, published by Galerie Aurel Scheibler, Cologne, 1992

Fig. 3 Double-page spread from Jack Pierson: *Angel Youth*, published by Galerie Aurel Scheibler, Cologne, 1992



shifting and photographic "mistakes" also recall Prince's "8-track mix," in which he subjected existing photos to a series of possible manipulations—cropping, sequencing, shooting out of focus, over- and underexposing, and so on—which allowed him to "reprocess" the images emotionally and bodily as well as technically.

This systematic "misuse" and reuse of photographic images evidences Pierson's distance from traditional "fine art" photography, in which prints are treated like autonomous and sacred objects. Instead he assembles images and objects as parts of a larger scenario. Even the way he uses objects comes out of a photo/cinema mentality, assembling them with an art director's care to propose fragments of a larger story. Yet at the same time he treats the photos themselves as objects, with a butterfly collector-ish nostalgia. Pierson insists, "I don't care what anyone says, photography is nostalgia." Whereas his friend and former boyfriend Mark Morrisroe used photography

to chronicle the performance that was his life, turning East Village crudeness into a patina, Pierson himself was less the performer than the stage manager, constructing scenes that he or others might inhabit. In this theatrical, performative mode, even the word pieces can read like subtitles to an unseen movie.

Pierson has talked about how he "always loved that found photo look, of 50s movie stars and serial killer biographies," and "the way that you'd find an image of 27 rue de Fleurus in an old book, just a crummy picture of a door . . . but there was the sense that it happened there." He eventually found that it was easier and more fun to make his own "found" photos than to rephotograph stuff from magazines. But he retained his fascination with a blankness or ordinariness that allows viewers to bring in their memories and fantasies: "a more generic quality—I know a person like that, I've been somewhere like that." He used a box camera to take some of his earliest pictures in L.A., as when he photographed the Hollywood apartment building where Janis Joplin died, in *A Woman Left Lonely*, 1990. And in his most recent Whitney Biennial installation, in 2004, he used photos that replicated the look of advertising because, in his words, "that's the way to be blank now."

Pierson's installation at Pat Hearn's Wooster Street gallery in 1991 extended this more "interactive" approach, by inviting viewers to enter works assembled almost as arenas for performance (fig. 4). The installation was upstairs, in the rougher, unfinished, third-floor space. It began with a kind of cheesy patterned carpet that led you into the room. On the wall an early sign piece announced "YOU ARE



Fig. 4 Jack Pierson installation view, Pat Hearn Gallery, New York, 1991

ALLOWED 2 TOUCH THINGS" (fig. 5), and in the corner a shiny silver Mylar curtain and Christmas lights decorated a low wooden stage, like a go-go dancing platform at a cheap nightclub. By two walls collections of furniture and objects evoked the sort of low-rent, beachy life that Pierson had lived in Miami Beach in the early 1980s. A pack of cigarettes, an upturned book, and a half-drunk bottle of Coke sat on a white painted kitchen table. Next to the table a man's white T-shirt was pulled over the back of a tattered chair, and a pair of flip-flops rested below. By another wall was a desk with a few books and an old turntable, and viewers could select and play the assorted LPs. As Pierson notes, the bits and pieces functioned "like pictures, clues that can make you believe anything . . . that someone was just there." It really worked. Whether culled from thrift stores or friends' apartments, the objects had a shabby, beat-up texture that gave the installation a sense of reality, of things that had been handled and lived with, and rooms that had been lived in. "Little lyrical rooms to die in," the poet Eileen Myles called them.³ But the bright yellow paint on the walls emphasized the staged quality, as in a movie set. As Pierson insists, "They were sets, though we call them installation art."

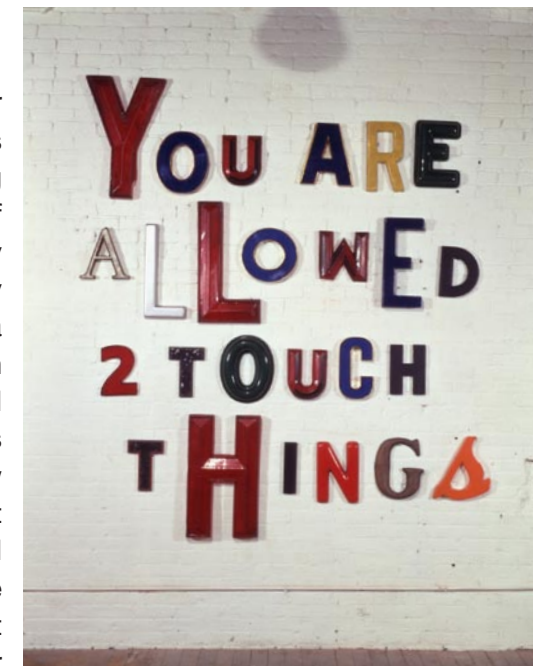


Fig. 5 Jack Pierson installation view, Pat Hearn Gallery, New York, 1991

This theatrical approach attests in part to Pierson's background in graphic design, in which he took classes while a student at Mass Art. He also studied with the artist Donald Burgy, whose conceptual investigations always had a slightly more narrative feel than the more deadpan work of Douglas Huebler. This history gave Pierson the freedom to use any materials or media—photo, drawing, text, performance, painting, objects—in the service of art, as did the low-budget ethic of "available-ism" of East Village artists such as Kembra Pfahler, who were committed to making art with whatever they had, as opposed to the slick, presentation-driven aesthetic that dominated the commercial art world by the 1980s. When he saw the performance photos of artists such as Joseph Beuys, Vito Acconci, and Chris Burden, Pierson remembers, he was struck by their romantic and intensely poetic qualities. Recalling the grainy black-and-white documentation of Burden crawling over glass, he retained the sense that "you could take a picture full-mindedly . . . without it being clear that it was documenting anything real. Did he do it or not? It was never clear."

Fig. 7 Felix Gonzalez-Torres, *Untitled (Lovers-Paris)*, 1993; 15-watt light bulbs, porcelain light sockets, and extension cords; Overall dimensions variable; two parts, each 61 feet (18.59 meters) long; Courtesy Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York

Pierson's own position was always at a certain distance from the more mainstream art world. He had worked as an art handler for Hearn back when her gallery was in the far East Village, and he had always been more "the boy in a drag queen circle" than a participant in the then-emerging circles of ACT UP and gay activism that intersected



Fig. 6 Robert Gober, *Deep Basin Sink*, 1984; Enamel paint on plaster, wire lath, and wood; 26 x 29 x 24 inches; 66 x 73.7 x 61 cm; Private collection

with the art world in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Of course, the very sentimentality and emotional charge of his work derives partly from this context. The pervasive backdrop of poverty, death, and deprivation is what makes the loving depictions of pretty boys, flowers, and sun-drenched meals with friends feel so rare and poignant. His distance from an overtly activist or "tragic" response to AIDS may paradoxically have made his work less readable in this context—although I remember being shocked when the photographer Zoe Leonard, who was in a show

² Richard Prince, *Inside World* (New York: Kent Gallery, 1989), *Spiritual America* (Valencia, Spain: IVAM; New York: Aperture, 1989), *Jokes, Gangs, Hoods* (Cologne: Galerie Rafael Jablonka and Galerie Gisela Capitain, 1990).

³ Eileen Myles, "Jack," in Lia Gangitano, ed., *Boston School* (Boston: Institute of Contemporary Art, 1995), 147.

with Pierson, said that she hadn't even known he was gay. After all, there were all those photos of pretty boys—as well as the Warholian understanding that “everything is style already” that had long caused so many gay artists to roll their eyes at the academicized media critique of the '80s “simulationist” crowd.

One could trace across the sculptural practices that emerged in the 1980s a studied embrace of the suppressed emotional

resonances of everyday objects that operated as a quietly gay sensibility. Robert Gober's sinks and drains could be seen as evoking a sense of loss or bodily decay—or a more overtly sexualized world of

tearooms and urinals (fig. 6). And Felix Gonzalez-Torres's series of light-string pieces insist on the beauty and grace that can be found in the most everyday materials, teasing out a decorative aesthetic that remained at the edges of his

more avowedly minimalist, conceptually oriented project

(fig. 7). In this world, Pierson was always outspoken

about his embrace of the lyrical and the power of

clichés: “Certain words aren't good when you describe artwork—like ‘sentimental,’ ‘romantic,’ ‘poetic,’ and ‘pretty.’ But those are my favorite qualities of anything.”⁴ Although Morrisroe died in 1989, works such as his 1985 photograph of a seagull against a yellowed sky could be seen retrospectively as a touchstone for an entire genre of the poignant that surfaced in the wake of AIDS as a way of speaking about loss and death indirectly and metaphorically (fig. 8).

Although he has said that he tries to avoid the abject, Pierson's strongest work has often emerged from a struggle between something very dark and what could otherwise seem merely decorative. Simon Watson once told me about his early visits to Pierson's old studio near

Times Square, where the artist wanted to show him monochrome paintings. Instead Watson found himself rummaging around, looking at these blurry black-and-white photos of naked guys wrapped around cigarette packages and self-help books (fig. 9)—a series of lozenge-shaped, jewel-like works that may well never have been

exhibited and which, in Watson's words, “weren't meant to be art but were some kind of personal talismans” to help ward off addictions or self-destructive urges. They were “this other thing, sort of lurid, a part of how he made his living, detritus from the porn trade.”⁵ Pierson's photographic work came out of these talismans, in an indirect way. Yet it is telling that he asked the painter Mary Heilman to write the short essay that accompanied the show, because her work is all about color and abstraction and pattern and the more formalist “decorative” qualities to which Pierson's work often aspires (fig. 10). Big deprivation, a friend points out, produces big desires. Pierson's work seems motivated by this swing from deprivation to excess, aiming for transcendent moments of beauty and grace that might be found in a smoky bar or alongside a desert road. Yet his “found photo” aesthetic insists that we can also find such transcendence even in

the formulaic pathos of popular culture, as in a recent exhibition where a recording of the encore music that accompanied Judy Garland's legendary 1961 performance at Carnegie Hall played over hidden speakers while gallery visitors found themselves entering onto a painted stage. That we know something is a cliché, Pierson suggests, doesn't mean it doesn't work.

Fig. 9 Jack Pierson, *Untitled*, 1989; Black-and-white photograph wrapped around “self-help” book; 7 1/4 x 4 1/2 inches; 18.4 x 11.4 cm; Collection of Simon Watson, New York



Fig. 8 Mark Morrisroe, *Lonely Bird*, 1985; Color print; 20 x 16 inches; Estate of the artist

Fig. 10 Jack Pierson, *Lights (42nd Street)*, 1995; Type C color print; 30 x 30 inches; 76.2 x 76.2 cm; Courtesy of Cheim & Reid, New York



⁴ Linda Yablonsky, “Jack Pierson, Bold Bricolage,” *Interview* (January 1992): 30.

⁵ Conversation with Simon Watson, March 12, 1996.