Photographs of queer love, partying and friendship in the 1980s

Jack Pierson has released a new edition of ‘The Hungry Years’, a book that explores his youth during the AIDS epidemic.

Jack Pierson makes being an artist sound like the easiest thing in the world. Uncomplicated if pursued with a few simple rules, a clear mind and a light touch. At any given time, you make the work you want to make — in his case, portrait photography, text assemblages, and found-object installations — using whatever (or whoever) catches your eye at that particular moment. Then you present the results however you see fit, with bonus points if it subverts the form’s conventions or the art world’s rigid categories. Your place in the art ecosystem — and what constitutes your own ‘style’ and legacy — are questions best left for critics and curators. In the meantime, the next project beckons.

I’m speaking with the Massachusetts-born artist about the release of a new edition of The Hungry Years, his 2017 photobook of images from his youth during the 1980s, which have come to be known for their warmth and easy sociality. Fallen disco balls, sprawling lovers and drive-thru meals against the backdrop of America’s AIDS epidemic. “It’s the first decade of my artistic life,” Jack tells me from New York City, where he’s working on a major show for 2023.
The distinction between life and art is an important one. The Hungry Years photographs were the first he ever showed in a gallery, but it was “collecting them together and printing them in this way that made them into art,” he explains. Until that point, they were just snapshots of his own experience: travelling, partying with friends, queer love.

The photographs appear somewhere between diary and fiction, subjects character-like in stature but at ease in their quotidian lives. Men lean on parked cars or lie on floating inflatables in pools. When captured in more intimate settings, they pose confidently (often nude) while women feel more tentatively observed. The expansive roadsides and dusty horizons give a sense of motion between the scenes and yet feel detached, as if forever untouched by the youngsters in adjacent plates.

“These photographs are pictures you would see in someone’s biography,” Jack says. “This is where they lived...these are the characters.’ Almost non-photographs.” They take on an anonymous quality as the years pass, and as the artist’s friendship circle and perspectives have changed. “At the time, they were received almost as though they were found,” Jack says. “Snapshots I had curated.”

Jack stopped taking pictures of his own life around 1995, after which a career in commercial and fashion photography followed. A more choreographed style fed into his fine-art practice. His 2003 Self Portraits series featured 15 men of different ages in various states of undress. The highly saturated photos of fragile beauty brought him great acclaim – and ushered in a tendency for editors and directors to request shoots in the “Jack Pierson style”. He laughs at the memory. “I like the style of no style,” he says. He mentions anonymity again, favouring making images that could appear on bus shelters or billboards, a nod to his Boston School roots alongside Nan Goldin and Mark Morrisroe.
Less and more, a major solo exhibition at Regen Projects, Los Angeles, last autumn displayed Jack’s text collages alongside installations recreating domestic rooms, gentle watercolour paintings, wrapping paper tessellations, and works on paper. The most recognisable of the Self Portraits photographs was hung prominently, but on closer inspection is an image of an image: the New York Times caption from its publication remains below the subject’s torso, his skin a little grainier in this front-page cutout. Mythology of the Self, the work is called, a nod to the wry self-fashioning that constitutes Jack’s process.
These tricks are delivered with knowing humour (another work is a collage of newspaper clippings from stories about Jack’s own art), but they also speak to his concern with the nature of the photographic medium. Photography ("capital P") stands separate from photography in the moment of creation, the affective instinct. Jack’s snapshot style keeps him rooted in the second category, while the first remains a strange zone into which he can enter at will, just by modifying the works’ contexts or display conditions.

“In The Hungry Years, there are a couple of images that, if you printed them right, would look like New Color Photography that’s important, or by a fine artist,” Jack explains, seeming to exempt himself from the canon. Creating the book was an experiment in blurring this line, in transposing artefacts of experience into art.
“By not full-bleeding them, by not making the layout super pretty or travelogue-ish, I’m asking: ‘Do these hold up as 35mm pictures like Stephen Shore’s?’” he says. “And I think they do, but the joke was to present them really formally.” (A quote from Stephen printed on the book’s back cover contests Jack’s modesty: “Authenticity is what Jack Pierson’s pictures convey. They have the feel of raw experience... Jack disrespects the merely good for the sake of the expressionistically real.”)

Humour is the key factor in the text works, too, a mixture of linguistic play and social observation rendered in carefree assemblage. The pandemic lockdowns allowed him to sort through years’ worth of clippings and ephemera in his Queens studio. “I thought: ‘Who the fuck blows up their newspaper clippings about themselves?’ Okay, I’ll be that person.”
He also created new assemblages featuring cloth, pins and cardboard grocery boxes. The repeated slogans may tempt Pop Art comparisons, but the works feel too considered for that; they are soothing and muted, especially Blue, which features an Adidas shoebox brought into dialogue with a pastel blue slab beneath it. Simplicity is the answer to most questions posed at his work, especially regarding choice of materials. “Once you have enough material, you can make a good assemblage or installation,” he says.

So is making art all that easy? Perhaps not, but it needn’t be complicated or over-categorised. “Everything I do is some sort of assemblage,” Jack says. “Even The Hungry Years—they’re good because they’re next to each other in an interesting way.” The pandemic brought back memories of the AIDS crisis, where death loomed and created a new creative drive. “That sense of impending doom and urgency made me create The Hungry Years,” he says. “It’s the same thing with these lockdown collages: what would you most want to do if the world was ending in a couple of years?” That sense of isolation freed me.”
The collector’s edition of ‘The Hungry Years’ (2022) is available to buy now from the Damiani online store, while the original is available from Artbook.
Photos: Copyright Jack Pierson
STAGES OF GRIEF

DAVID RIMANELLI ON JACK PIERSON'S SILVER JACKIE, 1991

JACK PIERSON'S SILVER JACKIE looks like nothing much: a rickety little postage stamp of a stage, just a raised platform made by the artist himself, and he says he's no carpenter. ("Those early stage pieces I did myself—and I'm not a woodworker—so they have a real slapdash quality.") Behind the stage, there's a silver Mylar curtain that I can't pry apart from my memories of 1970s Christmas decorations. It looks cheap; the materials are cheap. This sort of bedraggled, taped-together curtain and stage feel appropriate to those venues that one comes to with few expectations. The best one might expect would be trash of the John Waters sort. The chanteuse wouldn't be Anita O'Day; more likely, a drag queen lip-synching to Judy or Dusty, maybe to Madge. When Silver Jackie debuted at Pat Hearn's Wooster Street gallery in 1991, downtown fixture Sharon Niesp sang a couple songs. But while actual performers are possible, they are not necessary to the "completion" of the art's mise-en-scène. This is the stage just after, or just before, the performance, pregnant (so to speak) with anticipation and disappointment and cigarette smoke, drunk with love. In later versions of the work, Pierson actually affixed a few cigarette butts to the stage, artfully arranged bits of crud, dainty and precious, as if they were sapphires set in a Fabergé egg.

Pierson's work attracted a lot of attention, and it's not hard to see why. It went along well with a number of overlapping tendencies in the art that flourished in New York and Los Angeles, especially in the period right after the end (the Fall . . . ?) of the big bad '80s, and which from there infected Europe and whatever else then constituted "the art world." We can identify several currents. Vastly important at the time: abjection, those artworks that seem to speak to (or weep and mutter and gasp at) the psychic terrain adumbrated by Julia Kristeva in her book Powers of Horror (1980) and, beyond that heady literary-psychoanalytic-theoretical brew, to a sudden upsurge in material poverty of many qualities—the poor of student-loan debt and dirty dishes, say, or of decaying cities. In 1992, Rhonda Lieberman published in these pages an essay titled "The Loser Thing," a text still insufficiently recognized in the developing art histories of this period. Richard
Silver Jackie is more than content to leave the audience members waiting.

Linklater’s 1991 film Slacker (and Jack Bankowsky’s 1991 essay “Slackers,” devoted to Pierson, among others) cast a long aesthetic (more than just aesthetic: psychic) shadow. Correlative movements encompass scatter art, with various avatars including Felix Gonzalez-Torres (mounds of candy, strings of lights, leaves of paper) Laurie Parsons, Cady Noland, Karen Kilimnik, and, of course, Pierson, whose fussily, obsessively (dis)arranged tableaux vivants definitely at the very least pointed toward disarray, entropy, squalor. Manicured squalor. Beautiful (and damned!) squalor. The romance of the forever-umade bed. Important, too, was the sudden vogue for carefully calibrated unarranged hangings of drawings and photographs—not salon style, but rather with one picture hugging the perimeter wall, others of markedly different sizes hovering by the ceiling. See, in this regard, Raymond Pettibon, Wolfgang Tillmans, and Zoe Leonard.

Pierson’s art also seems to gesture at what Nicolas Bourriaud called relational aesthetics, another well-nigh inescapable ’90s artistic tendency. Pierson’s abandoned scenes exist in potentia (anyway, Silver Jackie does), just waiting to become “activated”; “working” when someone alights on the stage and belts out a song, intones a poem, tells pathetic jokes. But Silver Jackie is more than content to leave the audience members waiting—to leave them always wanting more, as Andy supposedly said. The relational aesthetics angle is a ruse, a lure for some, but not really operable. That silver curtain: Nothing is behind it.
Gonzalez-Torres shares with Pierson a sort of ambiguous connection to relational aesthetics. I mean, when you take a candy or a piece of paper from a mound or a stack, yeah, you’re relating to the object more than if you just looked at it. I have a feeling Bourrian must have meant something bigger than this when he coined the phrase in his 1998 book, but, ever the slacker, I don’t know; I never actually read it.) Silver Jackie went on view at Pera Hearn less than a month after Gonzalez-Torres’s Untitled (Go-Go Dancing Platform) opened at Andrea Rosen Gallery. (Another version, lit with pink light, debuted in London the following year.) I suppose that the imagined performer on Silver Jackie could be whatever go-go boy (or occasionally girl) whirled around the Gonzalez-Torres pedestal. But it seems unlikely. The solipsistic go-go dancers trip out to music that no one else hears. If dancing is often a code or stand-in for sexual congress, then this is sublime masturbation. Gonzalez-Torres’s work is a pedestal, while Pierson’s is a stage on which to enact, come what may, Marsha P. Johnson, Petra von Kant, the Women, Bree Daniels, Piedre. Pierson’s theatrics admit all sorts of not particularly self-flattering feelings: jealousy, greed, madness. Gonzalez-Torres, of course, isn’t free from the affectively dark and dismal, from loss and mourning, but his works dramatize these conditions in a way that feels rather more stately—monumental, if you will—despite being sculptural “anti-monuments” of disappearance and entropy. They lack the undercurrent of sometimes caustic irony that girds much of Pierson’s contemporaneous art. They’re sincere, in a way; they insist on this, to the extent that both artists can be called sentimental—though again, in Pierson, that sentimentality typically has a protective coating of irony. Maybe.

Some people you know, however chipper or onward-moving they seem, bear at all times the marks of grief and suffering, giving up and rage. These people are my people. Grief and rage are the linings—the exquisitely luxurious Loro Piana linings—of those wool overcoats of success and cheer and stupid, happy satisfaction. There’s no other way, or the other ways seen so facile, instrumentalized, hypocritical, deluded. Though all that’s good fun too! ☺

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Lisson Gallery

Jack Pierson

By Eileen Myles
Photographed by Mario Sorrenti
On the eve of New York artist Jack Pierson's new show at the Aspen Art Museum, which restages and rehungs seminal art works Pierson made from 1990 to 1996, he spoke with the poet and critic Eileen Myles about how he started making art and how he made it real.

I interviewed Jack in my apartment on East Third Street, and I've got to admit in advance that I bought us a lamp. I bought it about two blocks away, and I walked up the stairs with it. I wasn't worried about what Jack thought about the lamp (or my apartment), though I did think he just might like to see more. I think of his work as filled with room and light and a complete lack of shame. I was proud to talk with him in my home. I've known him for about 20 years, as long as I've known this work. If there was a better way of saying he's the artist “of a lifestyle” (ugh), I'd say that. I mean in exactly the way Westworld is not true, neither is Jack's work, but that's what's so true about it. We're all out here making stuff up. Of course, he's an artist who would work mostly in photography, and I love how he explains that here. On his trip to Florida, at age 23, he explained, “I kept using the camera there.”

See, that would be enough. That's exactly it. He's very good talking about his work because there's a kind of directorial affect to it. He came in looking good. He had a kind of gray top coat on, maybe tweedy. Jack is a redhead, so he looks good in gray. He looked handsome. I was glad to have this man come in my home. I poured us some Pellegrino and didn't ask; I just handed the glass to him, which was really laying on the family or we were getting down to business.

I have written about him before, but I don't recall ever interviewing him. He said, “I feel like I should be interviewing you,” which was sweet. Though we talked for about an hour, it could have been really brief or much longer. Jack was a little late, which I thought was cool because there was some push pull with the time (not between us), but intuitively I think he had to push back. Because I was interviewing him. Jack is not an artist shy about language. Though it's all very sexy and worldly, I do think of him as a private or somewhat philosophical artist. The person going look, look is always dropping a curtain. He's sitting right there. Yes, he is. No, he isn’t. It was a total pleasure to talk with Jack.

EILEEN MYLES: When I knew we were talking, I found myself thinking about your work, which I've just loved for so long, as well as loving you, and I thought, “What is it?” Your work is notebook-y, it's sun-drenched, it's nostalgic, it's tossed-off, it's working-class beach, it's pop, it's lonesome, it's tinted. Do you have a response to any of those words? Do any of those trouble you?

JACK PIERSON: Um, no. What do you mean by “tinted”?

MYLES: Some of the '90s work seems sort of starry from a distance, like you must have been using a filter to create that effect.

PIERSON: Not really. It was just poor focus. [laughs]

MYLES: Okay. So let me be really rudimentary: How did you become a photographer? You were part of the so-called Boston School, with David Armstrong and Nan Goldin and Gail Thacker ...

PIERSON: That's a sort of description added after the fact. We knew each other, but we all were in Boston at different periods, really. I was working class, so when I got to Boston, I guess I thought that the best I could achieve was graphic design, that it would be a good place for my creativity to sit, and it seemed practical. So I went to MassArt in 1980 to be a graphic designer, but within the first couple of months, I fell in with Tabbool and Mark Morrisroe. And I had acquired a love of photography through my first exposure to a Diane Arbus book. I thought, “Wow, this is really something.” It made me see the achievement of photography. Mark Morrisroe was a photographer. I wouldn't say I was under his wing, because he wasn't a very nurturing soul in that capacity. He was like, “Stick to graphic design.” But I took the classes and I felt like, “Oh, I could do this.” Even though it seemed challenging, being around both Tabbool and Mark Morrisroe—they were strong, they didn't give you a compliment unless you really deserved it. So I started taking pictures and then I moved to New York a few years later.

MYLES: What year did you come?

PIERSON: '83. I transferred to Cooper Union on an exchange program and finished my last year there and was doing photography, and that's where I learned to do color and things like that. After I'd been in New York awhile, I took a Christmas vacation, got paid cash from a gallery I was working at, and we just drove to Florida. We spent all the cash and couldn't get back.

MYLES: Who's we?
PIERSON: I had a boyfriend at the time named Andre, a French-Canadian who I had met in Provincetown. He didn’t know he was my boyfriend, but you know ... I wore him down somehow, one of those things. So we got there, we’re broke, and I kept using the camera there. It was such a different place than I had ever been—New England, away from those guys, or New York—and the idea that I had to make it somehow. I was the same age as Keith Haring and Jean-Michel, and they’d already been flying the Concorde and partying with Grace Jones for years. And I’m making things out of bottle caps and pieces of old fruit crates. I just didn’t see myself having that happen right away. So Miami Beach seemed pleasant—$55-dollar room by the beach.

MYLES: I met you in 1990 or something, and that’s when I got to know your work. There’s a piece in this show in Aspen, which is your ’80s work, that has this amazing little table with the ashtray and some cigarettes and a drink [the installation Diamond Life, 1990].

PIERSON: Exactly. That’s me in 1989, ’90, already memorializing my youth in 1983. Seven years later I was like, “Christ, where would I go if I could go anywhere?” And it was back to that room in Miami Beach. I was re-creating it.

MYLES: That piece really changed something for me. There was an autobiographical quality to it. It was an installation, and it managed to be so intimate and so fucked up and sweet. It had that quality that you do a lot. It was photographs, it was words on paper, it was letters on the wall. In my mind, you were an artist who enacted a group show; suddenly, I was like, “Oh, a group show can be one person.” You’re a photographer, but there’s always a question of whether you’re in the picture or taking the picture.

PIERSON: Yeah, I think that was something I hadn’t figured out. But as I entered the playing field, I knew I wanted to keep it wide open for me to do what I wanted to do.

MYLES: There’s something very performative about that.

PIERSON: Even those installations you’re talking about, I feel like they come out of a performative photographic sensibility. They could have been stage sets. In fact, it was my intention at the time to go back and take pictures that I should have taken better in that room, on these sets. I never did that, but that was the logic.

MYLES: I don’t understand. What do you mean by “I’ll go back and take the pictures I should have taken better in that room”?

PIERSON: I guess I mean that I was building these sets, and then I could re-imagine the life in them. The coolness of those sets is that they got to be real. I feel like I’m good at re-creating real.

MYLES: I think you are, too.

PIERSON: I have no problem telling you that real is a style. Of course, it’s not real, but I’m very good at giving the style of real.

MYLES: Do you think it’s something about boundary-less-ness, too? Real always has some extra shit to it. Art feels like it has this frame, and it’s either outside or inside. One of the things about your work is that it feels like it’s about to happen or just happened. The moment is not exactly set in stone.

PIERSON: It’s true. Even though I’m not actually performing in the works, I love the theatrical and have this fan relationship to showbiz. And one of the things that’s a disappointment to me about art is that it’s always a memory of something that happened. So I try to get as intimate or as real as possible. When I was doing those early drawings, I was really heartbroken and sort of despairing. So I adopted the technique or guise of doing those drawings like a sad lonely person would at night writing in their journal.

MYLES: The writing is such a piece of it. In my cases, those drawings are almost poems, like you’re leaking into some mental shit.

PIERSON: Right. And to do that work, I had to imagine myself like the person who would do that sort of thing. Until I finally come to the realization that, no, I am a person who does that.

MYLES: And when does that realization happen in the course of the work?

PIERSON: I had that realization early on. It was for a work where I was making all of these collages out of ’50s porn that I was collecting off the street. I would cut it up and tape it together and was like, “I want this to look like a crazy guy in Times Square who’s just filling the walls of his SRO, cutting and taping. I want it to look like walking into a crime scene.” And then I suddenly realized, oh my God, I am doing this.

MYLES: But your work is about class in some way, too, isn’t it?
PIERSON: I guess. I like that you said the working class. I think that's part of every excuse I have for not being a better, more sophisticated, intellectual artist. It seems so far-fetched that I'm doing it at this point. I had a big comeuppance sitting at the counter at Veselka [a diner in the East Village], in maybe '93. I had already shown at the Whitney, and some guy starts talking to me. He was like, "What do you do?" And I was like, "I'm an artist." And he was like, "You don't sound very enthusiastic about it." I was like, "It just seems so weird to say. But I am." It was a touching New York moment, because he was telling me that I should be happier about that.

MYLES: That's so great. It's almost like a good version of your family.

PIERSON: Just a stranger on a diner stool.

MYLES: All of that is something I feel I can see in the work, this kind of wondering if I am that guy. He's not there, but it's like he just was there, and it seems like the work can't quite hold him. There's a whole identity question going on, but it's not about fixing identity; it's about unfixing it, which is really great.

PIERSON: The key word when my work was being written about from '90 to '95, when I was 30 to 35, was adolescent. Now, Christ, at 56 I find it very difficult to do one of those drawings of heartbreak or despair, not even for how it would look, it just doesn't seem the same. I have attempted in the last ten years to try it, like, "I know how to do this. You use your left hand and really jerk around and write something heartbreaking." It doesn't work.

MYLES: You're not him anymore.

PIERSON: You can't get back to that, somehow. So it's interesting.

MYLES: That was something I was wondering; first of all, how does it feel to look at this body of older work? And also, is the work something you made to protect this guy—the one who made the work? How does all this work feel now?

PIERSON: It feels pretty good. I feel like I got at something, even in my naïveté and in thinking I was one step removed. The odd thing I realize now in trying to bring back the work for this show—it's not a retrospective—is that I was never making anything with the idea that it had longevity. Even letters can go back to being junk the minute you take them off the wall. When I had a show, I never used to deliver a template. It was just, "This is the stuff. You put it up." And the drawings were like, "How weird will this be if someone finds this piece later in a house in its little white frame?" I didn't photograph any of it, so there's no complete record. And maybe that's the working-class thing, too. I was just like, "If somebody's ready to pay $75 right now, they can have it. I don't need a photograph of it." Now I do care more deeply about them. But I'm still committed to this idea of It's just in the wind. Part of my struggle with being an artist is... Well, the first nervous breakdown I had was about the concept of eternity and how little we are in the scheme of things. And I would think, [gasps] "Who cares?" It's amazing that things last from 500 B.C. and are still around, really. So most of my work is very temporary, very provisional. You can take it with you or you can leave it. Which is a tough sell for art. Because part of what art is supposed to do is make you immortal, either by making it or owning it.

MYLES: Except that when people were doing all this work in the '60s or '70s, that was performative and stuff, the only ones that we know about now are the ones who figured out that somebody better pick up the camera and make a copy. But you were making actual objects and you weren't asking for anybody to necessarily document it. It was more that it simply existed.

PIERSON: I figured if it exists, it exists. They can find it again.

MYLES: But, for example, the table in the installation actually exists.

PIERSON: Yeah, and there are photographs. But the other thing is this implied value. If it exists, it might be in a museum, and that means someone paid money for it, but it's still just cheap linoleum tile glued to Masonite and a clamshell ashtray. It's not really there, you know? Which is, I guess, the same as Duchamp. I do realize now that, at the time, what I thought was art was really my life. And then there was the tinsel stage that came out of a million nights of being in a nightclub and thinking, "Nothing is better than this drag queen. Fuck the rest of this shit, this is it." In my tinsel stage, I tried to make my work seem like I just X-Acto knifed it out of a barroom. I didn't want it to make it anything more or better than it was.

MYLES: It's interesting to think about this moment in terms of gender, and there being today such a bigger conversational presence in wider culture around trans issues. But in 1991, you were making work about a drag queen onstage where a certain audience was coming out to be a part of this "conversation." Nobody was writing books about it or even saying, "We have a right to exist." It was almost like people were saying, we don't have a right to exist, and so we all need to be in here together. It was a very interesting time.
PIERSON: Right. And the other interesting thing that only came to me fairly recently that I feel was a big genesis of my work is that, after I would leave those nightclubs at three in the morning, there was the open market on Second Avenue with people selling stuff on blankets. As I wandered home, I would go there every night. And on these blankets was a very Joseph Beuys piece on a certain level. I, as young, naive, or just not very smart, always thought, “Oh my God, they stole all this stuff. Here are the ’50s porno magazines, here are snapshots, here’s James Baldwin, here’s Tennessee Williams. Look, you can see the whole life: ashtrays, pornos, a pretty good piece of ’40s pottery.” But I would think, “Wow, this is a whole life. I hope they didn’t rob the guy blind.” And then it dawned on me about five years ago, these were the contents of gay guys’ apartments who were dying of AIDS that had been thrown out. I might have known that much then, but I wasn’t aware that I had internalized it, that it was where those installation pieces came from in a big way. It was more like, “I want my gay life to not wind up on the streets—on Second Avenue. But at the same time, I don’t care if it does.” That’s why I like to make books. To me, it’s just as great to have some book of mine be in a flea market as it is to have a picture in a museum. I really stand by that because that’s how I got information as a child.

MYLES: It’s great because that also means the gallery and the museum become a dumping ground.

PIERSON: On a certain level. Part of the reason I play the game is so people will publish things and there will be more ephemera that will get out farther.

MYLES: What do you mean by “the reason I play the game is so people will publish things.”

I love the sound of that.

PIERSON: Part of my impetus to get famous is to have access to printed matter. I love all the stuff like postcards, books, little things. I can make my own zines, but it just helps if you’ve got somebody behind you publishing things.

MYLES: Right, so they make your museum for you.

PIERSON: I like both sides of the cultural stream. Because it does go far and wide.

MYLES: Are you a Robert Smithson fan?

PIERSON: Yes.

MYLES: That whole inside/outside thing, right? For him, the gallery was sort of a retrospective of reality, where he was leaving things in the desert someplace. I think writing feels like that for you, too. Some of the drawings, which are writing, it’s like you’re writing on a mirror.

PIERSON: Some of them are supposed to look like that.

MYLES: When it’s like that, it’s like saying that the act of writing isn’t so this will be closed and in a book, but more so this will be seen here now. It’s sort of like what comes from inside goes outside, and then it gets echoed again in the gallery. It just keeps being reflected, instead of the pages turning.

PIERSON: One of the things I’ve had to struggle with is that part of what people find critically and curatorially questionable in my work is that I try to make things that don’t read as art until they’re in a gallery.

MYLES: It’s like that Marcel Duchamp thing: Does the audience complete the work, or does the gallery complete the work? Or do the people who come into the gallery and see the work in the gallery complete it?

PIERSON: Exactly. But it’s also a hard thing for me to maintain, because all of a sudden you get seduced into things like, “Oh, they can afford these nice frames—go ahead.” There are little seductions. But that was my intention early on; leave nothing behind that looked like art too much.

MYLES: And again, that seems like class. It’s sort of like a safety valve; I’m not really saying it’s art.

PIERSON: But then, I went on painter trips. Like, “Now I’m a painter, and this is what a painter does.” A lot of it is acting.

MYLES: I love those oil-stick paintings that are in the show.

PIERSON: The blue, which I did in Provincetown.

MYLES: Yeah, and they’re theatrical. One was called The Essex. What’s the Essex? Is it a hotel?

PIERSON: It is a hotel, but to me, it’s this old ’50s rock ‘n’ roll group.
MYLES: Just the name was so evocative. You look at the painting, which is so abstract, and then you hear the name, and it just flips you into a space.

PIERSON: Then at the same time, it’s offhand. It wasn’t like, “These are the marks the Essex would make.” It was the music that was playing while I made it, something like that. And then that was a whole act of performance, because all of a sudden I had been given this Fine Arts Work Center fellowship in 1993, and I was in Provincetown for the winter, so I was like, “I’m an artist now, what will I make? I’ve got all this time. I’m going to make some abstract paintings.” So I started making these marks with my finger, or to approximate my finger. I want to show I can make something with my hands. Digital paintings were on the horizon, and I was reading a lot about computers, Is and Os. So I thought, “I could make digital paintings.”

MYLES: Well, your hands have digits. So let me repeat the big question: How does it feel looking at all this work that’s 20 years old, and you’re not necessarily that guy, but you were that guy, and you did that work? What does it feel like?

PIERSON: It’s a little scary. One of the other things I lived by in the early years was that I wanted my retrospective to look like a really good thrift store where you found lots of good stuff. But now, talk about class, it’s Aspen, it’s a very beautiful museum, these are very fancy people used to the highest quality. I don’t want to be in a thrift store! So we’ll see. Maybe we make the best version of a thrift store.

MYLES: Part of me thinks of there being a house somewhere where you install this whole body of work.

PIERSON: I don’t know. But it does feel like a natural progression somewhere, from there to here and how long it took me. My first show was when I was 30. It took me that long to figure out exactly how to fit in or what mattered to me. And it was all kind of okay somehow. It worked out. It wasn’t like, “I’m going to be an artist, and this what I’m going to do.” It was more like, “Well, what about this?”

NEW YORK AND MARFA, TEXAS-BASED WRITER EILEEN MYLES’S NEXT BOOK, A MEMOIR, IS DUE OUT SEPTEMBER 2017.
Jack Pierson remembers the ‘90s at the Aspen Art Museum

Jack Pierson has re-created his first five New York City shows for a new Aspen Art Museum exhibition, revisiting work from the 1990s and the beginning of a career that’s moved between photography, painting, sculpture, installation and drawing but which the artist himself often describes in the terms of poetry.

Spanning 1990 to 1996, the shows track Pierson’s early evolution from seedy nostalgia and playful narcissism to (almost) earnest art-making.

“I’ve always been nostalgic,” Pierson said as he installed the shows, which run through May on the museum’s ground floor. “Even at 30, I was nostalgic for 23, like, ‘Oh, those were the good old days.’

If You Go …

What: Jack Pierson, ‘5 Shows from the ‘90s’
Where: Aspen Art Museum
When: Through May 28
How much: Free
More info: [http://www.aspenartmuseum.org](http://www.aspenartmuseum.org)
Pierson made most of the pieces in this massive exhibition while working out of a studio on 42nd Street in New York — in the bad old days of pre-Giuliani era Times Square — when the young artist was exploring questions of identity and sincerity.

This precisely curated exhibition of Pierson's shows is the latest example of what’s become a cornerstone of the Aspen Art Museum program in recent years: reconsidering and re-contextualizing decades-old bodies of work by major contemporary artists. (Another, the monumental Julian Schnabel exhibition filling two basement galleries with his iconic “plate paintings” from the late '70s and early '80s, closes today).

The earliest of the Pierson shows is a photography exhibition that opened at the Simon Watson Gallery — a modest SoHo loft space — in 1990. It showcases 15 enlarged snapshots from Pierson's brief time living in Los Angeles. They mix kitsch and Americana with a dose of absurdity in street scenes, still lifes and portraits soaked in dreamy California sunshine.

Pierson made them in a one-hour photo shop that charged $9.99 to blow up the images to poster size. He put $500 on a credit card he couldn't pay off to make the posters and the show that started it all.

“I thought, ‘That's so good. It’s just big enough to be arresting somehow,’” he recalled of his decision to enlarge the photos and pin them, unframed, on gallery walls.

The most recent works included here, from a Luhring Augustine Gallery show in 1996, are similarly tied to the technology of their historical moment. These pink paintings — displayed in a pink-floored gallery modeled after the studio where Pierson created them — were made using a mid-'90s computer imaging process that transferred photos to canvas with paint.

A show from 1991 at the Pat Hearn Gallery includes Pierson's installation work “Diamond Life,” which reproduces a tumbledown bohemian living room space inspired by Pierson's crash pad in Miami Beach in 1983.

It has a specificity that makes it feel real — from the record player and stacks of vinyl on the floor, to the three packs of different brands of cigarettes (from three roommates with different tastes) to the beaten-down tables and chairs and lovely, shabby homewares like a Maxwell House coffee jar functioning as a flower vase.

“I was trying to create reality — to show you that reality was a style,” Pierson said. “I wanted you to know it was false but I wanted you to be here as if it was real.”

The installation is likely to strike a chord with the Colorado ski bum (or former ski bum) crowd: replace the blue bathing suit Pierson has tossed on the floor with a pair of ski pants and swap out the cigarette butts for vape pens, and this could easily be the 2017 living room in any Aspen seasonal employee housing unit.

These five shows also include several of the plastic word pieces that have become Pierson's best-known work, and which he's still making 25 years later.

The earliest Pierson words, from a 1992 show, were assembled with mismatched marquee letters that he salvaged from the Times Square peep shows and theaters that were shutting down around his 42nd Street studio. They spell out words like “STAY,” “SEXLESSNESS,” “HELPLESS” and “HOPELESS.”

Pierson recalled breaking the bank and spending $40 on the first four letters, “STAY,” marking the beginning of his signature body of work.
“I asked my roommate for the money,” he recalled. “He said, ‘Come on, man, we're broke. We can't do it.’ But I did.”

This breakthrough '92 show from the Tom Cugliani Gallery also includes drawings that Pierson made in the mode of a lonely, lovesick and tormented young man doodling in a diary — they mix images of cigarettes and Hollywood with laments like “I cried for you now it's your turn to cry over him.”

“It was like I was method acting, ‘What if you were a broken-hearted loser staying up late in your rotten apartment writing in your journal?’” Pierson explained, adding with a laugh: “And that helped me get to the point that I realized, ‘I am a broken-hearted loser.' So these came out of that.”

Chronologically, the body of work that follows is from the Luhring Augustine Gallery in 1994 and from a period where Pierson was getting hot and making a name for himself in the art world. They're the most straightforwardly beautiful and painterly works in the Aspen show — blue finger paintings and blue watercolors and blue portraits of hands holding cigarettes.

They seem less self-conscious than the works that preceded them, but Pierson was still putting on an act.

“I made a transition into a fancier gallery,” Pierson said. “I had some success, I started to feel it and to become an artist with a capital ‘A’ as opposed to a latter-day beatnik poet. So what do artists do? I thought, ‘I'll have a blue period.’”

Though they're the most traditional works in the show, even these — made during a residency in Provincetown, Massachusetts — are a riff on self-identity.

“Some of it was a performance of ‘I'm an abstract painter now!’” Pierson said, “in the same way I was a broken-down denizen of 42nd Street (in the lovelorn 1992 drawings.) I've always had this thing of ‘acting as if.’”
Remember your fantasy New York apartment? I remember mine, concocted from snippets of old movies like *Rear Window*, *Breakfast at Tiffany’s*, and, yes, even *Rosemary’s Baby*. It would be in Greenwich Village, with 14-foot ceilings and huge casement windows overlooking backyard gardens. The walls would glow with light. There would be a chic little foyer, a commodious kitchen I could eat in, and, of course, a great big room with a working fireplace where all my friends would congregate regularly. In more than 20 years in the city, not only have I never found such a place for myself, I've never seen someone else in one, either—until I set foot in Jack Pierson’s apartment. A short stroll from Washington Square Park, Pierson’s home is exactly the kind of space I pictured glamorous, artistic New Yorkers living in—with the added bonus of a small terrace that can hold a table and chairs.
This impression, it turns out, was no accident. Back in 2008, after a dispiriting search, the artist and photographer saw a listing for the one-bedroom flat. It cost a bit more than Pierson wanted to spend, but he fell in love and jumped at the opportunity. To amplify his feeling of good fortune, he set about decorating it like something he had magically lucked into.

“I decided that I wanted it to look like an apartment that a rich aunt—one I didn’t know I had—had left to me, and that I had taken over in my gay bachelor way,” he says. “But, just to be clear, I don’t have a rich aunt.”

His vision was fueled later that year when The New York Times sent him to Paris to shoot the residence of Yves Saint Laurent and Pierre Bergé in advance of the big sale at Christie’s following Saint Laurent’s death. It was an eye-opening assignment. “I loved the layering of objects, how the shelves were filled right to the top,” he recalls.

At first Pierson thought he could just work with an architect, Elias Moser, to pull his place together. “But as the decisions started coming fast and furious, I realized I was in over my head,” he explains. “So I called Fernando.”

Pierson and Fernando Santangelo have been friends since the mid-1980s, and Pierson has seen countless projects by the designer, foremost among them the renovation of the Chateau Marmont. He knew that if anyone could relate to his “rich aunt” concept, it was Santangelo. “I loved the idea as soon as he said it,” says the designer. “And I added in my own ideas about a kind of old Park Avenue style that I’ve adored since I first came to New York.”
The apartment’s shell got a full-on socialite-circa-1966 makeover. Woodwork and newly built bookshelves were painted a pale, stately shade that might be called dowager blue. A large window facing an ugly wall was covered with a phalanx of shutters. Modeled after Marlene Dietrich’s apartment, the fireplace was faced in antiqued mirror. The entry was wrapped in a hand-blocked black-and-gold wallpaper, and the kitchen was redone in classic wood cabinetry painted an old-school pale yellow.

In the bedroom and bath, meanwhile, Santangelo tilted the vibe more toward uncle. The bedroom walls are clad in a subtle metal-blue fabric, the bed frame is upholstered in a caramel-color faux suede, and a wall of closets and cupboards wears book-matched mahogany veneer. The clean, crisp marble bath—presided over by an extra-long, extra-deep tub—was inspired by the locker rooms of the New York Athletic Club.

A man would have to work hard to find a nicer spot to lay his head. But while the bedroom, bath, kitchen, and terrace are all disarmingly perfect, it’s the main room—with its myriad artworks, specimen crystals, and books amassed by Pierson over the years—that feels most like a space out of time.

As an artist, Pierson is known for evocative photography and conceptual pieces that suggest something—a locale, an atmosphere, a mood—without explicitly explaining it. And that is precisely what he and Santangelo have created here—a posh wormhole linking the real world of today to a yesterday we can only dream of.
“Fernando took the idea and ran with it,” Pierson says. “It really feels like something from another era, but not some exact place and time we all know or remember. So it’s always evoking something for me, always renewing that original fantasy.”
Jack Pierson

Early Works and Beyond

Daniel Reich Gallery
537 West 23rd Street, Chelsea
Through Jan. 28

This small survey of Jack Pierson’s career gives a historical grounding — and thus some validation in the marketplace — to the romantic, detritus-oriented work favored by the Daniel Reich Gallery. But it also provides a useful account of Mr. Pierson’s consistently melancholic art, its siftings through the rubble of American life and its restless roaming through photography, sculpture, drawing and language. In both medium and message, Mr. Pierson’s work is about a kind of homelessness.

Mr. Pierson emerged in the early 1990’s in a generation that reacted to the slick self-confidence of late 1980’s Neo-Geo with a dilapidated disillusionment hastened by AIDS. His approach was both Romantic and hardened; it favored bits of reality or language slightly rearranged. His best-known works are poignant words and phrases spelled out in the plastic letters of old signs.

In Mr. Pierson’s view, a strip of soft, garish carpet, comforting to the feet but not the eye, could be a sculpture. The opening page of Joan Didion’s “White Album,” painstakingly rendered in pencil, could be a drawing. For collage, pages from a catalog of Diane Arbus’s work were glued image-side down to a canvas; they form a white grid dotted only with the well-known titles of the photographer’s well-known images.

A work from Mr. Pierson’s student days at the Massachusetts College of Art sums up loneliness with two menu boards: one reads “Breakfast/Hope,” the other “Dinner/Fear.” Memories of absent friends or lovers infuse “Goodbye Yellow Brick Road, Part II,” from 1990, a bed of soap bars, each one inscribed with a man’s nickname. For Mr. Pierson the inanimate world brims with longing and memory waiting to be coaxed forward, and he has made a regular habit of doing so.

ROBERTA SMITH
Finding in other men the mythology of the self: Jack Pierson’s “Self Portrait No. 4,” above, and “Self Portrait No. 15,” below.

Self-Portrait as Obscure Object of Desire

Jack Pierson’s Autobiography, of Sorts, in Photographs of Unidentified Men
Self-Portrait as Obscure Object of Desire

Jack Pierson’s Autobiography, of Sorts, in Photographs of Unidentified Men

By PHILIP GEFTER

A new book of photographs by Jack Pierson features 15 images of beautiful men, arranged to suggest the arc of a lifetime—beginning with a young boy and progressing to old age with men in various stages of undress. There’s nothing surprising about that; Mr. Pierson has been photographing beautiful naked men for years. In this case, though, the photographs are offered under the title “Self Portrait.” But none of the images is of the artist himself.

Mr. Pierson has fashioned an autobiography from a collection of images of unidentified men. His photographs affect the casual look of a vacation snapshot, one you might expect to find clipped to a page of a personal diary. Often there is an implicit, offhand eroticism to his pictures of men, as if something sexual is in the cards, or might have just taken place.

While there is a canny intimacy to these new pictures, languorously attuned to the temporal glamour of ordinary moments, the subject of this self-portrait series is desire—when it begins, how long it lasts, what it tells us about ourselves or, at least, about the artist.

Mr. Pierson is part of a group of photographers known as the Boston School—David Armstrong, Philip-Lorca diCorcia, Nan Goldin and Mark Morrisroe, among others. All of them knew one another in the early 1980’s and photographed their immediate circle of friends in situations that were, or appeared to be, casual or intimate. Mr. Pierson was often the subject of Mr. Morrisroe’s photographs, and the object of Mr. Morrisroe’s desire. The photographs in this self-portrait series take their cue from the template of pictures of the artist taken 20 years ago. In an attempt to establish a mythology of self, Mr. Pierson is presenting new photographs of other men in the manner of his own portrait, claiming their appearance to represent his own identity. The book is published by the Cheim & Read gallery in Chelsea, where the exhibition “Jack Pierson,” featuring other works of his, runs through Jan. 3.

“Self Portrait” is the flip side of what Cindy Sherman accomplished in her series “Untitled Film Stills.” Dressing up to enactment a wide variety of female archetypes, Ms. Sherman photographed herself in fictional scenes alluding to Hollywood films. That body of work expresses an idea about the way identity is summoned in the barrage of images endlessly flashing before us. Mr. Pierson’s self-portrait series attests to this, underscoring at its core his own erotic impulse to be as desirable as those he desires, to become the very object of his own attraction.

In naming his pictures of others “Self Portraits,” Mr. Pierson also owes a nod to the Dada legacy of provocation. The catalog of “The First Papers of Surrealism,” a 1942 group exhibition in New York organized by Marcel Duchamp and André Breton, used the self-portrait as a symbolic equivalent in photographs and drawings of completely unrelated or unknown people. Titled with the names of the participating artists, these “ready made” portraits, or found faces, took on new meaning in place of other expected identities.

In an essay for a show of portraits at PaceWildenstein Gallery in 1976, Kirk Varnedoe wrote, “If, in the extremes of modern portraiture, the artist sees the other almost wholly as himself, so in the self-portrait he often sees himself as somebody, or something, irrevocably ‘other.’”

Portraiture has always revealed as much about the artist as the subject. If you think about the difference between portraits by Richard Avedon and Robert Mapplethorpe, each photographer has a signature style. Remove the names of their subjects and you’re left with a collection of portraits that become as much a self-portrait as the artist’s own likeness.

In effect, Mr. Pierson has taken that idea one step further by omitting the names of his subjects, assuming their identities and calling his collection “Self Portrait.”

Picasso, unsatisfied with the face of his portrait of Gertrude Stein—after 80 sittings, painted one based on a mask of an Iberian sculpture. When people protested that the portrait did resemble the subject, he is said to have commented: “Everybody thinks she is not at all like her portrait, but never mind. In the end, she will manage to look just like it.”

Continued from First Arts Page

formed by the cultural forces all around us; yet, despite Ms. Sherman’s insistence that her “film stills” are not self-portraits, the series flirts with the very idea of identity and self-portraiture. Mr. Pierson, by eliminating his own likeness from his “Self Portrait,” comments on the same postmodern idea about the cultural construction of the individual, but in this case the work suggests that assumed identities both define and obscure the individual in society.

The idea of the constructed identity is nothing new. In an age of cosmetic surgery and on-line communication, it’s easy to customize our appearance or hide behind an invented persona. How often do we look at a picture in a magazine and imagine ourselves with that haircut, in those sunglasses, on that beach? No matter how strong our own sense of who we are, the lust for some idealized version of ourselves is invariably