

NEW YORK

Jack Pierson

CHEIM & READ

Jack Pierson has already made salvaged-sign-letter word sculptures spelling out *ANGST*, *GONE*, *HELL*, *BETRAYAL*, *DESIRE/DESPAIR*, and *LOST*, so maybe it was only a matter of time before he got around to *MELANCHOLIA*. Or perhaps it just took a while for him to name the temperament that saturates his work; melancholy turns, after all, on ambivalence and deferral. In his recent show at Cheim & Read, Pierson filled the gallery with twenty-four works in different media that, the press release claims, meditate on “women’s suffering.” But this dwelling on loss extended out from his feminine subjects to encompass beautiful boys, works of literature, language, and even the artist himself. “The complex of melancholia behaves like an open wound,” Freud wrote, attracting satellite cathexes “from all directions.”

In seven lovely small pencil drawings, for example, Pierson meticulously copies the first pages of books by women, including Barbara Pym’s *Less Than Angels* (1955) and Sister Wendy Beckett’s *The Gaze of Love* (1993). They shared a back gallery with thirty-five men. *Untitled*, 2005, is a grid of black-and-white headshots of handsome but long-forgotten B-movie actors, their neglect seconded by a burnt-out neon *N* in the adjacent *Another Night*, 2005. Pierson’s words are becoming ever more materially self-referential: The last two syllables of *Melancholia*, 2006, spill on to the floor, as if unable to sustain the sad weight of their meaning, and the tangle of letters in the floor-bound *Roses Roses Roses*, 2005, enacts the tongue twister of its own name, a linguistic scramble that leads Pierson (as it did Gertrude Stein) to “eros.”

Eros abounds in *Past Life in Egypt*, 1997, starring Ursula Hodel as dominatrix queen, but the video is maladroit and tawdry, best left at the nightclub where it originally screened. Its inclusion here was Pierson’s only misstep, though, in what was otherwise an intelligent exhibition bristling with shrewd thematic reverberations between different rooms—the first page of *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (1933) sounded *Roses*; the first page of Pym’s book echoed another of her novels, wedged into one of the letters of *Melancholia*; the first page of Marilyn Monroe’s *My Story* (1974) tied suggestively to eight paintings of her rumored rival Jackie Kennedy.

The woman in these paintings, which formed the nucleus of the show, is actually identified only as the outgrowth of “an earlier series of pencil drawings” that Pierson executed “from an old postcard of a woman’s face,” and the title of both the series and the show, “Passing from Melancholia into Madness,” is taken from a nineteenth-century clinical photograph supposedly documenting said transition. But that

face is pure Camelot-era Mrs. Kennedy, her rictal grimace, inky eyes, and thick-eted eyebrows summoning, eight times over—melancholics repeat, obsessively—a dolor that also pervades the four self-portraits of Jack punctuating the paintings of Jackie. Pierson draws himself as half demented; it would be worrisome if he weren’t so evidently courting the link between artistic temperament and insanity.

As his miniretrospective at Daniel Reich Gallery last winter made clear, Pierson’s debt to Warhol is heavy, though Pop’s canniest self-marketer (a former window dresser) would never have kicked up the fuss that the younger artist’s gallery did last March, when they publicly accused Simon Doonan, creative director at Barneys, with presenting “formally weak, plagiarized versions” of Pierson’s word sculptures in store displays. The timing of the kerfuffle was hardly incidental: it garnered what Warhol craved and Pierson’s melancholics want most—attention.

—Lisa Pasquariello

Jack Pierson, *Roses Roses Roses*, 2005, metal, plastic, and wood, 30 x 87 x 70”.

