

Ian MacMillan

A fellow photographer
loses himself in the world
of Jack Pierson.

Hit the Road, Jack



Jack Pierson, *Joe*, 1995, ekta-color print, edition of 10, 76.2 x 76.2 cm.
Courtesy Cheim & Read, New York. © 1995, Jack Pierson

It's an uncomfortable, balmy, clammy Saturday afternoon while I'm writing this. I know Jack is in Provincetown and it's probably just as balmy there, though it's near the sea and there is good food and music and a coastal breeze, a respite that I don't have, trapped at home in my cramped office in South London. Some people at Jack's house perhaps are swimming, they're laughing and there's wine on a long wooden table and remnants of food from lunch, and it's a bit like a technicolour scene from a movie with Elizabeth Taylor and Montgomery Clift, and perhaps their relationships are tetchy and a little tortured, or perhaps it's the idyll I'm thinking it is and some beautiful boy I'll never meet is stretched across a bed on a patterned blanket and he's being photographed asleep, unaware of the lens's penetrative gaze, and I'm looking at this photo some months or even years later and having my own private thoughts about him, about this scene, looking at the tattoo on his upper arm and the calm and peaceful look on his face and I'm wishing, for just a brief moment, that my life was like it is in this picture.

I know what Jack's summer retreat in Provincetown must be like because I've spent the major part of this afternoon looking through his book, *All Of A Sudden*, and it's filled with these frequently idyllic images and suffused moments of languor and beauty and charged sexuality and joy and longing, and it's felt a bit like sneaking a look at someone's photo album without asking them beforehand, though it's a pleasure that comes without any associated kinds of guilt. I've constructed whole stories and occasionally just little scenarios from the portraits, still lifes and landscapes that sneak across its pages, sometimes

as fragmented and disjointed as the book's layout and more often than not just simple, uncomplicated responses to the straightforward, uncluttered pictures he snaps with his camera like a happy tourist, a grateful lover or a charmed romantic. Pretty soon after digging into the book a mood both wistful and melancholic comes over me, and I put on the Chet Baker album *Let's Get Lost*, the one he made near the end of his similarly romanticised and doomed life, and everything seems to fall into place. When Baker recorded these songs he was a fading beauty, wracked by years of heroin addiction and a life lived to the full, being filmed by Bruce Weber, another celebrated photographer (though to these eyes anyway a lesser one) for a painfully revealing documentary. But anyway, it's maybe half an hour later and I look again at the handsome naked young man stretched across his bed in the afternoon sunlight, and I start to drift. Chet's plaintive, sometimes hesitant and (as if it matters) tonally imperfect voice is singing. It's unspeakably beautiful. 'Night is at our command. Moon and sand.'

I barely know Jack Pierson. A couple of months ago I went to photograph him at his studio in midtown New York. It was raining and we joked together about going downstairs to shoot him in the gloomy damp of grey streets and industrial wasteland, but I resisted. What a cheap shot that would have been, not something you find in Pierson's own work. I was more than just a bit apprehensive: a fan, I felt, trapped in an already uncomfortable position, capturing a portrait of a man whose whole art often rests on this very intense visual and emotional relationship. Naturally, though, I sometimes think of these temperamental

windswept urban settings and feelings when I look at his work, because they're so obviously in there. Streams of nascently poetic adjectives spring up almost unconsciously, the ones we read all the time when people talk about the Pierson look: melancholic, wistful, searching, hopeful, tragic, wanting. I worry about listing these all too easy to grasp references to his aesthetic here, like another cheap shot, but it kind of feels all right. It gives us something concrete to grasp onto. After all, what is a Jack Pierson work anyway? Often it's not even a photograph at all, but simply a barren text, as unadorned, brutal and hauntingly direct as these one word descriptions of his photographic oeuvre; blunt, isolated pleas hung up on a perfect white gallery wall and formed from the kind of discarded sign lettering you might find in any Midwest American junkyard.

These are some of the things they say. GONE. STAY. LOST. BOREDOM. SOLITUDE. That's a good one, I think, particularly on this hot dreamy afternoon. GOD. That one is even better, actually. CRY. I've seen several versions of that. I wonder if Pierson is given to crying a lot or thinks about it a lot? Maybe he just likes the resonance of the word. Sometimes there are whole sentences or bits of sentences. THE ONE AND ONLY. HELP ME PLEASE. HELPLESS and HOPELESS criss-crossed against each other. They're oddly reminiscent of the most stark poetry you've ever come across and it's striking to think how much can be read into these very pure but at the same time loaded words. BLUE, for example. In the pictures I've been looking at today these letters are propped up on the end of a jetty that could be the patio of some rented summer house. There are the lazily prone figures lying around, maybe napping after lunch or joking with each other, and it seems like the blue here could be the blue of the sea or maybe just the very blue of the lettering itself, which is a kind of summery sky blue or baby boy blue. Then again, the very same letters mounted next to an Edward Hopper painting at the Whitney Museum conjure up a whole new range of sentiments. The kind of blue we associate with Hopper's estranged landscapes, his empty stairwells and sunset terrains, or with the same rented house when summer is over and the laughter has died down and everyone's going back to their fragmented and frenetic lives, or the kind of blue we hear in the Miles Davis album *Kind Of Blue*.

Pierson is very much an artist of our current time, but there is a real timelessness in his work and much of it does seem to connect with a romanticised jazz age feeling or 1950s beatnik culture as much as it does with real life in the 1990s. It's art with a strong gay sensibility, obviously, but it's not like the campaigning, socially motivated gay art of late '80s New York. I first saw these photos and text works and installation pieces at the now notorious Whitney Biennial of 1993 when Political Correctness was thought to have overtaken the American art scene and a general atmosphere of multicultural race politics, anorexia and vomit, women's oppression and the anxieties of the body and sexuality, both homo and hetero, seemed to permeate the very air of the galleries themselves. Of course, I'm a gay man myself living through these times and I share lots of these concerns, but I can't help but think sometimes that if art has to turn to hectoring and polemic then it really does need to have some kind of aesthetic element to it, otherwise a pamphlet or manifesto might better serve the job at hand. In the midst of all of this, Jack's room in the show felt out of kilter and, moreover, out of time. Blurry Ektachrome and Kodachrome colour-infused images of friends in hard-to-place domestic interiors or holding tunafish salad after a picnic, absolute words as solitary as an abandoned lover, and a re-creation of a section of a dreamer's domestic interior with poetry books and an old record player on a desk and a pile of albums we can't identify except for the one at the front which is by the tragically doomed teenage heart-throb crooner Johnnie Ray. Exceptionally forthright and unassumingly moving – I was instantly, remarkably impressed.

Looking today for a third time through *All Of A Sudden* brought to mind a quote from the poet and art critic Frank O'Hara who described his New York as a city of 'jazz, good painting and black and white movies' and it's this kind of feel, though obviously not this particular look, that suffuses Pierson's casual, languid and often unconventionally focused pictures. John Ashbery said of O'Hara's similarly unconventionally structured poems that they were 'trying to juggle the contradictory components of modern life into something like a liveable space'. This art is a bit like that. There's narrative in it, but it could be anyone's narrative, anyone's associations with real life, not just Jack's.



Jack Pierson, *Stay*, 1992, plastic, metal, wood, variable dimensions. Courtesy Cheim & Read, New York. © 1992, Jack Pierson



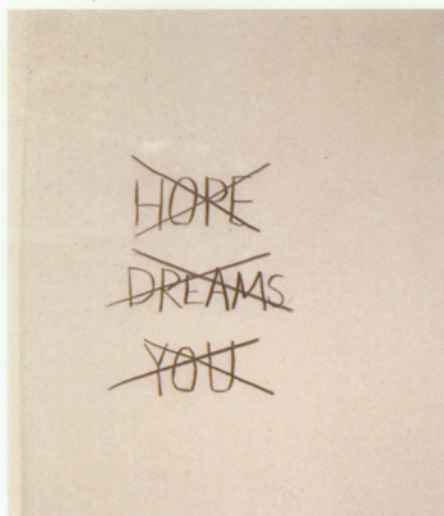
Jack Pierson, *Blue*, 1995. Courtesy Cheim & Read, New York. © 1995, Jack Pierson

Jack Pierson

When he sets up fractured sculptural installations like a chair with a shirt draped across it and cigarettes stubbed out around it, we can recognise this as an image familiar to all of us, and project our own unique associations on it as much as we wonder about its significance to the artist himself. Like the straightforward photos and the formally abstracted phrases on the wall, these are works of the art of our time in themselves, but also clues and signifiers, little teases and glimpses into the artist's life.

And it's a charmed life, or so it seems, even given the sadness and wistfulness we can't help but take from this body of work. Pierson seems to revel in the process of making art, and his studio is filled with boxes of unused lettering and large format photographic prints on canvas like the one I saw later in a group show of paintings, a huge smudged pair of inviting lips with a cryptic title lifted from an old Beach Boys song, *Hang Onto Your Ego*. Girl group music from the 1960s is playing, and there are drawings and a huge table full of cut up test prints collaged into elegant abstract forms, a new and surprisingly effective departure. Assistants beaver away, packing up because he's moving out of this present space which is leased from Alex Katz, of all people, and one of them brings us sandwiches and we talk about art, Jack and me, and my suspicions are confirmed when he says he doesn't feel part of what's going on in that world now, and it turns out he's quite a traditionalist and he likes Howard Hodgkin and Richard Long and apologises for how unfashionable these tastes must seem. We both share an interest in the British poet and painter David Robilliard who died from AIDS complications in 1988, and whose work strikes me now as a more naïve form of what Pierson is trying to communicate, albeit a perhaps more optimistic one. 'Life's not good', read one of his paintings, 'it's excellent.'

Jack and I go over to a window and he poses for my camera and I try to capture an image of how I see him: a modern-day Beat traveller, a rugged romantic hero from the Rock Hudson era, a fellow drifter and idealistic dreamer. A few days later,



Jack Pierson, *Hope Dreams You XXX*, 1991, graphite on paper, 35.56 × 27.94 cm. Courtesy Cheim & Read, New York. © 1991, Jack Pierson

I pore over the contact sheet and select the one where his face seems to mirror my favourite of all his works, a smeared and slightly dirty piece of paper with three words scrawled on it in rough, hesitant handwriting; HOPE, DREAMS, YOU, all defiantly crossed out with bitter, scratchy marks. I like it when Pierson is upbeat and celebratory, but I think I prefer it when he's at his more melancholic, as in that drawing, and I hope it hasn't been too depressing for you, the reader, to read this piece. And the Chet Baker album finished ages ago and I hadn't even noticed until now.