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The New York Times

Jack Pierson in Miami: An Artist and a City in Transformation

Visits to the area in the 1980s left a lasting impression on the artist and his work.



Jack Pierson, in front of his piece, "Augustin" (2023), was drawn to Miami's city's cheap and easy beach life, thrift shops and seedy glamour in the 1980s. Credit...Scott McIntyre for The New York Times

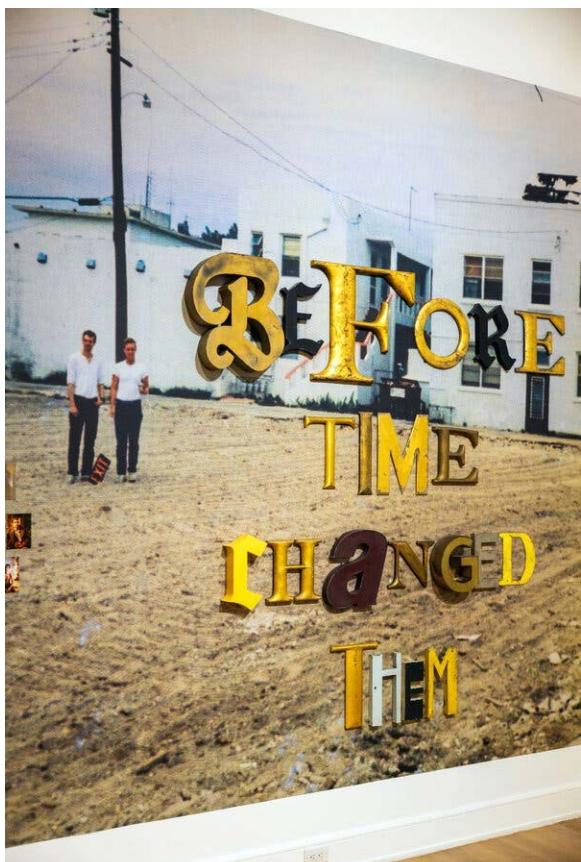
Just after Christmas in 1984, a struggling young photographer named Jonathan Pierson, fresh out of art school, took an impromptu road trip from New York to Miami Beach with his friend and infatuation, André Laroche.

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Drawn to the city's cheap and easy beach life, thrift shops and seedy glamour, Pierson stayed on for six months working as a busboy at the fabled deli Wolfie's on Collins Avenue, where a Cuban co-worker struggled to pronounce his name and called him Jack. It stuck.

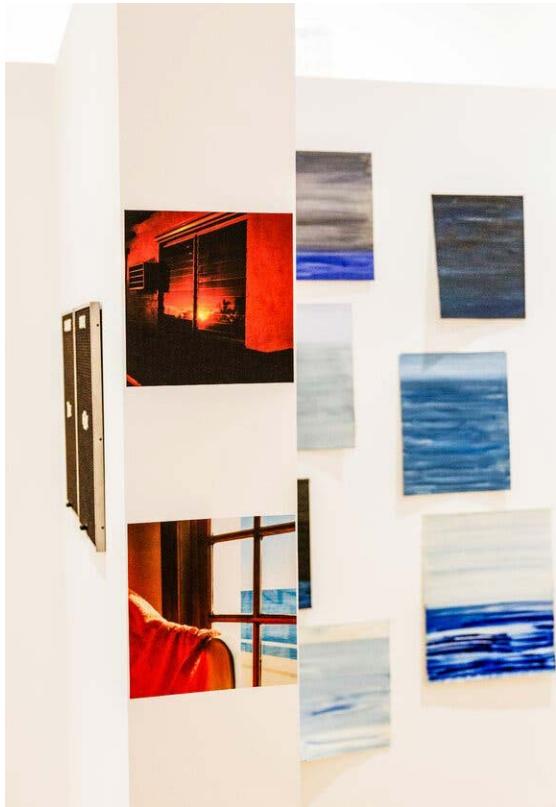
Return trips throughout the 1980s, as Miami was undergoing a rapid physical and cultural transformation, left a lasting impact on how Pierson approached making art.

"Jack Pierson: The Miami Years," on view at the Bass Museum of Art in Miami Beach through Aug. 16, 2026, shines a spotlight on this formative period for the artist, who first exhibited in New York in 1990. He came to prominence during the AIDS crisis for his intimate, informal views of everyday gay life and bohemian culture, alongside photographers such as Nan Goldin and Wolfgang Tillmans.



Pierson's piece "Before Time Changed Them" references a poem by Constantine Cavafy, whose work strongly influenced the artist. Credit...Scott McIntyre for The New York Times
Image

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The collision of art, fashion and celebrity was heating up when Pierson returned to Miami in 1989, the same year he created “13 Watercolors from Bob Miller’s Apartment, Miami Beach.” Credit...Scott McIntyre for The New York Times

Pierson’s diaristic assemblages — which evoke ideas of longing, loss, beauty, transience and memory — can incorporate photographs, printed matter and record covers, found objects and signage, paintings and drawings.

“I can really trace how it all happened vis-à-vis stops in Miami along the way,” said Pierson, now 65, in an interview last month at Elliott Templeton Fine Arts. He opened the storefront gallery in 2023 on Manhattan’s Lower East Side to showcase work with a gay aesthetic.

Through Sunday, in an apartment on Liberty Avenue a short walk from both the Bass Museum and the convention center hosting Art Basel Miami Beach, Pierson is staging an Elliott Templeton pop-up. Open by appointment, it features what he termed “masterpieces of the male nude” by artists including Victor Skrebneski, John Brock Lear, Vincenzo Galdi, Danny Fitzgerald and Alessandro Raho.

His gallery’s name is a tongue-in-cheek reference to the character of the wealthy uncle in W. Somerset Maugham’s novel “The Razor’s Edge,” whom the artist described as grand and snippy.

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“They didn’t say he was homosexual but you just knew,” said Pierson, who is gay and felt the name set the right tone for the gallery. “The vibe is homosexual as opposed to queer. I came in on the last gasp of that sort of thing, before everything was very out-political.”

At Art Basel Miami Beach from Friday through Sunday, Pierson’s own work will be on view at Regen Projects and Thaddaeus Ropac, galleries that have represented the artist since the ’90s. Lisson Gallery, which began showing him in New York in 2023, will present a new word sculpture titled “THIS PERFECT MOMENT,” the phrase spelled with mismatched oversized letters salvaged from abandoned commercial signage; and “MALE ARRAY” (2024), collaging images of classic male idols from found posters and prints with Pierson’s own photography.



“He’s deeply steeped in the language of magazines and advertising,” Alex Logsdail, the chief executive of Lisson, said about Pierson’s work. “In a sense, it’s pure Americana.” Credit...Scott McIntyre for The New York Times

“Jack’s surveying the sociological landscape and distilling it into individual objects or assemblage that are clearly very personal but ambiguous as well; it allows you to impart your own meaning onto the work,” Alex Logsdail, the chief executive of Lisson, said in a phone interview, noting how Pierson has long moved between fine art and commercial photography.

“He’s deeply steeped in the language of magazines and advertising,” Logsdail added. “In a sense, it’s pure Americana.”

At the Obama Presidential Center in Chicago, expected to open next spring, a newly commissioned word sculpture by Pierson spelling “HOPE” will grace the entry pavilion,

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echoing one of the 2008 presidential campaign's central themes and evoking nostalgia with found marquee letters that show their wear and tear.

Pierson has long been a mainstay in the art world. But in 1984, scraping by in a temp job at a gallery on Bleecker Street in New York, he was convinced that he had missed the boat.

"I was the same age as Keith Haring and Jean-Michel Basquiat and by the time I got to New York, they had already been world famous for years," said Pierson, who grew up in Plymouth, Mass., and studied at the Massachusetts College of Art in Boston.

"All the photography being shown was six feet wide and four feet tall, in a frame, and each one cost \$4,000 to get on the wall," said Pierson, who at the time could not afford to print his own photos.

In Miami Beach the following year, as Pierson was living by the ocean with Laroche in a \$55 a week apartment at 56 Washington Ave., "it was a really important moment to discover his identity as an artist," said James Voorhies, the curator of the Bass who organized the Pierson show.

It is the third in a series examining how the history of Miami has influenced internationally known artists who spent significant time there.

"Escaping some of the things he was experiencing in New York, I think Miami gave him a lot of self-confidence and allowed him to just do what he wanted to do and figure out later whether it was 'art,'" Voorhies added.

For the Bass installation, Pierson has reshuffled his own deck, juxtaposing photos, watercolors and sculptures cobbled from street and thrift-shop finds that he made in Miami with later pieces and new commissions reflecting his time in the city. "The entire exhibition became a collage," Voorhies said.

Eighty-four casual snapshots of Laroche, many taken in their apartment and arranged unframed in a sunburst cluster, reflect Pierson's experimentation with displaying images pinned to the wall like butterflies, a gesture both poetic and ephemeral.

For the exhibition, he tacked this fragmentary portrait onto a mural-size vinyl blowup of a photo, taken on a return visit to Miami, with Laroche and their former neighbor standing in a large dirt lot where their apartment building once stood, precipitating the building boom in Miami Beach (today, the site is the parking lot for Joe's Stone Crab).

Looming on top of the vinyl backdrop is the elegiac phrase "BEFORE TIME CHANGED THEM," a new gold-leaf word sculpture referencing a poem by Constantine Cavafy, whose work has strongly influenced Pierson.

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Another new commission for the exhibition, a 10-by-16-foot assemblage of photos, posters and mementos from Pierson's archive titled "ARRAY (MIAMI)," maps the constellation of characters he encountered — itinerant to famous — during his generative time in Miami, as the city was also in a state of transition. The collision of art, fashion and celebrity was heating up in 1989 when Pierson returned to Miami under the auspices of the gallerist Robert Miller, whom the artist had befriended in New York.

The dealer had just purchased the penthouse in a brand-new high rise in Miami Beach and tapped Pierson, with time on his hands, to drive down some furniture and get the apartment ready for Miller's family holiday visit.

"Bob saw I had some visual acumen and set me free in the apartment," said Pierson, who camped out there and created a beach shack in the sky by painting walls Day-Glo colors and dragging in dead palm leaves to mix with objects found in galleries and on the streets.

When the fashion photographer Bruce Weber came to visit Miller for lunch, Weber asked if he could do a shoot there for Vogue with Pierson styling it — giving the aspiring artist an important credential.

Weber, who has continued to cross paths with Pierson over the years, recalled in an email that the young artist had a "shyness" at first, a quality he also liked in Pierson's pictures from the start.

"Jack's easy approach to life is the overarching spirit in his photography," Weber said. "You could say it's modern or it's old-school. But I think it's just Jack."

A correction was made on

Dec. 2, 2025

An earlier version of a picture caption with this article misspelled the title of a Jack Pierson piece. It is "Augustin," not "Augustine."