

# CHEIM & READ

## Art in America

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### Hands Over Head: An Interview with Jack Pierson

by William J. Simmons



Jack Pierson: *Untitled*, 2015, seashells, styrofoam and driftwood on wood, 40 by 99 1/2 by 54 inches.



Jack Pierson's show at New York's Cheim & Read, "onthisisland" (through Aug. 29), featuring more than 60 works made since 2012, presents an opportunity to reconsider the breadth of Pierson's artistic repertoire by expanding our expectations of his oeuvre. Widely acclaimed for his word sculptures using found materials and his intimate photographic portraits, Pierson also explores the conventions and paradoxes of abstraction—questions that have been increasingly pressing in recent art historical discussions, especially after the Museum of Modern Art's divisive painting survey "The Forever Now" earlier this year. For "onthisisland," Pierson combines candy-colored compositions of oil, paint, sand and wax on canvas with subtle graphite drawings and beautifully lush watercolors, which he created in isolation on North Captiva, off Florida's Gulf Coast. Pierson spoke to *A.I.A.* about the mythology surrounding artistic creation, as well as his intensely personal investment in this complex, unexpected series.

**WILLIAM J. SIMMONS** This show has been called a departure, but I see it as a reorientation rather than a break in the trajectory of your career. You have always dealt in abstraction, literally in some of your previous paintings, but also metaphorically—words are themselves abstractions, as is place, epitomized perhaps by works like your well-known sculpture from 2000 made of found letters that spells out its own title, *Anytown USA*. Where do you situate this show in relation to your previous work?

**JACK PIERSON** The last show I did at Cheim & Read, in 2009, was called "Abstracts," so it's not that much of a departure. The first few years of my career, I thought I was successfully sidestepping any trademark. I felt there was enough going on between the drawings, photography and installations that the signature would become that there was no signature. Then the words snuck in there, and of course they're like trademarks or logos. I didn't anticipate that happening. So the word pieces became a shortcut for a "Jack Pierson"—they're the most easily identifiable and you can pull them out of a lineup, as opposed to sensitive little drawings and rather anonymous looking photographs you have to look at longer to get the reveal. This show does not cue you in the way my earlier exhibitions did; there are no supertitles provided by the word pieces. It seems definitively more abstract than what I have done previously, and I think that's what the departure angle means. But really I've been doing this stuff all along.

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**SIMMONS** This show seems to deal with two myths that have been problematized time and time again—Surrealist automatism and the "back to nature" trope. It's hard to not think of Gauguin and Tahiti, and the story of the artist going away to find inspiration.

**PIERSON** I never went to graduate school, so I haven't had any problem with back to nature or automatic drawing. And I honestly have to tell you, if that's one of your initial questions regarding this work, I feel I must have failed. If you didn't "get" some emotional, visceral or bodily response that took you out of the headspace of art history, then I failed because that's what I was hoping to do—to get a chakra response to the work. Taking myself out of the staccato of New York by relocating to North Captiva, I hoped to pull something out of myself and get at something that didn't have to do with "strategy." I didn't go away to find inspiration. I went away to find peace and quiet. I went away because that was what I wanted to do. I wanted to make something simple—little paintings—and not have to get into shipping huge canvases.

Gauguin was what, 120 years ago? That trope seems ripe for the picking! Anyway, I was hoping the story wasn't the interesting part, but the result was. In a perfect world, you wouldn't need someone who went to graduate school to unpack whatever meaning there was to be found in these works in such a way that it

would enthuse the public.

People love a story. I went to an island and worked every day on the beach. I was reading Emerson, which I have never done before, but it seemed to apply. My whole deal has always been a performance of the idea of the romantic artist. All artists are romantic.

**SIMMONS** The way that you characterize things is very important. This was just an earnest attempt to create the way you want, without any distractions.

**PIERSON** Imagine going to an island just to paint and walk around barefoot. It's like part of a dream I get to live, and I'm grateful for it. I've been making it happen since 1983, when I lived in a \$55 per week room by the beach that would get padlocked if I didn't pay the rent. I hope my work might make someone go off on their own trip.

**SIMMONS** I half-jokingly said when I saw the show that some of your watercolors reminded me of Judy Chicago in their resemblance to second-wave feminist body-centric imagery (or perhaps the feminized history of tapestry/weaving that seems to connect to your layered compositions). There's something that is not necessarily feminine, but rather some interior space—you're digging at the flatness of the paper for something beyond its representational capacities. What might this space be?

**SIMMONS** Whether through making explicitly abstract works, or words that are made strange to us as viewers, you are looking for novel methods to reframe people's vision. When thinking about precedents for your Cheim and Read show, I thought of another artist known for both painting and sculpture—Eva Hesse. I'm thinking specifically of her "Spectres" (1960) with their muted palette, gently expressive and deeply present brushstrokes and the subtle suggestion of bodies. This series seems to prefigure the erotics of her later minimalist sculpture. There is a similarly nuanced interaction in your work between the body and not-body, the jubilant and the deadpan, presence and absence. How have you so successfully moved among and throughout a variety of expressive strategies?

**PIERSON** Thanks for that comparison, because I worship Eva Hesse. She's out of my realm. She's the real ticket to me. When I first came to New York, I worked at Pat Hearn Gallery. She did an Eva Hesse show in the early 1980s when only a few people cared about Hesse or Louise Bourgeois. How do I do it? Time will tell. If it comes out of my hands, I usually like it or can talk myself into liking it. I don't know Hesse's whole story, but I know I have really visceral responses to what she made. I've gone through periods where my work is very penitent and repetitive—making a mark. Early on I was doing drawings of the front pages of novels I liked that were really intense and intimate and hard to make. I guess as artists, we want to indulge in the act of making, so you have to

figure out what you can do without attaching all this meaning to it.

It's hard to make work at this point because everything has been made. For me it all starts with my hands instead of my head.