

Jack Pierson

Press Release

MELANCHOLIA PASSING INTO MADNESS

March 30 to May 6, 2006. Opening Reception: Thursday, March 30, 6:00 – 8:00 p.m.

Cheim & Read is pleased to announce an exhibition of new work by Jack Pierson. This is Pierson's third exhibition at Cheim & Read, his last was in 2003.

Jack Pierson is a peripatetic artist, exploring different territories of media; he is known equally as well for his sign-letter sculpture (vintage sign letters are re-appropriated to create words and phrases loaded with cultural symbolism) as for his lush, sensual photographs. He generates video and sculptural installations; he produces intimate drawings and quickly scratched lists of fleeting phrases and crossed-out words. Informed in part by his artistic emergence in the era of AIDS, Pierson's work is weighted by a strong and somber undercurrent of melancholy and disillusionment, yet his images are often buoyed by a celebratory aura of seduction and glamour. The work is also infused with humor and a personal nod to the fallibility of human nature. Pierson's fixation with fame does not distance the viewer, but instead affirms one's tendency to yearn for an ideal, to daydream new identities. His artistic wanderlust is fueled by the poignancy of emotional experience (found in loss, love, lust) and by the sensations that permeate our individual response to memory and nostalgia, idealization and obsession, absence and grief.

The work exhibited in Pierson's current show at Cheim and Read continues his fascination with these themes, but moves beyond his often male-dominated imagery to meditate on female suffering. The title of the exhibition, *Melancholia Passing into Madness*, takes its name from a 19th century medical photograph of a deranged woman, which claims to capture the very moment her melancholy passes to madness. With this reference, Pierson cites the Romantic's fervent intertwining of madness and artistic genius; the link between artistic temperament and insanity was encouraged in part by mutual characteristics of introspection, imagination, and rebellious individualism. Pierson also references the ultimately cruel studies of Cesare Lombroso, who used physiognomy to distinguish criminals and maniacs from rational society by the analysis of their physical features.

Inspired by an earlier series of pencil drawings he did from an old postcard of a woman's face, Pierson produced for this exhibition a suite of twelve large-scale silkscreen paintings, all linearly graphic in black ink on diffused, off-white linen. Pierson has composed his subject each time in three-quarter view, but her emotional representation, managed by changes in the density of line and the subtle reorganization of features (and assisted by the sketchiness of Pierson's style) shifts between melancholic moods—she looks lonely, anxious, deep in thought, separated from the outside world. Her facial features become emblematic of emotion: suffering is paramount. The way in which Pierson has orchestrated these images further enforces their emotional distance from the viewer: removed from its original and singular representation in a photograph, the woman's facade is variously multiplied by hand and then enlarged by the machine-like reproduction of silkscreen. The images' complex journey from photograph to artist's drawings to multiple silkscreen paintings (from the mechanically produced to the hand-drawn to the mechanically produced) bestows anonymity. The series becomes a meditation on absence, a somber narrative of a woman's restrained endurance.

Contrastingly, in a group of what Pierson refers to as “first page drawings”, original texts from various female authors, already multiplied by machine to the printed word, is returned to the realm of the singular and hand written original. Pierson diligently copies the first page of books—penned by Barbara Pym, Jean Rhys, Sister Wendy and Marilyn Monroe, among others—on 11 x 14 inch paper. The implied intimacy of these pencil drawings is achieved by the meditative action of Pierson’s transcription, the voyeuristic aspect of another’s handwriting, and the personal subject of the women’s text. They remind one of illuminated manuscripts, and the patient, penitent work of the captivated copyist.

Exhibited also, Pierson’s video, *Past Life in Egypt*, emits colorful, transcendental, psychedelic energy into the show, but it too is not without melancholic undertones. Commissioned in 1997 by the artistic collective Bernadette Corporation, the video has been screened only once, in a nightclub. Pierson collaborated with Ursula Hodel to make the film, who plays an outrageous and glamorous dominatrix in the video. At one point, her character sadly recounts her past life as a wicked queen of Egypt, in love with a much younger man and impervious to the suffering of her people. The narrative is at times humorous, sensational and spectacular, but is ultimately grounded in the haze of past memories and the regrets of a past life.

Anchored by a sign-sculpture of the word “melancholia,” Pierson’s exhibition is a meditation on women’s suffering, and alludes to the link between grief and madness, artistic genius and insanity. Also an element in the show, memory is often nostalgic (for happy times), regretful (for past mistakes) or seeped in longing (for friends and moments lost forever), and always connected with the unavoidable sensation of past time. This in turn imbues memory with the characteristics of melancholy—the meditative, introspective aspect of “looking back.” Pierson’s exhibition continues to explore an enigmatic autobiography writ on an undercurrent of narrative supplied by memory, nostalgia and emotional experience.

Louise Fishman remains on view through March 25.

For additional information please contact us by calling 212/242-7727, faxing 212/242-7737, or emailing gallery@cheimread.com.