

CHEIM & READ

WEEKEND Arts FINE ARTS
LEISURE

The New York Times

FRIDAY, JANUARY 20, 2006

Art in Review

Jack Pierson

Early Works and Beyond

*Daniel Reich Gallery
537 West 23rd Street, Chelsea
Through Jan. 28*

This small survey of Jack Pierson's career gives a historical grounding — and thus some validation in the marketplace — to the romantic, detritus-oriented work favored by the Daniel Reich Gallery. But it also provides a useful account of Mr. Pierson's consistently melancholic art, its siftings through the rubble of American life and its restless roaming through photography, sculpture, drawing and language. In both medium and message, Mr. Pierson's work is about a kind of homelessness.

Mr. Pierson emerged in the early 1990's in a generation that reacted to

the slick self-confidence of late 1980's Neo-Geo with a dilapidated disillusionment hastened by AIDS. His approach was both Romantic and hard-nosed; it favored bits of reality or language slightly rearranged. His best-known works are poignant words and phrases spelled out in the plastic letters of old signs.

In Mr. Pierson's view, a strip of soft, garish carpet, comforting to the feet but not the eye, could be a sculpture. The opening page of Joan Didion's "White Album," painstakingly rendered in pencil, could be a drawing. For collage, pages from a catalog of Diane Arbus's work were glued image-side down to a canvas; they form a white grid dotted only with the well-known titles of the photographer's well-known images.

A work from Mr. Pierson's student days at the Massachusetts College of Art sums up loneliness with two menu boards: one reads "Breakfast/Hope," the other "Dinner/Fear." Memories of absent friends or lovers infuse "Goodbye Yellow Brick Road, Part II," from 1990, a bed of soap bars, each one inscribed with a man's nickname. For Mr. Pierson the inanimate world brims with longing and memory waiting to be coaxed forward, and he has made a regular habit of doing so.

ROBERTA SMITH