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'Close-up: Stages of Grief'

By David Rimanelli

CLOSE-UP

STAGES OF GRIEF

DAVID RIMANELLI ON JACK PIERSON'S *SILVER JACKIE*, 1991

Opposite page: Jack Pierson, *Silver Jackie*, 1991, plywood, silver Mylar, Christmas lights, 96 x 48 1/2 x 48".
Below: Poster for "Jack Pierson," 1991, Pat Hearn, New York.



JACK PIERSON'S *SILVER JACKIE* looks like nothing much: a rickety little postage stamp of a stage, just a raised platform made by the artist himself, and he says he's no carpenter. ("Those early stage pieces I did myself—and I'm not a woodworker—so they have a real slapdash quality.") Behind the stage, there's a silver Mylar curtain that I can't pry apart from my memories of 1970s Christmas decorations. It looks cheap; the materials are cheap. This sort of bedraggled, taped-together curtain and stage feel appropriate to those venues that one comes to with few expectations. The best one might expect would be trash of the John Waters sort. The chanteuse wouldn't be Anita O'Day; more likely, a drag queen lip-syncing to Judy or Dusty, maybe to Madge. When *Silver Jackie* debuted at Pat Hearn's Wooster Street gallery in 1991, downtown fixture Sharon Niesp sang a couple songs. But while actual performers are possible, they're not necessary to the "completion" of the art's mise-en-scène. This is the stage just after, or just before, the performance, pregnant (so to speak) with anticipation and disappointment and cigarette smoke, drunk with love. In later versions of the work, Pierson actually affixed a few cigarette butts to the stage, artfully arranged bits of crud, dainty and precious, as if they were sapphires set in a Fabergé egg.

Pierson's work attracted a lot of attention, and it's not hard to see why. It went along well with a number of overlapping tendencies in the art that flourished in New York and Los Angeles, especially in the period right after the end (the Fall . . . ?) of the big bad '80s, and which from there infected Europe and whatever else then constituted "the art world." We can identify several currents. Vastly important at the time: abjection, those artworks that seem to speak to (or weep and mutter and gasp at) the psychic terrain adumbrated by Julia Kristeva in her book *Powers of Horror* (1980) and, beyond that heady literary-psychoanalytic-theoretical brew, to a sudden upsurge in material poverty of many qualities—the poor of student-loan debt and dirty dishes, say, or of decaying cities. In 1992, Rhonda Lieberman published in these pages an essay titled "The Loser Thing," a text still insufficiently recognized in the developing art histories of this period. Richard



Left: Jack Pierson, *Diamond Life*, 1990, table, chair, record player, record albums, books, ashtray, coffee cup, miscellaneous items, linoleum flooring, painted wall, 96 x 60 x 40".

Below: Karen Kilimnik, *The Hellfire Club episode of the Avengers*, 1989, fabric, photocopies, candelabra, toy swords, mirror, gilded frames, costume jewelry, boot, fake cobwebs, silver tankard, audio media player, dried pea. Installation view, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, 2015. Photo: Anuradha Vikram.



Silver Jackie is more than content to leave the audience members waiting.

Linklater's 1991 film *Slacker* (and Jack Bankowsky's 1991 essay "Slackers," devoted to Pierson, among others) cast a long aesthetic (more than just aesthetic: psychic) shadow. Correlative movements encompass scatter art, with various avatars including Felix Gonzalez-Torres (mounds of candy, strings of lights, leaves of paper) Laurie Parsons, Cady Noland, Karen Kilimnik, and, of course, Pierson, whose fussily, obsessively (dis)arranged tableaux vivants definitely at the very least pointed toward disarray, entropy, squalor. Manicured squalor. Beautiful (and damned!) squalor. The romance of the forever-unmade bed. Important, too, was the sudden vogue for carefully calibrated unarranged hangings of drawings and photographs—not salon style, but rather with one picture hugging the perimeter

wall, others of markedly different sizes hovering by the ceiling. See, in this regard, Raymond Petribon, Wolfgang Tillmans, and Zoe Leonard.

Pierson's art also seems to gesture at what Nicolas Bourriaud called relational aesthetics, another well-nigh inescapable '90s artistic tendency. Pierson's abandoned scenes exist in potentia (anyway, *Silver Jackie* does), just waiting to become "activated"; "working" when someone alights on the stage and belts out a song, intones a poem, tells pathetic jokes. But *Silver Jackie* is more than content to leave the audience members waiting—to leave them always wanting more, as Andy supposedly said. The relational-aesthetics angle is a ruse, a lure for some, but not really operable. That silver curtain: *Nothing is behind it.*

Below: Jack Pierson, *Silver Jackie with Pink Spot*, 1992, plywood, silver Mylar, Christmas lights, spotlight, 96 x 48 1/2 x 48".

Below, right: Felix Gonzalez-Torres, *Untitled (Go-Go Dancing Platform)*, 1991, wood, lightbulbs, acrylic paint, go-go dancer in silver lamé bathing suit, sneakers, personal listening device. Installation view, Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York, 1991. Photo: Peter Muscato.



Gonzalez-Torres shares with Pierson a sort of ambiguous connection to relational aesthetics. I mean, when you take a candy or a piece of paper from a mound or a stack, yeah, you're relating to the object more than if you just looked at it. (I have a feeling Bourriaud must have meant something *bigger* than this when he coined the phrase in his 1998 book, but, ever the slacker, I don't know; I never actually read it.) *Silver Jackie* went on view at Pat Hearn less than a month after Gonzalez-Torres's *Untitled (Go-Go Dancing Platform)* opened at Andrea Rosen Gallery. (Another version, lit with pink light, debuted in London the following year.) I suppose that the imagined performer on *Silver Jackie* could be whatever go-go boy (or occasionally girl) whirls around the Gonzalez-Torres pedestal. But it seems unlikely. The solipsistic go-go dancers trip out to music that no one else hears. If dancing is often a code or stand-in for sexual congress, then this is sublime masturbation. Gonzalez-Torres's work is a pedestal, while Pierson's is a stage on which to enact, come what may, Marsha P. Johnson, Petra von Kant, the Women, Bree Daniels, Phèdre. Pierson's theatrics admit all sorts of not particularly self-flattering feelings: jealousy, greed, madness. Gonzalez-Torres, of course, isn't free from the affectively dark and dismal, from loss and mourning, but his works dramatize these conditions in a way that feels rather more stately—monumental, if you will—despite being sculptural “anti-monuments” of disappearance and entropy. They lack the undercurrent of sometimes caustic irony that girds much of Pierson's contemporaneous art. They're sincere, in a way; they insist on this, to the extent that both artists can be called sentimental—though again, in Pierson, that sentimentality typically has a protective coating of irony. Maybe.

Some people you know, however chipper or onward-moving they seem, bear at all times the marks of grief and suffering, giving up and rage. These people are my people. Grief and rage are the linings—the exquisitely luxurious Loro Piana linings—of those wool overcoats of success and cheer and stupid, happy satisfaction. There's no other way, or the other ways seem so facile, instrumentalized, hypocritical, deluded. Though all that's good fun too! □

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