Saltz, Jerry, "Shelter from the Storm," Arts, September 1991

NOTES ON A SCULPTURE

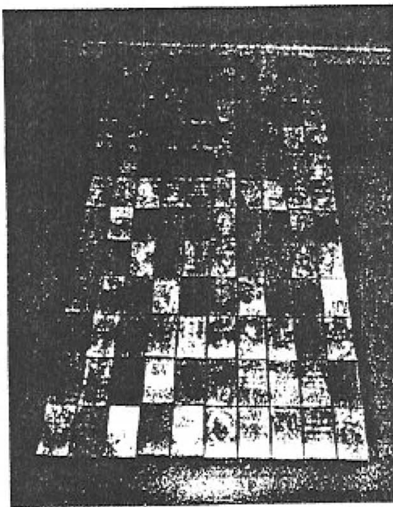
Jerry Saltz

Shelter From The Storm

Jack Pierson's *Goodbye Yellow Brick Road, Part II*, 1990

Jack Pierson's odd art has a kind of down-on-its-luck, just-scraping-by quality. It's *art noir*, without the wooden seriousness or the emotionless flat-footed gloom of its distant cinematic cousin. It's pieced together from carefully selected leftovers—tatters really—derelict and inexpensive materials (a dirt-poor, itinerant family, like the Joads from *The Grapes of Wrath*, might have the means to make this art). His works are animated by a narrative that is at once personal and mythic, sweeping and private—and has glimmers of tinsel-town glamour and toughness. Pierson's art is marked by an exquisite and enchanted aridness, and a hypnotic, nonchalant transience. But his art is never dark—there's a blank, hand-to-mouth radiance to it, the feeling that some sort of gifted and mysterious drifter might have made it. Pierson's hand feels innocent, but his soul feels old. You feel he's somehow experienced beyond his years, worldly, and a little laconic—even jaded—but he's endlessly elegant, a refined gentleman; and when he's on target he has moments of clarity and savoir faire that border on reverie. There is an incremental redemptive quality about his art. He rescues memories and materials from the junk heap—but he also seems like a man with a past, like he's making up for wasted time.

I suppose you could call Pierson a sculptor, but I think of him as a poet. Really, his work is a literature—it's all of a piece. They're stories and sagas, episodes and insignificant flashes of insight that all somehow add up to mundane dramas. He makes long stories short, reassembling bits and pieces from his own disjointed and often mundane personal (we assume) story. There's a post-beatnik sensibility to everything he does, a contradictory take-it-or-leave-it-ness, and a sincerity that can be downright sappy. Pierson's like a bad boy trying to make something of himself. It's as if Raymond Chandler, Hunter Thompson, Jack Kerouac, Montgomery Clift, and Marilyn Monroe were all one person and made art—you'd get this kind of over-the-edge luscious brevity; an art of ill repute and lurid lamentation, but an art that celebrates raucous life and all the fantastic ragamuffin castaway characters you ever met.



Jack Pierson, *Goodbye Yellow Brick Road, Part II*, 1990, 120 inscribed soap bars, 53" × 25" × 1½". Courtesy Simon Watson Gallery. Photo: Oren Slor.

Pierson's is an art of simple twists of fate. He's at home with the aimless. In some of his sculptures he finds these three-dimensional plastic letters, the kind used on movie marquees—discarded or fallen on hard times—and breathes a second, cryptic life into them by placing them in regular grids attached to the wall. You feel this guy roaming Times Square, searching for stuff to make art out of. The patterns he forms never really amount to words—they're grammatical ne'er-do-wells. They build up to words, but they never coagulate into them. They feel tired this way—like invalids. The letters simply trail off into gibberish, but not before they make you think of the other words you thought they were building up to. You desperately try to make something out of these letters—and then you just lay back and go along for the ride. You relax your sensibilities and let his wash over you, and this is refreshing and relaxing. You start to move at his pace.

In other pieces he makes empty stage sets with backdrops of silvery tinsel; or rich, red-flocked wallpaper—the kind you'd see at an out-of-the-way passport photo place, a two-bit Broadway agent's office, or maybe the walls of some dive, on which he simply hangs a tackily framed black-and-white publicity photo of the Ronettes. His work feels very inner city. There's this Warhol sensibility about his art. It doesn't look like Andy's so much as it *feels* like him—and this is kind of eerie and exciting. Pierson seems interested in celebrity, theatricality, milieu, and mood. (Obsessed would be too strong a word to use when talking about Pierson. He seems virtually incapable of mustering such feelings.) He's captivated by chance events, dilapidation, the languid, and the overlooked. It's as if one of those people at Warhol's Factory had gathered a sufficient sense of self and enough will and had begun to make art. Pierson celebrates and records the uneventful, unimportant details of life, which in the end sometimes turn out to be the most significant stuff of all. That fragile person you met on one of your trips—the spaced-out one with pretty eyes; those people you used to sit around and smoke cigarettes with till dawn; those places you used to go. He makes you remember things that happened to you and things that didn't—the memories you wish you had. Hotels and motels, lost keys and ashtrays, sinks full of dirty dishes, road trips and coffee shops. The world run on a skeleton crew—always oddly empty, overlit and undernourished, pale and strangely silent—as if someone had turned the sound off. He's the kind of person you wish you could be—easy, flexible, unencumbered, and alive. Even hi

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tedium is charged with electricity and a visionary aloofness.

It's always summer in Pierson's work. It makes you feel the way you do on a hot, dry, sizzling July day. A fictitious Nathanael West–James M. Cain–Los Angeles 1954 day. Sun-drenched and washed out. An end-of-Empire kind of day, where you feel the lazy weight of it all. The kind where your neck sweats and your clothes stick. Visions of *Double Indemnity* and *Sid and Nancy* drift in—like everything's played out and a little sour. But unlike West, who looked down on it all, or Chandler, whose stories blur one into the next, you feel Pierson cares, that it all means something to him, that he's holding on by the skin of his teeth. And this is endearing. He may not make "important" art—but he makes art about things that are deeply important.

His work is lyrical. In my mind it is most closely linked to the lyrics of songs. His works are like the songs that form the invisible backdrop of our lives—the sound track. The snippets and lines and parts of verses you can't live without and then soon forget. His work hits you the way songs do when you've just broken up with someone—when all the songs on the radio seem so important and meaningful—as if they're just for you. They have that kind of lucky synchronicity.

Although his work is just now becoming known, a piece from 1990 seems to presage much of what follows. It may not be his best piece (that distinction probably belongs to those honest little drawings), but I think you could say it is his "first" piece. In it he does something we've all done, only he does it more so and in public. *Goodbye Yellow Brick Road, Part II* is a grid of soap bars laid on the floor against a wall, twelve rows of ten bars each. They just sit there—you can smell them. The bars smell like industrial soap, or Lava. It's like a welcome mat made of little yellow cobblestones, or a Carl Andre with an inferiority complex. It feels antiquated—yellowing and lackluster as it is—and this look of age lends a bit of romance to the piece. It's a difficult edge to walk and not fall off into The Land of Nostalgia—and it's a close call. Pierson may win by a TKO.

I used to love watching bricklayers work when I was a kid. You got a real sense of progress, perfection, suspense, and beauty from their methodical process. Pierson trips this wire in a small and somewhat coy way (and this is what allows him to escape with his aesthetic life). First you feel as if it's simply an ironic play on sculpture and you think, "That's bad—borrrrrrring." Then something subtle and alluring takes place. Pierson throws your sense of scale and balance off. You know if you walked on this piece you'd squish it (unlike its muscular Uncle Carl), and there's something allusive about the dimensions. You think about the Yellow Brick Road in *The Wizard of Oz* even without knowing the title (which, though it's a good one, may give too much away, and I never liked the Elton John song it's named after). It's the opposite of high-tech and it's not ponderously Arte povera. There's almost no overt intervention—it's gentle and untainted.

If you bend down you can make out something imprinted on the pocked surface of each bar of soap—letters. They're difficult to make out. It's like looking through someone else's glasses. You've got to concentrate; you get a slight headache. But then you start to make out words and names and there is a pattern to them. These impressionable cakes have each been hand stamped, one letter at a time, with a particular name. They look like little tombstones, or sarcophagi. They're anonymous names and phrases, like BUTCH, MARK D., JIMMY M. and JOE; MODEL IN PENTHOUSE, GUY WHO STOLE 6 BUCKS, FRENCH GUY, BLACK GUY AT Y, and FAT GUY. And then everything starts to come into psychological focus. This is a kind of sexual *Total Recall*—a list of lovers and liaisons—with the names obscured. It's a confession and a memory tool—the words of the silent song that is life—those you "loved," if only for an instant.

The perishability of soap is equated with the fleeting nature of memory and love—one being material and the other immaterial. The cakes of soap are like gushy bars of gold, and will melt if they come into contact with water (like the Wicked Witch in *The Wizard of Oz*, so it makes you realize how tenuous and chimerical, fading and unfathomable these memories are—how they must be protected in order for them not to slip away. The soap also makes you think of hygiene and bodies, what is clean and what is dirty, baths as children and showers in high school, of bad jokes about bending over to pick up the soap, and having your mouth washed out with it. Somehow soap, so plain, becomes tangled in a melange of associations. This is the sexual history of one person—Pierson we assume—a full disclosure. It's really sort of amazing! It's a diagram of love—and it feels genuine; in short, autobiographical. There are three basic types of memory. One is recalling the name of a friend—of recognizing a color as "blue." Another is the type we use to remember the 50 states, or list the presidents in order. These are fairly "cool," rote-like. The third is "hot," and is located all over the body—where you remember not just the facts but the sights and sounds and smells of an experience, where your fingers remember the touch of warm skin. Pierson has put these last two types of memory together in a "love sonnet" 120 verses long.

Do all of us make lists of our lovers? Such a list serves to remind us who we are—who we were, what we want, where we come from. It reminds you of good times, bad times, wild times, and wicked times—moments of intense pain and pleasure. But most of all, I think, making a list like this tells you of times when you were alone and filled with desire, haywire with passion—looking for love, or sex, or connection, or whatever—a time when you are utterly and totally yourself; in short, the time when you're the most you. Times filled with private thoughts and secret fantasies that only you know about—things you and that other person take to your graves. These people we "loved" and were "loved" by *are* our biographies—are who we are. These names are markers, the brief respites from our "regular, normal" lives, the times when hunger and pleasure prevail, when heat wins out over reason and fear—when urge is more important than duty. A time when you get away from yourself—to yourself—in a "shelter from the storm."

It is said that it would take a year to recount a single day of your life. This pathetic piece has somehow mutated into something big. You start to wonder "How am I remembered?" Am I "Jerry S."? "That guy in Colorado"? "The boy on the beach"? "The one in the car"? "The out-of-shape guy with a messy apartment"?—or am I only a blank—an empty space in somebody else's life? And you realize that a part of who you are exists in other people's memories. That once someone is gone, a part of you is gone too. People take their memories of you with them, and a part of you is irretrievably lost. We remember each other and we hope we are remembered. Pierson seems so unashamed in his confession.

Every part of our body contains memory—Proust said "our arms and legs are full of torpid memories." Jack Pierson speaks of loss and oblivion—and the vast barren stretches of memory that can form between lovers—and reminds us that oblivion is the fate of all but a precious few of our dearest memories. And he means to make us remember these, our most passionate. □

Jerry Saltz has edited several books on contemporary art. His column, which concentrates on a single work, appears month[ly] in Arts.