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“The Life and Work of Charles Henri Ford”
Mitchell Algus Gallery, through Feb 12 (see Chelsea).

Why is artist Jack Pierson the one who, as the press release states, has “selected and arranged” the Charles Henri Ford show at the Mitchell Algus Gallery? Pierson is best known for his deceptively casual color photographs documenting handsome young hipsters in honey-lit or gloriously seedy settings, and for re-arranging plastic letters from vintage commercial signs to spell plaintive words like solitude.

Ford, who died last September at 94, was known less for his efforts as a visual artist than for his work as a poet and founder of the magazine View (1940–47). A legendary arts magazine of Surrealist bent, which sported glorious covers designed by artists such as Man Ray, André Masson, Fernez, Man Ray, and Pavel Tchelitchew (Ford’s companion for 26 years), View introduced American readers to the likes of, e.g., cummings, Jorge Luis Borges, Jean Genet and Paul Bowles. There is nothing from View in this exhibition. Instead, the show was selected from the mass of materials Ford left behind in his Dakota apartment. Algus even front rooms feature ephemeral and portrait of the artist others, Ford’s own idiosyncratic art, meanwhile, dominates the gallery.

In the charming “Scrapbook Col- lages” (1934–35), Ford superimposes snapshot cutouts of himself and his travel companions, Tchelitchew and the supremely elegant Cecil Beaton, on illustrations of quintessential Spanish scenes. But in this exhibit, the late 1960s and ‘70s rule. Works from that era include six intensely psychodrama cut-up “Poem Posters” (1966) and the haunting “Layout and Camouflage” (1976–77). Installed in a grid on one wall, this series of photographic portraits, each shot against one or more projected slide image, spans the generations from Paul Cadmus and Philip Johnson through Robert Rauschenberg and Ultra Violet, to Debbie Harry and Robert Mapplethorpe.

The show’s contents attest to Ford’s life and work as connecting threads in a mostly lavender bohemian elite that stretches from Cotteau to Warhol and beyond. In an effort to extend Ford’s legacy to the present, or merely to take his place at the party, Pierson has included a piece of his own, an allusion to the weight of history in the form of a sign that reads 16 TONS.—David Deitcher

Malick Sidibé
Jack Shainman Gallery and Kennedy Boesky Photographs, both through Feb 8 (see Chelsea).

Judging from the sheer joie de vivre of his photographs, Malick Sidibé’s portrait studio in Bamako, Mali, must be one of the happiest hangouts on earth. Each and every man, woman and child who ever dressed up to sit before his camera, whether in traditional finery or funky Western gear, appears so glamorous and self-possessed it’s hard not to wish for a session of one’s own.

However, most of the pictures in these two complementary exhibitions date from the postcolonial period of the 1960s and ‘70s, after Mali (once French Sudan) gained its independence. They record, in fascinating detail, a wholesale countercultural revolution. Unlike his mentor Seydou Keita, Sidibé did not confine himself to his studio, making formal portraits. He also took his camera out to neighborhood clubs and nearby beaches, photographing a generation of young people raking punishment at the hands of their Muslim elders to embrace the forbidden: Jimi Hendrix and James Brown, pompadours and Afros, bell-bottoms and bikinis, boom boxes and cigarettes.

About ninety lightly tinted black-and-white prints of Sidibé’s beach and party scenes comprise the show at Kennedy Boesky, while Shainman has 130 vintage studio and club prints. Most are no larger than a postcard and are “framed” with tape, string and cardboard, as is customary in Mali. The studio shots (including a striking self-portrait) date from the mid-1960s to 2002, when Sidibé dutifully photographed his more conservative clients in fabulous headdresses and voluminous gowns, while aiding and abetting his younger subjects’ wish to be seen in trendier getups. The difference in attitude between these sitters and their more traditional counterparts makes as indelible an impression as their pictures. Shown side by side, these images give American viewers the most intimate acquaintance with modern Mali that they’re likely to get this side of Ali Farke Toure and Salif Keita, whose infectious music is as spirited as Sidibé’s photographs. In fact, you can almost dance to them too.—Linda Yablonsky


Living in Brooklyn, and with life in our heterogeneous postcolonial world. Such amalgams also highlight a veritable tradition of cultural dialogue on the Indian subcontinent: Although Hindu India and Muslim Pakistan are now separate, antagonistic entities, their religious and artistic traditions are historically entwined. By resurrecting this connection, Sidibé’s hybrids not only speak to the present but also point to a forgotten past.—Laura Auricchio

Except for Valerie Tevore (whose videotaped questioning of the denizens of Amsterdam about the relative values of public and private yields predictably bural results), all the artists in “Walking in the City” effectively resist the complacent citizen’s role so disparaged by Rimbaud and Wozniakowski. Alila Villar awkwardly climbs building facades and telephone booths; Valie Export assumes cumbersome poses that transform her body into mock-architectural ornaments; Adrian Piper walks the street dressed as an Afro hipster, muttering memorized phrases from her diary. Both Yayoi Kusama and Kim Sooja simply stand still in crowds, forcing the throngs to move around them.

These days we are so transfixed by our collective trauma at the WTC’s absence that the possibility of individual thought and action seems almost boor- ish. This sanguine exhibition suggests that only through solitary acts of defi- ance can we restore the unity of the urban experience.—Noah Chasin


“Walking in the City”
Apex Art, through Feb 1 (see Soho).

This small but thematically tight group show curated by Melissa Brookheart Beyer and Jill Dawsey takes its title from a text by theorist Michel de Certeau. His 1974 Walking in the City argued for the importance of understanding urban space not as an abstract entity but as an aggregate of individual experiences. De Certeau’s focus was the World Trade Center and its oppressively authoritative omnipresence, a topic the show indirectly addresses by presenting a series of extremely solitary acts of artistic intervention (typically documented in photo or video) in various metropolitan environs.

It is the louche figure of Arthur Rimbaud, however—not De Certeau—who is the real motivating force behind this exhibition. In his activities within the Paris Comune of 1871, Rimbaud proved an ink-rarefied aesthetic appreciation with the brutal truth of journalistic reportage. The poète maudit appears here in the guise of a face mask worn in a photograph by David Wojnarowicz—another artist for whom the construction of identity was an act of political defiance and of transcen- dent beauty. Both he and Rimbaud resisted any codified role of worker or artist and insisted that all experience must be multifaceted and free of boundaries—a resistance intensely, in large measure, to evoke the oppression of a nonpolitical political sphere.