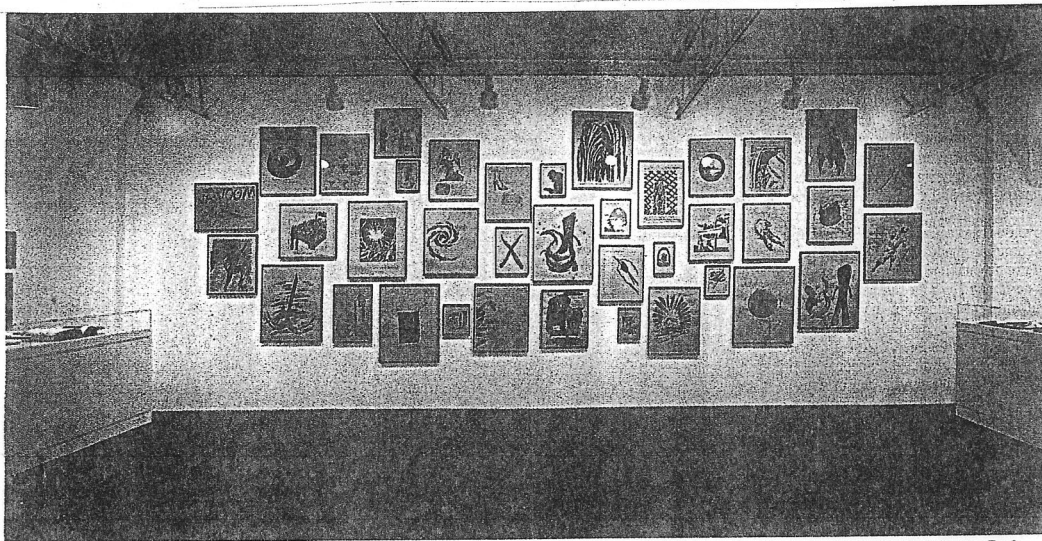


REGEN PROJECTS*

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Installation view of Raymond Pettibon's drawings at the Renaissance Society, University of Chicago, 1988. Photo courtesy the Renaissance Society. Photo Tom van Eynde.

Pettibon's Talking Pictures

An exhibition now on view at the Drawing Center surveys the work of L.A. artist Raymond Pettibon, whose quirky combinations of images and texts reflect his fascination with classic literature and the fringes of popular culture.

BY MICHAEL DUNCAN

Ever since Horace coined the phrase *ut pictura poesis*—"as in painting, so in poetry"—art and literature have had a complicated relationship, each eager to infringe on the other's domain. In this century, attempts to mix the two endeavors have resulted in such eccentric projects as Gertrude Stein's associative word "portraits" and Frans Masereel's textless woodcut "novels." For the past two decades, seemingly from left field, Los Angeles artist Raymond Pettibon has been melding the verbal and the visual in installations of hundreds of pinned-up drawings, each work incorporating a hand-lettered text inspired by writers ranging from John Ruskin all the way to Mickey Spillane. Only occasionally appropriating directly from his sources, Pettibon instead responds in his own words to what he reads. Displaying verbal sophistication, sonority and rhetorical control, a Pettibon text combines with its plainspoken ink or watercolor sketch to emulate the qualities of a compact poem.

While moving over the years from a bad-boy esthetic to an increasingly complex stance, Pettibon has developed a unique kind of "talking picture." A traveling exhibition of more than 500 of Pettibon's drawings and artist's books, organized by Suzanne Ghez of the Renaissance Society and Ann Temkin of the Philadelphia Museum of Art, provides an occasion for viewers to fully acquaint themselves with the work. Pettibon's output, which has been estimated at more than 7,000 drawings, offers a challenge to curators of a retrospective survey. Here, rather than selecting individual drawings, the curators have chosen to present 21 existing groupings of works belonging to private collectors and institutions, with each group hung in its own salon-style cluster. According to the curators' catalogue introduction, Pettibon "provides collectors a way of reading their own palms, and their collections of his work provide uncanny profiles of their individual obsessions and attitudes."

Although these groupings help to divide the large exhibition into man-

ageable chunks, they also prove somewhat distracting, at best providing odd insights into the "obsessions and attitudes" of well-known dealer/collectors like Barbara Gladstone, Rudolf Zwirner and Tom Patchett. (It seems worth noting that the private collections of Pettibon's drawings are noticeably stronger and reveal more discerning connoisseurship than those of the public institutions.) A further problem for those trying to understand the development of Pettibon's work stems from the fact that the exhibition's wall labels do not provide dates for the individual drawings. Although Pettibon's dating of his drawings is not always precise, knowing roughly when they were made can help viewers to sort out the complicated distinctions between earlier and later work.¹ By eschewing chronology or even thematic organization, the curators clearly aimed to provide viewers with a kind of total immersion that they feel suits the artist's freewheeling subject matter.

Although the best of them stand on their own, Pettibon's drawings generally rely on the cumulative impact they acquire in his sprawling installations. These walls packed with drawings introduce a protean artistic sensibility unfazed by distinctions between high and low. The broad range of this sensibility seems equally to reflect a wide reading of literature and visceral reactions to contemporary popular culture and politics. The installations thrust upon viewers the task of scanning and selecting among hundreds of disparate works, each providing its own resonant frisson. To digest this multitude of poetic fragments is to experience the exhilarated overstimulation of an esthetic binge.

With their variously lyric, comic, arcane, sardonic, poignant and paradoxical texts playing off a far-flung repertoire of images, Pettibon's installations seem almost textbook-ready displays of a fragmented postmodern sensibility. Significantly, however, his approach seems shaped less by the theories of Barthes, Deleuze or Foucault than by the writings of literary figures such as Laurence Sterne, Ruskin, Proust and Sir Thomas Browne. In addition to these stylistic exemplars, of course, Pettibon's sources include political cartoons, rock-music lore, hard-boiled fiction and true-crime sagas, film noir, Goya's etchings, '60s children's television, incidents from American history, baseball trivia and left-wing politics.

The exhibition is accompanied by an unusual catalogue called *Raymond Pettibon: A Reader*, which brings together the artist's drawings and his selections from the writings of favorite authors. These excerpts conjure up an imaginative world steeped in the whimsy, vibrant rhetoric and poetic nuance of the classic Western literary tradition. Henry James's lists of potent character names, Jonathan Swift's fantasy battle between ancient and modern books, Sir Richard Burton's categorization of pederastic terms, Robert Henri's psychoanalysis of the brushstroke, Arthur Symons's fetishistic appreciation for book bindings and Samuel Coleridge's for proper ink wells—all serve as prose complements to various aspects of Pettibon's contemplative, word-besotted esthetic.

Introducing multifarious personae and complex emotions, the drawings are by no means directly autobiographical. Very much the creations of a voracious reader, they often address the self-reflective and participatory nature of the act of reading. One of Pettibon's "Scarlet Letter" drawings, for example, features a large "A" accompanied by the text, "There is something in my storyteller's art that wants to put the reader and writer on equal footing in the role of the creator." Pettibon obviously relishes this open-ended quality of his art. A drawing of a hand holding a pen is captioned, "The hand that draws the Rorschach blots."

Pettibon's project brilliantly conveys the Borgesian notion that literature and art are self-sustaining universes which subsume individual readers and viewers. The irony-laden self-consciousness of Pettibon's work would



Untitled, 1986, black ink and collage on paper, 11 by 8 1/2 inches. Photos this article, unless otherwise noted, courtesy Regan Projects, Los Angeles.



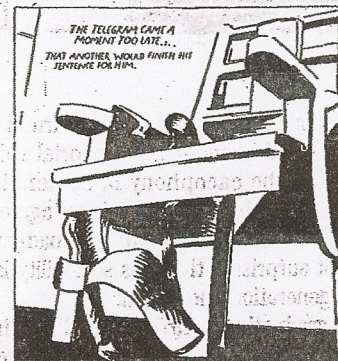
Untitled, 1987, black ink on paper, 24 by 18 inches. Collection Tom Patchett, Los Angeles. Photo courtesy Philadelphia Museum of Art.

ONE OF THE BEST THINGS ABOUT WAR IS ...
LOVE



Untitled, 1978, black ink on paper, 15 1/4 by 10 1/8 inches. Collection Hauser & Wirth, Zurich.

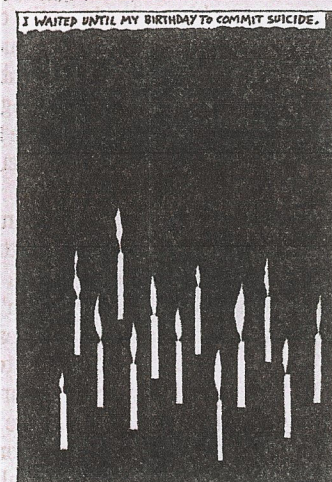
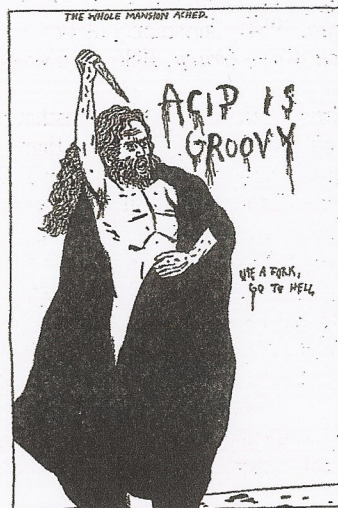
HERE THE VERY INTRICACY AND SUBLTLY OF THE MORAL WORLD ITSELF TAKES FORM. (AUG GOLDREB HIMSELF HAD A HAND IN DESIGNING IT.)



AND FORM EVERYWHERE PREDOMINATES OVER THE MERE MATTER OR SUBJECT HANDLED.

Untitled, 1991, black ink on paper, 22 1/2 by 17 inches. Collection Rudolf Zwirner, Berlin. Photo courtesy Philadelphia Museum of Art.

Untitled, 1984, black ink on paper, 14 1/2 by 10 1/2 inches.



Untitled, 1984, black ink on paper, 12 1/2 by 8 1/2 inches. Collection Barbara Gladstone, New York.

Pettibon's sprawling installations of his drawings create a field of infinite dissociations, ranging from Houdini to baseball lore to Gothic architecture.

In the mid-'80s Pettibon began to branch out, exploring subjects that were ripe for more expansive, literary texts. Perhaps the most lyrical of these works are the train drawings, some of the best of which can be found in his wonderful larger-scale book *Meandering On a Riff* (1988, Illiterati Press). In ink or watercolor sketches that depict a variety of speeding steam and electric engines, Pettibon plays with the quintessential American themes of wanderlust, frontiersmanship, upheaval and idealism. He employs a refined, even tender irony, relishing the various subtexts of innocence, power or burgeoning sexuality. A drawing of a train winding through hills is captioned, "Think of an Indian running." In another, the text next to a cylindrical steam locomotive reads, "When I see a train, I want to take it in my arms."

Pettibon achieves similar effects with other repeated visual motifs, which include a silhouetted cityscape, a surfer on a huge cresting wave, a black Bible, the mushroom cloud of an atomic blast, a Gothic cathedral, a bare lightbulb, Joan Crawford's face, a silhouetted penis, a baseball player and a heart. He elaborates elliptical comments around these motifs, testing out tone, mood and rhetoric like a jazz musician exploring a theme.

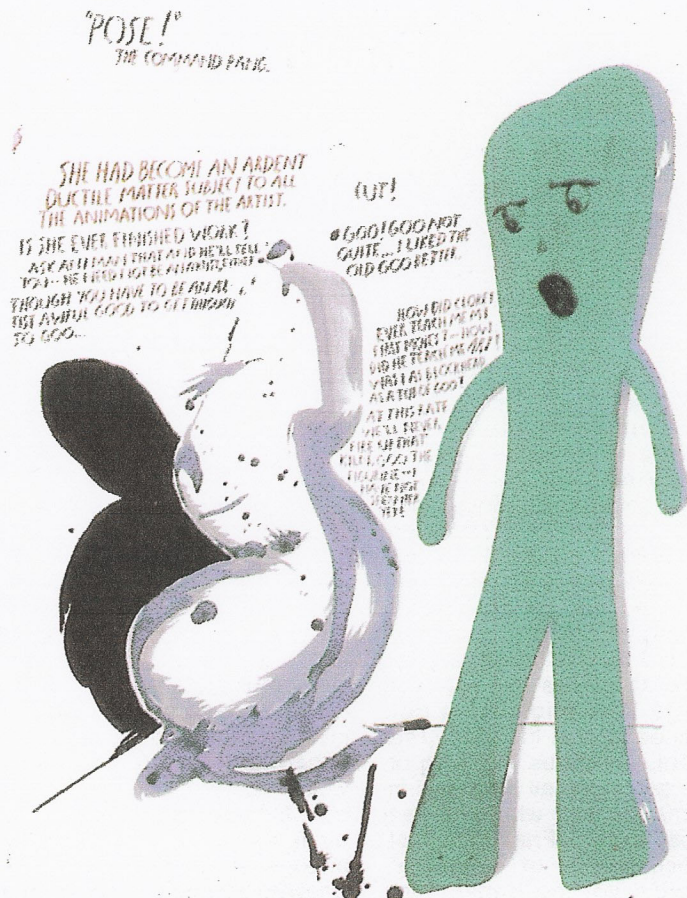
Pettibon's own role as creator takes center stage in two series centered on comic alter egos. The first of these, Vavoom, based on a minor character in the TV version of the comic strip "Felix the Cat," is a cloaked urchin with a huge gaping mouth that blasts out only his name. This one-note oracle with an earth-shattering voice serves as a kind of reductive parody of Pettibon's role as an oddball bard. One text refers to Vavoom as "the terrible accuser of the earth." Another hints at the meaning of his booming message and anticipates his listeners' reaction: "The voice of his love or hate, of his hope or sorrow, idealizing, challenging, or condemning the world. Are we really dead?"

As Ann Temkin spells out in her cogent catalogue summary of Pettibon's enterprise, Vavoom can be seen as a sort of Romantic poet, one "with the innocence of youth but with the ability to be both mighty and destructive." The text of one Vavoom drawing plays with that image of the artist and also doubles as a tongue-in-cheek self-portrait: "A beautiful, actual, fictive, impossibly young (how young?) man, of a past age and undiscoverable country (ok, America), who spoke in blank verse and overflowed with metaphor. America's greatest poet."

Pettibon's second comic alter ego is Gumby, the rubber-eraser hero of the 1950s "claymation" children's TV show, who is gifted with the supernatural ability to slide through the covers of books and take part in storybook adventures. Gumby's hands-on interaction with fiction—in a sense rewriting it to include himself—of course appeals to the bookish Pettibon. Several particularly fascinating drawings concern Gumby's attempted creation of a mate named Goo, whom he tries to sculpt out of a mass of blue clay. As Temkin reports, the Goo of the television series turned out to be a "long-lashed, high-voiced 1950s blonde." Pettibon's Gumby, however, significantly hesitates to sculpt her into any distinguishable shape. The act of shaping a new character according to his own whims seems too daunting for this failed Pygmalion.

Like Gumby, the Pettibon who emerges from an examination of his works is a solitary sort. Many of his drawings deal with sexuality, twisting and turning ideas about masculinity in particular. His phallus drawings, often featuring a whole squadron of penile shapes accompanied by ironic quips, scent out latent sexual urges in everything, lampooning the very idea of the phallic symbol and the Freudian notion of the male urge to create. Pettibon seems most intrigued by the manipulative and compulsive sides of sexuality, especially its engendering of fictive masks and odd role-playing. In many drawings, repressed gay characters—most memorably Batman and J. Edgar Hoover—are confronted with the contrast between their public image

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Untitled, 1991, colored inks on paper, 30 by 22 1/4 inches. Collection Rudolf Zwirner, Berlin.

An untitled acrylic wall drawing from Pettibon's 1995 exhibition at David Zwirner Gallery, New York.



Pettibon

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and their taboo desires. The Joan Crawford drawings address what Pettibon views as the grotesquerie of the actress's desire to conform to Hollywood ideals. An outrageous series of drawings depicting Ronald Reagan's vortex-like anus and another series chronicling alleged trysts between Nancy Reagan and unnamed CIA operatives equate private and public deceptions, providing down-and-dirty catharses of grim late-'80s political dramas.

In the substantial body of writing about Pettibon's work, a number of art critics seem to have come unhinged when confronted with the artist's hundreds of fictive characters. In their efforts to pigeonhole the work into the category of postmodern fragmentation, these critics tend to deny the artist creative control of his own voice. Pettibon's uncertain or equivocal personae, however, echo such modernist antiheroes as T.S. Eliot's Prufrock, Samuel Beckett's Malone and Molloy, and the book-obsessed narrators of stories by Jorge Luis Borges. And Pettibon's cullings of literary sources from the past are very much in the tradition of such 20th-century chestnuts as Pound's cantos, Eliot's "The Waste Land," Cyril Connolly's *The Unquiet Grave* and Norman O. Brown's *Love's Body*.

Pettibon's work makes evident the lack of nuance and sophistication in much of today's art criticism. With their complex resonances and cadences, his drawings seem most unlikely subject matter, for example, for the tortured prose of Benjamin Buchloh, whose catalogue essay is characterized by a host of writerly sins, including clotted syntax, elliptical logic and coded terminology. Furthermore, Buchloh wrongheadedly identifies the flatly phrased "Truisms" of Jenny Holzer as a "major precursor" for Pettibon's work.³ It seems clear, however, that Pettibon's enterprise owes less to the political, text-driven work of artists such as Holzer, Barbara Kruger or Hans Haacke than it does to the language-oriented work of a more poetic group of artists from Los Angeles, namely Ed Ruscha, Alexis Smith and Allen Ruppersberg.

Exploiting the full complexity of the written word, Pettibon's drawings bring a full-fledged literary sensibility to the art world. His installations inflect the individual drawings' formal properties, so that their content is diffused to become part of an aggregate map of experience. These installations provide a setting that can encompass such topics as the Reagans, Houdini, baseball lore and Gothic architecture—and introduce a new style of anomie, one of infinite dissociations and polymorphous dissatisfactions.

In an unexpected way, the loose formal structure of Pettibon's work softens its hardest edges; his sprawling displays create an upbeat mood that subsumes even the gristliest drawings. A large wall drawing in his 1995 show at David Zwirner Gallery in New York depicted a cluster of pencils; the text read, "One spends one's life in the happy condition of never being without a subject." With the buoyant confidence of a lifetime reader, Pettibon will forever be stoked on books and ready to draw. □

1. Pettibon sometimes does not add text until years after making the drawing. The dating of such works is particularly difficult to pinpoint.
2. Pettibon's two-hour video *Sir Drone* (1989) features a band hopelessly trying to be "punk." Other of his videos from the same period, such as *Citizen Tania: As Told to Raymond Pettibon*, *The Whole World is Watching: Weatherman '69* and *Judgement Day Theater: The Book of Manson*, chronicle the antics of similarly misguided '60s radicals, hippies and cultists.
3. "Pettibon, like Holzer, adheres strictly to a nonjudging and nonselective arrangement of quotations of the language performances and ideological subject positions inhabited in everyday speech, thus making it impossible for the viewer/reader to detect a centralized speaking and judging subject and necessitating a continuous revision of the reader's own responses to the positions performed in the text." Benjamin Buchloh, "Raymond Pettibon: Return to Disorder and Disfiguration," in *Raymond Pettibon: A Reader*, Philadelphia, Philadelphia Museum of Art, 1998, p. 227.

"Raymond Pettibon" was organized by the Philadelphia Museum of Art and the Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago. The exhibition appeared at the Renaissance Society [Sept. 13-Nov. 3, 1998] and is now at the Drawing Center, New York [Feb. 21-Apr. 4]. It will travel to the Philadelphia Museum of Art [May 2-July] and the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles [Sept. 26, 1999-Jan. 2, 2000]. The exhibition is accompanied by a 252-page publication, Raymond Pettibon: A Reader, featuring literary selections made by the artist as well as essays by Bernard Welt, Hamza Walker, Benjamin Buchloh, Peter Schjeldahl and Ann Temkin.

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