

REGEN PROJECTS

Cerio, Steven, "Conversation with Raymond Pettibon," *Seconds*, #34 (1995): pp. 48-50 ill.

SECONDS

RAYMOND PETTIBON

"Art is the last place anyone is going to derive their inspiration from."

By STEVEN CERIO

Like most people on the East Coast in the early Eighties, I first witnessed **RAYMOND PETTIBON**'s work gracing his brother **Greg Ginn**'s early **Black Flag** LPs as well as the gatefold of the **Minutemen**'s classic *Double Nickels On The Dime*. On the West Coast, his work had wallpapered walls and telephone poles since the dawn of Punk — a period highlighted by his brief stint as the original bassist for **Black Flag**.

Raymond's work was a great gift, going far beyond the droll Rock & Roll iconography so painfully present at the time. His drawing embodied what my suburban friends and I believed to be the Punk ideal: unruly, snide and bleak. Even his draftsmanship reaked of sarcasm and gloom.

His output consisted entirely of drawings with captions.

*During the Eighties he self-published close to one hundred photocopied collections of his grim renderings, as well as contributing politically-charged **Serial Art** to **Exit** magazine and producing a book of dynamic locomotive drawings. Nowadays he hangs his voluminous works on gallery walls throughout most of the free world. He tacks up his pieces by the hundred in salon style, sometimes putting one piece over another, obscuring both word and image and making the relationship (conversation) increasingly abstract.*

*In the last decade, Pettibon's work has borrowed less and less from Punk ideals and has taken on a decidedly diplomatic and expedient tone. He's thrown away his checkers and taken up chess. Where before his work seemed to emanate from the Cro-Magnon underpinnings of Punk, he has now taken on a lyrical glow which attributes to the literary luminaries **William Faulkner**, **Marcel Proust** and **James Joyce**.*

Only a few years ago **Sonic Youth** convinced Raymond to decorate their Goo LP. Despite the great difference between what emanated from the vinyl and what was said by the images on the cover, Pettibon's work still felt abrasive and timely.

His image and word juxtapositions, though visually sparse in composition, seem heavy, manifesting themselves as question marks. Lyrically they stand as a testament to logic and speech in their purest states, frozen at the decisive moment before being polluted by the obscene vagaries of conversational speech.

SECONDS: A lot of people know you from the Xeroxed books you were distributing through SST.

PETTIBON: I didn't distribute them through SST to any extent. I ended up destroying most of them. No, they never distributed anything if they could help it. I tried to keep some in print later. I just did thirty, forty copy editions and ended up giving ninety-nine percent of them away. Right now, there's nothing in print, but I'm always planning on doing more when I get the time.

SECONDS: Are you going to collect them together?

PETTIBON: Yeah, part of it is to have the documentation evidence and to have a communicative value as well, rather than having them disappear into the ether.

SECONDS: Is it important that people see the books?

PETTIBON: Oh sure. Part of making art is you're making it for somebody. It's not done in a vacuum. Some work is problematic as far as reproduction and bookmaking and some is less so. A lot of my stuff tends to work just as well or better in book form. I always like the idea of making books ...

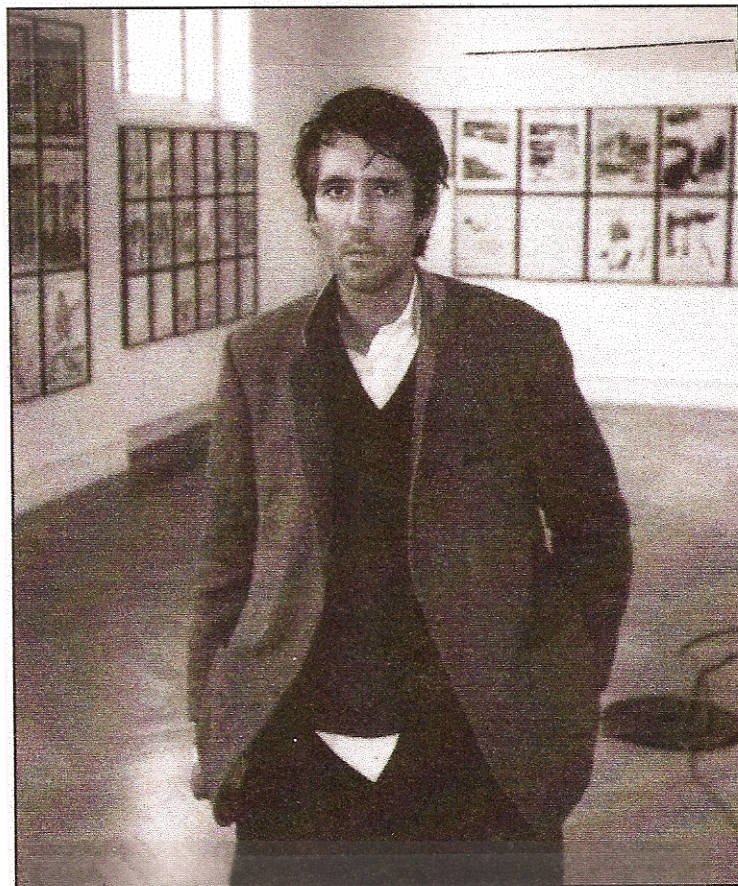
SECONDS: From the older stuff, you get this tag on you about the comics influence but I've read that you're not even a comics fan.

PETTIBON: No, I wouldn't say that. My visual style is no doubt right out of comics. While learning to draw, the figures I looked at were people like **Marsh**, **Hopper**, the **Ash Can School**, the etching style, **Goya**, then also people like **Milton Caniff**.

SECONDS: *Herriman*, maybe? *The Crazy Kat* stuff?

PETTIBON: I love his work. I don't know if that comes into my own stuff that much but I like him from afar. There's some artists you may not even like whose work, for whatever reason, becomes an influence on your own. I think maybe the Caniff kind of school and the guy who used to ... what was his name? **Frank Robbins**, I liked his style. Who else ... this guy who used to draw for EC, **Bernie Krickstein**. Those are probably the primary ones. I'm not a comic fan so much. I love the form but I just don't think there has been much done in it. I think the comics form is capable of a lot more than what's been done in it. It

"Everyone thinks they've got great ideas."



should be as legitimate an art form as any but the problem is they don't want to play on the same playing field as everyone else. On one hand, they're bitter about being looked down upon by the rest of the art world, but when it comes down to it, they're happy being in their own world and having their own standards. There's an attractiveness to being ghettoized. Like any genre writers, they're making a steady income putting out the same thing they've been doing over the years.

I never wanted to be a commercial artist and have some asshole art director for DC looking over my shoulder telling me what to do. I never wanted any part of that world, never thought about it without revulsion. The comics field is its own enclosed little world. It's just a slacker jack-off mentality of people who know what they want. They're the kind of people who are into what they themselves call bad films. They have this inverse high-low kind of thing that they celebrate.

SECONDS: *That whole concept caught on a little too heavily. People are going out and watching a movie just because they think it's bad.*

PETTIBON: I haven't been able to get through a comic book or so-called bad movie. The whole camp thing, looking

down on something ... if that's their whole life, they can't get anything out of the other end.

SECONDS: *Something like poetics — how deep does that run in everyday life?*

PETTIBON: It depends on what you mean by poetics. I don't set-up these hierarchies, either. What I mean is that there's a certain type of people who break them down just to celebrate the garbage. I can appreciate Rap music, I think there's great writing in Rap and other forms outside of academic poetry. You have poets writing for poets and that's always been the complaint. Every generation looks

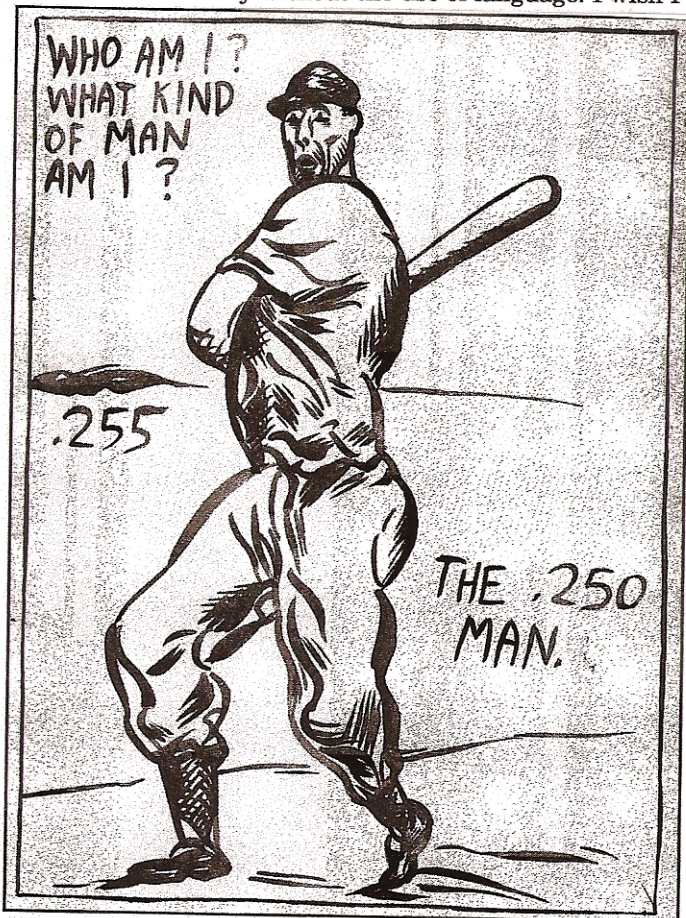
down on the previous generation with its apocalyptic vision like everything is going down the gutter, and it's not true. Things always revive. Good things are always going on. It's not that bad.

SECONDS: *What do you find more powerful, the drawn image or the written word?*

PETTIBON: I guess the written word can work graphically within your own mind but my work's always been weighted more towards the words. I don't think there's any question.

SECONDS: *With the lettering you're doing, it seems like the words are fighting for control. Do you ever see yourself doing something with just words and no images?*

PETTIBON: I've done that before. There's usually some formal reason behind it that calls attention to itself as words without images. I also do writing of other sorts where I'm not dependent on visual images. In the work we're talking about, it is art and it's not that often that I can get away without the use of language. I wish I



Who Am I? 1987



Black Flag "Six Pack" 7" with Dez Cadena (SST 005), 1981

PETTIBON: I'm not making any demands of people. I would if art had the ability to do that with authority, but that's highly doubtful with the debasement of art in this country. Art is the last place anyone is going to derive their inspiration from.

SECONDS: *How about demanding visually? Do you hope to exhaust the viewer?*

PETTIBON: Not really. The way I look at it, there's no contract with the viewer the way a professor assigns a certain amount of pages to the student. I'm not making any demands on the viewer. I don't have any crusade about that. The gallery audience is not a captive audience like in music or theater. There's been shows before where you have this palpable resentment between the audience and myself. Just walk out. I'm not expecting anything from anyone. For one thing, I'm working in a medium where even the crassest pulp book takes at least a few hours to read — and people are complaining that it takes more than ten minutes to look at a show of mine? Here I am, condensing large bodies of work into small fragments and it's as if I'm making demands. The whole thing is absurd. If someone's interested in my work, maybe some people go back a few times. That's nice but I don't have to know about it. It's not an issue with me. When I read art reviews, it's like reading restaurant reviews. The whole show is reviewed as if it's set up with an appetizer ... whatever. I like the idea of being able to do shows of a few works, that's cool too. The show in New York I didn't have any hand in.

SECONDS: *You didn't hang that one?*

PETTIBON: No. I didn't make the decisions of what to show. There's stuff I would have preferred not to, there's ways I would have done it different ... sometimes it works better just to let someone else do it. If there's any complaints, maybe it's from an art student whose assignment was to go look at the show and make notes on every piece.

SECONDS: *How do you perceive your own show?*

PETTIBON: Usually, I try to just dismiss it. I think it's an expression of love — that's what's behind it for me. Anything less is not worth all the years of twenty-four-hour days three hundred sixty-five days a year. Nothing else would compensate for all of that.

Raymond Pettibon is represented by:
Regen Projects, Los Angeles