



THIS FEELING IS EXPRESSED MOST CLEARLY IN THE POEMS.

*Swinging
For
The
Fences*

**THE WICKED
IRONY &
MASSIVE
OUTPUT OF
RAYMOND
PETTIBON**

Written by Jamie Brisick

Raymond Pettibon's text/image paintings and drawings look a bit like scenes from a comic strip, albeit with a dark, ironic twist.

In a black-and-white drawing, a pair of noir-ish gentlemen in suits sip what I imagine to be hard liquor. "To the same woman," reads the text. In one of his many surf paintings, Gumby glides down the face of a tubing blue wave. "Lived, Loved, Wasted, Died," reads the text. Then at the bottom: "P.S. — Surfed." His most well-known piece might be the cover of Sonic Youth's *Goo*. A black-and-white illustration of a pair of young, mod-looking lovers in dark sunglasses, the girl at the wheel, the mood vaguely sinister. In the upper right corner the text reads, "I stole my sister's boyfriend. It was all whirlwind, heat, and flash. Within a week we killed my parents and hit the road."

Born in 1957 and raised in Hermosa Beach by academic parents, Pettibon's childhood was filled with books, comics, basketball, baseball and surfing. When his brother, Greg Ginn (Ginn is the family name, Pettibon is Raymond's nom de plume), formed seminal punk band Black Flag in 1976, Pettibon was appointed chief graphic designer. He first designed the band's famous logo (four black bars), and then a slew of album covers. He also published zines of his text and drawings with catchy titles like *Tripping Corpse*, *The Language of Romantic Thought* and *Virgin Fears*. For much of the next decade he remained decidedly underground, exhibiting in small galleries and record stores.

As his work evolved, so did his audience. In the mid-'80s a handful of renowned L.A. artists — Mike Kelley, Jim Shaw, Paul McCarthy and Ed Ruscha among them — embraced Pettibon and subsequently a number of key collectors and curators. Soon, he would occupy an almost contradictory post. He was a bona fide global art star; he was also a DIY/indie icon. Though he'd graduated with a degree in economics from UCLA in '77, he was essentially self-taught. His medium required nothing more than a piece of paper and a pen. He ran with jazz musicians, barflies, Mike Watt of Minutemen. He did not drive but rather rode public transport, often scribbling away at the back of the bus. To top it off, he still lived with his parents in the home he grew up in.

His subject matter includes Charles Manson, surfers, baseball players, vixens, homicidal teenage punks, Elvis, FBI director J. Edgar Hoover and the cartoon figure Gumby, who has the miraculous ability to walk into a book and enter a story (an alter ego, perhaps?). His brilliance resides in the marriage/collision/disconnect of image and text. Some pieces do this in a wry, straightforward manner; others are like great song lyrics — they could be interpreted a thousand different ways, and none would be wrong.

I first met Pettibon about a dozen years ago at Regen Projects, his Los Angeles gallery. Tall, shaggy and bearlike, he spoke slowly, carefully, with little eye contact. He wore sneakers, loose-fitting trousers and a wrinkled dress shirt, his dark hair looking like he'd just woken from a long nap. I thought he was one of the most stylish dudes I'd ever met.

Though he still keeps a home and studio in Los Angeles, Pettibon spends much of his time in New York. He lives downtown in a Frank Gehry-designed high-rise with his girlfriend, the artist Aida Ruilova, and their 1-year-old son, Bo. He is an avid sports fan. Above the kitchenette of his studio hangs a poster of John McEnroe and Björn Borg. Deeper in the studio, presumably where the serious work takes place, portraits of baseball players Babe Ruth and Lou Gehrig do a sort of face-off. Alongside his worktable is a massive collection of vintage baseball bats and mitts.

"Wanna hit?" asked Pettibon during a recent visit to his studio.

"What do you mean?"

"Can we set up the pitching machine?" he asked his studio assistant, Billy.

A minute or two later, I found myself taking turns at bat with Pettibon. The pitching machine hurled soft plastic balls. Pettibon's stance was relaxed and sturdy. He hits like a motherfucker.





Opening Page
NO TITLE (THE FEELING IS) 2011
 Pen and ink on paper
 Unframed: 35 x 47 inches (88.9 x 119.4 cm)
 Framed: 37 1/4 x 49 1/2 inches (94.6 x 125.7 cm)

Left
NO TITLE (WITH BROWS KNITTED) 2011
 Pen, ink, gouache, acrylic and collage on paper
 Unframed: 32 x 42 1/2 inches (81.3 x 108 cm)
 Framed: 34 1/2 x 44 1/2 inches (87.6 x 113 cm)

Next Page
NO TITLE (IT WAS A) 2011
 Pen, ink, acrylic and pastel on paper
 Unframed: 51 3/4 x 94 1/2 inches (131.4 x 240 cm)
 Framed: 57 1/4 x 100 1/4 inches (145.4 x 254.6 cm)

IT WAS A CURVEBALL THAT DID NOT CURVE OR DROP;
BUT HUNG THERE AS IF SUSPENDED IN SPACE, WAITING FOR
SOMEONE TO JUMP ON AND TAKE IT FOR A RIDE HOME.
LOOKING FOR SOMETHING TO DRIVE?
LOOK NOWHERE ELSE. AND THERE'S ROOM FOR
THREE MORE -- "COME ON BOARD!"

CRACK!



TO THAT HE GAVE THIS
GORGEOUS ANSWER.



WEIGHING ONE SIDE AGAINST THE OTHER.

Can you remember your earliest drawings?

I always drew. My brother, Greg, and me, we did this book in '77 or '78 called *Captive Chains*. And then the record covers — that was around '78. Before that, I did some cartoons for the *Daily Bruin*. Not many, maybe a half a dozen. My drawing skills and my politics were probably too radical for that. But that's how far it goes.

What inspired you when you were growing up?

I was never into comic books; I could never read them. It's not like it was below me, or anything. But as a visual style, it was something that you could learn from. Actually, my early style was more from the etching style of Goya and John Sloan and Edward Hopper — I was working in black-and-white on paper — and, of course, Blake. Those are the starting points of the model for anyone working black-and-white on paper. Those were the templates — especially Goya and Blake because they combined words and drawings at the same time. And also political cartoons — Herblock, who drew for *The Washington Post*. There are many others along the way. I'm always open to influences.

Tell me about the zines you used to make.

I think my first zine was probably '78. It took me a couple years to finish because I was just learning how to draw — and still am, really. My second one was maybe the first *Tripping Corpse*, which became a series of like 12 or 13, and that was a few years later. And then there were a number of them, about 100 or so. The fact is I stopped doing them, though I never meant to, but I had other things to do. But I never want to leave the fanzine form, you know? Christ, I always tell myself, "Tomorrow I'll do a fanzine," which I should do, but that's how things turn out.

Your work weds text with image. Was that there from the beginning?

Yeah, because I can't rely on one or the other; it has to be the combination, really. Even when I do video or film, it's a combination of both. I'm not a great draughtsman or painter. It's a combination of the two; it's always been and probably always will be. You know, I can't see myself doing great drawings or painting without the crutch — or whatever you want to call it — of having to add language to it.

What comes first, the words or the image?

Well, it can be one or the other, or at times simultaneously. I don't know. It's hard to say. I mean, I have voluminous writings, and I have ... you know, you've seen my studio — I have stacks of drawings, and it's a matter of putting them together. One depends on the other. I think more in the beginning I started with an idea for a drawing, then I did the drawing. Nowadays, I'm just as likely to do the drawing first then figure out a way to make the drawing relevant or interesting or tell a story.

I've noticed how you'll be working on, say, a piece about surfing next to a piece about baseball next to a piece about Gumby. I'm guessing you work on these simultaneously, i.e., you're shifting subject, theme, headspace. Do you inhabit each piece the way, for instance, an actor inhabits a character?

I don't know. Maybe. I write all over the place, and I draw all over the place, so there's no demarcation point so much. The subject matter: I didn't start at ground zero and figure, I'm going to do drawings about Gumby or surfing or baseball, they're just subjects that evolved and for whatever reason held interest for me. You know, 'cause I grew up with surfing and baseball, and I don't know, like, cotton candy and whatever images I do. And on the other

“UNFORTUNATELY, WE HAVE ONLY A SPARSE AMOUNT OF TIME TO LIVE ON EARTH, AND THAT'S REGRETFUL, BECAUSE I WISH I COULD DO MORE READING AND LOOKING AND INVESTIGATING, BUT YOU KNOW, I'M NOT GOING TO BE ON THIS EARTH FOR THAT LONG. THERE'S ONLY SO MUCH ATTENTION SPAN ONE HAS. CHRIST, YOU KNOW, I'D LOVE TO READ HEMINGWAY'S COLLECTED WORKS, BUT I DON'T HAVE THE MOTHERFUCKING TIME.”

hand, there are images that are ... I try to start with completely odd images that can be ... wherever they come through. I wouldn't say they come through deep in the unconscious; it's more like whatever is in the media or whatever I run across randomly. It could be anything. Like right now I'm doing these images based on pro wrestling, and earlier there are some collages based on 69, like 69 sexual positions. And they work out visually as a collage. [I'm not really obsessed with any of these subjects]. Like, I'm not a fanatic about, but, you know, I like pro wrestling. It's not psychologically driven from my unconscious. It's more taken almost randomly from the real world or the media world, which is all the same.

When your work is flowing well, what's happening?

I can write profusely for days and nights. I don't have writer's block or that same thing with the images. I can always do something with anything. I mean, it's a challenge to me to take the most ridiculous image and make a story out of that. Like, you know, walking into the studio, if you put your eye onto something, I have the confidence to, whatever it is, to make something of interest that's worth telling. Of course, that's not for me to judge, but it could be anything.

Your work makes me think of Hemingway's "iceberg theory," as in there's so much subtext, so much kind of vibrating and suggested in both the words and the image.

Yeah, Hemingway's part of the canon; he's had his ups and downs as far as his reception goes, for whatever reason. My work isn't looked at that closely. I'm not complaining about it, OK? I'm grateful for the audience I have. I'm grateful to have one person looking at my work, which wasn't always the case. Yeah, of course there's a whole life of ... you know, I didn't fall off a turnip truck into making art. I mean, how old am I? 55. You know, I've been reading and studying and drawing my whole motherfucking life, and any individual piece doesn't just create itself. There is a background to it. There is ... you know I can't make ... I'm not going to footnote everything or explain everything. If someone else wants to do that, fine. I'm not saying it's necessary at all. The more you delve into great artists and writers the more there is, the more it never ends. Unfortunately, we have only a sparse amount of time to live on earth, and that's regretful, because I wish I could do more reading and looking and investigating, but you know, I'm not going to be on this earth for that long. There's only so much attention span one has. Christ, you know, I'd love to read Hemingway's collected works, but I don't have the motherfucking time. And

I don't expect people to have the time with mine. You know, I'm distilling a lifetime of knowledge — and sometimes experience as well — into one drawing. And you know how people go through gallery or museum shows: It's like Ben Johnson in the 100-meter dash; it's like on steroids they go so fast through them. I realize that. That's how it is.

You once told me that you rarely read entire books, that you more just tear out pages or chapters and study them closely.

Yeah, I don't really have the time to sit and read a narrative, the words of Hemingway or whoever. I've read the motherfucking Bible two or three times through. I've read Proust. I've read Joyce. It's always a scramble, believe it or not, to finish my own motherfucking shows. People think these things come out of thin air. Well, they don't. I've got too much in hand of my own to write and to draw than to read and look at art, as much as I'd like to. But I'm not on this earth for that long.

What inspires you? What do you pay attention to?

That can be anything. In New York, you've got one of the biggest bookstores in the world, Strand. You can go there on any afternoon and come back with a shelf of books. I don't know; it's hither and thither. There's not any one [writer] I'm obsessed with reading at this point. It's been like that in the past, but like I said, there's an economy of time and attention span and life on earth. And it's not like I just take random pages out of this and that. Some books, some writers are more compelling to me than others.

Is there a particular piece you're working on right now that you're really excited about?

Well, you've been here, and you've been to my L.A. studio, which is even worse. I'm spread out all over the place. When I started, I used to work on one individual drawing idea from beginning to end, and then it was finished. Now I can't really say one thing that is compelling or that I'm working on. I'm doing more collage work, which is why I regret the day I thought about doing collage — because it's so time consuming.

Last time I visited your studio, you were working on a piece about the first African American to play for the Boston Celtics.

You know how the Boston Celtics are green, OK? Well, Boston was back then and probably still is the most racist town in the United States, including the South, and they were the last basketball team to have a black player on the team. And it was a drawing of Gumby, who was green of course, so he's wearing the Celtics green, and Chuck Cooper. So it was a commentary on that. I think there's like three basketball players with balls in their hands. One was Gumby, one was Chuck Cooper, and one was someone else.

How does your typical workday go?

Well, that can change from day to day. I can be flat on my back watching TV. There are no artists' union rules that made a 40-hour workweek. I was up three, four, five days and nights at a time working for most of my life. But I haven't completely burnt out. I want to do this show at David Zwirner [Gallery] in September, which is a ways off, but for the ambition I want to do it with it really bearing close. At 55 years old, I don't have the energy or the health — I mean my health is fine, but it's not as ... I'm usually working on something. I have so much of a backlog of writings and ideas and material that it would take multiple lifetimes to finish. So, I'm just doing whatever I can — probably the answer to that question would be best displayed at the next show I do.

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NO TITLE (WEIGHING ONE SIDE) 2011

Ink, gouache, watercolor and acrylic on paper

30 x 22 3/4 inches (76.2 x 57.8 cm)