

REGEN PROJECTS

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Raymond Pettibon

RALPH RUGOFF

Surfing with Raymond Nobody Rides for Free

Beginning with his dauntingly fabulous exhibitions during the late 1980s and early 90s, Raymond Pettibon has invented a new medium. Although on the surface his materials of paper and ink could not be more traditional, and his mixing of pictures and words conjure precedents from the comic strip to Blake, Pettibon presents his work in a significantly novel way, cluttering walls with hundreds of drawings of varying sizes, bombarding the viewer with far more to read and look at than could ever be absorbed. As if mimicking the ceaseless maelstrom of our mass-media landscape, these shows engulf you in a whirlpool of words and images; yet unlike the media, they generate unexpected layers of meaning, black humor, and barbed lyricism, while surfing across a seemingly haphazard cross section of cultural history.

Though composed of individual drawings, a wall-to-wall display by Pettibon functions like a single

RALPH RUGOFF is the author of *Circus Americanus* (Verso) and *Through the Eye of the Needle*, a monograph on microminature sculptor Hagap Sandaljian (Museum of Jurassic Technology Press). He is the curator of the exhibition "Scene of the Crime," which will open at the Armand Hammer Museum in Los Angeles in 1997.

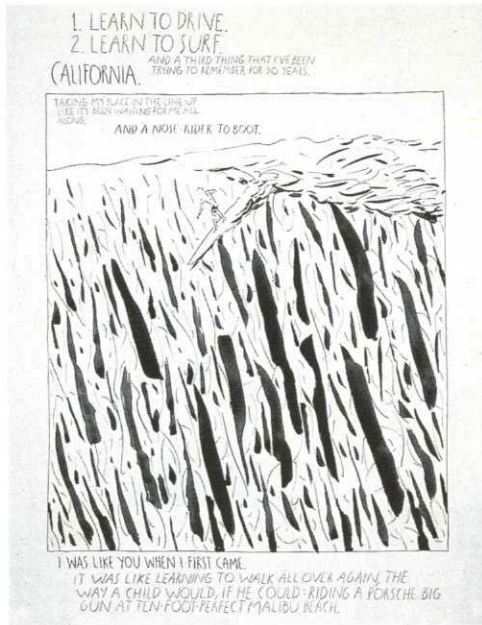
work, a discordant symphony where leitmotifs repeat themselves in unpredictable rhythms. Amid the multitude of pictures and scrawled texts, half a dozen major themes may gradually emerge, weaving across the walls. While an exhibition never lapses into randomness, it never totally resolves itself, either; instead, it teases you along cresting waves of delirium, and just when you feel utterly overwhelmed and about to drown, a half-formed riptide or partially delineated current spins you to the next drawing, towards a new thematic connection.

This kind of installation is a labyrinth. There is no real sense of escape in a Pettibon show, because you're continually confronted by the work of reading and rereading, deciphering and searching. You can take on as much or as little as you like, of course; but in the end, nobody rides for free. Pettibon enlists you, Dear Reader, in the pleasures of his endless spidery activity, and the web in which you find yourself is astonishingly far-reaching. Ingeniously plundering everything within reach of his eclectic sensibility, Pettibon seamlessly slips in references from Ruskin to Felix the Cat, from baseball trivia to Henry James, from Charles Manson to Gumby and Ad Reinhard—sometimes all in a single work. Probing dark subcultural pools, cosmic assholes, and

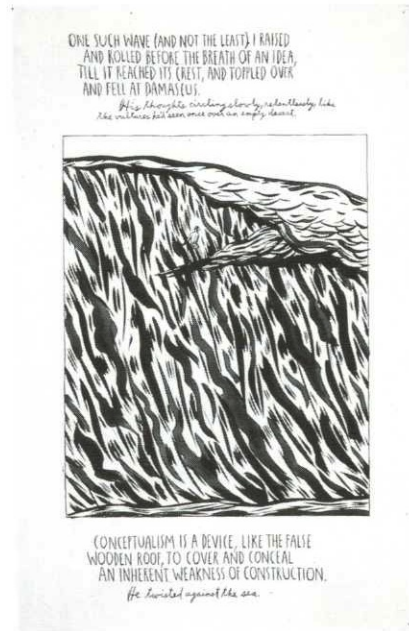
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RAYMOND PETTIBON, NO TITLE, 1990, ink on paper, 22 x 17" /
OHNE TITEL, Tusche auf Papier, 55,9 x 43,2 cm.



RAYMOND PETTIBON, NO TITLE (ONE SUCH WAVE), 1990,
pen and ink on paper, 23 x 14" / OHNE TITEL
(EINE DIESER WELLEN), Feder und Tusche auf Papier,
58,4 x 35,6 cm.



nightmarish confluences of history (in one drawing, William Kennedy Smith rapes a girl on the grassy knoll), the artist's erratic pen leaves a wake of churning cartoon thought-bubbles.

In a Pettibon installation, as brilliant as certain individual pieces might be, one is inevitably reminded that it's not the pearls that make the necklace, but the thread. In the fugitive associations between sentences, phrases, and images, Pettibon's art traces the contingent motions of thought itself, the unrepeatable ride across waves of meaning impossible to anchor. This same propulsive diffusion characterizes not only Pettibon's large-scale installations, but also his single works. A medley of dark quips, philosophical queries, acerbic asides, and literary quotes may swirl around a given image, not illustrating so much as reframing it. If certain visual motifs recur in the oeuvre—fires, trains, clocks, surfers, Gumby, hearts, and mushroom clouds—it's because Pettibon's work is a lesson in context. Even the barest icon, a sparsely sketched lightbulb, takes on endless resonance when coupled with his shrewdly evocative texts.

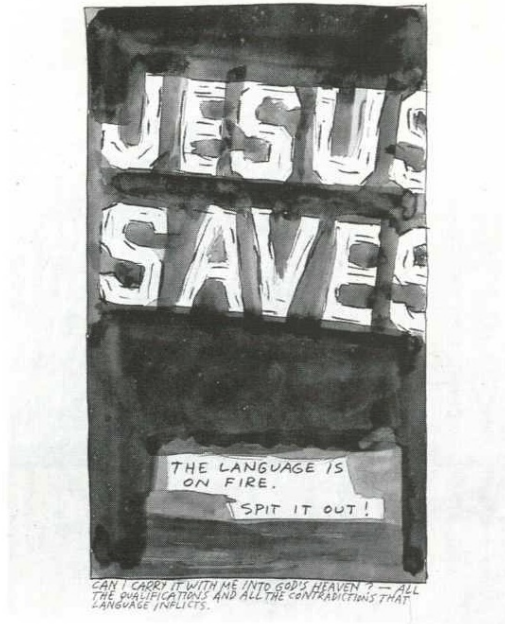
Pettibon's drawing style is often characterized as illustrational or generic, which is odd considering how idiosyncratic and psychologically charged it is. What distinguishes it is less any particular technique

than the artist's conception of imagery: Pettibon's pictures are simple enough to seem immediately accessible, yet on closer inspection they often remain curiously elusive. They seem to be less representations, per se, than metaphoric emblems, black boxes of displaced meaning. Even Pettibon's self-portraits are essentially metaphorical images—instead of providing insights into their creator, they tell us about the fiction of the artist, the gulf separating representation and subject, author and reader. It is precisely into this gap that Pettibon's art plunges, extending an offer to play, rather than merely to "communicate." Indeed, Pettibon doesn't communicate with the reader, he communicates with the inexpressible; hence the sense of loss and absence that haunts his art as a whole.

Unlike his pictures, Pettibon's words address us in a motley array of styles, drastically shifting tone, grammatical structure, and tense, gliding from first to second to third person as his pen travels across a page. Quieting this multiphrenic din, his words, whether borrowed or original, are all forged in the same handwriting, an obsessive scrawl that suggests jottings from a private notebook, the record perhaps of a mind assailed by its own inner chorus, but nevertheless the record, at least apparently, of a single mind.

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RAYMOND PETTIBON, NO TITLE (JESUS SAVES), 1986,
pen and ink on paper, 14 x 10½" / OHNE TITEL (JESUS ERLÖST),
Feder und Tusche auf Papier, 35,6 x 26,7 cm.

Pettibon elaborates on this faux intimacy with his penchant for addressing his “Dear Reader,” evoking a bond of trust as well as our own fictitious role as innocent viewer. But the contract of good faith that allows us to inhabit the secure structures of traditional eighteenth- and nineteenth-century literature is difficult to maintain with so splintered a voice; and besides the reader is rarely treated genteelly: a slight snarl, a hint of nastiness, implications of less cordial relations sometimes creep into Pettibon’s direct appeals. In a 1992 self-portrait, a first person text warns that the artist cannot be trusted because the voices he repeats belong neither to his muse nor to the man himself.

By wryly calling attention to the conventions of our respective roles, Pettibon prompts us to step back and re-imagine the rules of our communication, to see the border between producer and consumer as infinitely flexible. Given his own repositioning of purloined texts, reading, especially rereading, starts to seem like an art form itself, an act of creative inter-



RAYMOND PETTIBON, NO TITLE, 1991,
ink on paper, 30¼ x 22½" /
OHNE TITEL, Tusche auf Papier, 76,8 x 57,2 cm.

pretation where even a single word—like “Vavoom!”, the sublimely inarticulate call that dwarfs its very speaker in Pettibon’s drawings—is capable of promiscuously shifting nuance and connotation with every changed context.

In *The Tragic Muse*, Henry James observes that there are two “affections”—that which “isolates and simplifies its object” and that which “seeks communication and contacts for it.” Pettibon’s generous art clearly embodies the latter affection: In derailing trains of conventional thought, his work consistently forges contacts where none before existed. It moves us towards the open sea and away from the fixed shore. Indeed, consistency represents a kind of death in Pettibon’s aesthetic, a conceptual rigor mortis; the price of growth, on the other hand, is uncertainty and a rigorous resistance to our habitual modes of interpretation. In this way, Pettibon qualifies as a moral visionary—not a bluenose, certainly, but an artist whose freedom of style seems to guarantee the purity of his credo.