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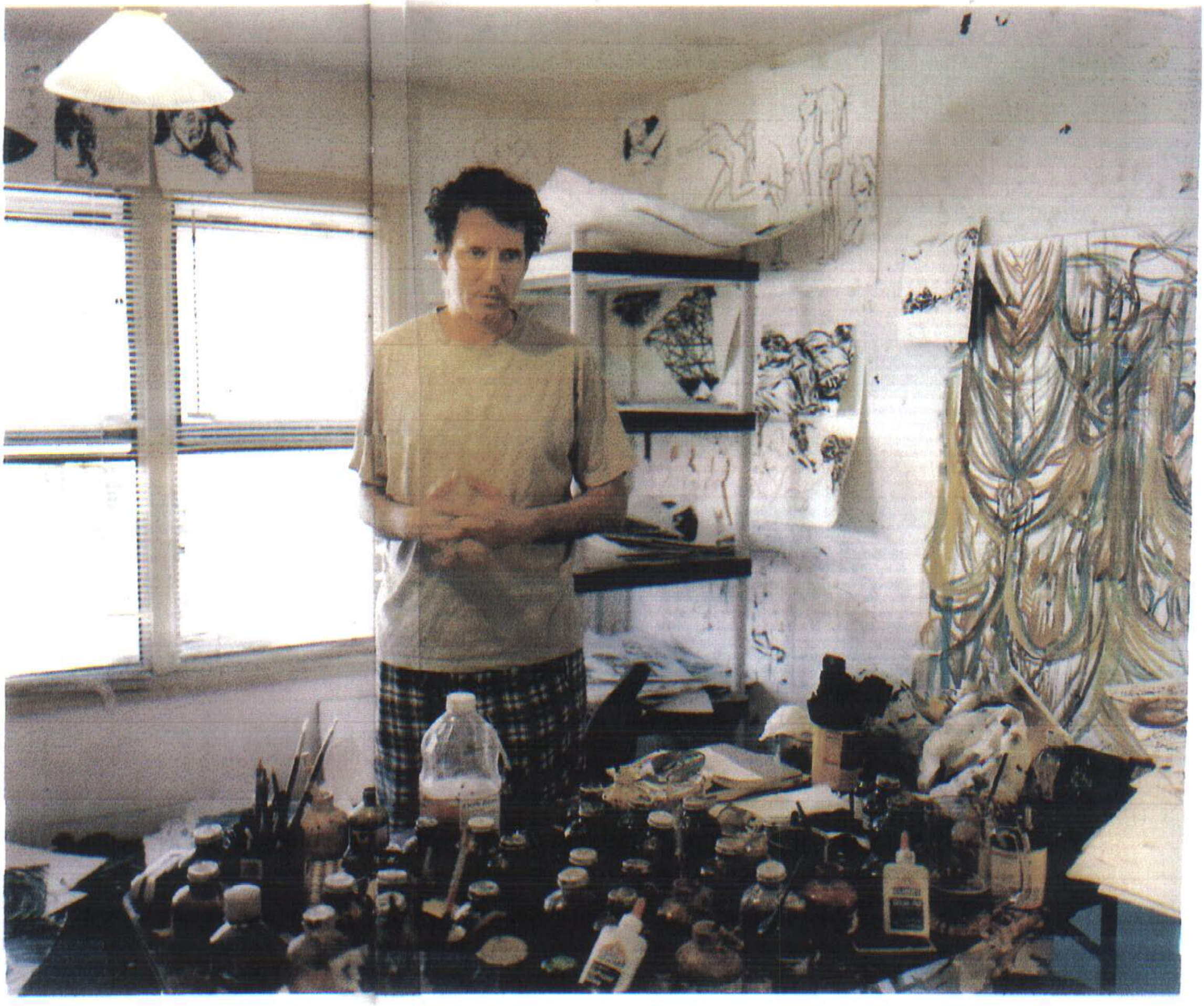
The Underbelly Artist Raymond Pettibon draws on L.A.'s detritus.

By Michael Kimmelman Photograph by Tierney Gearon



Pettibon's repertory of atomic explosions, hippies, vixens, cowboys, dismembered bodies, old cars and liquor bottles describes a morning-after portrait of America *in extremis*.

On a sweltering day early last month, I arrived at the Museum of Modern Art to watch the artist Raymond Pettibon make a wall drawing, which the museum had commissioned him to do just outside the third-floor drawings galleries. I had been told to come by at 4. As I might have anticipated, Pettibon, having invited me to watch, was being polite to a fault. He had pretty much finished the drawing by the time I got there. It was a picture of a crashing wave. I found him surrounded by tubes of acrylic paint, plastic bags, paper bowls and sponge brushes. He was riffling through loose folders of clippings from books and magazines.

"Sorry," he said softly, avoiding eye contact and gently trying to excuse what I realized had been a quasi-deliberate misencounter. He mumbled something about how, to his surprise, the work had all just happened so fast, and would I now maybe like to see him add some touches to the picture, it would be no trouble, not an act, I could still say I had watched him paint. He squeezed a dab of cerulean blue from a half-spent tube into a bowl, picked up a fresh brush and drew a single, small stroke in the middle of the wave.

A shaggy fellow given to rumpled Oxfords or T-shirts, baggy khakis and tennis shoes, Pettibon has, at 48, after several decades of hard living, the pale, unshaved, sagging face of a handsome man nursing a perpetual hangover. Awkward and guarded, he favors indirection and halting non sequiturs; and, as a way of joking around, he'll inject in the middle of conversations bizarre, made-up stories (about having played for the Yugoslav national basketball team or for the Philadelphia Flyers hockey team), which he delivers in a straight-faced, apologetic voice sometimes so hard to interpret that it's impossible to know why or when he's pulling your leg.

He is also without pretense and, improbably, disarmingly tender. "I still have to choose some text to add to the drawing," he said to me, as if in compensation for my having missed him paint the picture. That's what he had been looking for among his papers, an apt quote, which he would paint tomorrow. "Why don't I come back then," I said.

So the next morning I again found him and his disarrayed tubes of paint and brushes, now roped off, like a zoo specimen of an artist on display for the passing mobs. "If I could shrink any more into this corner, I would," he said, slouching against the wall, head down, still absorbed in his folders. One folder contained a page from the art critic Brian O'Doherty's "Inside the White Cube," with a passage highlighted — "the relation between the picture plane and the underlying wall is very pertinent to the esthetics of surface" — and in the margins, Pettibon's own punning, run-on sentence about surfing: "When you bring shore life thoughts and theories/observations into the surf (when you attempt to shore up the line up) that is when (the moment) the nose of your longboard (shortboards, you're not ready for) breaks the surface of the wave, begins to 'pearl.'"

Pettibon offered to decipher this, but in the process detoured into a conversation about surfboards and Bob Beamon, the Olympic athlete, and long jumping and the flood in New Orleans, without getting to the point, if there had been one. Or perhaps I missed it. Evidently he had intended the wave as a kind of mixed metaphor about Abstract Expressionism and the Modern. I noticed in one folder, along with the O'Doherty page, a passport application, some yellowed clippings from Apollinaire and Henry James, pages ripped from old Hulk comics and an advertisement from the 1940's British magazine Lilliput for men's underwear, the image from which Pettibon once used in a drawing. It was the slogan that interested him now, he said: "For Men of Peace, for Men of War, for Men Who Find Them Both a Bore." On a separate page, torn from "Finnegans Wake," Pettibon had underlined some of Joyce's made-up words, like "zoravarn" and "damman," to which he added: "funeureal," "puskkalating," "perticulating."

"With my kind of work, things mingle and associate, and something comes from it — or not," he said. He was making no progress whatsoever on the wall drawing and wouldn't, I imagined, if I stuck around. We gathered up his papers, slipped into the crowd and rode the escalator to the cafe. After an hour or so, nursing a cappuccino, I left him and Lisa Overduin, the soft-spoken director of his L.A. gallery, Regen Projects, in peace. Two days had passed, and I had seen him paint a single, thin blue line.

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WHEN THE ART WORLD first took notice of Pettibon's lurid, ham-fisted drawings during the late 1980's, he was a marginal, cultish scribbler and lyric poet of obsessive, black-humored art who lived in Hermosa Beach, a buttoned-up surfer's haven south of Los Angeles. Having not gone to art school, Pettibon emerged as an underground discovery. He had already published darkling, slender mimeographed and offset zines of his texts and drawings, disconnected images, laboriously done, in hand-stapled editions of 40 or 75, with titles like "Tripping Corpse," "The Language of Romantic Thought" and "Virgin Fears." Almost nobody noticed or bought them. He also illustrated album covers for his brother Greg Ginn's legendary punk band, Black Flag. (Ginn is the family name, Pettibon, Raymond's nom de plume.) He occasionally exhibited in out-of-the-way galleries and local record stores, but for years, almost nobody was interested in buying his drawings. To the extent he developed a reputation, it was as Greg's younger brother, a hanger-on.

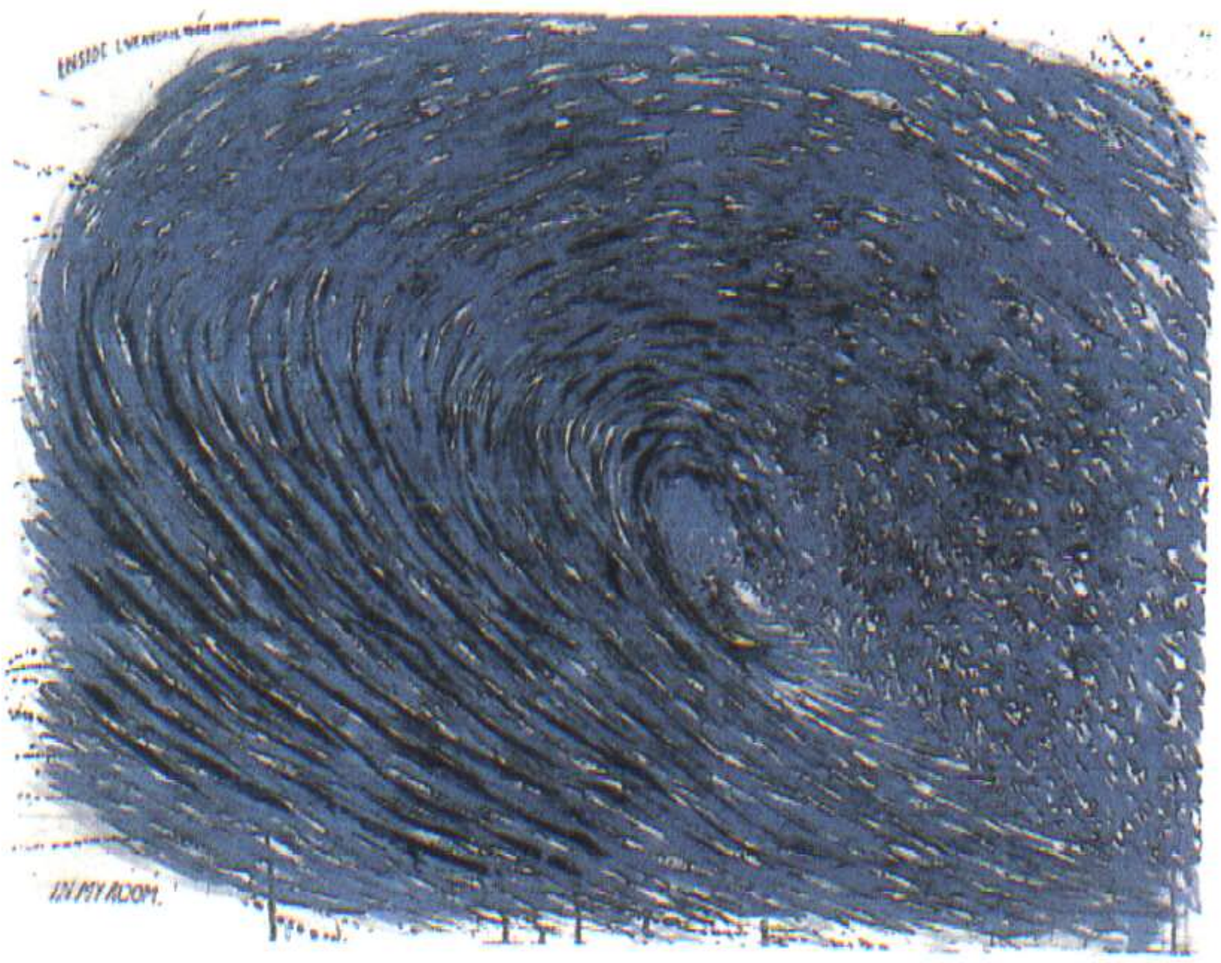
But in the unlikely way that the art world sometimes works, Pettibon has now become one of the exalted fixtures on the international art scene, a high-tone collector's darling and senior superstar. Along with his wall drawing at the Museum of Modern Art, he has just completed an installation at the Museum of Contemporary Art in San Diego and, having won the Whitney Museum of American Art's 2004 Bucksbaum Award, he has been given a Whitney show, which opened this week and mixes drawings with a new animated video.

Meanwhile a new generation of artists steeped in rock, 60's and 70's revivalism, cartooning and surrealism has come to regard him as a hero and an inspiration, a model insider-outsider. Paul Schimmel, chief curator at the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art and a longtime friend of Pettibon's, said that he finds that "young artists admire him not necessarily for who he is but for how they imagine him still to be. To them, he still represents fringe culture, which means 'Ulysses' and underground comics."

Among other signs of his prestige, his influence is discernible in the current vogue for shambling, winking sorts of drawing, in the mixing of text with image, in the exaltation of comix and the whole D.I.Y. (Do It Yourself) subculture of zines and Web sites. For his part, Pettibon, while perfectly capable of tending his career, does pretty much what he has always been doing, still taking public buses to get around Los Angeles, still spending much of his time at home with his mother in Hermosa Beach, still making art out of not much more than a piece of paper, a pen and a Masonite board to lean on.

Three years ago at Documenta, the quintennial mega-survey of contemporary art in Kassel, Germany, which was devoted that time around to righteous and civic-minded art, Pettibon's loopy, messy drawings of steaming trains, gangsters, Bible thumpers, California surfer dudes and vintage baseball players in the slanting light of the late afternoon — accompanied, as usual, by incantatory texts culled from Mickey Spillane or Walter Pater or St. Augustine or wherever — came as a tonic and a rebuke. The antic, bad-boy eccentricity was the opposite of pedantry. People didn't smile much at that Documenta ,but they smiled leaving the room where Pettibon had tacked his drawings, dozens of them, as he likes to do, making a collage of the wall.

His repertory of atomic explosions, hippies, vixens, cowboys, dismembered bodies, old cars and liquor bottles describes a morning-after portrait of America *in extremis*. The affect is world-weary but slyly comic. The pervasive nastiness and unfettered id belong to the worlds of Joan Crawford and low-budget horror films: to camp as much as to punk. Surfers, Gumby and Vavoom, the wide-mouthed character from the old animated series "Felix the Cat," are Pettibon's occasional surrogate self-portraits. Old



Pettibon's Untitled (Inside Everyone There), 2003

Vargas pinups and beefcake nudes traced from magazine advertisements or superhero comics give to some of the pictures an ambiguous, once-upon-a-time, bleak eroticism.

And the disconnections between text and image in Pettibon's art provoke a laughter that's not quite straight but uncomfortable or melancholic. His drawings are often like disparate film stills from movies whose plots are no longer known, as in the one of a man with a stocking pulled over his head, talking into a telephone. "Hi, Paula?" he says. "It's Lee. I have a new number. Do you want it?"

Pettibon has told me that when he started to draw his zines, he was interested in Edward Hopper and Reginald Marsh and the whole Ash Can School of American art, along with film noir. He admires Thomas Nast's illustrations and Herblock's cartoons and Philip Guston's late paintings. The links in his work to Blake, Goya and Otto Dix are often mentioned, as are ones to R. Crumb, but Pettibon claims that Crumb actually was never much on his mind. Crumb's comics, more deftly drawn, are, as narratives blunt instruments by comparison. Pettibon's allusions are more obscure without being opaque, skirting specific meanings to linger at the mercurial edge of clear thought where poetry tends to operate. The work can also break your heart, sneakily. A Boy Scout, as if copied from a fading snapshot, is drawn beside the phrase "that they might become clear and sunlit, too." Like so much of Pettibon's work, it implies the memory of a childhood that was not exactly ordinary.

ONE LATE AUGUST MORNING I visited Pettibon at the Ginn house in Hermosa Beach, a tumble-down beige stucco split-level that his father, Regis Ginn, designed himself, on a nondescript street of middle-class bungalows. Along with his mother (his father died earlier this year), one of Pettibon's brothers, Adrian, lives there, as does a man Pettibon calls Fleck (he doesn't seem to recall Fleck's last name), who for some years has slept in a shingled, makeshift lean-to he erected in the gap between the back of the garage and a wire fence, no wider than a phone booth and not much deeper.

The front door was ajar when I arrived, and walking in, I instantly wondered whether I had entered the back way: a darkened room was crammed with old furniture, teetering boxes and electrical appliances. A dog barked furiously from the kitchen, behind a barrier at the opposite end of the room, where I made out the silhouette of a small, gray-haired woman in a rock. It was Pettibon's mother. High-stepping my way through the piles on the floor, I introduced myself over the din. The kitchen was cluttered with more boxes and days-old dishes. It opened onto a small, sunny backyard with a big bougainvillea bush, where I spotted a new basketball hoop, the plastic wrapping still half on, piles of trash, an unplugged freezer, two bicycles and a surfboard. Pettibon appeared in a hallway, glancing away, as usual, when I said hello and stuck out my hand. He shook it limply.

His father had designed the house with few windows, his mother said, as if answering a question I hadn't asked.

"Maybe he wanted more wall space for bookshelves," I ventured.

"That must be it," Pettibon responded, trying to be helpful.

"It's more complicated than that," his mother said, shaking her head. She looked oddly displeased. To break the ice, I asked if Pettibon might show me around.

The house was a rabbit warren and rattrap befitting the Collyer brothers. Lately Pettibon has been tending, he says, to the Sisyphean task of culling the thousands upon thousands of dogeared paperbacks, back issues of Show and Detective Story Monthly, old Playboy magazines, picture frames, dusty garbage bags containing who knows what, boxes of moldering sporting goods, paintings of pinups and other remains of his father's life. The nostalgic quality in much of Pettibon's art, which cribs from the 1940's, 50's and 60's, I realize, has its sources in these magazines and books, in his father's era, as opposed to his own.

Pettibon showed me the upstairs and his own lofted study, crammed with unfinished paintings, shoeboxes of zines, trampled drawings, stereo and video equipment and back issues of Kennedy-era American Heritage and Crimes and Punishment. He tripped over a vacuum cleaner in the middle of the room, knocking a plastic container of coins from a table onto the floor, the coins scattering among the socks and empty Coke cans. On the roof, paintings by Pettibon's father (eerie, thrift-store Francis Picabia-style portraits and pinups) were laid out as if to dry in the sun.

"What's there?" I asked Pettibon, pointing, a bit warily by now, to a closed door.

"My brother's room," he said, and before I could tell him not to bother, he knocked. Adrian, disheveled and smiling in a Hawaiian shirt and rumpled trousers, appeared after a moment or two. Seated on the bed behind him, looking blankly at me, was a woman in a tight blouse who could have come straight out of a Russ Meyer movie.

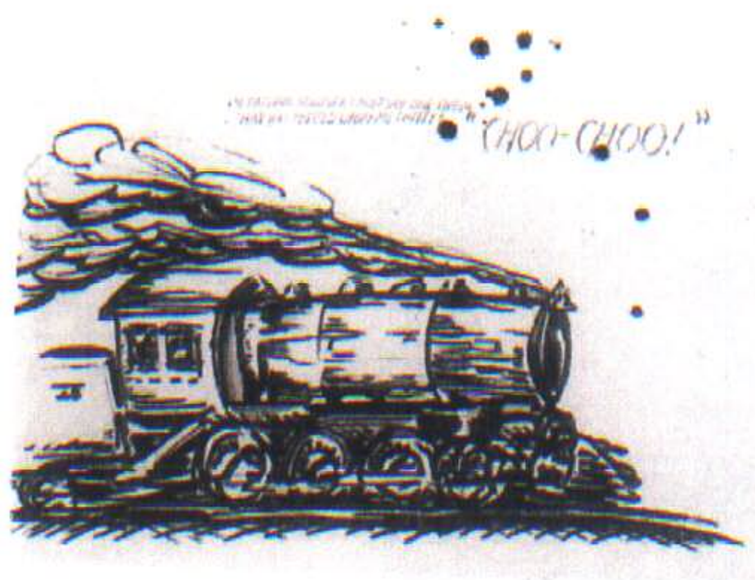
"Vodka?" Adrian asked me, in lieu of the usual greetings. It was 11 o'clock in the morning. No thanks, I said.

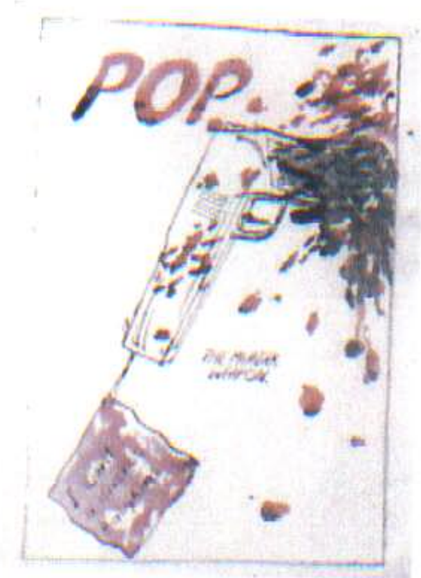
"Vodka?" Ray repeated to Adrian, accepting the offer and disappearing behind the door. Doubting there was room for the four of us in the room, I turned and noticed Pettibon's mother, now at the opposite end of the hall, smiling. She gestured for me to join her in her bedroom, next to Adrian's, and showed me one of her favorite drawings by Pettibon, of a speeding train, with the accompanying text: "I have, I confess, truly to jerk myself with violence from memories and images, stages and phases and branching arms, that catch and hold me as I pass them."

She had a paperback at hand, "The Cold Warrior," which her husband, Regis, self-published, a thriller, with Regis's drawings as illustrations and, below a mustachioed self-portrait on the inside back cover, a brief autobiography: "Patriarch, erotica archivist and sly frottage enthusiast, end product of seven American colleges and distinguished graduate of the U.S. Air Force Weight and Balance School, the arriviste posed bashful behind the postiche basher is a nonpracticing Freeman of the City of Cambridge who summered and falled in Britain (1944) and now lives in the extreme northeast section of Hermosa Beach, 90254."

Pettibon's nom de plume comes from his father, who gave nicknames to his children — Kierkegaard, Tiger — calling Raymond *petit bon*, good little one. A navigator with the Army Air Force during World War II, he then knocked around teaching English at various colleges and junior colleges on the outskirts of L.A.

"My father painted and wrote," Pettibon said. "I didn't read comics





much, but he had these 50's horror comics, which he'd bring out once a year, as a curiosity. I started to do some political cartooning in college. I wanted to be a writer. I was taking lots of literature classes, and on the bus back and forth to U.C.L.A., I'd read and do my own things at home. We were all kind of in our own world at home. My father was a Republican, like most people in Hermosa Beach, but he wasn't uptight. His politics weren't hippie, but his lifestyle sort of was."

For a long time, Pettibon was especially close to his older brother, Greg: "We weren't co-conspirators or anything. But there was a certain shared attitude. Greg had the idea that he could do things for himself. He was a genius." Black Flag, the hard-core punk band that gave the lie to the cliché of Southern Californians as laid-back surfer dudes, epitomized punk's Dadaist model of anticorporate entrepreneurship. Ginn started a record label, SST, at first to produce Black Flag's albums, which mainstream companies wouldn't touch (wherever the band played there were riots); then SST went on to release albums by the Minutemen, the Meat Puppets, Sonic Youth and Husker Du. It also published Pettibon's early zines. Pettibon said he hasn't seen Greg in years. Talking to people around Pettibon, I get the sense that Ginn, who has largely dropped out of public sight, might have resented Pettibon's success, which gradually rivaled and maybe even supplanted his own.

IF HE WAS NOT QUITE Lana Turner at the soda fountain when he was discovered, Pettibon was lifted from obscurity not by fans of Black Flag or Sonic Youth or by the comix world, in which he says he has always remained a nobody, but by artists. Over breakfast at the Mondrian Hotel one recent morning, Schimmel, the curator, recalled having "heard about Ray in the late 80's from Irv Tepper, a conceptual artist and ceramicist from San Francisco. Irv had seen Ray's work in some out-of-the-way place, and he told me I had to go, that this was the real thing and not the usual art stuff. So I met Ray. His shirt was not one button askew but three buttons, he was completely disheveled, and I thought this might be just a little too far from the art world so I didn't see much of him for a few years until the early 90's when I was organizing the 'Helter Skelter' show, a survey of L.A. art, for which Ray seemed perfect.

"His work had changed a lot in the meantime, from pamphlets and album covers to the drawings we know him for," Schimmel went on to say. "I brought a few collectors over to see him. He was totally broke. They bought 10 or 20 drawings for $5,000 total, which was big money to him at the time. Now Ray's collectors have become like Paul Klee's — obsessively specializing in particular bodies or subbodies of work."

Schimmel credited artists, many of them already working with text and images, like Mike Kelley, Jim Shaw, Paul McCarthy and Ed Ruscha, for "embracing Ray because they saw he occupied a beautiful quasi place — not of the L.A. art world but in tune with it — and because he was also more truly L.A. than almost anyone, I mean in terms of beach culture, lower middle class white culture. Most artists here come from elsewhere. Ray is the real McCoy."

When I visited Mike Kelley, who has become dean and sage of the L.A. art scene, he remembered coming across Pettibon's work during the mid-80's and including him in a few shows he was organizing. He saw the drawings as raw but brilliant, the product of neither art school nor punk. "Raymond was considered punk in the beginning, but he was too smart for punk," Kelley said. "The punk audience liked his art because it was illustrational and there were jokes about hippie culture and film noir. But what I liked about it was that it had this very knowing, winking position vis-à-vis hippie and punk culture. It struck me as Magrittean while pretending to be Victor Hugo." Kelley laughed.

"Back then, no art in L.A. was considered significant by collectors and institutions, so artists could be supportive of each other because there weren't camps," he continued. "Some people liked Raymond because they considered him a guy who didn't kiss the butt of the art world. Others thought he represented punk, or blue-collar Conceptualism or D.I.Y. What interested me about him was how he constructed things — like Lautréamont, who's my favorite writer — with all these different sources juggled and combined into something particular. Raymond had that definite auteur look, which was faux-romantic, faux-Gothic, very Tennessee Williams, very foppishly funny."

PETTIBON AND I WERE shooting hoops in his backyard one afternoon with half-inflated basketballs, our stray shots careering off broken picture frames, bicycles and the bougainvillea. Fleck joined us. He had recently found a red leather jacket in the trash, which he dyed with black shoe polish and had now shed to launch three-pointers. Did Raymond have any black paint? he asked. A discussion of spray-painting leather ensued. I noticed a painting of a beach, a washy scene hanging on the fence. It turned out to be Fleck's. "Not bad," I said. Fleck was pleased.

Meanwhile, the family dog was busy rooting around the garage, feverishly burrowing into the piles of roller skates, baseball bats, magazines and books ("The Aeneid," "Tantric Sex"). Adrian and Marlene, the girlfriend whom I had earlier spied on Adrian's bed, appeared and joined the shoot-around. Fleck was thrilled to come across a dead rat in the yard, which, he said, the dog or cat must have finally caught. I drifted into the garage, where crusty old fluorescent ceiling lights dangled from wires. Pettibon told me that his father, who used to drive 20 miles out of his way to find a gas station charging 25 cents, as opposed to 27 cents a gallon, built additions to the old family house with cheap, termite-ridden wood that leaked so badly that as a boy Pettibon slept under plastic tarpaulins heaving with rainwater.

We took a drive. Around downtown Hermosa Beach, he pointed out the pretty Christian Science church on a hill where his mother, over his father's objections (Regis was Roman Catholic), took the children for serv-

ices (Pettibon's parents almost broke up over this, he said). He pointed out where SST used to have its offices, and the high school where he played sandlot baseball (he was a so-so pitcher), which saved him from being the stereotypical class nerd. Down the coast, we stopped at Malaga Cove, where Pettibon bicycled to go skin diving. It was a calm, gray morning, and standing on the cliff, at the top of the dirt path beside the Pacific Coast Highway that descended to the rocky shore, we saw no surfers, but a flock of sea gulls circled the weedy shallows.

We ended up at Acres of Books, a used-book store in downtown Long Beach, where Pettibon used to go with his dad, and scavenged the shelves of art and literary criticism, after which we drove to Pettibon's own apartment, also in Long Beach, a nondescript second-story flat in the middle of nowhere. Pettibon dumped his bag of new acquisitions (Santayana, Ruskin, Benjamin DeMott, some back issues of American Heritage) onto the pile of drawings, magazines, tapes, 1970's football cards, batteries, soda-can tabs, newspaper clippings and other loose papers that, like landfill, already blanketed the living room floor.

He put on a scratchy CD he made recently, a live, homegrown punk record he produced with a band of friends. Fishing through the stacks of papers on the floor, he uncovered a video of one of his films, from 1989, "The Whole World Is Watching: Weatherman '69." In the film, faux radicals sit around debating whether Chinese Communists prematurely ejaculate and whether the former Mets pitcher Jerry Koosman was a fellow traveler. Like his music, Pettibon's films are crude, tongue-in-cheek and hard to sit through for their sheer boredom — Warholian movies whose themes are caustic riffs on onetime tabloid favorites, political extremism and hippie culture. Like Ed Wood's cult movies, they look as if they're made on a budget of $75, which is part of their coy charm.

Over the years, as Pettibon's art has become more complex, the drawing more adept and the language denser, he has nevertheless stuck to familiar themes. That crashing wave at the Museum of Modern Art is not the first wall drawing of a crashing wave. But if he often repeats himself now, you could say he has an eye for monotony and abundance, an American trait.

Pettibon projected an image of Wonder Woman on a wall beside his desk to show how he traces certain pictures then changes them. "The projector has a tendency to make the work look stiff and poorly drawn," he said, "and to rely on it just makes no sense, so I try not to." Several unfinished drawings, based on this Wonder Woman image, were on the floor; they turn her into a baseball player with a glove, twisted like a corkscrew, a Mannerist and androgynous riff, the comic-book source no longer decipherable.

"I want to make images that have the disparities of Surrealism," Pettibon added. "I've heard people say my work is arbitrary, random, spliced together. But I think that's a pretty simplistic comprehension level. If anything, my work is fairly easily understood compared to most poetry. I try to be in the communication business."

At that point, Pettibon retrieved from a kitchen cabinet jumbled stacks of what he said were his earliest drawings. They were children's drawings. "Actually, they're by my nephew," he said. Pettibon is proud of his nephew. Schimmel has said that Pettibon is one of those adults who genuinely listen to children. Diffident about his own drawings, he regards his nephew's as ingenious. He interspersed some of them in a 1986 zine, "Bottomless Pond." Above a drawing by his nephew of an atomic explosion is scrawled: "When it comes I'll be playing!" His nephew's picture of a junkie shooting up is accompanied by the text: "Don't do it for me or I'll never learn how to do it." And between those two pages, Pettibon inserted his own image of a man lifting a young boy. "It may not seem like fun for you now," he wrote, "but when you're a big boy you'll be doing the same things I do."

PICKING THROUGH A LUNCH of sushi and beer in a sports bar near the beach in Hermosa later, Pettibon talked uneasily about his father. "When you have your whole life invested in someone . . . ," he said, letting the sentence trail off, like so many sentences. After some hesitation, he revealed that his father would be silent whenever a show of his got a good review but would clip out and leave in some conspicuous place all the good reviews of artists whom he considered to be Pettibon's rivals.

Pettibon spent the better part of the next two days trying to explain away that anecdote. In his apartment, while thumbing through the phone book, looking for the nearest In-N-Out, where we could get a burger on our way to an Angels game in Anaheim, he said that his father "wasn't as eccentric or odd as that . . . I mean, compared . . . I mean it's always pretty much been this way . . . the perfect nuclear family . . . considering the dysfunctional, abusive situation, this was pretty minor. . . . I mean he was actually a very, uh . . . an extremely generous person in a way that. . . . " His own art, he then ventured, often speaks in his father's voice — flippant, knowing, a bit rough. The voice, it so happens, of the sort of backslapping, tipsy bully who calls people by ridiculous nicknames.

Later Paul Schimmel told me he remembered Pettibon's father hanging around while Raymond was installing his one-man show at MoCA in the late 90's. His father kept pestering Pettibon. He was taken aback by his son's success, Schimmel said.

Schimmel then recalled when his own son Max, as an 11-year-old, gave Pettibon a sculpture he had made out of the metal wrapper on the top of a wine bottle. Pettibon slipped it into his shirt pocket, and Schimmel assumed it would be crushed and forgotten. Months later he got a call from Pettibon's L.A. dealer, Shaun Regen. She wanted him to bring Max to Pettibon's next show. There, Max found, Pettibon had drawn a large, painstaking copy of the sculpture, which Max had titled "Winer," with an accompanying text that Schimmel remembers said something like: "I think I've never seen anything more beautiful than this. It has the freshness of g'day mate." Schimmel swallowed.

"Such heart." ■

FROM REGEN PROJECTS, LOS ANGELES, AND DAVID ZWIRNER, NEW YORK