

REGEN PROJECTS

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MODERNPAINTERS

Dark
Silent
Type

An afternoon at Raymond Pettibon's

Benjamin Weissman

A BARELY VISIBLE PATHWAY SNAKES FROM THE FRONT DOOR, down the hall, into a living room, where there is an old stained couch, no chairs, several boxes and banana crates filled with disturbed black-and-white drawings, microscribed writing, brittle newspaper clippings dating back to 1966, books piled tower-style nearly up to the ceiling, overturned lamps, but, interestingly enough, no blood. These signs of trouble are the overall decor of Raymond Pettibon's studio, a room not much different than the full sensory assault of gallery walls smothered with his art, just a bit more random. Scribbled directly on the wall facing the couch is a note: *my boyfriend doesn't like to kiss me so I kiss you (two lipstick prints)*, a few inches away, also handwritten on the wall: *cinema (w/phone number)*, and push-pinned next to it an 8 x 10 of Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers. On three of the four walls are posters of buxom female wrestlers (wrestling-obsessed comic Andy Kaufman comes to mind), torn masking tape curling in every direction. A fleet of surge protectors cluster at the foot of a tilted drawing table (beg pardon, one chair) with what seems like 300 cords tangled together, veering toward various electronic devices, disasters.

After I showed Raymond my shoebox-sized Optimus tape-recorder I intended to use to record our interview he walked straight into a back room and reappeared with two palm-sized mini recorders and said I should take one. I said no, thank you no, I can get by with my crappy one. Choose, he said, I don't need two. I tried no again but he insisted, so I moved a hand toward the Sony. He retreated to the hallway and returned with a pack of blank mini tapes. During the next two hours every book we discussed that he had in his possession he said take it, you want it, take it. I found myself saying no thanks many times and left three books on the

couch by comic pioneer Will Eisner that I agreed to take home.

The name Raymond has always intrigued me. Women named Ray are similar to the sun, beaming wide-eyed and chesty, absorbing the world, brightening their field of view. Male Raymonds have a madness about them, and male Rays as dark as mental wards, or manta rays, or bail bondsmen or the murderers the bondsman set free. Raymond Pettibon's face illustrates a perfect type of Raymond/Ray complexity. His haunted visage is melted downward into a handsome theatrical gloom. It is a face that could also be seen with Victorian ruffles surrounding it. It is a beautiful, solemn face and we are grateful for its existence.

Raymond sat on the floor and joked that he had to be coddled into talking, that the last interviewer sat on his lap. His right big toe twitched as he spoke. It had a black one-inch apostrophe inked across the nail. When Raymond got up from the floor for a glass of water, disappearing into the kitchen mid-sentence, or to find something or eavesdrop on his active phone machine, he stepped barefoot on layers of his drawings which carpeted the floor.

Raymond's normal expression - the one that's fixed on him through most of the day without variation - is a distracted, thoughtful face, sad, handsome, pissed-off, a sort of dark delirium, which I have grown to understand does not always mean what it seems to convey. But whose facial expression doesn't get away from them on occasion, or always? Raymond speaking is similar to Raymond drawing: multiple voices vying to be heard, each one waiting its turn, a schizo ramble steeped in Victorian literature, pulp novels, sports, politics, the Bible. Eye contact is rare so you find yourself getting used to not having it and when it happens it's almost too much to bear.



No Title (Not an original)
2005, pen and ink on
paper, 102 x 67 cm
ALL IMAGES COURTESY REGEN
PROJECTS, LOS ANGELES AND THE
WHITNEY MUSEUM OF AMERICAN
ART, NEW YORK



Still from animation
(in progress), 2005

There is an ongoing conversation, not a monologue, discoursing inside the head of Mr. Pettibon. It's one reason why he's so quiet. He's trying to listen to both sides so he can add his two cents into the din but often he doesn't need to because his fractious mind is doing all the talking. There's a zombie-like quality in most of the people I know but it's strongest in Raymond. He takes so long to answer a question you think you should repeat it. But you don't. He heard you and he's thinking, and this pace reminds me of Middle Western American intellectuals, a *nothing fast, think before you speak* people. To be around Raymond is to be reminded of life and death. A human Ave Maria.

Raymond shut the streetfacing windows so the trucks barrelling down Falcon Street were less audible. After much searching on the floor he lifted up the live end of an extension cord and handed it to me. I plugged in the Optimus warhorse, its last mission, and away we went.

BW Most kids who are making comics when they enter a fine art grad school are encouraged to stop it right away or risk getting the backs of their hands slapped... like if you, Raymond, enrolled in a high-end LA art school today they'd forcibly plead with you to throw away all your supplies and start working with fancier gear, more serious mediums, and quit the caricatures and simple renderings, even though art heavyweights like Guston, Rosenquist, Lichtenstein and Ad Reinhardt all played with comics. I ask you, good man, why the hostility toward comics?

RP There is no reason based on actual work. But it comes from both sides. Cartoonists' take on museums and gallery art is that it's pure elitism, as if it's some kind of conspiratorial thing against them. Well, Lichtenstein - all he did was steal from Jack Kirby and puffed up the drawings into paintings and made them presentable to the high-

class New York collectors and museum people and made a killing. It comes down to turf wars. As a teenager I know my own work was very awkward and clumsy and, like everyone else, I didn't know where I was going. In art school lots of times they want to take the awkward kid and remake you into an art marine. I'm not against art school but it's basically a socialization process which is not about learning or continuing to learn and prepare and hone your skills and extend them. It's not the kind of environment that encourages anyone to do something unusual. They want to force kids who came to art school, who learned to draw like Jack Kirby, to start over, as if drawing like Jack Kirby was embarrassing to an art programme.

BW Tell me about your first initiation into comics? Who you were reading and what were the earliest effects it had on you?

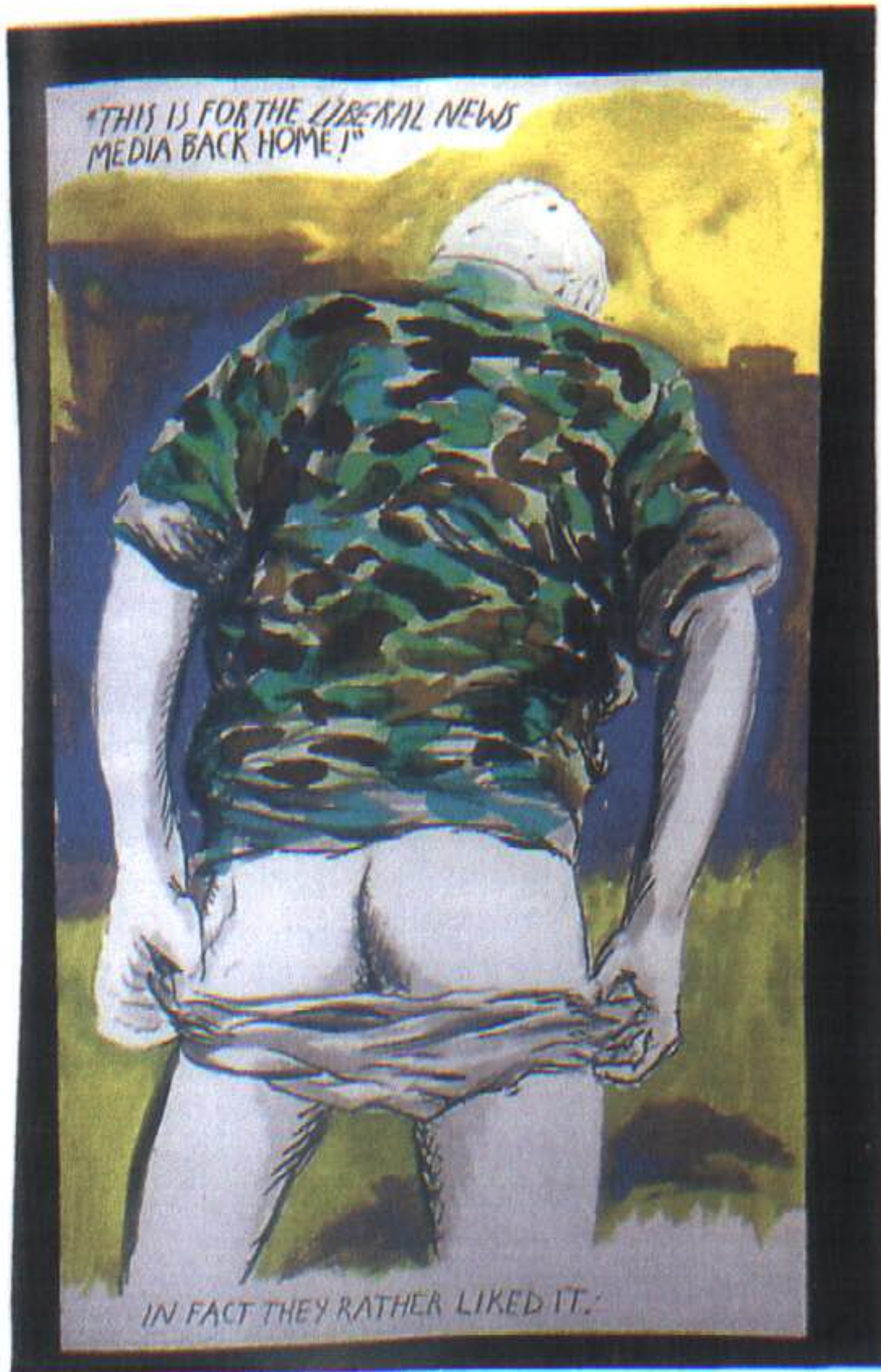
RP I wasn't really into comics as a kid. I looked down at them because they were considered beneath consideration. I only considered them later. The style of my work owes a lot to comics, obviously. The medium itself allows for so much and is capable of so much.

BW There's a chatty quality to your drawings, multiple voices conversing with each other, and yet you've always chosen to work on single panels. Your work seems like a project built for multiple panels, but they remain in one condensed frame. The subjective floating figure with multi-channel commentary boxing him or her in...

RP Sometimes those work, sometimes they do sort of explode. Sometimes I cut them up, making material out of them for future use. There is a point physically when you run out of room. You've seen how at the bottoms, the letters get smaller and smaller. As I write I realize I have only so much room. You can barely see, barely read what I'm writing. Sometimes it gets too involved for the panel, for the drawing.

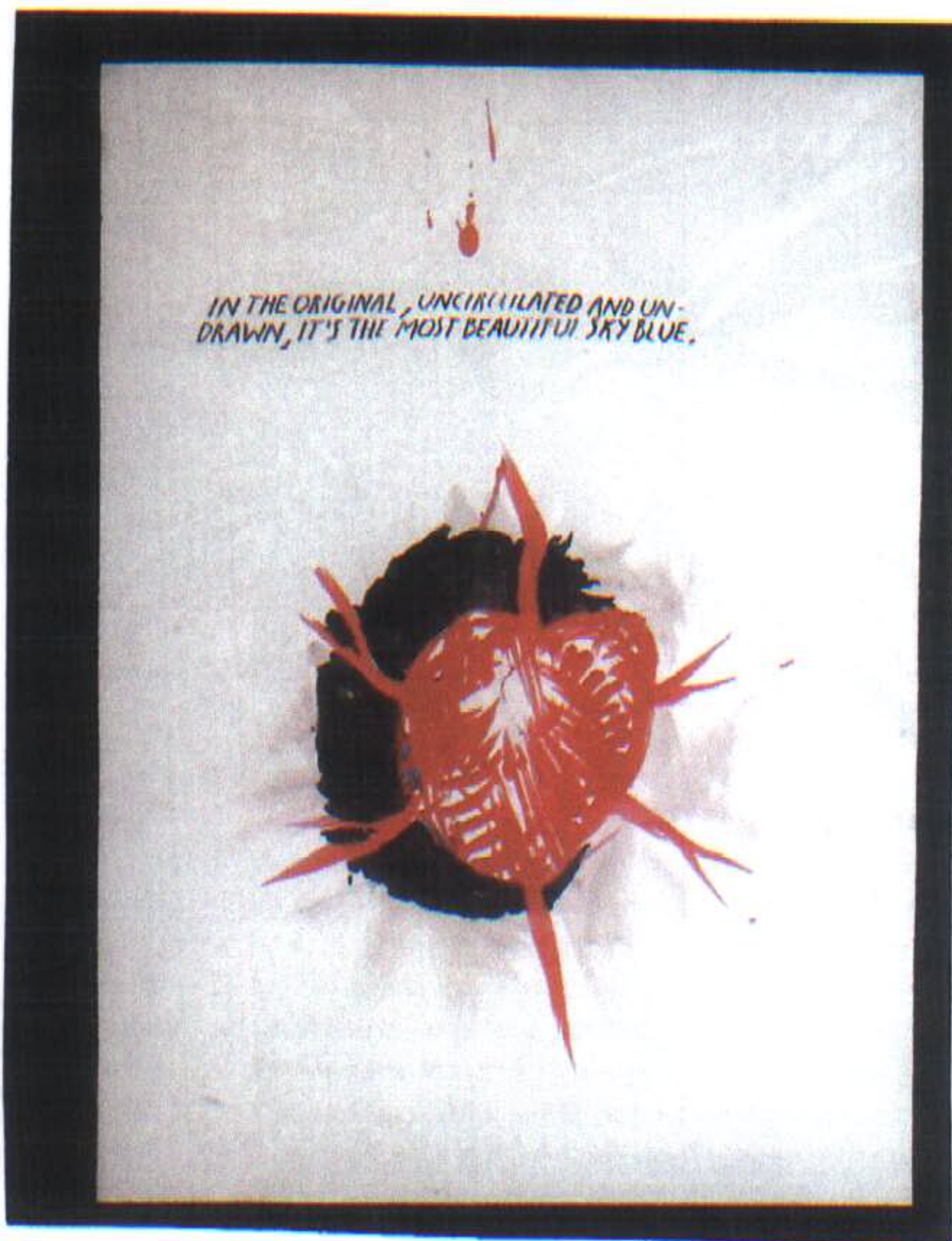


PARDON ME, BUT ANOTHER SORT OF POETRY IS UNEXPRESSED HERE; IT KNOWS IT IS INEXPRESSIBLE, CERTAINLY IT IS NOT MADE KNOWN IN BOOKS, BUT IT IS SIMPLY THERE ALL ALONG, TO OSMOSE IN THE AIR FOR THAT RARE GOD'S CREATURE WHO'S OPEN TO THE WORLD AND MUST DRINK OF IT AUKALLY— HIM AND THE EARTH, WITH ITS DEEDS TO REPORT AND ITS BLOSSOMS TO SAVOR, ITS SEEDS TO SPREAD OVER... AND DRINK UP WE DID, TOO -- TILL THE MUSES WERE QUITE, AND UTTERLY, WELL-TOASTED.



"THIS IS FOR THE LIBERAL NEWS MEDIA BACK HOME!"

IN FACT THEY RATHER LIKED IT.



IN THE ORIGINAL, UNCIRCULATED AND UN-DRAWN, IT'S THE MOST BEAUTIFUL SKY BLUE.

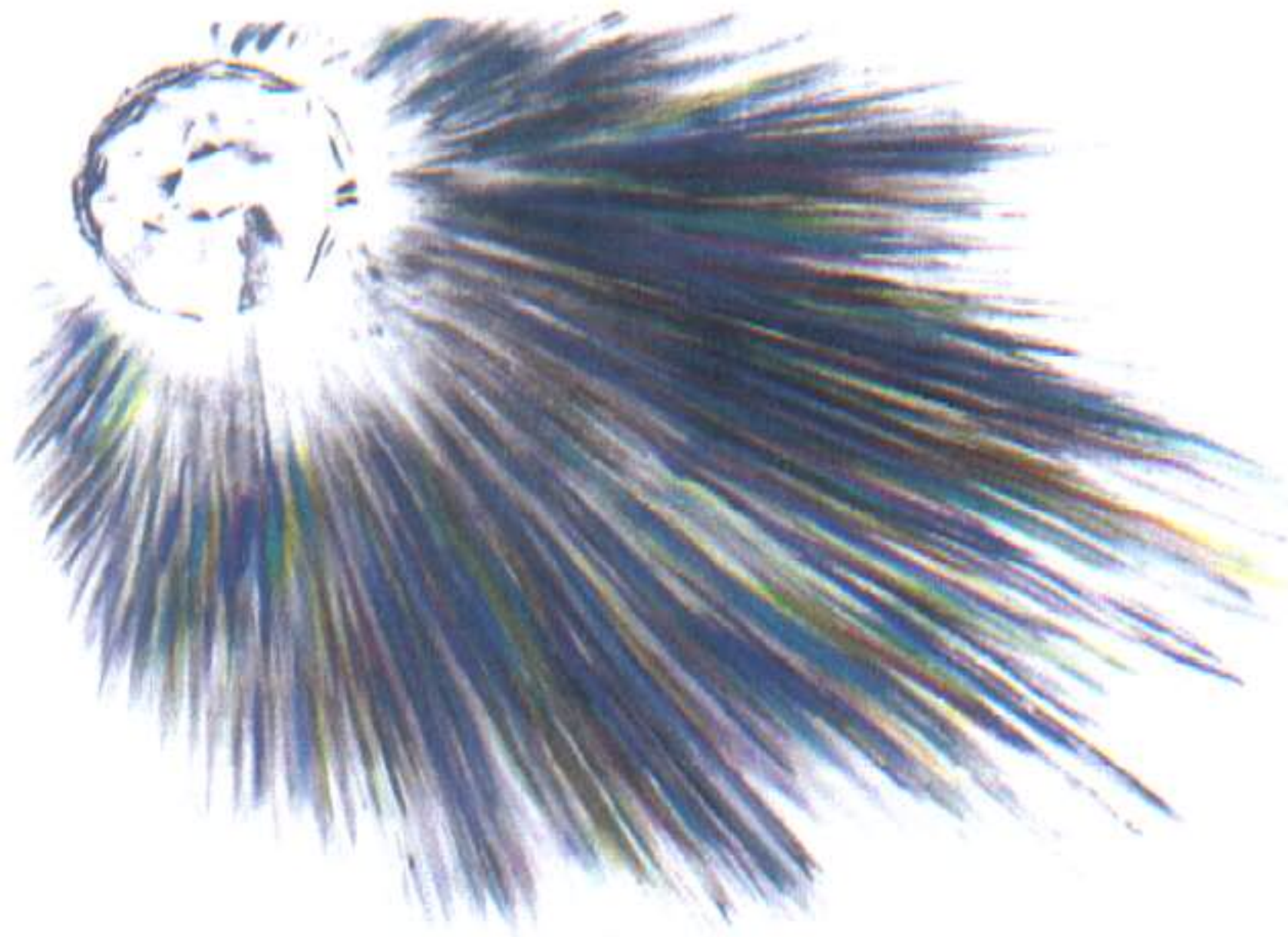
Clockwise from above:
No Title (Pardon me, but), 2005, pen and ink on paper, 57 x 77 cm
No Title (In the original), 2005, pen and ink on paper, 61 x 43 cm
No Title (This is for), 2005, pen and ink on paper, 56 x 33 cm

"MAP TO STARS,
MA'AM?"

GET IN, I THINK
I KNOW MY WAY
AROUND BY NOW.



"It's a happy man, to be going, like this, to see your plays acted (on)"



eye contact is rare so you find yourself getting used to not having it and when it happens it's almost too much to bear

When it goes on and on like that I have to make a video, a comic book, a sequential art version of it or a collage.

BW What do you think about the all-male line-up for the upcoming comics show at the UCLA Hammer Museum and MoCA? No women. No Linda Barry for example.

RP Linda Barry is one of my favourites. I think she's the best right now. The reason I like her is she's working in comics or cartoons and she doesn't give away anything. You couldn't do the equivalent without the image or without the text. There doesn't have to be an allowance or excuses made for her work, she's just brilliant. Speaking of the one-panel narrative like you were before about my work, what she's able to do with that is amazing... within that economy of means she's able to describe so much... which is important when you're doing comics or anything in print, journalism or interviews or anything where you're given constraints. But with the broads in general - you're asking me, someone who uses the term 'broads' [laughing], to weigh in on this - I don't think it's an oversight, either wilfully or not, on a gender basis, because you're working with history. I think it goes all the way back to 'The Yellow Kid', or even further. Cartooning has always been mostly the boys in the class.

BW Do you want to shoot some hoops?

RP Yeah, you want to play basketball? We can play at The Backyard.

So we get in my car and drive across a remarkable bridge and head toward Hermosa Beach where Raymond grew up. As we approached The Backyard, he asked if I could pull over immediately. Raymond saw a car he recognized parked in front of a bar, and said that he could drum up *some competition*. I lifted my foot in the air and showed him my flipflops, indicating bad idea. He said it would only take a



minute, so I parked and followed him in, where we found a solitary man hunkered over a clear drink in a small glass with a pale green bandana tied around his head - an old childhood friend of Ray's. Ray ordered a double shot of tequila and the barmaid said that it would cost one million dollars. He paid with a fifty and took a sip. His friend told me that he was recovering from the death of both his parents earlier this year. He also said that Ray was the sweetest, most generous man alive. Ray left a \$42 tip.

The Backyard was not a public hoop as I imagined, but the backyard of Raymond's childhood home, where he still lives, with his mom sleeping upstairs, and a man with a glass eye and an overgrown Mohawk assembling a kite, who seemed to be living in a narrow nook beside the garage, with a girlfriend who came and went. There were 11 basketballs in the yard, some orange, some brown with white scuffs, two purple, one silver, one absolutely perfect NBA leatherette model, all void of air. Raymond pumped air into one or two but the needle got stuck and air began to leak out. Eventually we were shooting baskets, bouncing the balls on crab-grassy earth. I mentioned that the clear plastic cover on the backboard could be removed if he wanted, that it was kind of peeling and buckling in places. He said he hadn't noticed, then grabbed a ladder and climbed up three steps. Before he made his way to the fourth precarious step he said, to the ground, and to me, this next one requires trust. So I held onto the ladder with both hands so he could reach the upper left tip of the clear plastic sheet at the top of the backboard, 12 feet high. Raymond appears to be a couple inches over six feet tall and, if you're wondering, he has a silky jump shot reminiscent of former LA Laker Jamal Wilkes, a graceful behind-the-head high archer that leaves his fingertips like an answered dream. ●

Above from left
Still from animation
(in progress), 2005

Still from animation
(in progress), 2005

Raymond Pettibon
the Whitney Museum of American Art
19 February. *Raymond Pettibon: Untitled*, artist's book created for the exhibition, is available through www.whitney.org