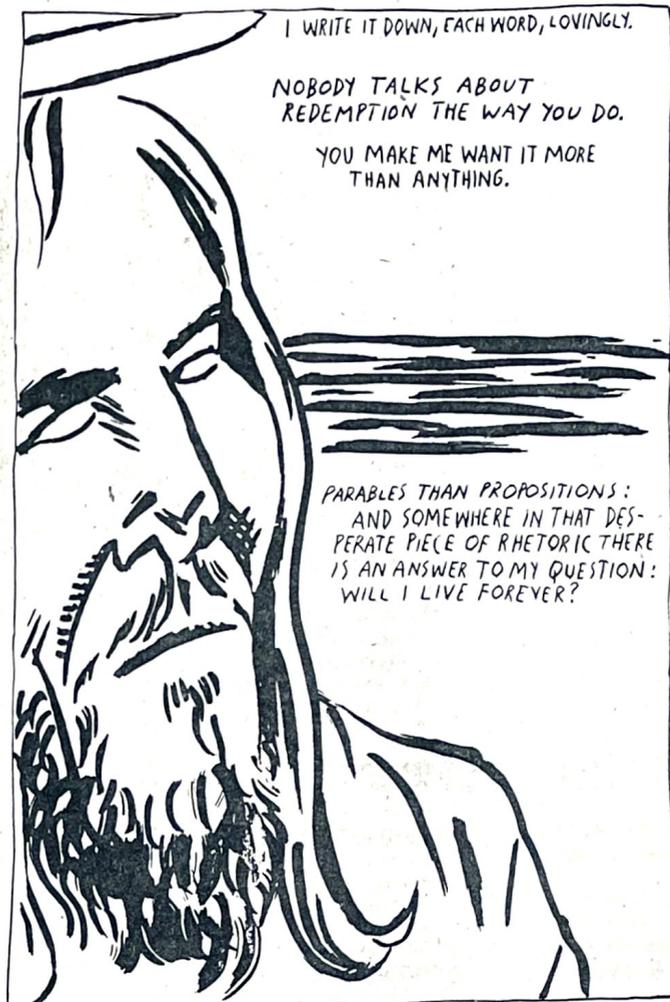


JIM MENDENHALL / Los Angeles Times

Raymond Pettibon and his "Nobody Talks About Redemption" (1990): "The work is supposed to be finished by the reader. It's up for interpretation."



I WRITE IT DOWN, EACH WORD, LOVINGLY.  
 NOBODY TALKS ABOUT  
 REDEMPTION THE WAY YOU DO.  
 YOU MAKE ME WANT IT MORE  
 THAN ANYTHING.

PARABLES THAN PROPOSITIONS:  
 AND SOMEWHERE IN THAT DES-  
 PERATE PIECE OF RHETORIC THERE  
 IS AN ANSWER TO MY QUESTION:  
 WILL I LIVE FOREVER?

## Drawn to Words

Pairing sketches with texts, Raymond Pettibon keeps his art between the lines—where his mother could find it

By HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA

It's no wonder that the art world took a while to catch on to Raymond Pettibon. What does one make of images picturing iconic figures as disparate as Gumby and Babe Ruth, paired with musings on the repressive nature of television or poetic exhortations to greatness?

His simple ink drawings and paintings are combined with texts of his own words and those borrowed from such writers as James Joyce, Henry James and John Ruskin. The absurd and sublime, the sacred and profane, the enduring themes of art history and literature are delivered with the economy, and sometimes the appearance, of a comic strip.

"Originally, I was learning to draw from the etchings of John Sloan, Reginald Marsh and Edward Hopper, Goya and Rembrandt," Pettibon says. "In the back of my mind was always the idea of reproduction. I was never too into comic books, but I like the style. It's shorthand for depicting reality in a way that practically everyone can understand. I know that drawing is not

my strong point. I'm trying to do my best, though. I'm not trying to make 'bad' art. It's a challenge to see if I can make art of such feeble sources."

Pettibon is an artist's artist. In the competitive and cutthroat art world, an unusual number of his colleagues speak of him with admiration and generosity. And now, his ongoing dialogue between the pathetic and the heroic are gaining the attention of more than a few cognoscenti. Pettibon says, "I always knew that as the work went on, it would get harder and harder to ignore what I was doing."

This summer, he will be showing at galleries in Cologne, Nice and Milan. In Los Angeles, his paintings and drawings are included—along with works by Mark Heresy and Richard Roehl—in a group exhibition titled "Dangerous," currently at the Richard/Bennett Gallery.

There are a couple of reasons why Pettibon, who began showing his work here in 1981, is getting noticed. For good or bad, they have to do with the success of a few friends. Mike Kelley, long regarded as

an underground darling of the local art world, has achieved overdue critical and commercial success. His use of visual and literal conventions drawn from the subcultures of society, along with an involvement with punk rock, parallels that of Pettibon.

Their interests have been so close and, in some cases collaborative, that critics have mistakenly thought the artists influenced one another. In fact, both had developed their idiosyncratic styles independently and before they ever met. But Kelley's sales and exhibition record of the last year have undoubtedly helped the art world accept Pettibon.

In addition, Pettibon has garnered kudos this year for his cover of the newest Sonic Youth album, "Goo." Bassist Kim Gordon, who went from conceptual art to music via the New York art band circuit, has been a longtime admirer of Pettibon's art. She had written about Kelley, Pettibon and performance artist Tony Oursler for Artforum 10 years ago.

The album covers and posters that Pettibon did for the punk band Black Flag in the early '80s initially got Kelley's

attention too. (Pettibon's oldest brother, Greg Ginn, was a founder of the band as well as of the independent label SST.) What impressed Kelley was that these images were not commercial illustration—they were pre-existing art.

"He was dealing with these subcultures and ideologies in a serious way," recalls Kelly. "They were about carrying the expectations of ideology and history, but with a twist, making it dysfunctional so you have to take responsibility for the reading. Like my early work, he was using a form that was invisible to the art world who saw it as cartoons. It's more about conventions. It's not about the transposition from low to high art—like Pop art was. It's more obviously about quotation."

For Pettibon, the associations with punk rock are uncomfortable. Hudson, whose Feature gallery in New York is currently showing the artist's drawings, remembers that he first noticed Pettibon's work on the Black Flag albums, but points out that the music world has not supported the artist in

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# Pettibon

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terms of sales. Hudson notes that members of Sonic Youth talk about Pettibon on MTV and come to his openings, but such notoriety can backfire. The art establishment has been somewhat aloof. Until now.

Hudson explains Pettibon's growing popularity, saying he "addresses the image and text syndrome but without the baggage of the cult of CalArts. The gap between meaning and non-meaning that constitutes his work is one of the goals of many artists today. His work has a strong conceptual base but the making is involved with the hand, so there is a poetic aspect to it."

"He is consistently discriminating about the values between things and that's why he's so successful in creating that gap. His drawings are often based on etchings, so they look somehow to be of the past. His subject matter, like the trains and baseball players, looks to be early 19th and 20th Century superficially, but it is about right now. After all, we make sense of the present by understanding the past."

Pettibon is eager for some acknowledgment from the art world. Contrary to much that has been published about him, he is not a recluse. He laughs dryly at the accusations of being shy. "I'm taken for that. I'm basically quiet, but it's not a matter of timidity. If it was someone else's work, I could run a gallery, make things happen, but it's not my role."

"I'm not in this to be an artist, to have an artist's life to be in the art scene. I'm in it to work, and there is a distinction there. I go to an opening and there are not too many artists who bother with that—you just see people who hang out and want to be artists. Maybe it's unfair to make distinctions between serious artists and hangers-on, but there is a huge amount of work I have to do to make art. It looks easy but there is a lot behind it before I can make it."

Pettibon, 33, is a tall man of intense, interior focus. He takes his time to be thoughtful when answering questions, and that pregnant pause—which can seem awkward in this garrulous world—is the effect generated by the best of his work. It is a quiet moment between the information and the recipient—an independent, undisciplined, unmanaged number of minutes when the imagination is allowed some range.

He has accomplished an art that is an extension of who, and more important, how he is. This is not to say it is Expressionist or a manifestation of his personality. Instead, it is created with his peculiar sense of time, one that recalls the leisurely, philosophic pace of an earlier age. This may be due to the fact that the art is text-based.

"Most of my work is concerned with literature . . . rather than personal life or anything else. I quote and I write." When Pettibon is questioned as to the source of a particular text, he will frequently find it impossible to recall. Some of the words might be Ruskin, and some might be in the style of Ruskin but written by Pettibon. "It's almost a way of reading in art," he explains. "The ideas, at first, came between the sentences, rather than as a quote. It's as though I was making a response—a dialectic of reading."

Asked if, as a young man, he'd wanted to be a writer, he says, "The only thing I can remember wanting to be is a mountain climber." Eventually, he confesses some family history that makes writing seem a rather natural option. His father, R.C.K. Ginn, is an English teacher who has published several spy novels and who coined the nickname Pettibon adopted.

"Using literature was a way of making art that came natural to me," he admits. "The work is supposed to be finished by the reader. I'm meeting them halfway but it's supposed to expand from some small scene on the paper. It's a starting point towards creating a world—a dialectic of reading."

Pettibon has a brooding look, with a boxer's nose and curly black hair tousled over his forehead. He has long, immaculately groomed hands that he holds very still, a small mouth and a laugh that seems to surprise him when it comes. You recognize him as the subject of many of his own drawings. He is wearing a rumpled white cotton shirt, chinos and torn white sneakers without the laces, yet he has the artist's uncanny ability to make it come off as somehow debonair. His brown eyes rarely meet a visitor's gaze.

He lives in the small Hermosa Beach house he grew up in, around the corner from Miracosta High School, from which he graduated. He attended UCLA and got a bachelor's degree in economics in 1977. He taught math in the L.A. public school system for a few years but also began the serious pursuit of his art.

Around the living room of the house, which serves as his studio, is a chaotic abundance of source ma-

terial—shelves sag with books and records, canvases are stacked against the wall, dozens of drawings are piled on a table.

Pettibon's drawings come out by the hundreds. He started to publish them as limited-edition photocopied booklets in 1978. These booklets, which he continues to produce as "Superflux Publications" are the sum of his ideas and aesthetics and available for \$2 each. "I never want to get away from books. For me, it's a catalogue of the work, a way of retaining the images."

"The Author Is a Medium" features a sailing ship in the style of an etching on the cover and the quotations: "Bonaparte had passed that way" and "Shifting as the Stars Shift." The back cover bears a rough drawing of a light bulb exploding the surrounding darkness. The text reads, "Dawn at Last Trembles." The images are obviously copied from photographs, etchings and comics, though the style of the characters appears vaguely associated with the 1940s.

They are sketchy pictures that balance the weighty nature of their texts. Their apparently casual execution prevents the texts, indeed, the whole enterprise, from coming into over-determined art school drivel. The book seems to connote everything and nothing, like a single frame from a Polanski movie or a paragraph of Joyce. One page depicts Gumby staring at a copy of "Finnegan's Wake." The text reads, "Would we have embarked on that stream had we known?"

"It has to take place in the head—not on the canvas or page," Pettibon says. "What matters is what takes place in the reader's imagination. Gumby goes into books and lives them. He's a symbol of what I'm doing, in a way."

Pettibon continues: "Some painting is about the re-creation of

reality, playing God almost. It's something I'm not capable of approaching, so I try to get by. I'd like to say a lot using very little, with images and with words, as well."

"I was talking to a class at an art school and the question came up, 'Who are you doing this for?' I told them, 'I'm doing it for my mom.' I meant it to bring laughs, but in fact, she's a better audience than are the. The older you are, the more background you have in the intellectual world, and my mother's main thing is metaphysics. Christian Scientists relate to people on a spiritual level, and there is an affinity with that in my work."

"This country is such a media-saturated place that what I'm doing gets shut out of the game. Usually the perception of my work is the exact opposite. I'm not doing popular art."

"My strengths are probably more weighted to the words. I write songs and screenplays for my friends. I don't write much prose. It's almost like I can't believe it. I've analyzed and dissected it so much I don't believe it enough to write that way anymore. I kind of envy people who are able to do that."

Pettibon's videos, as well as his earlier drawings, deal with such subculture mythology as the Weathermen, Patty Hearst as the revolutionary Tania, and Charles Manson. A particularly droll look at the punk music scene called "Sir Drone" is subtitled "A New Beatles Film About the New Beatles—Love Is God Is Boredom." It stars artists Mike Kelley, Richard Lee, Chris Wilder and musician Mike Watt, one of the punk band the Minutemen—another Pettibon album cover—now of Firehouse. The drama of this tape revolves around whether Kelley will cut his long hippie-style hair in order to be an

authentic punk rocker.

The production is minimal but the dialogue is scathingly acute, debunking the pseudo-heroic stance of the punk as revolutionary. Pettibon's critiques bleed because he comes from the inside and his complicity is defined. Kelley says, "Music is emotionally loaded with such mythic figures. Raymond's work is all about taking God down a notch. The punk scene promised a freedom, yet his work reveals holes in the ideology."

Kelley points out that he and Pettibon both were interested in underground culture, which has made the work difficult to approach for art critics. "For a long time, images from the lower class were considered populist. But the artist might not be accepting the convention that a certain image has traditionally implied. It's questioning the notion of authorship, the notion of being the 'eye' is more complicated now."

Kelley played guitar on an album of songs that Pettibon recently recorded for the independent label Blast First out of New York and London. His band, wryly named Super-Session, is the standard of rock 'n' roll with guitars, bass, drums and keyboards. "My band is something I backed into," he confesses. "It seems kind of unlikely for this but to be in something like this but I like the songwriting."

In music as in art, Pettibon resists attempts to streamline or categorize his work. He toils in the ineffable. The artist sighs and says, "I do have a comfortable hold on meaning or the confidence to tell the world what to think about it." □

Hunter Drohojovska is chair, department of liberal arts and sciences, Otis/Parsons School of Art & Design.

## Art Notes

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and Doug & Barnstein—is holding a collaborative "Summer Event of Art and Music" on Thursday from 6-9 p.m.

Included will be an open house at all the galleries and an 8 p.m. performance by the contemporary ensemble Musica Nova, plus free cocktails and hors d'oeuvres.

The event is planned as the first of a number of collaborative art events to be held at the complex, which is at 2032-2114 Broadway. Information: (213) 828-6608.

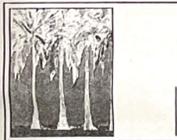
**Also Happening:** "Sanctuary: Mirages in a Parallel Landscape," a site-specific installation and performance by the won Barnsdall Art Park's Sixed Works '91 competi-

tion, will be presented at the park Saturday and next Sunday at 8 p.m. The work is conceived by performance artist/maskmaker Swanson, in collaboration with painter/visual artist Jim Starrett and writer/director Shirish Kurup. The event is free. . . . Enemy's Installation One Gallery will have a special open house next Sunday from 3 to 7 p.m. featuring refreshments and performances by L.A. club bands Chance, Ritt Henn & the Concerned Citizens Combo and Sam Ten. Tickets are \$5.

**Benefits:** Specially designed chairs made by 27 L.A. artists including May Sun, Lita Albuquerque, Jeffrey Vallance and Betsy Saar will be on view at Daniel Saxon Gallery on Beverly Blvd. June 26-27. The works will be auctioned at the gallery from 6-10

p.m. on the 27th, with proceeds going to the Sunshine Mission/Casa de Rosas, an emergency shelter for homeless women. Tickets are \$20. . . . An "Instant Art Collection" valued at more than \$50,000 will be up for grabs in a drawing at the Santa Barbara Contemporary Arts Forum on June 29, with proceeds going to support the gallery's exhibitions program. The collection includes works in all media by artists such as Carmen Lomas Garza, Christo and John Baldessari, and tickets for the drawing are \$100 each. Information: (213) 966-5373.

**Entries:** Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions is accepting submissions through July 1 for its 6th Annual, an exhibition open to all L.A. artists that will run Sept. 6-Oct. 6 at LACE. Entries are also being sought for LACE's annual billboard art program, sponsored by Patrick Media Group. Three artists will be selected to have their original works produced as outdoor public billboards. The deadline is July 2. Information: (213) 624-5650. □



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