

Untitled, 1991



Disciplined by the artist
to go round
& round

—William Carlos Williams,
“Pictures from Breughel”¹

Hold back the edge of your gowns,
Ladies, we are going through hell.

—William Carlos Williams,
Introduction to *Howl*²

Raymond Pettibon’s drawings occupy the gallery like a whirlwind. Images and words seem to fly about like the barnyard animals that spun past Dorothy as she cycloned out of Kansas. Gumby, Superman, Joan Crawford, Babe Ruth, Jesus Christ, the Bible, Felix the Cat, as well as pictures of a swinging light bulb, a locomotive, a baseball player, a starburst, and a shadowy phallus appear and reappear throughout the artist’s installation. The artist’s sketchy, shorthand style contributes to the overall dizzying effect.

Each image typically shares the page with a handwritten text. Alternately laconic and garrulous, these texts, like the images, derive both from Pettibon’s own imagination as well as from various appropriated sources. Pettibon’s literary quotations, however, come less from the kind of pop culture that provides much of his imagery than from the heady realm of nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century writers such as Nathaniel Hawthorne, John Ruskin, Henry James, and James Joyce. Frequently, Pettibon employs what the writer Amy Gerstler has called “a self-conscious literary 19th century hybrid poetic diction (‘JOINED WITH THE INFLICTION OF GRIEVOUS SIGHT BEFORE THE INFLICTION OF GRIEVOUS BLINDNESS THAT

SO THE LAST SIGHT OF THIS
WORLD’S LIGHT MUST
REMAIN A GRIEF.’)”³

“Most of my work is concerned with literature...rather than with personal life or anything else,” says Pettibon. “I quote and I write. It’s almost a way of reading in art. The ideas, at first, came between the sentences, rather than as a quote. It’s as though I were making a response—a dialectic of reading.”⁴

Stylistically, Pettibon’s fluid quoting and intuitive collaging of images, phrases, and themes places him squarely in the Modernist tradition of Ezra Pound, William Carlos Williams, Kurt Schwitters, and Robert Rauschenberg. Like these artists and writers, Pettibon creates an art of dynamic interchange between visuality and language. His heterogeneous approach requires a certain involvement on the part of the reader/viewer. “The work is supposed to be finished by the reader,” Pettibon has said. “I’m meeting them halfway but it’s supposed to expand from the small scene on the paper. It’s a starting point towards creating a world in the imagination.”⁵

The more time one spends with Pettibon’s drawings the more clearly certain primary themes—mortality, fate, and existential solitude—emerge. Rather than being undermined by Pettibon’s apparently off-hand execution and whimsical subject matter, the seriousness of these issues is forced into a darkly humorous reconciliation with the commonness of everyday life. In one drawing, for example, the artist depicts a reflective, cigarette-smoking chimp with a re-worded line from the children’s book

Curious George, “And now I was sorry that God had made me a monkey.”

This absurdist and acerbic aesthetic is what links Pettibon’s gallery pictures to his involvement with the Los Angeles punk scene. Besides contributing drawings for the covers of albums by Black Flag, Sonic Youth, and the Minutemen, Pettibon has made several videos on such “subcultural” themes such as Charles Manson and Patty Hearst, a.k.a. Citizen Tania. His most recent tape, titled *Sir Drone: A New Beatles Film About the New Beatles—Love Is God Is Boredom*, stars the artist Mike Kelley as a wannabe punk rocker reluctant to give up his surfboard and hippie-style hair. Since 1978, the ever prolific Pettibon has published numerous limited-edition photocopy books incorporating his drawings and song lyrics. His own band, *Super Session*, featuring Mike Kelley on guitar, has recently recorded an album on the independent label Blast First.

Raymond Pettibon was born in 1957 in Tucson, Arizona. He lives and works in Hermosa Beach, California.

Lawrence Rinder

¹ William Carlos Williams, “The Wedding Dance in the Open Air” from *Pictures from Breughel and Other Poems* (New York: New Directions, 1962), p. 10.

² William Carlos Williams, *Introduction to Howl and Other Poems* by Allen Ginsberg (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1959), pp. 7-8.

³ Amy Gerstler, “Raymond Pettibon, Robert Berman Gallery,” *Artforum*, March 1992, p. 114.

⁴ Raymond Pettibon, quoted in “Drawn to Words” by Hunter Drohojowska, *Los Angeles Times*, 16 June 1991, p. 92.

⁵ *Ibid.*

Works in MATRIX:

Various drawings, ink on paper, 1992. Lent by the artist.

Selected one-person exhibitions:

Zero-One Gallery, Hollywood, CA '82; Semaphore Gallery, New York City '86; Feature, New York City '89, '91; Richard/Bennett Gallery, Los Angeles, CA '91; Terrain Gallery, San Francisco, CA '91; Massimo di Carlo Arte Contemporanea, Milan, Italy '91; Robert Berman Gallery, Santa Monica, CA '91; University Galleries, Illinois State University, Normal, IL '92 (catalog).

Selected group exhibitions:

Feature, Chicago, IL, '87; Rhona Hoffman Gallery, Los Angeles, CA, *Problems with Reading Rereading* '89; Feature, New York City, *Buttinsky* '89; Simon Watson Gallery, New York City, *Total Metal* '90; Rosamund Felsen Gallery, Los Angeles, CA, *Just Pathetic* '90; 303 Gallery, New York City '91; Villa Arson, Nice, France, *The Kelley Family* '91;

Rena Bransten Gallery, San Francisco, CA '91; Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, CA, Helter Skelter '92 (catalog).

Selected bibliography (see also catalogs under exhibitions):

Coley, Brian. "Dreams Not Sprung from the Bush of Madonna: an interview with Raymond Pettibon," *Forced Exposure* (Winter '88), pp. 65-64.

Spaid, Sue. *Art Issues* (Summer '92), p. 30.

Spiegel, Judith. *Artweek* (22 March '93), pp. 12-13.

Weissman, Benjamin. *Artforum* (May '90), p. 197.

Myles, Lilien. *Art in America* (March '91), pp. 141-42.

Drohnowska, Hunter. "Drawn to Words," *Los Angeles Times* (16 June '91), pp. 90-92.

Gerstler, Amy. "Raymond Pettibon, Robert Riman Gallery," *Artforum* (March '92), pp. 114-15.

Plochere, Michelle. "A Conversation with Raymond Pettibon," *Artweek* (6 Feb. '92), p. 20.

Venechino, G. Daniel. "Writing on the Wall," *Artweek* (6 Feb. '92), pp. 1, 19.

MATRIX is supported in part by grants from the Paul F. and Phyllis Wattis Foundation, the National Endowment for the Arts, the California Arts Council, the T. B. Walker Foundation, and Jack Hanley and Alexandra Bowes.