

EDITION KRINZINGER  
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RAYMOND PETTIBON



Raymond Pettibon – Edition (Etching and Aquatinta ) 1992

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### DIGGING THE LITTLE BONE :

The King-sized art of Reymundo Pettibon by Ralph Rugoff 1992

Raymond Pettibon is a drawing machine programmed to proceed until the world is papered over. He spins out countless works that multiply like mice, and while at first each tiny terror seems almost negligible, one by one they add up. Sooner or later, you find yourself at the mercy of a Pettibon universe . Of course, the artist will assure you that it's perfectly safe - it's only art, for one thing, and besides, he'd never hurt a fly - but it's hard to believe him. Pettibon doesn't speak in humanist truths, after all , but in the splintered dialects left us by a history of terror and spectacle . As they say in Alaska, if you live with wolves, you learn to howl.

There' s an element of assault in any large - scale Pettibon installation. Typically the exhibition space is cluttered with hundreds of drawings of varying sizes, including some made directly on the wall, presenting far more to read and look at than you can possibly take in without exhausting yourself . The net effect - at least on first impression - is a din of competing voices, a farrago of words and images that seems to apply parody the media hurricane of modern life. But unlike the mass media, whose pseudo- information reduces everything to the level of trivia, Pettibon's installations are generative . Meanings proliferate through prismatic effects, degrading into promiscuous circuits that are corrosive and funny as hell. On an individual basis, Pettibon' s drawings can look slightly overwhelmed: instead of evoking terror, they appear to register emotional fallout. His images are rendered in a tentative and schematic fashion, with ink blotches occasionally providing evidence of a hasty touch . The accompanying handwritten text wavers unsteadily, an agency of uncertainty. The medium of drawing, historically consigned to a secondary shelf as the poor relative of painting, appears here as blatantly impermanent, flawed and imperfect. Many works only hint at the idea of drawing, falling short of any fully-fledged investment. Pettibon doesn't seem interested in Art with a capital A. His hit-and-run

methodology skids past the longing for isolated masterpieces and instead sets out to discover the relations between system and desire , spectacle and speech - the Sphinx' s riddle for the cybernetic age.

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One man's for making this discovery is a controlled delirium. A

dizzying weave of figures from pop music, politics, cartoons, baseball, crime and B movies parade through Pettibon's drawings like the subjects of a debased history painting. Pettibon, however, is less interested in official biography than in rummaging through the rumorladen counter-histories promulgated by underground subcultures and what the government used to call "dissident elements". His skeptical eye falls on established figures like J. Edgar Hoover and the Kennedys, but also on the subcultures themselves, whether hippies and punks or radical groups like the Weathermen. The hypocrisy of "alternative" cultures and their failed utopias, in fact, has been a frequent subject of Pettibon's biting humor, so much so that a trace of bitterness is apparent, as if his caustic attitude was that of the guy who hates the sixties because he was never invited to an orgy or who couldn't "let go" enough on LSD to have a bonafide psychidelic revelation. Of course, Pettibon can trip with the best of them. It's just that his hallucinations are so sharp they're easily confused with reality. On the surface, at least, Pettibon's art closely resembles the format of comics, yet he has little use for sequential narrative. His texts play off the image directly, sometimes indirectly, sometimes obscurely or not at all. You end up with the impression that the two operations - the writing of text, the drawing of pictures - are performed at radically different moments in time, fractured by the passage of unknown histories.

Duplicity, rather than narrative, is Pettibon's crucial tool. As his imagery and texts ramble across the underside of America's Pop landscape, authorial point of view slides like mercury on ice: a single image may be accompanied by as many as half a dozen fragments of writing, which range in tone from lyrical to caustic to humorous. Comic oneliners and metaphysical speculations compete over the same picture, as

if the author were suffering from Multiple Personality Disorder.

Semantic bureaucracy is dissolved, but strong voices remain – voices which we recognize so instantly that they seem to belong to us, even when they contradict one another. The wobbly handwriting of Pettibon's texts gives them the appearance of diary-like jottings, something highly personal, even confessional. This impression is enhanced by his penchant for using firstperson voices, and for phrases which directly address either the reader

or an alter-ego. But just as his images draw on a generic visuallexicon, many of his texts are borrowed from pre-existing sources, anything from Henry James to works on experimental cinema. Pettibon has a fine ear

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for selecting evocative fragments which, when pulled out of their original contexts, can be poignantly open-ended. Generally, he avoids the bon mots and aphorisms that end up in books of quotations; he's not interested in received wisdom, but in creating systems for its disposal.

Raymond Pettibon's original writing, including the screenplays for his epic video productions, tends to be loaded with puns and associative word play. Instead of serving narrative needs, dialogue is given over to a logic of immediate surface connections, words plugging into each other with erotic abandon, like bullets ricocheting in an echo chamber. The pathetic desire to be always understood is replaced by a type of play that propels itself to the edge of nonsense.

As if in mock consolation for these violations of narrative decorum, some of Pettibon's works reassuringly address the genteel "Dear Reader" of 19th century novels, establishing a contract of good faith between artist and viewer. Yet like the "unreliable narrator" of modern literature, Pettibon's seductively familiar voices prove to be no more than the first skins of an onion that can be peeled indefinitely. Lines of text reach out and tap the viewer on the shoulder, ironically offering to turn the page or declaring, "You are an actor in my play."

At the risk of appearing sophomoric, these texts draw attention to the fictional bond between viewer and artist, wryly recalling the

mediated nature of visual experience. They conjure up a sense of

intimacy and arouse Oedipal desires only to frame them as a dubious part of the art game; in the end, Pettibon insists that you are not alone, dear viewer - there is always an other looking over your shoulder.

Blurring the boundaries between art and life, Pettibon occasionally fictionalizes his own artistic persona. Whereas conventional self-portraits present themselves as psychological documents, records for posterity of the artist's gaze turned on itself, Pettibon's taciturn self-images seen more like emblems or logos, stripped of all a personal trace. Instead of revealing anything about their creator, they tell us about the gulf separating representation and subject - the gulf where desire is forged and ensared in a position of unrequited yearning.

A drawing from early 1992 seems to reveal something of Pettibon's modus operandi: alongside a generic self-portrait, a first-person text declares that the artist cannot be trusted because the voices he repeats belong neither to his muse nor to the man himself. This position leads us into an ancient paradox: if Pettibon tells us he can't be trusted, should we believe him? Lampooning the artist's authority, Pettibon toys with the lines

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where communication begins and ends and raises questions about who has the power to determine them, without ever reducing the issue to a singular answer. Nietzsche remarked that it's possible for modern man to imagine himself not as an "immortal soul" but as many mortal -souls . Likewise Pettibon' s work suggests that meaning lies not in some Platonic model of true-being but scattered between lines and images, in multiple resonances which each viewer must spin out for herself . This kind of semantic relativity is an old story, but there' s a haunting emotional power and melancholy beauty in Pettibon' s work that defies his minimal means. The lyricism is especially surprising, given the tough, often sordid material he draws on for subj ect matter. The beauty lies not in the pictures or the texts, but in the processes of discovery they jointly engineer.

System and desire, in other words. A room flooded with drawings is less about communicating individual messages than c r eat~ng an environmental structure. You plug in randomly, much in the way you pick up information everyday in bits and pie ces from a variety of media. As with one of Warhol ' s underground film epics, it doesn' t matter if you miss parts of the show . It's bigger than you are, and no definitive reading is possible. Amid the endless possibili ties, you feel a sense of loss triggered by the absence of a centered meaning, but a l so an exhilarating expansion of self (which comes from playful disintegration rather than any merging with the sublime) .

Without ever being didacting, Raymond Pettibon shows us that the boundary between art and l ife is not as simple as often thought. And that in a society glutted with pseudo-information and endl essly repeated trivia, a certain kind of complex terror can be a meaningful act - some would say the only one.

(Text from the catalogue „Up the threshold“ part of the LAX exhibition 1992 in Galerie Krinzinger Vienna. Text by Ralph Rugoff).



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