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Raymond Pettibon

JIM LEWIS

A Conversation with Raymond Pettibon

We need a new word for the kind of apprehending we bring to bear on a Pettibon drawing; our standard understanding of the eye's saccade and the mind's recreation of meaning just doesn't seem to be sufficient. Indeed, everything we do is opposite from its ordinary nature: We read the images as easily and immediately as if they were words, and let our eyes wander back and forth over the texts, piecing their meaning together the way we do the elements of a cubist painting. And no sooner has one finished than another drawing appears, and another, and another, a thousand Pettibons, each of them broodingly beautiful, subtle and complex, each to be admired for the fragility of its faith, its humor, its erudition. As much as any artist I can think of, Pettibon makes good on the promise of the Twentieth Century: that every scrap of culture counts for something, that the individual bits and pieces of our experience and our history can be reconstituted into some able story of our lives.

JIM LEWIS is a critic and a writer who lives in New York City.

JIM LEWIS: I always wondered what's important to you about the images in your drawings. Why didn't you just become a writer?

RAYMOND PETTIBON: You could ask the same question of a writer: You know, why doesn't he do what I do? I think it's as legitimate a form as any other; I always wondered why it wasn't exploited more often. It's not like the visual part is a crutch or anything. It's true, my primary interest has always been the writing part of it much more then the visual arts, but I don't think it stands by itself as writing: It's not literature, it's art.

JL: Do you think of the drawings as illustration of the text, or the text as commentary on the visuals?

RP: I don't really think of it in those terms at all. Sometimes I kind of play with the whole idea of illumination, as if the text was something that was passed down from God to the lowly monks, who spend the duration of their lives illuminating it. But that's just another way of placing the whole question in a context that makes it senseless. Sometimes I almost wish I could have some kind of contract with the devil, giving away my everyday life, if that would buy me the

RAYMOND PETTIBON, NO TITLE, 1995, ink and gouache on paper 14 x 22" / OHNE TITEL, Tusche und Gouache auf Papier, 35,6 x 55,9 cm. (PHOTOS: REGEN PROJECTS, LOS ANGELES)

thousand years I need to really begin to understand the work I'm doing.

JL: Can you give me a sense of the influences on the visual side of your work?

RP: When I started, they were derived from a kind of etching style, of, for instance, Whistler, or Samuel Palmer, or the style of Turner's paintings and his watercolors. Who else? John Sloane or Joseph Pennell, or Hopper. If you look at my earlier work, you can see Goya in it. Those are the kinds of the people who I learned to draw from. But as pure drawing my work didn't really amount to much; it probably still doesn't. The point about, for example, Pennell, is just that as an artist your influences aren't necessarily the people you admire the most, as a whole.

JL: The videos of yours that I've seen—the one about the *Weathermen*, for instance—are so much looser than the drawings, though I understand they're scripted down to the word. What's the relationship between the two media?

RP: In a sense the drawings are kind of like video stills; for a while I used to actually draw them from the video screen, by pausing a tape, usually some movie or something. I think that's how my style arose; it was kind of unintentional on my part, the film noir aspect of it.

I'd make more of my own videos, except that, even the way I do it—without a crew or anything—you still have to involve other people, and it's just a lot of trouble getting everyone on the same page. I'm not trying to be folksy and primitive; often I work in the form I do just for practical reasons. No aesthetic reasons at all. Money, time, talent, skill, the number of assistants I have, those can dictate the form.

JL: How much of the text in your drawings is your own and how much is quotation?

RP: I don't really know. It depends on the period. I remember going a few years at least just writing entirely on my own. But a lot of my work is a combination of both, and a lot of times neither the words nor the drawings are finished for several years. In the last year or so I've been borrowing a lot more, but overall maybe a third is borrowed. It might be more. It's hard to say; because it's not just borrowed, it's changed around sometimes. And I can revert, in my own writing, to the style I'm borrowing from; and in any one drawing there might be any number of voices.

JL: I've always wondered how much Melville there is in them. You use the same sort of humor, the same very sly sentence structure. And you seem to like a certain exclamatory rhetoric; your people are always blurting out things.

RP: I like Melville a lot, but oddly enough there's very little of him in my work. I use the kind of blurting out that's caught off guard, very fragmentary expressions, rather than something that's fully formed. Shakespeare is another writer that I don't borrow from much, partly because the expressions in his plays are so fully formed. Whereas the writing of Marlowe, for instance, who's from the same period, lends itself a lot easier to what I'm doing. But my primary sources are the great prose writers, like Henry James and Proust and Ruskin and Pater. And Thomas Browne. If you read them you'll come across quite a bit.

JL: These are all writers with a very elaborate syntax.

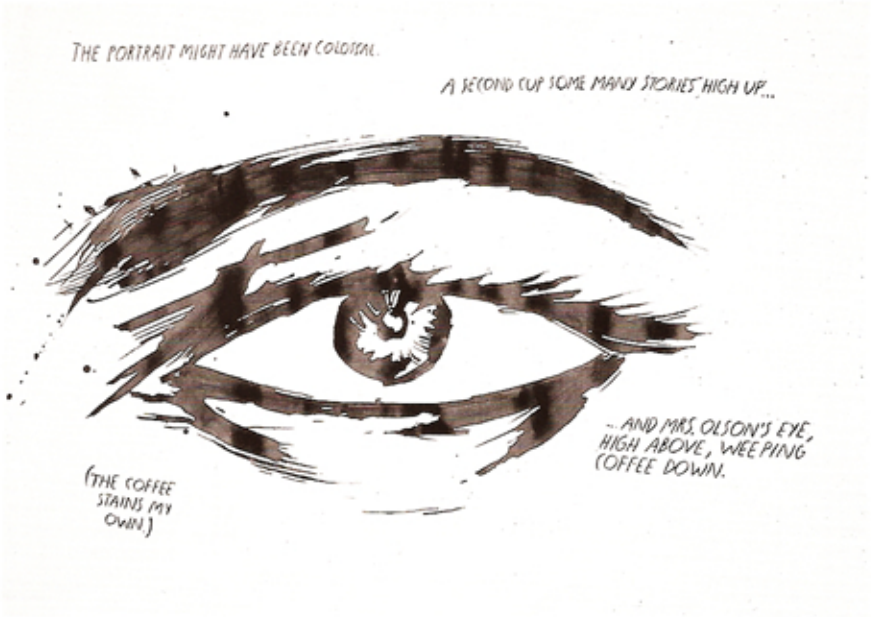
RP: Right, they're very elaborate, and the sentence structure can elaborate itself into very long paragraphs. But in a fragmentary way. Their work, taken out of context, can mean something completely different, and at the same time it's so beautifully said.

JL: When you read, do you read fitfully, or do you sit down and read books all the way through, and then go back and pull out your favorite passages?

RP: That depends: Lately it's been fitfully. And even if I'm reading something cover to cover, it's very... fitful. I can't think of a better description. Because it's a type of reading that's always looking for something between the lines. And I kind of rewrite as I go. It's as if I bring myself to this universe or something, and... It's hard to explain. But it becomes the world you're living in or thinking in.

JL: What is it about James that appeals to you?

RP: James, especially late in his career, had such a complicated mind. He was writing in a narrative form, but he couldn't for the life of him look at the simplest thing without looking at it from many different views. He always writes out of an inner struggle between the dramatic form and narrative, and this wealth of ideas and information that's imploding in each sentence. If you read his notes, you see what he



RAYMOND PETTIBON, NO TITLE (THE PORTRAIT), 1992.
pen and ink on paper, 12 x 17" / OHNE TITEL (DAS PORTRÄT),
Feder und Tusche auf Papier, 30,5 x 43,2 cm.

– NO TITLE (I'M SORRY, I'M), 1985, 12 x 9" /
OHNE TITEL (TUT MIR LEID, ICH BIN), 30,5 x 22,9 cm.

– NO TITLE, 1986, 11 x 8,5" / OHNE TITEL, 28 x 21,6 cm.

RAYMOND PETTIBON, NO TITLE (THE FRIGHTENED), 1985, pen and ink on paper, 14 x 10½" / OHNE TITEL (DIE ERSCHROKKENEN), Feder und Tusche auf Papier, 35,6 x 26,7 cm.

RAYMOND PETTIBON, NO TITLE (IF YOU CAN'T READ, MAKE), 1986, pen and ink on paper, 14 x 11" / OHNE TITEL (WENN DU NICHT LESEN KANNST, ERFINDE), Feder und Tusche auf Papier, 35,6 x 28 cm.

goes through to keep to the narratives he sets up for himself, which start with these very simple ideas. They're kind of pathetic; it's like something you'd hear in a Disney story conference, these moral conundrums, or what-ifs, you know.

I have this funny image of him dictating to his old secretary and just going off on all this stuff, and trying desperately to maintain some kind of narrative, dramatic organization. And for a lot of people not really succeeding, which is why he's so difficult to read; you immediately lose the thread of the narrative, and it seems like he's meandering around in language. But he actually isn't. He's desperately trying to keep control. For the kind of reading I do, it's perfect. To me it's—I don't know if you'd say fun to read—but I guess I would.

JL: Do you find that it mimics thought patterns, or do you like it precisely because it is so mannered?

RP: The criticism of him is that it isn't real, that it's all mannerism, but it does mimic thought patterns. To me that's its appeal. I mean, people have always said that about me, too, that, you know, you don't want to get me started, I can't stick to the facts or the starting point without adding another tangent that I have to go off on. But I think that's a mimicking of the complexity of thought and reality, and the relationship between the two, more than anything else. Whereas, to pretend to tell a simple story and tie everything up at the end is actually wrong, really. It's dishonest.

JL: Your work seems to me to be perfectly contemporary—not so much because you take on, for example, Elvis cults and Ronald Reagan, but because of the means of representation that you use, which is at once fragmentary and ephemeral, and very... lapidary. It's peculiar to find that the syntax and the structure of a Jamesian sentence can be so perfectly applied to a contemporary situation.

RP: Yeah, well that's what's fun about it. There's a sense of humor to it that has really found its audience in the art world. But I'm not a throwback; I think my work is contemporary.

JL: I find it striking that in some sense you're very much an American artist, even very much a California artist, and yet none of your sources in literature seem to be American.

RP: Well, that's not true. Hawthorne. Twain—sometimes he tries too hard to be funny, but sometimes, for some reason, just a phrase can seem really funny to me. I remember when I was young, reading Huck Finn, and this kid says, "Give me chaw tobacker, won't ye?" And for some reason I just thought the

RAYMOND PETTIBON, NO TITLE (ALL THIS WE READ), 1989, pen and ink on paper, 14 x 11" / OHNE TITEL (DAS ALLES LESEN WIR), Feder und Tusche auf Papier, 35,6 x 28 cm.

RAYMOND PETTIBON, NO TITLE (STAY WITH ME), 1987, pen and ink on paper, 14 x 11" / OHNE TITEL (BLEIB BEI MIR), Feder und Tusche auf Papier, 35,6 x 28 cm.

image of that, the vernacular, and the context was just so funny. But I guess I do have more of an affinity with a British sense of humor; I think of someone like Pinter, or Anthony Powell, or Evelyn Waugh. As long as you don't take it as far as Monty Python, or British musical-hall comedy. I can be as vulgar as anyone, I guess, but even when I'm writing about Ronald Reagan's asshole or something, I try to have a measure of decorum.

JL: Are cartoons a context in which you're comfortable having your work seen?

RP: No. No. My work comes from a lot of traditions, including those, but I wouldn't say that cartoons or comics are that important. On the other hand, that's not a qualitative judgment; I'm not putting myself above them; I just think they're two different things.

JL: Are you so sure that there are no qualitative judgments to be made, based on a distinction between high and low art?

RP: That's a different question altogether. Is that to say that the best of George Herriman is automatically worse than the worst of Norman Mailer?

JL: No. On the other hand I am a little tired of the whole cultural studies thing. It seems as if the pendulum has swung so far in the opposite direction that it may be time, people started wondering if maybe, for example, pop music really wasn't capable of expressing a very wide range of emotions, or capturing a very wide range of phenomena.

RP: I've wondered exactly about that myself. Sometimes I blame the times, and ask, what happened? All I can say is that I keep expecting something from people who work in the "lower" arts, because I don't think there's any innate reason why these forms can't encompass the same range of emotion and thought as anything else. But it doesn't seem to have happened, so maybe it's now necessary to say, no, they can't. And at the same time I keep thinking that, well, maybe, it's just that the right people aren't going into it.

And I also have to check myself sometimes, because I tend to apply literary standards to things that either don't need them or shouldn't. Rock and roll, for instance. It's something that doesn't have to translate to paper, to poetry, in the first place. I don't know. I mean, I like rock and roll, too, and I like some of it better than I like some poetry. So, the issue does get muddied up. All I can say is I'm fed up with the discussion and the uses it's put to. Most of the writers I like aren't even read anymore.