



# In Pettibon Retrospective, an Anarchic Vision in Images and Text

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by Dylan Hoffmann

On display at the [New Museum](#) until Sunday, April 9, 2017 “[Raymond Pettibon: A Pen of all Work](#)” is a show that continues to shock and astound visitors. Filled with artist’s raw, in-your-face, often cartoon-like images layered with fraught text, the exhibition offers an intimate peek into Raymond Pettibon’s lifetime of work, his views on growing up during a turning point in America’s history, and the cultural icons and influences that flavor his aesthetic.

[Raymond Pettibon](#) (b. Raymond Ginn, 1957) is an artist known for rough, free associative drawings and paintings that utilize prose and pop culture iconography as a means of cultural and political satire. Rising to fame in the early 1980s, Pettibon is best known today for designing album art for bands involved in the West Coast hardcore punk scene, most notably [Black Flag](#).

The current exhibition marks the artist’s first major museum exhibition in New York and his largest show to date—cataloguing more than 800 drawings and paintings that span a lifetime, along with his self-published zines, short films, and Black Flag ephemera.



Installation of “Raymond Pettibon: A Pen of All Work,” 2017, at the New Museum in New York. Photo: Maris Hutchinson / EPW Studio. Courtesy New Museum.

Curated by the New Museum’s Kraus Family Curator, Gary Carrion-Murayari, and Edlis Neeson Artistic Director Massimiliano Gioni, the exhibition is spread out over the museum’s second, third and fourth floors, expertly categorized by the various phases and recurring themes of Pettibon’s career. These include his reverence for and relation to Art Clokey’s Gumby; his love of the surf culture and scenery that colored his stomping grounds of Hermosa Beach, California; and his cynicism and iconoclasm with regard to religious iconography, to name just a few.

Iconoclasm is a theme that pervades the entire retrospective, revealing that nothing is sacred and nothing is immune from Pettibon’s satirical, graphic, and profane vision. Still, based on his early cartoons and his recycling of pop culture icons, Pettibon’s artwork seems to be most concerned with the degradation of American culture in the second half of the 20th century.



Installation of “Raymond Pettibon: A Pen of All Work,” 2017, at the New Museum in New York. Photo: Maris Hutchinson / EPW Studio. Courtesy New Museum.

Growing up in California, Pettibon saw the dissolution of the hippie movement firsthand, beginning with the atrocities of the Manson family murders. The hippies’ disenfranchisement followed, leaving the West Coast a wasteland of burnt out addicts and living relics of a defunct era, archetypes that frequently populate the artist’s drawings. With consumerism rampant and the Reagan era beginning, for Pettibon America had lost the hopeful future the nation once envisioned. His earlier drawings document this time, taking on a macabre form rich in the hyperactive lewdness of cartoonist R. Crumb.

Much as T.S. Eliot did in “The Waste Land,” Pettibon stacks a stockpile of cultural fragments against the ruins of a disillusioned nation, employing references that have been re-envisioned and repurposed for his own ends. This kind of appropriation and reinvention is apparent in his series of paintings starring “Vavoom,” a forgotten character from “Felix the Cat” who levels mountains with his booming voice.

Vavoom serves as an analog for Pettibon’s artistic voice, his messages shouted across vast distances with the same devastating effect. In a similar manner, Pettibon summons Batman and Superman, both as avatars for himself and to illustrate their status as antiquities in a modern era, depicting them as either sexual deviants or rejected idols.



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The show comes to a boil on the museum’s fourth floor, devoted almost entirely to Pettibon’s political drawings and paintings. Collected here are the Nixon, Reagan, and Bush administrations arrayed along the wall for viewers’ condemnation. Damning scrutiny of the wars in Vietnam and Iraq is rendered through the artist’s rough hand and scattered prose, acting as a cruel reminder of the violence and abuse inflicted on civilians.

Specifically in these works, Pettibon’s signature quirky captions become a necessary source of levity, lest the paintings become mere re-creations of front page photos and gritty stock footage. Above all the pieces on the wall, a piece reads “Paint the all Unutterable” on a white background, solidifying the role of an artist, or of any voice, in times of political discord.

“A Pen of all Work” is a show that exudes a unique energy, one that is practically voyeuristic in its access to the artist’s journal-like drawings and self-deprecating scrawl, colored with cultural

artifacts and a whirlwind of influences, spanning the breadth of culture, from classic literature to Saturday morning television. Funny, disturbing, and difficult in its unflinching vulgarity and ubiquitous sincerity, this Pettibon retrospective is one to behold.

After its run at the New Museum, the show travels to Bonnefantenmuseum in Maastricht, the Netherlands, where it will be on view from June 1–October 30, 2017.



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**BASIC FACTS:** “Raymond Pettibon: A Pen of all Work” is on view February 8 through April 9, 2017 at the New Museum, 235 Bowery, New York, NY 10002. [www.newmuseum.org](http://www.newmuseum.org).

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