Untitled, 1991
Disciplined by the artist
to go round
& round
—William Carlos Williams,
“Pictures from Breughel”

Hold back the edge of your gowns,
Ladies, we are going through hell.
—William Carlos Williams,
Introduction to Howl

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 heavy realms 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 INFLECTION OF
GRIEVOUS SIGHT BEFORE
THE INFLECTION OF
GRIEVOUS BLINDNESS THAT

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

“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.”

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 visibility 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.”

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 photo-
copy 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

Works in MATRIX:
Various drawings, ink on paper,

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, Buttrinsky ‘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;

1 William Carlos Williams, “The
Wedding Dance in the Open Air”
from Pictures from Breughel and
Other Poems (New York: New

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,”

4 Raymond Pettibon, quoted in
“Drawn to Words” by Hunter
Drohojowska, Los Angeles Times,

5 Ibid.
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):


Spaid, Sue. "Art Issues" (Summer '90), p. 32.


Myles, Eileen. Art in America (March '91), pp. 44-42.


MATRIX is supported in part by grants from the Paul L. and Phyllis Watts Foundation, the National Endowment for the Arts, the California Arts Council, the F.B. Walker Foundation, and Jack H. Finley and Alexandra Bowes.