



INTO WHICH YOU WERE BORN  
HAS MELTED AWAY UNDER  
YOUR EYES.

Raymond Pettibon

SEPT. 13 - NOV. 8, 1998  
OPENING RECEPTION  
SUN, SEPT. 13, 4-7 P.M.

THE RENAISSANCE SOCIETY  
AT THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO  
5811 SOUTH ELLIS AVENUE  
CHICAGO, ILLINOIS 60637  
773-702-8670

# Dear Reader,

In a media saturated era, there is no shortage of either words or pictures and few things would seem as natural as their combination. Both are a primary means of representing thought in an urge to communicate. A history of combining the two has made for a very powerful narrative device which can be said to have culminated in cinema. Needless to say, the age of information relies so heavily upon the combination of words and pictures that their marriage is taken for granted. Over the past two decades, however, artists have become increasingly preoccupied with examining how meaning is formulated around such narrative conventions. Most of these efforts have taken the form of photography based media, making the more basic means of constructing narratives through a combination of text and the hand drawn image seem as anachronistic as a horse and carriage. The act of combining text and drawn image, however, has quite an illustrious history from the illuminated manuscript to the comic book. Although photography based media shed light on cinematic narrative conventions, it is actually something as simple as the cartoon format of text and drawing that throws these conventions into stark relief, exposing not only their seams but their very threads.

It comes as no surprise that Raymond Pettibon is based in Los Angeles. Likening him to a monk, locked away in his Hermosa Beach monastery producing drawing after drawing, would seem an extravagant claim were it not for the fact that his collected body of work could be said to comprise an American Book of Kells. Pettibon's practice is deceptively simple and his drawings could be objectively described as singular panels from a comic strip. His reverence for the word and image is directly proportional to his irreverence for their context. He combines hand drawn images and text taken from a variety of indiscriminate sources. The style of his drawings range from the highly illustrative work of cartoonist Milton Caniff to the fluid brush work associated with kanji. His eclectic iconography includes Gumby, surfers, trains, and dollar signs to name few and he draws as much from pulp fiction as he does the Bible. The simplicity of means, however, does little to explain the complexity of the results. Likewise, the familiarity of the form makes it difficult to articulate exactly what separates Pettibon from a clever cartoonist or illustrator. It certainly is not Pettibon's drafting skill, which in many instances he purposefully chooses to disregard, opting for an aesthetic of rapid execution that forsakes elegance for urgency. In addition, many of Pettibon's drawings operate in a relatively straightforward manner, delivering their punchline, be it poignant or perverse, by exploiting the irony between what is written and what is rendered. It is only after viewing several Pettibon drawings, that the ambiguity of the speaking subject becomes apparent. To whom do the thoughts in a Pettibon drawing belong? The viewer, the artist or the subject depicted? At its most complex, the text in a drawing shifts between the first, second and third person and the excerpts may cross reference themselves as well as the image. The result is a profusion of associations that resist any singular meaning. In short, Pettibon's drawings confound so as to become profound. The appropriated voice could be as immediate and disturbing as the internal monologue of a psychopath or as eloquent, detached and supremely a matter of fact as the voice of God.

Pettibon was born in 1957. Twenty years later, he made his artistic debut with *Captive Chains*, a self-produced, 64 page, black and white, underground comicbook. Although Pettibon has always considered his career trajectory as that of a fine artist, he initially gained notoriety in the Los Angeles punk rock scene of the late 70s when many of his early drawings were reproduced as record covers and promotional flyers, particularly for the rock band Black Flag. Despite the fact that these materials and the numerous, self-produced, Xeroxed fanzines were the initial means by which his work became known, high art versus popular culture is hardly an issue in Pettibon's work. Two decades and thousands of drawings later, it would be a mistake to say that Pettibon illustrates anything. In fact, it is more appropriate to say that Pettibon illustrates nothing for what he actually renders opaque is the very act of reading. To whom Pettibon's decontextualized thoughts belong should not be confused with whom they are for. As several of his drawings make explicit, they are for you, "Dear Reader."

This exhibition, which inaugurates the Society's 83rd season and its 19th in the Bergman Gallery, is dedicated to the memory of Edwin Bergman. Through his commitment to new and provocative art, Ed championed all The Society stands for. We remain grateful for his outstanding example, friendship, service and support.

## Raymond Pettibon September 13 – November 8, 1998

### Opening Reception

Sunday, September 13 from 4:00 to 7:00pm  
featuring an artist talk from 5:00 to 6:00pm

**The Renaissance Society  
at The University of Chicago**  
5811 South Ellis Avenue  
Chicago, Illinois 60637  
Phone: (773) 702-8670  
<http://www.renaissanceociety.org>

**Museum Hours:**  
Tuesday–Friday: 10:00 am – 5:00 pm  
Saturday, Sunday: 12:00 – 5:00 pm  
Closed Mondays

## The Renaissance Society

### Related Events

#### Artist Talk

Sunday, September 13, from 5:00 to 6:00pm  
This event is free and will take place in Cobb Hall Room 307, directly below the gallery.

#### Lecture

**Lisa Wainwright**  
Art Historian  
Sunday, October 4, 3:00pm

Lisa Wainwright is currently a professor of art history at The School of the Art Institute of Chicago specializing in pop art. She will deliver a lecture that discusses Pettibon's work as a post-pop phenomena beyond the binary of high art and popular culture. This event is free and will take place in the gallery.

#### Reading

**Dawn Raffel and William Tester**  
Sunday, October 18, 3:00pm

This evening features a double bill of recent talent in the world of fiction. Dawn Raffel made her stunning debut with *In The Year of Long Division*, a collection of lucid and striking short stories each wrought with the precision of a jewel maker. She will read from her upcoming novel *Bedtime*. Tester's debut, *Darling*, is a perverse, gothic pastoral that somehow manages to retain the quality of a crisp sunny day. Tester will read from his forthcoming book, *The Heart of the Animal*. This event will take place in Cobb Hall room 307, directly below the gallery. Admission is \$5, \$3 members and students.

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