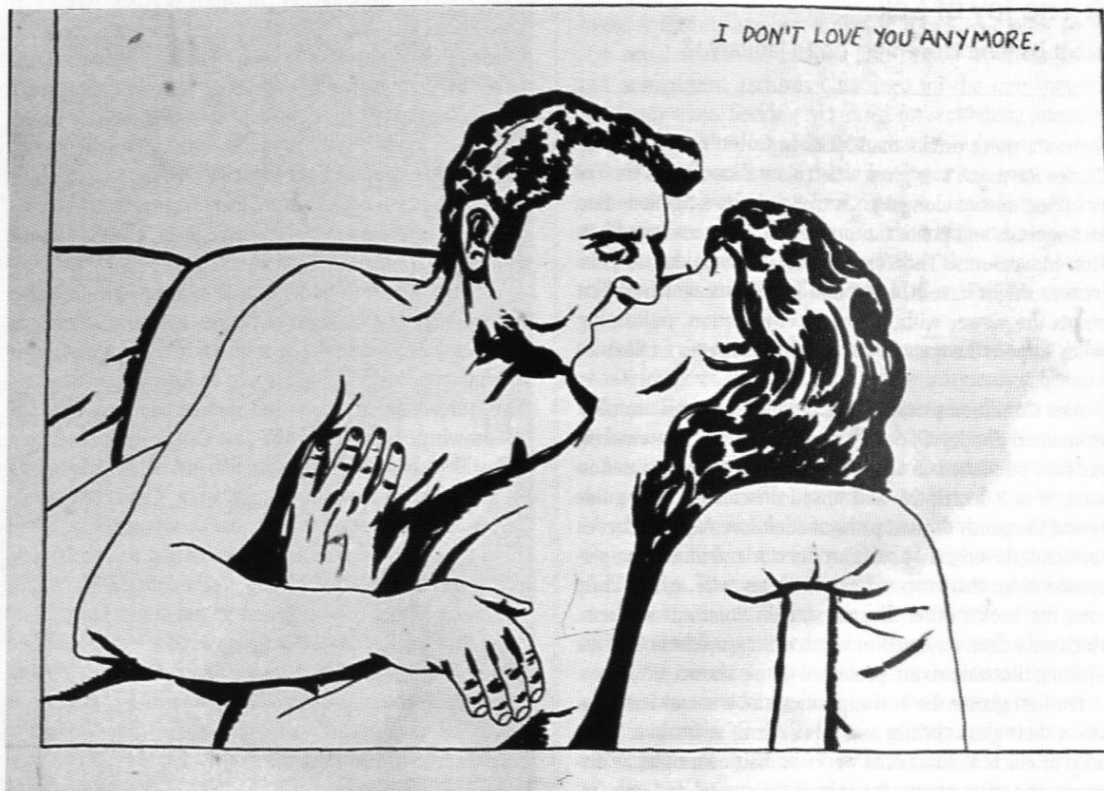


Raymond Pettibon
No title (I don't love) 1984



The abundant commodity stands for the total breach in the organic development of social needs. Its mechanical accumulation liberates unlimited artificiality, in the face of which living desire is helpless. The cumulative power of independent artificiality sows everywhere the falsification of social life.' ■

MARIA FUSCO is a London-based writer.

■ Raymond Pettibon

Sadie Coles HQ London December 16 to January 31

Raymond Pettibon is an artist of no use to an art student. His work seems to have emerged fully formed without any effort or deliberation, perfect in its vision, scale, direction and iconography. All his personal turmoils seem magnificently manifested in the depths of his art – rather than, say, in the paralysing inability of deciding what to make next. Pettibon is, for the struggling artist, a frustrating example of *The Real Thing*: a poetic genius like Antonin Artaud or Kurt Cobain, dripping with talent, inescapably destined for acclaim. Pettibon is a prodigy with a unique, inimitable gift which can in no way be picked up at art school. Perpetually

combining his edgy drawings with obliquely related, spooky texts, Pettibon's career has never really suffered highs and lows: just a continuous, fluid outpouring of an art comparable only to itself (despite its strong contextual grounding in the 80s LA scene of Mike Kelley, Jim Shaw et al, and a noble pedigree stretching back to William Blake).

Sometime during the late 90s Pettibon's work became even more virtuosic, with elaborate, room-size installations combining drawings on paper with text-and-image murals, culminating in his Documenta XI extravaganza and, for audiences here in London, his tour de force show at the Whitechapel Art Gallery in 2001. Next to those, this current show comes as a bit of a downer, an ad hoc mix of recent drawings and vintage pieces from the 80s. It's a pretty staple selection from the Pettibon lexicon: film noir, surfers, choo-choo trains and darkly uncomfortable portrayals of sex, childhood, American politics and death. We've seen this a hundred times before; if Pettibon's monstrous talent is starting to bore, what finally is his real contribution to contemporary art?

For one thing, Pettibon is one of the Great White Hopes of new figuration, having almost singlehandedly reinvented what is, arguably, one of the world's oldest art forms: ink on paper. He updated this virtually moribund media by infusing it with superheroes, and references from punk, cinema and literature, among an infinity of others. What is finally most interesting about Pettibon is how so many unrelated

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instances of contemporary culture seamlessly coexist, all connected through the artist's unerring hand: the emptiness of political rhetoric is connected to the emptiness of a hustler's pillow talk; the strange distancing of the movies is connected with the distancing of childhood memory. The same kind of layered, unexpected ambiguity lies in the position he has created for himself as an artist. On the one hand he is the desperately tortured, dysfunctional sub-urban male, squandering day after day of glorious California sunshine scribbling away at his desk, a victim of the oppression which he draws. On the other hand Pettibon is a great socio-political commentator, a success story picking apart the gaping holes in American mythology with a sophistication rarely seen in that whole country. In the same way, while he is the product of mainstream culture – comic books, special effects, bad TV – he is also a rare, erudite literary man, drawing out the relevance of Rilke, Ruskin, Milton and Joyce for a contemporary audience. Pettibon's achievement finally lies in his ability to pull together and transmit cohesively the contradictions around him, insulting and accusing the human psyche while persuading us, his audience, that we are somehow with him in his merciless understanding of our defective world.

Pettibon is a master at picking iconographic imagery: bold, emblematic moments which, unexpectedly in this cinematic world, turn suddenly motionless. Rarely depicting, say, actual sex, the LA freeway or movement of any sort, Pettibon is alert to those instances when time seems to stop – in the statue-like surfer balanced among the waves; in a forgotten newspaper snapshot; in beach bums sleeping in the sand; in the posed smile of a pin-up girl; in the stillness of a stunned bird or an unmoving rocking horse. On the downside, what is, finally, the most irksome thing about Pettibon – and very apparent in this collection of pictures – is the oppressive cloud of nostalgia running throughout, with forgotten icons like Lyndon Johnson or Will Rogers always making cameo appearances. In this he belongs firmly to the early 80s, as so much American art from the first part of that decade was steeped in nostalgia for pre-70s America, from Barbara Kruger to the Talking Heads. Pettibon is amazing, but his longing for mid-20th-century Americana, the romanticising of a pre-feminist, pre-Stonewall, pre-multi-cultural world, might be what makes him finally feel slightly inconsequential. ■

GILDA WILLIAMS is a writer and commissioning editor for contemporary art at Phaidon Press, London.

■ The Office

The Photographers' Gallery London

November 27 to January 18

A white-collar worker is seated by his desk. A blue-collar worker is at his feet, shining the man's shoes. The shoeshine 'boy' – who must be in his 60s, judging by his craggy features – looks up at his employer with stoic contempt. But the younger man trumps such disdain by not even deigning to return the gaze; he is busy with the work balanced on his knee. This is *Lawyers' office, New York, 1997*, by the Swedish photographer Lars Tunbjörk, and it is an example of documentary photography at its best: capturing the moment in a narrative where the subtext of the scene is exposed.

To contextualise such contemporary work, 'The Office' also includes a number of historical photographs. These show how offices have changed over the decades: from vast, open-plan typing pools to modular cubicle systems; from filing cabinets to mechanical storage systems to individual computer workstations. It's notable that, as these images move through the years, the offices appear to get messier, culminating in sheets of A4 avalanching down the sides of document mountains from the late-1990s onwards. As administrative tasks have been automated by the PC and manual labour has given way to cognitive labour, so every worker has had to become an office manager – both of themselves and their computer. It's a situation that many obviously find overwhelming.

It is this situation that is hinted at in Thomas Demand's 1995 photograph *Büro*, which presents a life-size office that Demand has constructed entirely out of paper and card. The scene depicted is a small office with a paper-strewn table and a set of drawers turned out. It might be a joke about the Orwellian properties of the phrase 'paperless office', but the image suggests the aftermath of a crime, a desperate search, or an act of office rage. The unsettling tension in this carefully staged work is taken a step further in Niall Blankley's new series of images. These depict workstations in nightmarish states of disrepair, filled with such office-flotsam as old newspapers, kettles, cans of insect spray, dirty mugs, cable spaghetti, cats, telephones, coils of insect-encrusted flypaper. In many of the photographs the desks are uncomfortably close to tiny, squalid cupboard lavatories. The most disturbing aspect of this series is that you cannot immediately tell whether these are documentary photographs or Mike Nelson-style constructions. Only after spotting a recycling of props are you reassured that these are fictional environments.

The Ghanaian photographer Philip Kwame Apagya also presents fictional environments. At his studio Apagya offers clients a stage backcloth painted to resemble an office – including PCs, desks and an amusingly distorted world map – before which they can pose as if working. But you can tell that these are not real offices; the subjects are far too happy. Apagya's photographs, collectively titled 'Booming Internet', which dates them to 2000, bring a valuable perspective to the documentary works that dominate the exhibition.

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