



RAYMOND PETTIBON AND THE MASSIVE WAVE THAT INUNDATED MUSEION

I will never forget meeting Raymond Pettibon outside Museion, which in 2003 was still housed in a former hospital in Bolzano. I had been asked to pick him up, and the weather was freezing. But I found him waiting for me, perched on a stone wall, wearing only lightweight cotton trousers, a cotton jacket over a T-shirt and espadrilles on his feet. I was unnerved by his stoic attitude to the cold. It seemed to me as though, inexplicably, the icy cold was unable to penetrate the boundaries of his conscious perception.

We had invited Pettibon to Museion because his cartoon-like drawings fitted in well with the “Language in Art” section of the collection. His works are characterized by a hybridity not only of image and text but also of high and low, i.e., popular and high art. He rose to prominence in California punk circles in the 1980s with his works on paper. Pettibon drew record covers for the band Black Flag and also wrote lyrics and sang. In contrast to conventional comic strips, his works are single images whose internal dynamic comes from how the image and text often do not explain each other.

The Pettibon exhibition at Museion featured some 200 drawings loaned by various collectors. And as Museion sees itself as a site where works are also produced, it was agreed that Pettibon would paint a mural in the central room. A concert was also planned for the opening at which the artist would sing, and the broad end wall of the central room was covered with large, primed wooden panels for him to paint on.

Certain themes constantly recur in Pettibon’s work: moving trains, the Manson commune, drug trips, sex, exploding bombs, waves and surfers, Hollywood, etc. For the mural at Museion, he had chosen to paint a wave with a surfer. Waves and surfing were part of his youth in Hermosa Beach, California, and later, he included them in his painting, too. The artist Paul Thuile, who often advised us about exhibition design at the time, had procured some professional acrylic paints for the artist. Even if he was in Bolzano only for a week, though, Pettibon let several days pass before finally setting to work on the wall in the last three or four days. We were worried he might not finish it, as it was a huge area to paint.

He did, though, and to complete it, he wrote the words “I have writt’ nothing but surf” on the wall in red paint and relatively small letters. I do not recall the artist making any comment about this phrase. A typical element of Pettibon’s motifs is that they often have a very different content to the texts they appear with.

During his preparations, the artist made several preliminary drawings of the wave and the figure of the surfer, which he later signed and gave to Museion. These do not have the status of independent works, but they do reveal the artist’s process. As well as the drawings, he created two silkscreen editions for Museion, and he also created two drawings together with Paul Thuile, in which Thuile drew a brush or a pencil on a sheet of paper and Pettibon reacted to it with a drawing.



Raymond Pettibon, "6 sketches for walldrawing", 2003. Ink on paper. 29,6 x 42 cm
Museion Collection. Photo: Antonio Maniscalco



The monumental mural was purchased by a collector after the exhibition, which helped to finance the whole project. Over ten meters wide and almost four meters high, this mural stands out clearly from Pettibon's otherwise relatively small drawings. The work may, in fact, be one of the largest wall drawings Pettibon has ever created. From today's perspective, it may seem strange that the museum didn't purchase the mural itself, but the simple reason was that we did not have the funds. In retrospect, this was perhaps a missed opportunity.

One or two days before the opening, the artist Hans Weigand, a friend of Pettibon's, came to Bolzano from Vienna with his band. They rehearsed in the central space in front of Pettibon's mural. The opening then turned into a real punk concert, with Pettibon singing (shouting) lyrics he had written himself. Looking back, I think this music and the audience who had come for the opening were not entirely compatible.

In the 1980s, punks wanted to use their way of life, their appearance, and their music to disrupt the smooth functioning of what they saw as a misguided society. Pettibon expresses this attitude in his films. It is also true of the aesthetics of his drawings, as the texts he uses—quotations from books, magazines, conversations, and even his own words—often have no clear connection with the image they appear with. The principle behind Pettibon's works is therefore the productive disruption of any easy understanding.

Almost twenty years after his solo show, Pettibon has returned to Museion—now at its new home in Piazza Piero Siena—for the Erling Kagge Collection exhibition that combines a selection of drawings from Kagge's collection with works owned by Museion. I imagine Pettibon still comes to his openings in espadrilles. As is evident from his films, his works are rooted in the underground and yet, over the years, they have found their way into the world's leading museum and private collections and have become a sought-after commodity.

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