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Suggestive States of Disarray

Raymond Pettibon Prepares for His Opening at the David Zwirner Gallery

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By ANDY BATTAGLIA

On a tranquil afternoon in Chelsea, Raymond Pettibon wandered among a mess of hectic drawings and cryptic words scrawled on white walls. Unless his plans go awry, the scene at David Zwirner gallery will look much the same on Thursday, when his exhibition opens.

"I had the opportunity to do things on the spot, which is not normally the case," the artist said, between sips of whiskey from a dirty wine glass. "It's a space to work on, rather than just a place to put up work."

With the gallery dark for most of August, Mr. Pettibon essentially moved in, working there instead of his SoHo studio to piece together "To Wit," a show that features more than 200 works in suggestive states of disarray.



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Craig Warga for the Wall Street Journal

Raymond Pettibon at work at the David Zwirner Gallery in Chelsea

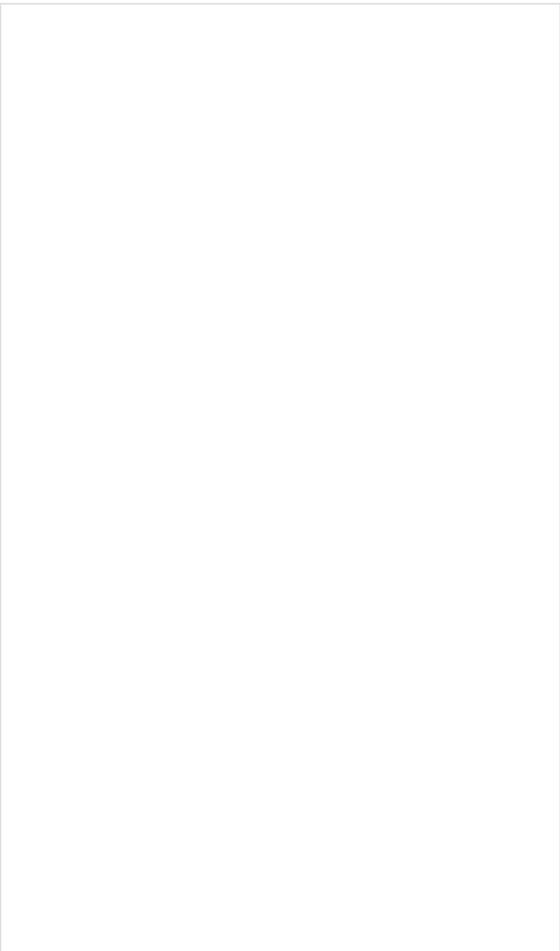
"It's still up in the air," he said of his collection of drawings splayed out on tables and the floor, many not yet complete.

A certain amount of haphazardness is to be expected from Mr. Pettibon, whose intentionally disheveled mix of illustration and text have coalesced into an influential style. His early work, beginning in the late 1970s, emerged in concert with California punk music,

whose tattered aesthetic he helped define with art for album covers and fanzines. His brother, Greg Ginn, was a founder of the punk band Black Flag, and Mr. Pettibon (born Raymond Ginn) designed the group's logo with four black bars.

Mr. Pettibon's work in the musical underground thrived, reaching a peak with Sonic Youth's 1990 album, "Goo," featuring his image of an achingly cool teenage couple striking out for the road. Meanwhile, his sensibility began to spread.

"He opened the door for drawing in contemporary art," said fellow artist Marcel Dzama, also represented by Zwirner. "Before that it was seen as the sketch you do before a painting. He made drawing important. I don't think I'd be around if he wasn't there."



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 Mr. Pettibon, 56 years old, considered his past part of a surprising progression. "I didn't learn the rudiments of drawing in school, starting with a cube and a circle and charcoal," he said. "I learned on the job. The images can come from practically anywhere."



Enlarge Image

Craig Warga for the Wall Street Journal

Sketches, many incomplete, that will be part of the show

His work revisits odd Americana—recurring presences include Gummy and the vintage cartoon character Vavoom, as well as scenes from baseball and surfing. To his drawings he then adds text, which he writes himself or reappropriates, often in discord with the imagery.

"I have books that I tear pages from," he said, holding up a fragment of a volume about writers and alcoholism called "The

Thirsty Muse." Other sources mined for text, usually unattributed and sometimes reworked, include Don DeLillo's "Underworld," a poem by Wallace Stevens, and classics by Horace and Sappho.

"The text opens the imagery up to all these different dimensions," said Sonic Youth guitarist Lee Ranaldo, a friend of Mr. Pettibon's since the early 1980s. "You aren't sure if this is exactly the artist's voice or not."

Lucas Zwirner, assisting Mr. Pettibon on his upcoming show, praised that sense of elusiveness. "There's a real sense of destabilization in Ray's work," he said. "A chasm opens up between what you read and what you see."

Mr. Pettibon, whose time in the gallery has been punctuated by games of catch with his collection of vintage baseball gloves, said the images and the words come together in curious ways.

"Often I live for a while with the image, and a story or an idea comes to it, eventually," he said. "I really don't know where it's going to go until it's finished—both the drawing part of it and the writing part."

He still had to finish many works for his show, which will be complete when the images and the texts cohere, or when gallery-goers appear, to try to make sense of it all.

"I haven't arrived at it yet," the artist said, looking down at a large surfing picture still in search of words. "For whatever reason, some things take on a life of their own."

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