

VENUS

MANHATTAN

Morse, Trent. "Raymond Pettibon." *Art News*, June 2014.

ARTnews

Raymond Pettibon

Venus Over Manhattan



Raymond Pettibon's artworks are at their most colorful, free-flowing, and energized in his "Surfer Paintings." Forty-eight such works were brought Pettibon, Duke Kahanamoku, Eddie Munster, and the Riddler. As with most of Pettibon's work, bits of text play a role in the surf compositions, with references to the Gidget movies and Isaac Newton's Laws of Motion.

The more narrative pieces featured muscle-bound rooms, nondescript houses, and enigmatic nudes. Using soft natural light and Kodak film, he would mine a plaintive beauty out of unpromising surroundings. The overarching feeling conveyed by these works was one of loneliness, of hollow lives unspooling amid the high-pitched dread of an anonymous suburbia.

A gentler spirit seemed to pervade the works in this show. In one landscape image, #10192-50 (2011), fog mingles with selective blur (apparently achieved by spraying water and glycerin onto a car windshield and then photographing through it) to produce a dreamlike effect that speaks of loss and longing. In #10789-2109 (2012), a no-frills motel exterior is rendered giddy and joyous with the addition of colorful holiday lights along its rooftop. Printed sumptuously large at 59 1/2 by 89 1/2 inches, the image exudes an atmospheric pull and narrative intensity—though the story is ambiguous.

Hido's foray into his past was expanded in an accompanying book, also titled *Excerpts from Silver Meadows*. In this longer form, the artist combined his recent photographs with archival material, including snapshots from his childhood, vintage photographs from a yard sale, and even the cover of a pulp-fiction novel ("She was the campus tramp.

All a boy had to do was... Say When”). The result, a mash-up of moody, arresting images and pop-cultural tidbits, is messy and intriguing—a compelling ode to memory and the way it shapes us, even dudes and topless surf bunnies, but mostly what we got were loose panoramas of angry breakers that threaten to swallow little men on boards. These waves are mythical monsters, they are reminders of just how puny we become when confronting something as big as the ocean. In *No title (the mantling of)*, 2011, a longboarder barely escapes the tube of a wave together for this heady exhibition, titled “Are Your Motives Pure?”

Here, tiny riders could be seen whooshing across giant waves in electric blues and tropical turquoises, all executed in a variety of techniques rarely used by the artist. From up close, the towering waves could be viewed simply as abstractions: the red-and-black waters in *No Title (Kurek had already)*, 1987, might seem at home on a Clyfford Still canvas; the drips and splotches exploding all over *No Title (Sometimes approaching the)*, 2001, conjure Jackson Pollock or Zen Buddhist ink masters; and the diagonal slashes in *No Title (The lower half)*, 2013, summon the cross-hatch paintings of Jasper Johns. But, of course, Pettibon’s creations are not abstract.

A few of the earliest ink drawings on view recalled the rogue comic-book style that first garnered Pettibon attention in the 1980s, when he was designing flyers for Black Flag and other Los Angeles punk bands. The scale is small, the marks are graphic, and there’s a lot of white space. In *No Title (Jacob’s surf team)*, 1985, a lone boarder faces a black sun hovering beneath a list of two (fictional) surf teams, whose members include Raymond swirling whitecap as he heads toward bluer waters. Above him are the words, “All this must be either surfed or painted.”

—Trent Morse