

# THE SCARLET LETTERS

Raymond Pettibon's drawings had engaged me from the first time I saw them, years before I began collecting them. The combination of the image and the accompanying text or layers of text, whether humorous, ironic, deadpan, or emotionally raw, would always echo through my memory for weeks after seeing them. I could not, however, figure out a way to collect his works in a way that would be meaningful to me. I wasn't particularly interested in the baseball players, surfers, Gunsby dolls, phobias, or locomotive engines that are among Pettibon's widely recognized and collected drawings. I wanted to assemble a group of his works that represented a blending of his interests as an artist with mine as a collector. I also wanted the process of assembling the drawings to be ongoing—like a treasure hunt of sorts. I came up with the idea of collecting only scarlet A drawings as a result of a chance encounter I had with Raymond, before I knew who he was. At an opening at the David Zwiler Gallery in 1996 when it was in Soho, I began a casual conversation about some works in the show with the man standing next to me. Commenting about one of the works (I can't remember which one), he mentioned a connection to Nathaniel Hawthorne. I registered this information, shifted away, and continued to look at the show. Later that evening, one of the gallery directors, Bella, introduced me to Raymond, who turned out to be the man I'd spoken with earlier. Raymond's comment about Nathaniel Hawthorne, author of "The Scarlet Letter," provided the key. Some friends of mine owned a Pettibon drawing of a scarlet A and were offering it to me in trade for another work I owned. The text on this drawing was about "putting the reader and the writer on equal footing in the role of creator." This statement perfectly captured the interaction I wanted. With that realization I committed to the idea of collecting Pettibon drawings that featured scarlet letter A's, but only those with text that references literature, communication, or creativity.

If one were to flash a scarlet A in front of Pettibon, he says his first thought would probably be, "It is for Apple." Like many of us, he instinctively associates this letter with a time when his mother began teaching him to read from a picture book. During high school, the A acquired relevance to adultery when he read Hawthorne's great nineteenth-century novel of guilt and redemption. Other meanings were layered onto it as a result of his living and reading. "Overall," Pettibon says, "the meaning [of the A] is more layered, more open-ended, accommodating different meanings. It references AIDS, the beginning of an attempt to communicate an idea or feeling, an effort to maintain correspondence over distances, as well as people's desire for reciprocity of words, desires, and emotions."

The text he writes on these drawings is not particularly personal or confessional; it is not Pettibon's attempt to elicit reciprocal emotion from his viewer or reader. "It is not my intention

to open myself up," he says. "However, because I use words, deeply personal things do slip out. Sometimes I can see a kind of cat-and-mouse element in my words, in my phrases. In my drawings of the letter 'I,' there is always some selfhood contained in the text." The thought to draw an A (or an I) is not consciously driven. It can be prompted when Pettibon is reading, perhaps one of the thousands of paperback books from the 1940s, 50s, and 60s that he and his recently deceased father collected. Others A's exist in his imagination as he's trying to realize an idea. While the text may start with a specific quote, it's reworded, expanded, contracted, or obscured; it's made more angular, oblique, ironic, paranoiac, romantic, or stream-of-conscious as Pettibon plays with and synthesizes the references that come to him over days, weeks, and months. "It's rare that a drawing begins and ends in one sitting," he confesses.

Recently, the A has begun a further evolution in Pettibon's mind and in his hands. In an upcoming collaborative book, Ed Ruscha has created A's in different colors and Pettibon has written the text for each one. "The A's are black, blue, green, red, pink, and purple. I found myself able to write a lot of material, for example, for the purple A, as in 'purple prose,' and the pink A. Green prompted thoughts of money." Pettibon is quick to point out that this project is not like creating a children's alphabet. He has tried to do that and is "not good at that decorative type of thing." The A's are getting bigger. In 2007 Pettibon created a Kauschach test-like, *Sayed A* for an AIDS-related project involving Bono and Damien Hirst. And after my interview with him he created a large *Saying A*, inspired by reading a book I gave him, "One Writer's Beginnings" by Eudora Welty. Both of these drawings are approximately 36 inches high by 26 inches wide.

The text for the most recent A, "My mother taught me the alphabet and how to read. I taught myself to draw and write," is, to me, Pettibon's best. It is not stamped with the specificity of a place or time. It captures a scene (whether with our mother or father), delineates an activity that most of us probably don't really remember, and evokes memories of a beginning and an evolution that are both personal and universal. We can read this quote as being about Raymond's specific beginnings as an artist; it can be a metaphor for the beginning of each of our individual lives, artistic or not; and it can be the encapsulation of one of the most common and basic human experiences. To me, it is this quiet and primal depth that I find in all of the Pettibon A's I collect. Just looking at and reading the text on one of the A's can initiate a consciousness about many things—apples, AIDS, alpha (the first or beginning), omega (the last or opposite), aphorisms, akrasia, angst, arde, ange, alienation, adversary, arduous, art, artlessness, even Alvin. "It is," says Pettibon, "simply the origin of so many things we think about within ourselves and outside of ourselves."

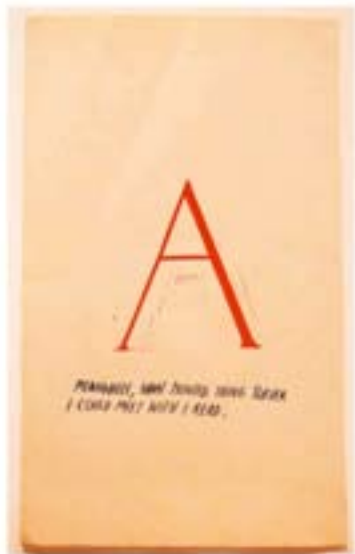


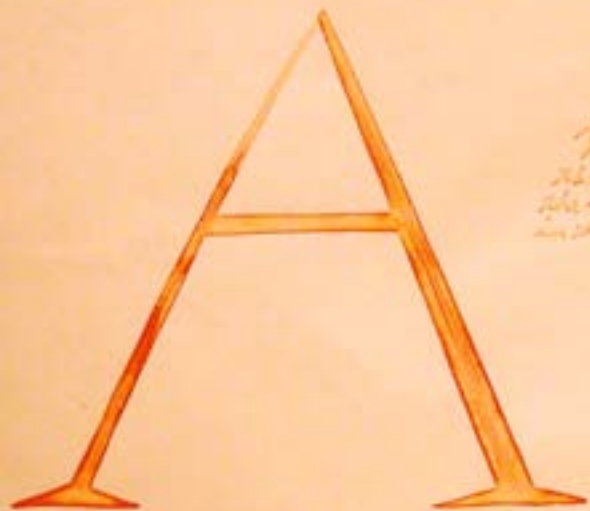
Use a pencil you literally  
nothing and now I got it  
all back.

A

BUT THE REST OF THE PERSONS WHOSE  
LETTERS I HAVE JUST MENTIONED, I BE-  
LIEVE HE NEVER SAW. AND THIS PERHAPS  
HE ACQUIRED A HABIT OF WRITING THAT  
SUPPLIED THE PLACE OF PERSONAL INTER-  
COURSE.

A





There is something in my theory of  
the story teller's art that would do well  
for the reader and the writer on equal footing  
in the case of the reader.

I took the letter to Ellenore.  
"Already!" she said, after reading  
it. "I did not think it would  
have been so soon."



I FEAR LET EACH OTHER BY SHOULD READ  
THE SURETY I CARRY IN MY BELIEF



