


 Art

# Forget It

Two one-note artists combine for less than the sum of their parts **BY R.C. BAKER**

**W**hat happens when you mash up a grizzled icon of the Southern California punk scene and a young darling of the art-industrial complex? As those exemplars of hardcore the Circle Jerks observed in their song “Beverly Hills”: “All the people look the same/Don’t they know they’re so damn lame.”

Once upon a time in the late 1970s, Raymond Pettibon (born 1957) designed album covers, flyers, and T-shirts for his brother’s punk band, Black Flag, including what became the group’s iconic logo — four misaligned black bars, a concise abstraction of a rippling banner. Although Pettibon’s style was blunt, some kid shelling out cash for the band’s record (or boosting it from the bin) understood that the packaging faithfully represented the raucous innards. Pettibon’s monochrome flyers included text shout-outs to Charles Manson (“Do the Creepy Crawl”), illos cribbed from *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, and such post-pubescent fantasias as a buxom school-girl in spurs brandishing a baton and pistol. Ransom-note typography added further graphic brio.

Over the years, Pettibon transitioned from stapling up DIY Xeroxes to push-pinning watercolors onto gallery walls, and his imagery, no longer moored to the anarchic music scene it once promoted, took on a muddled cast. Despite the addition of color and an increase in text snippets — some lifted from the likes of Joyce and Faulkner — the graceless figures cobbled together with vapid ink slashes were absent the punch of his stark posters. Whether picturing George W. Bush with bloody hands or a clown with Bozo-flame hair and no pants, the sketches were noisy but one-note.

Enter Marcel Dzama (born 1974). Recruited into the Zwirner empire shortly after receiving a BFA from the University of Manitoba, he’s been cranking out drawings, sculpture, paintings, and videos ever since. His stilted crowd scenes of repeated figures done in murky tones (he has used root beer as a medium) recall the wiggly panoramas of outsider virtuoso Henry Darger (1892–1973) — not, apparently, that Dzama would know. As he told an interviewer in 2003, “I only learned about Darger a couple years ago, when I kept seeing his name in reference to my artwork so I looked him up. I wouldn’t consider him an influence...”

He should reconsider. Stealing from your elders is an admirable tradition — witness Velázquez’s 1619 *Peasants at the*

*Table* studiously ripping off Caravaggio — and Dzama’s callow style has shown little progress toward the mastery Darger achieved through a deft sense of scale, palettes ranging from delicate to naturalistic to phantasmagorical, and passionate (if unhinged) narratives. Instead, Dzama’s work remains instantly mannered, little changed from his earlier amalgams of replicated bodies melding with trees or strung from gallows, sometimes surrounded by flitting bats — a camp Surrealism reminiscent of Edward Gorey’s animated introductions for the PBS show *Mystery!*

In this collaborative show at Zwirner, gallerymates Pettibon and Dzama trade on the Surrealists’ exquisite-corpse method, working together on the same page in an attempt to conjure drama from juxtaposed styles. Here, though, with both artists taking turns drawing, painting, and collaging on each sheet of paper, we get a bland hodgepodge swiped from various strata of pop (and pulp) culture. The images are larded with text, a shopworn strategy signaling that even if the drawings are slapdash, there are veins of precious content in the dross. Isn’t that Manson in one drawing, his forehead scribbled on with ink? It must be, since Pettibon can’t quite seem to let the old psycho go — and, indeed, one of the two Dzama women raises her arms in the foreground to reveal the word “HELTER” in the pattern of her red frock, a reference to the cult leader’s once-apocalyptic (since reduced to YouTube fodder) vision of “Helter Skelter,” a brutal race war that would cleanse humanity. Did either artist think for

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offering little to look at, much less to contemplate.

There is a classic *Saturday Night Live* skit that has Jon Lovitz, bald and in a striped sailor shirt, sitting at a restaurant table, scribbling on a soiled handkerchief and other scraps, claiming that each is worth a fortune because “Art comes easy

**Marcel Dzama & Raymond Pettibon: ‘Forgetting the Hand’**

David Zwirner  
525 West 19th Street, 212-727-2070  
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Courtesy David Zwirner, New York/London

### No, thanks. Beware Diamond Dog (2016)

to me! I’m Picasso!” On his best days, the Spaniard — and more recently, Sigmar Polke, who discovered gravitas in the dashing strokes and nimble text of his sketchbooks — could actually make such a claim. The rest of us, however, have to sweat over our work, and it’s not enough to simply toss Superman, Alice in Wonderland, and Charles Atlas into a cultural juicer, season with cack-handed nudity, and expect viewers to care enough to connect such color-coded clots of text as “TRN TO PG. 19,” in red, with chromatic links farther down the page: “AND FAR T OO LATE FOR TRNG BCK” (*The Supermen would walk in flames*, 2016).

Another piece — on Chateau Marmont stationery, presumably to convey the reek of decadence — includes the line “THIS IS FOR LEONARD IF HE IS STILL HERE...” A nice phrase implying a broader story, which turns out to be something Bob Dylan said at a concert after Leonard Cohen declined to join him onstage. This is the kind of interesting tidbit that once separated the cognoscenti from the unenlightened — and that, back in the day, would have fueled endless arguments in hand-stapled

zines. Now anyone with Google can be in the know. Artists need to sift the gibbering of our internet age rather than simply shovel more onto it.

In a larger drawing (not counting a spread-winged bat and other oversize doodles slapped directly onto the walls), we get Batman and Robin with Gummy in a corner, lamenting (in the twee orthography the artists favor): “I FEEL TRAPPD LIVING IN A COMIC BOOYK!” Is there poignancy in a Claymation character imprisoned by print? Not in this sludgy composition, titled *Dynamic Duo* (2016). But maybe the artists are simply positioning themselves as peers of such cultural behemoths, since, in a similarly sized image of Superman, adorned with the phrase “Forgetting the hand” — and certainly there is scant dexterity in the draftsman’s hand here — they’ve included self-portraits.

Despite the drips on the walls, you’ll find little that’s visceral amid all this hackneyed calculation. Better just to close your eyes and crank some Circle Jerks instead.