

Allen Ruppersberg *Drawing and Writing: 1972–1989*

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When it comes to classic Los Angeles conceptual art, the historic debates over the primacy of the art object or the categorical definitions of mediums or the notion of whether or not mere ideas and concepts could be art rarely step forward as central to the experience of looking at the art itself. Instead, what does step forward is the humour. In removing images and objects from their contexts and recombining them, LA Conceptualism was often kooky and off-kilter. Allen Ruppersberg, for example, once served his visitors 'Patti Melts' at his conceptual restaurant, *Al's Café*, in 1969. The art sandwich consisted of marshmallows and a picture of the actress Patti Page, a culinary delight straight from the kitchen of Surrealism.

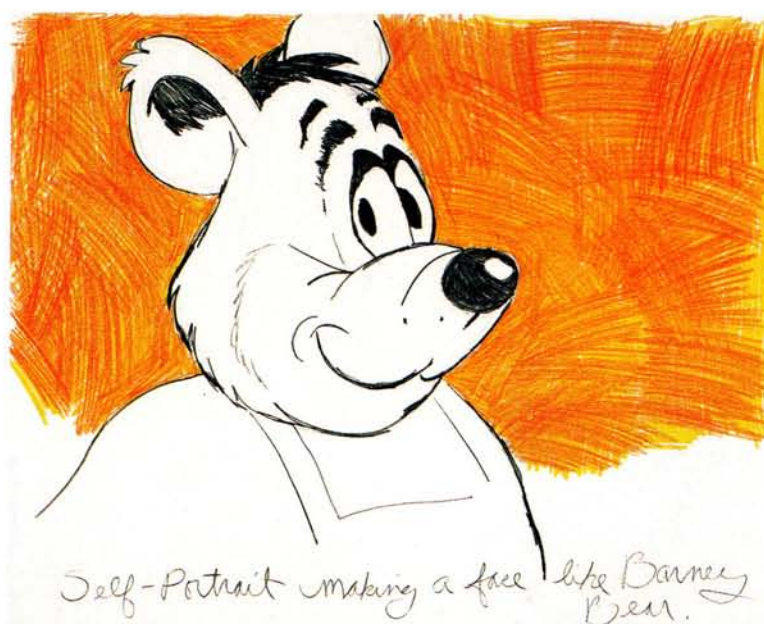
It is hard not to laugh out loud occasionally when looking at Ruppersberg's drawings from the 1970s and 80s. Many of the images are taken from old postcards and book collections, have a nostalgic bent and, in Ruppersberg's hands,

take on new meanings. In one drawing, *Searching for Passion and Sex (and an even exchange, people in boat in cave)* (1979), a viewer gets exactly that, a group of straitlaced sightseers boating inside a dark cave. In another work, a well-used copy of Ernest Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea* (1952) is flatly titled *A Quiet Sketch of a Novel* (1975). No more, no less. Ruppersberg admits he got his deadpan delivery from Ed Ruscha, but such humour is incredibly common in Los Angeles: one need only look to John Baldessari, Raymond Pettibon and Larry Johnson.

However, Ruppersberg's drawings go deeper than the mere delivery of strange associations and retooled contexts. The friction between his images and the captions he applies to them seems to suggest the longings of an entire generation, a group of people coming to maturity in the 1970s, with a memory of the prosperous 50s and their devolution to the social

unrest and Vietnam War of the 60s. A deeper look at that group of people in the cave, for example, can lead to something haunting: yes, it is a joke on 1950s sexual repression, but it is also revealing of the unhappiness such repression could cause, a genuine alienation from one's desires.

This alienation can exist in the mere fact of representation, and Ruppersberg is deft at demonstrating it. *The Old Man and the Sea* can be seen but not read. It is not a book at all, but a drawing, and the drawing will give up none of the book's secrets or its lessons. The book is a mere image of itself. In another drawing, *Reading Time (The Elements of Style)* (1973–4), Ruppersberg writes, 'Reading Time: 2 hrs. 58 min.' under a copy of William Strunk, Jr & E. B. White's famous handbook. What's deadpan and factual on one hand is representational arrest on another – meaning seen from a distance but not grasped. *Ed Schad*



Self-Portrait Making a Face Like Barney Bear, 1975, pencil on paper, 58 × 74 cm.
Courtesy the artist and Marc Selwyn Fine Art, Los Angeles