

MOUSSE

REVIEWS

Permutations of Various Ideas: The Making of Husbands: “Christina Ramberg in Dialogue” at KW Institute for Contemporary Art, Berlin

by Tim Steer



“The Making of Husbands: Christina Ramberg in Dialogue” at KW Institute for Contemporary Art, Berlin, 2019-2020.
Photo: Frank Sperling

The Making of Husbands: Christina Ramberg in Dialogue presents
twenty-three paintings and drawings by Ramberg made between 1967

and 1982. They capture a range of her practice, from *Black Widow* (1971), a flatly rendered painting of a torso undressing, introduced in the first room, to the more deformed-body-resembling assemblage of figurative parts in the later painting *Glimpsed* (1975). The exhibition looks at the radical implications of Ramberg's practice alongside a broad range of other approaches, politics, and histories through a selection of thirteen other artists presented over the ground floors of KW Institute for Contemporary Art in Berlin. The exhibition is curated by Anna Gritzand will travel to Frac Lorraine, Metz, France, and BALTIC Centre for Contemporary Art, Gateshead, UK, in 2020.

In an interview, Ramberg once described her interest in hair: "I did another whole series on the same size Masonite called *Backs of Head* and that came out of an interest in comics, of comic conventions to draw hair, and hair still fascinates me in that it is supremely manipulative; it can take any form, it can be anything you want... The levels of meaning are just incredibly rich."^[1] In this series Ramberg reduced the visual information of hair down to a refined iconography, rendering a minimum of texture to signify it, and then explored the limit that the form allowed. This approach might be read as the basis for much of her practice. Ramberg plots figurative signifiers of the body and manipulates them to the edge of legibility, pushing what a body can be.

Seriality through ideas allowed for fluidity of form, just familiar enough to be read or interpreted: "I made sixteen paintings of hair... Those are the paintings that got me started and I always worked in series from that point on. Permutations of various ideas."^[2] Different series over nearly two decades focused on hair, hands, corsets, handkerchiefs, torsos, and shirts, blending garment and anatomy. These were informed by the artist's typologically arranged collections of reference materials: cartoons, advertisements, dolls (at one point she and her husband owned more than 350 dolls), medical illustrations, folklore, and her own extensive body of photographs. She distilled the visual material down into iconographic parts that operated on different levels, reading as symbols *and* bodies. The fetishistic concentration on the female torso and garments operated somewhere between empowerment and exploitation. Ramberg's definition of these body-objects as "corset/urn" points to the duality of sexuality and death. In a body, sexuality, gender, death, symbolism, and abstraction combine—they are bodies reorganized into a state of becoming.

Ghislaine Leung's new commission *GATES* (2019) is the first thing we see upon entering the exhibition—child safety gates installed at every doorway around the rooms of the gallery spaces. They are subtle enough to scan as background but also readable enough to change the institutional temperature and reconsider access. Leung's other work, *SHROOMS* (2016)—mushroom-shaped night-lights plugged into every available electrical outlet—punctuate the space and call out the institutional infrastructure. Both works call out the institutional body and tilt the formal register of the space into something softer.

Around the space is the ambient sound from Kathleen White's four-channel video installation *The Spark between L and D* (1988) and Terre Thaemlitz's eighty-minute video projection *Soulnessless* (2012). Part of a thirty-hour multimedia "album" of lectures, video projections, music, and events, Thaemlitz's video is divided into "cantos," including an account of the artist's own resistance to Catholicism, family history, and gender identity; a visit to a Philippine convent; and appropriated footage of immigration procedures from Japan. White's *The Spark between L and D* alludes to the world's broken approach to the AIDS crisis. The artist, dressed in a nurse's uniform covered in world flags, appears to hit herself, then lick the blood, and slowly wraps her head with gauze and bandages while singing a more and more muffled rendition of "On Broadway." Both works hold a lyrical and darkly comic mood over the exhibition space and illustrate bodies programmed by organizational structures.

Ramberg's paintings and drawings are visually distinguished from the other works via freestanding display walls made from aluminum frames and concrete-coated plywood boards, which are distributed evenly over the ground-floor rooms. Productive associations transpire where the displays are integrated among other works. A room that combines Ramberg's paintings with works by Alexandra Bircken and Senga Nengudi, for example, elegantly weaves together visual and conceptual threads of desire, labor, and garments that shape bodies.

The hall has a display of Ramberg paintings that form a sort of inner room, delineated by an L-shaped freestanding wall system, splitting attention between Ramberg and the other artists. The visual split indicates the duality of the project as a whole—it is a Ramberg solo exhibition *and* a group exhibition (involving her and other artists), and also both simultaneously.^[3] The press materials and accompanying essay suggest that the show begins with a reading of Ramberg's practice as undoing conventions of gender—disturbing notions of identity via framings both physical and metaphorical. Gritz asserts in her text that in Ramberg's early paintings, bodies "become hybridized... with objects, infrastructure, and architecture." This is then brought into another, broader conversation about social codes enacted on bodies via the other

artists presented, who are “concerned each in their own way with the impact of the process of socialization on the human body.”[4]

The works by other artists, which range from 1981 until 2017, are not in direct dialogue with Ramberg’s practice but do relate to the theme of representing “socialization” on the body. The “dialogue” format does not completely justify itself given that both parts could function as separate shows. At times, the broader conceptual framing of the body defined by institutional structures, which allows for the other artists to be included, reads as an appendage onto a simpler initial reading of Ramberg as deforming bodies and gender. Yet this does not detract from an adept, thoughtful, and considered selection of works that feels contemporary and relevant at a time when it’s important to consider how bodies relate to society.

[1]Donna Seaman, *Identity Unknown* (London: Bloomsbury USA, 2017), 331.

[2]Seaman, *Identity Unknown*, 332.

[3]The other artists in the show not mentioned here are Rachal Bradley, Sara Deraedt, Gaylen Gerber, Frieda Toranzo Jaeger, Konrad Klapheck, Hans-Christian Lotz, Ana Pellicer, Richard Rezac, and Diane Simpson.

[4]Anna Gritz, “Standardization and Identity in the Work of Christina Ramberg,” in *The Making of Husbands: Christina Ramberg in Dialogue* (Berlin: Koenig Books, 2019), 51.