

## THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

**'Christina Ramberg: A Retrospective' Review: Seeing Patterns**

The American painter, who died in 1995 and is now the subject of an arresting exhibition at the Art Institute of Chicago, suffused her crisply executed canvases with subversive commentary on sex, style and femininity.

Peter Plagens | June 3, 2024



A panel from 'Hair' (1968), by Christina Ramberg.  
PHOTO: ART INSTITUTE OF CHICAGO

### Chicago

At 6-foot-1, the Chicago artist Christina Ramberg (1946-1995) found it hard to find clothes that fit, so early on she turned to making them herself. Sewing taught her about patterns and methods of garment construction, which show up in her paintings as mechanized silhouettes painted with brushstrokes as precise as the stitching in a bespoke collar. Added to these ingredients were an intense appreciation for the shapes in Ernie Bushmiller's comic-strip "Nancy," a subtle sense of muted color, and more than a hint of S&M. This arresting mix, highlighted in "Christina Ramberg: A Retrospective" (at the Art Institute of Chicago through Aug. 11, before traveling to the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles and the Philadelphia Museum of Art), yields one of the best exhibitions of contemporary art in recent memory.

Although Ramberg fits chronologically and stylistically into Imagism (the Chicago style of oddball figuration from the 1950s and '60s—of such artists as Jim Nutt and Roger Brown—that was inspired by surrealism and "outsider" art), her version is literally and metaphorically darker—an open and disarmingly honest pursuit of something profound about individual human existence that, strange as the comparison may seem, brings to mind the transcendence in a Rembrandt self-portrait.

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The daughter of a piano-teacher mother and a father who was a high-ranking officer in the U.S. Army, as a child Ramberg moved around the world to the bases where he was stationed. The family finally landed permanently in Highwood, Ill., a northside Chicago suburb. While in high school, Ramberg took a summer class at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, and enrolled as a full-time student the following year. Eventually, she became part of SAIC's faculty, as well as chair of the painting department. (The school is known for what some there call the "ingrown toenail" of its alumni-heavy teaching staff, but Ramberg and a few other exceptional teachers make that look like a reasonable practice.)

Ramberg's breakthrough moment was "Hair" (1968), a work that constituted her undergraduate thesis show. She used small, square Masonite panels (the cheapest painting formats available in the student store) to lovingly render "portraits" of women's heads as seen from the back—namely, hairdos with hands helping keep them in place. The pictures are slightly cartoonish (that is, flat with no modelling), gently satirical, and—as is true with almost every painting in the exhibition—deceptively subversive on matters of sex, style and femininity.



'Japanese Showcase' (1984) PHOTO: ART INSTITUTE OF CHICAGO

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‘Waiting Lady’ (1972) PHOTO: ART INSTITUTE OF CHICAGO

From 1969 to 1980, Ramberg kept a diary where she mused upon her desire to have affairs (she had married the artist Philip Hanson in 1968, the same year she both finished her bachelor’s degree and was in her first exhibition); her fascination with the imagery of sadomasochism, especially bondage; and her guilt over both her attraction to S&M and attempted denial of it. In October 1973, Ramberg gave birth, but the baby was premature and died shortly thereafter; the event and its troubling aftermath constituted one of the diary’s longer entries. (She later had a son, Alexander.) Whatever Ramberg’s inner turmoil regarding sex, she made several illustrations, in her almost instantly recognizable style, for *Playboy* (headquartered in Chicago at the time).

While Ramberg’s paintings are executed crisply and cleanly—almost obsessively so—“neat divisions of Ramberg’s archival material are artificial,” says co-curator Thea Liberty Nichols in the exhibition’s excellent and superbly designed catalog. (The show’s other curator is Mark Pascale.) “Her diary contains sketches, her sketchbooks contain long diaristic passages, and within her studio, she kept all of these items within arm’s reach.” Ramberg also took and saved any number of 35mm slides of strange objects and advertising signs, and collected hundreds of dolls—from handmade and folksy to commercial souvenirs—that she hung as an overflowing wall installation in her apartment.

Although Ramberg was a remarkably consistent artist, four paintings from 1980-81—each about 50 inches high by 40 inches wide—are exceptional. They are “Sedimentary Disturbance,” “Hearing,” “Black ’N’ Blue Jacket” and “Simultaneous Emergence.” Schematically, each is of a headless female body depicted from shoulders to midthigh. The paintings draw us into a surreal world where in place of sexual organs there are tiny, partial human figures. Because of the formal aesthetics—designs that rely on compact shapes with subtle variations in the background color of each—things are haunting but not the least bit grotesque. “Haunting,” in fact, is the adjective that best applies to all of Ramberg’s art save for the textile works she produced throughout the 1980s that are at the end of the show.

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(Although these are technically impressive, they are rather an anti-climax to her paintings.)

In 1989, while chair of the painting department at SAIC, Ramberg was diagnosed with Pick's disease, a form of dementia. She spent the last years of her life in an assisted-living facility where she was regularly visited by Mr. Hanson, from whom she was separated, and artist-friends who would take her for walks on the grounds. Ramberg died on Dec. 10, 1995, not yet 50 years old.



'Untitled (Hand)' (1971) PHOTO: ART INSTITUTE OF CHICAGO