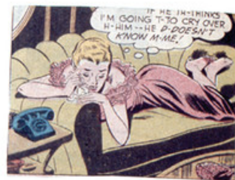
ARTFORUM

How Would a Comb that Cannot Untangle Hair Look?: The Art of Christina Ramberg

Dan Nadel on the Art of Christina Ramberg

Selection of Christina Ramberg's comic-book clippings, 1972

HAIR, URNS, AND THE BODY as sexualized object were where Christina Ramberg (1946–1995) began, and they are still what she is best known for. After nearly two decades of making paintings and drawings depicting heads, hands, and torsos, she rigorously pursued quiltmaking, and then created a final group of architectonic abstract paintings a decade before her life was cut short by a debilitating neurodegenerative



disease. Throughout, her work is characterized by a fierce attention to structural integrity and an unflinching exploration of the female body, first as a subject of fetishistic fascination and later as a more or less foregrounded armature for audacious experiments in texture, pattern, and imagemaking.

Christina Ramberg, Double Hesitation, 1977, acrylic on Masonite, 49 1/2 × 35 1/2". © Estate of Christina Ramberg.

Ramberg lived and worked in Chicago for most of her life, and for nearly fifty years she has typically been shown together with that group of friends and peers often known as the Chicago Imagists—among them Jim Nutt, Roger Brown, Barbara Rossi, Ed Paschke, Karl Wirsum, and Suellen Rocca. These artists all shared an education at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and a focus on psychologically charged figuration, but the loaded "Chicago Imagist" label—while initially useful, in part to establish the group's distance from the Minimalism and Conceptualism then dominant in New York—has since often seemed to obscure their actual achievements and the substantial differences between them. For Ramberg, the term applies primarily to her earliest work and makes it harder to appreciate the degree to which she was a sui generis painter.

Christina Ramberg, *Waiting Lady*, 1972, acrylic on Masonite, 22 3/4 × 34 1/4". © Estate of Christina Ramberg.

Nevertheless, exhibitions celebrating this set of painters from late-1960s Chicago continue to be the default context in which to view her work. The latest example was Germano Celant's recently ended "Famous Artists from Chicago. 1965–1975" at the Fondazione Prada in Milan, itself an oddly unreflective amalgamation of artist and curator Don Baum's groundbreaking 1969 exhibition "Don Baum Says: 'Chicago Needs Famous Artists'" at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, and "Made in Chicago," organized by Baum with Stephen Prokopoff for the 1973

São Paulo Bienal. The latter show, which Celant's most resembled, was already considered problematic at the time for equating Chicago with Imagist art and excluding Chicago-based outsider artists such as Joseph Yoakum, as well as any artists of color, Ray Yoshida excepted. Celant's version not only failed to address these mistakes, it repeated them some fifty years on.

Christina Ramberg, *Vertical Amnesia*, 1980, acrylic on Masonite, 47 3/4 × 35 5/8". © Estate of Christina Ramberg.

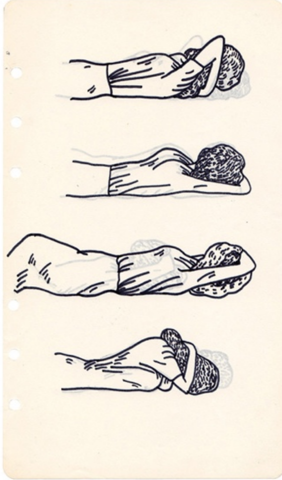
But a couple of recent museum exhibitions, each following a different tack, provide models of how Ramberg might be explored going forward. Kelly Baum's just-closed "Delirious: Art at the Limits of Reason, 1950–1980" at the Met Breuer in New York attempted to reframe twentieth-century art through the embrace of the irrational. It included Ramberg's Vertical Amnesia,1980, one of the last in a nearly decade-long series of frontal views of the female body from the neck to just above the knees. Here the headless body is subtly ungendered, its torso a quilt-like group of patterns, its left side a precarious construction of wooden slats balanced by a rather mysterious origami cube against a tightly wrapped pelvis. The work points to subtle notions of abstracted and submerged sexuality that remain fertile ground for contemporary artists, but its context in the Met Breuer show in a section devoted to bodily distortion (which also included the work of Jim Nutt and Peter Saul) risked sidelining how it simultaneously explores the possibilities of new forms in paint: Like all of her late work, Vertical Amnesia is also a nuanced collection of ideas about unnameable volumes, spaces, and patterns.

Christina Ramberg, *Strung (for Bombois)*, 1975, acrylic on Masonite, 49 1/8 × 37". © Estate of Christina Ramberg.

A more generative way to situate Ramberg can be found in the exhibition “Outliers and American Vanguard Art,” curated by Lynne Cooke and on view through May at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, DC, which takes us beyond the usual geographic and subject-driven approaches by positioning her among other artists who likewise saw little use in hierarchical distinctions of inside and outside. Ramberg’s work could and often did relate equally to a Renaissance painting, a Gee’s Bend quilt, or a collection of dolls. So if Ramberg’s Strung (for Bombois),1975, is once again presented alongside paintings by some of her Chicago peers, it here makes sense in view of the way these artists all also collected and incorporated non-art and the work of what Cooke has termed outliers (replacing the persistently problematic term outsider artists). Strung is one of the first works in which Ramberg moved away from undergarment-sheathed bodies, and it may have been inspired by the kinds of wire assemblages and rug beaters that she would have seen in Chicago’s Maxwell Street Market. It depicts a female torso as a symmetrical frame held together with string and taut cloth, its pubic area covered with a frowning mouth of slick, glistening hair. That same hair ominously and sexily delineates an urn-like space in the structure’s absent chest. Although the figure is anything but full, the work’s parenthetical subtitle makes explicit its sincerely winking nod to the French “naive” painter of voluptuous women Camille Bombois (1883–1970). The title is also a confirmation of Cooke’s thesis—Bombois, who would otherwise occupy an “other” history, is here part of Ramberg’s.

Christina Ramberg, *Istrian River Lady*, 1974, acrylic on Masonite, 35 3/8 × 31 1/4". © Estate of Christina Ramberg.

Ramberg’s admiration for artists not aligned with the straight arrow of modernism also encompassed Fernand Léger, whose volumetric forms were intrinsic to his refusal to bend to the supposed needs of “progress.” And her own work does not sit comfortably in any art-historical narrative of the 1960s and ’70s, either. It is quite far from Pop; it is not invested in exterior referents; it is not ironic or didactic. Her single-minded focus, compact forms, and disinterest in visual and verbal puns set her apart from even her fellow Chicagoans. In many ways, she is best seen in relation to other artists who worked serially to construct highly charged, complex images: Here I think of the Bill Jensen of the late ’70s, whose forms seem infected by sexual and religious iconography, or of Laurie Simmons, whose meditative, sexy, and sometimes horrific and surrealist photographs—of postwar homes or, more recently, love dolls—evoke many of Ramberg’s interests, both in terms of subject matter and in the cool remove of the artist’s gaze.



Christina Ramberg, *Untitled (Women Covering Head)*, ca. 1968, felt-tip pen on paper, 7 1/4 × 4 1/4". © Estate of Christina Ramberg.

CHRISTINA RAMBERG was the second of four children born to Vernon and Norma Ramberg. They lived in Kentucky until she was two, when Vernon, an army colonel, was assigned to Yokohama, where the family stayed for about two and a half years. The moving continued—first to Virginia, then Heidelberg, Germany, followed by Kansas, Virginia again, and finally Illinois. Ramberg, who was fascinated with paper dolls as a child, attended summer classes at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, where she earned both a BA (1968) and an MFA (1973). There she solidified her artistic methodologies, thanks in part to Whitney Halstead and Ray Yoshida. Halstead was an art historian and artist who gave equal weight to the fine art at the Art Institute and the natural history collections at the Field Museum, while Yoshida, an artist not much older than Ramberg and already a friend and mentor to other Chicago painters, encouraged collecting as both art and inspiration.

Christina Ramberg, *Sedimentary Disturbance*, 1980, acrylic on Masonite, 49 1/4 × 37". © Estate of Christina Ramberg.

Just as Ramberg began her undergraduate studies, a group of six Art Institute graduates (Nutt, Wirsum, and Rocca among them) opened the first "Hairy Who" exhibition at the Hyde Park Art Center under the aegis of Don Baum, the institution's director at the time. Hairy Who became the name of the exhibiting group, which mounted six seminal exhibitions between 1966 and 1969. The success of these exhibitions prompted Baum to look for other young artists who might work and be shown as groups with discrete identities. Nutt and Yoshida suggested Ramberg, Philip Hanson (her husband), Roger Brown, and Eleanor Dube, all 1968 graduates, who collectively dubbed themselves False Image and mounted exhibitions at Hyde Park in November 1968 and November 1969. Two members of the group, Ramberg and Brown, would become fixtures in the shows of Chicago art that followed across the country. Indeed, Ramberg was almost immediately successful—by the end of the year in which she completed her MFA, she had participated in twelve group shows as well as the aforementioned São Paulo Bienal. She had her first solo exhibition in 1974, at the Phyllis Kind Gallery in Chicago. In those early days she had already found her signature materials, too: acrylic on Masonite, a surface resistant enough for her careful brushwork and desired ultraflat finish.

Ramberg located the discomfiting feeling that lies between "fascinating" and "awful" and made compelling and definitive images of and from that place.

Ramberg had also already started working serially, beginning with the backs of heads and carefully posed hands, then moving on to torsos and urns. Corset/Urns, 1970, moves through permutations of urns and corsets, linking sex and death as each turns into the other and back again. That these corset/urns seem to be made of swatches of coiffed hair adds to the images' uncanny feel. "I have always recognized two parallel strains in my work," Ramberg said. "One was the readable, recognizable-as-figure image, and the second was a more abstract, metaphorical image often reading as torso/urn." This explanation taps into the Surrealist idea of one form embodying dual meanings and objects (corset/urn: sex/death).

Christina Ramberg, *Freeze and Melt*, 1981, acrylic on Masonite, 47 5/8 × 35 5/8". © Chazen Museum of Art, University of Wisconsin–Madison.

A work made two years later, *Waiting Lady*, is, by contrast, one of Ramberg's most sexually explicit paintings. The figure is more recognizable, even though it is as carefully volumetric as any form by Ramberg's beloved Léger. A bent-over woman completes a strange symmetry: Her hair reaches the frame's bottom and her arms and legs stretch to the edge of the picture, while the

lace of her undergarments is painted with devotional detail. Ramberg noted that this figure is "waiting on someone or waiting obediently to have something done to her." When asked about her early focus on corsets, the artist recalled:

My father was in the military and I can remember sitting in my mother's room watching her getting dressed for public appearances. She would wear these—I guess that they are called "Merry Widow"—and I can remember being stunned by how it transformed her body, how it pushed up her breasts and slendered down her waist. Then she put on these fancy strapless dresses and went to parties. I think the paintings have a lot to do with this, with watching and realizing that a lot of these undergarments totally transform a woman's body. Watching my mother getting dressed I used to think that this is what men want women to look like, she's transforming herself into the kind of body men want. I thought it was fascinating. . . . In some ways, I thought it was awful.

Ramberg located the discomfiting feeling that lies between "fascinating" and "awful" and made compelling and definitive images of and from that place. The combination of density of content and assured handling of paint is rarely found anywhere else in late- twentieth-century art.

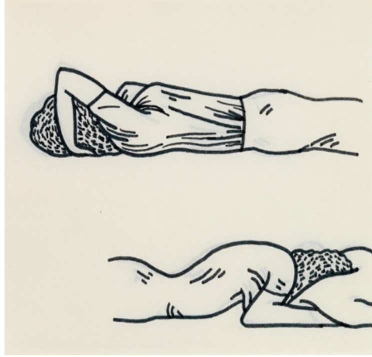
Christina Ramberg, *Japanese Showcase*, 1984, stitched fabric, cotton batting, 66 × 56". © Estate of Christina Ramberg.

In some ways, Ramberg brings to mind the "atomic" energy Myron Stout packed into his work in her similarly packed, almost overwhelmingly powerful forms. No matter what she did, Ramberg retained a sense of structural integrity; she was not unlike an engineer constructing a perfectly balanced machine that allowed her to take off in all directions. As she began to move away from the corset and from normative representations of the body in the mid-'70s, she explored other approaches to processing and transforming her subject matter in paintings such as Double Hesitation, 1977, where hair serves as wood, lace, and bandages, all on a single body. Ramberg's work of this period has nothing to do with the cartoon origins of some of her visual signatures, and everything to do with making paintings that were intimidatingly complete, unassailable, and yet mysterious in waysthat evoke Max Ernst's own body distortions. Her initial focus on undergarments opened onto broader notions of covering and building, albeit still mediated through clothes: As Dennis Adrian notes in his essay for Ramberg's 1988 retrospective

at the Renaissance Society in Chicago, most of the late-’70s paintings “deal with a very complicated system of outer garment forms. Some of these jackets, vests, coats, blouses, skirts, sweaters, peplums, and dickeys are now tangled together or change into areas of satin paneling remaining from the ‘undergarment’ images or even into braiding, hair patterns and wood graining.”

Christina Ramberg, Untitled #126, 1986, acrylic on linen, 22 × 18". © Estate of Christina Ramberg.

IN 1974 RAMBERG, along with Hanson, Rossi, and Brown, went on a trip to Europe, where she visited the Hans Prinzhorn and Dubuffet collections and the Adolf Wölfli collection at the Waldau asylum in Bern, Switzerland. She was particularly taken with the German outsider artist August Natterer’s depictions of skirts, recognizing a proximity to her own approach to the structure of garments. The trip also marked the culmination of nearly a decade of looking deeply at outsider art, as well as collecting and documenting all manner of visual phenomena. Ramberg took collecting very seriously: At one time, the home she shared with Hanson was festooned with more than 350 dolls. Curator Jenelle Porter nicely summarizes the breadth of Ramberg’s interests: “To browse the over 1,000 slides Ramberg left behind is to gain a foothold on how she looked at the world. Slides of Buddhist hand mudras echo the elongated fingers in [the 1971 painting] Hand. Patterned asphalt shingles, hand-painted signs, wig shop displays, the homes of outsider artists, a twisted and frayed awning—one can begin to decipher how Ramberg translated quotidian visual experiences into highly ordered paintings.” Ramberg and Hanson also created a scrapbook of comic-book clippings with examples of explosions, word graphics, and dreams, among other categories. The scrapbook, Ramberg noted, was “valuable as a sourcebook of comic conventions or shorthand methods of depicting various themes and objects.” She did not, however, employ collage and comic-book imagery in her paintings, as some of the artists Ramberg admired—Öyvind Fahlström, the Swedish master of reconfiguring comic-book elements; San Francisco’s symbolist painter and collage-master Jess; and Yoshida—did in their own. For Ramberg, these fragments revealed modes of rendering and moments of accidental strangeness, such as when a speech balloon hovers above a house to indicate an interior conversation. Taken out of sequential context, as in Ramberg’s scrapbook, the house appears to “speak,” as if in a Magritte painting.



Christina Ramberg, *Untitled (Two Women)*, ca. 1968, felt-tip pen on paper, 3 1/2 × 3 1/4". © Estate of Christina Ramberg.

In the 1970s and ’80s, Ramberg would, as part of her curriculum at the School of the Art Institute (where she also chaired the painting and drawing department for several years) teach her students ways of collecting. Her handout “Some Approaches for Exploring Collected Material” recommends classifying objects by shape, texture, function, color, or structure, ideally in at least three different configurations. She slyly moves students away from literal interpretation by advising them not to make copy drawings of anything, or cut-and-paste collages. Instead, she tells them to make drawings that cross “one or more objects or QUALITIES of those objects.” She also proposes they carry out transferences of one function or texture onto another, as well as think through the denial of the primary function of an object: “How would a comb that cannot untangle hair look?” Another exercise involved step-by-step drawings detailing the transformation of two opposites into a whole. These kinds of activities were at the core of her own artistic practice. Her voluminous verbal and visual lists include transformations and comparisons: “Urn-torso- bodice-vase” or “corset—containing, restraining, re-forming, hurting, compressing, binding, transforming a lumpy shape into a clean smooth line.” That last clause is crucial: Until her final series of paintings, Ramberg always kept her distortions “clean”—no matter how disturbing the imagery, the surface and the final shape would be immaculately formed and delineated. It is often the resulting subtle tension between idea and execution that makes her work so compelling.

These paintings are utterly still. They are eerily quiet, like fireworks on television with the sound off.

Ramberg’s paintings of the late ’70s and after—see Sedimentary Disturbance, 1980, or Freeze and Melt, 1981—mark a simultaneous analysis and reimagining of the female body. It is no longer a whole form, but pieced together out of textures, objects, and depictions of fabric. Her works become single-artist exquisite corpses, yet we never see the seams. Gender is suddenly in flux, as interior turns to exterior and vaginas transform into upside-down suit forms. The conflation of sexual organ with figural form is the territory of a flickering, ambiguous image—a vaginal birth and a newly born (and clothed!) being, impossibly simultaneous. In this phase of her work she also uses the body as an armature for formal experimentation: There is no internal logic to the light sources, and many of the component parts can only be insufficiently described with words and phrases such as pincer, dome, or overlapping rectangles. At the same time, in

their consistent format and serene surfaces, these paintings are utterly still. They are eerily quiet, like fireworks on television with the sound off.

Christina Ramberg's doll collection, Chicago, 1972.

By the early '80s, however, Ramberg had taken her exploration of the body as far as she wanted to. She had been engaged with quiltmaking since the early '70s, and now she pursued it with new rigor. "Quiltmaking bailed me out at a time when I had reached a crisis with my major interest—painting," she wrote. "[It] was the perfect activity for me at that moment because I did not have to think about content." Once again engaging a traditionally "female" practice, Ramberg molded it to her own needs. In these quilts, which she treated as artworks (although they were seldom exhibited), Ramberg cycles through patterns and shapes—repeating and stacking and taking them through permutations impossible to work into a figurative painting. Some also connected to her passion for collecting: Japanese Showcase, 1984, was made up of pieces of traditional Japanese fabric Ramberg had bought on a trip to Japan.

The structural necessities of quiltmaking carry over into the next and final phase of her painting: the abstractions of the mid-'80s. A series of untitled (but numbered) works in acrylic on linen or canvas depict cylinders, cones, and lines that evoke satellites in an imagined landscape. While they also resemble—once more—urns, there are no recognizable footholds here. We are left to wonder how she would account for these works. Ramberg's notes indicate what her subject matter might have been:

surface space
energy glowing core

These paintings, rarely seen since her death, depict symbolic forms that radiate emotive, not literal meaning. They are urns turned inside out, suggesting a kind of liberation. Crucially, they have externalized the relentless energy that is otherwise sublimated in Ramberg's figurative works. They point forward, suggest possibilities, and deepen our appreciation of an artist whose relentlessly exploratory spirit was matched only by her ingenious ability to create paintings as dense with meaning as they are serenely meditative.