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Christina Ramberg retrospective opens at Art Institute nearly 30 years after her untimely death

Stunning and much-deserved, it's the largest and most comprehensive exhibition ever devoted to the Chicago artist's work.

Kyle MacMillan | Apr 20, 2024



Christina Ramberg, "Waiting Lady," 1972. Collection of Anstiss and Ronald Krueck, Chicago.
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Fractured and fetishized. Cropped and contained. Patterned and precise.

Christina Ramberg's figurative images share all those qualities and more, a coolly elegant, slyly provocative and enduringly contemporary body of work that continues to influence other artists today.

Although she is internationally known, as exemplified by a 2019-20 group show in Berlin subtitled "Christina Ramberg in Dialogue," and much respected by other artists, the Chicago artist nonetheless remains underappreciated.

That's where "Christina Ramberg: A Retrospective," a stunning, much-deserved exhibition that opens April 20 at the Art Institute of Chicago, comes in. In preparation for more than three years, it is the largest and most comprehensive exhibition ever devoted to her work.

The clear-eyed survey contains more than 100 paintings, quilts, drawings and other objects — about two-thirds of all the work she created in a life that was tragically shortened by an 1989 diagnosis of Pick's disease or frontotemporal dementia (the same illness that has befallen actor Bruce Willis and former talk show host Wendy Williams). The illness curtailed her artistic output and ultimately led to her death in 1995 at age 49.

CHICAGO SUN★TIMES

While some of the selections come from museums, including notable institutions like New York’s Museum of Modern Art and the Art Institute’s own collection, most of the loans are from artists and private collectors across the country.

Ramberg, who earned her bachelor’s and master’s of fine arts degrees from the School of the Art Institute in 1968 and ’73 respectively, lived her entire adult life in Chicago. And, as evidenced by a display of dozens of her snapshot slides, the city’s social, artistic and architectural milieus helped define who she was as an artist.

While at the SAIC, she studied with Ray Yoshida, one of the 14 members of the famed Chicago Imagists, a loose-knit, free-wheeling association of artists who ignored the prevailing artistic winds and drew inspiration from other sources including surrealism and comic books.



Christina Ramberg, “Bound Hand,” 1973. Collection of the Henry and Gilda Buchbinder Family, Chicago. © The Estate of Christina Ramberg/Photography by Jamie Stukenberg

Ramberg became part of that group when, still a student, she was featured in “False Image,” one in a series of group shows from 1966 to ’73 at the Hyde Park Art Center that thrust these independent-minded artists into spotlight.

The word “Imagist,” though, is hardly mentioned in the exhibition or the accompanying 253-page catalog. According to the show’s two organizers — Thea Liberty Nichols, associate research curator of modern and contemporary art, and Mark Pascale, curator of prints and drawings — that was by design.

“She is an Imagist,” Nichols said. “She has always been associated with the Imagists. But for us in thinking about this solo retrospective, we really wanted to look at Ramberg as an artist unto herself.”

CHICAGO SUN★TIMES

That Ramberg is arguably less widely known than some of her fellow Imagists like Karl Wirsum or Ed Paschke can be attributed in part to her premature death and the absence of a major solo show of her work since a 1988 showcase at the Renaissance Society, a contemporary art space at the University of Chicago. (A selection of her drawings was shown in a touring show organized in 2000 by the University of Illinois at Chicago's Gallery 400.)

"So, it's easy to forget about someone who just disappears," said Pascale. "She's out of people's mind's eye."

Unlike some artists who need time to find their creative footing, Ramberg established her artistic voice in her earliest student works, dealing with fashion, pattern and the fetishization of the human form.

Indeed, the 1972 work, "Waiting Lady," featured at the show's entry and on the frontispiece of the catalog, sets the tone for the entire offering — a sideways view of sexualized, lingerie-clad female figure in a slightly crouched, bent-forward pose with the hands, feet and face cropped out.

Her early pieces are mostly miniatures, some focusing just on bits of human anatomy, like "Part-Permanent," a 9-by-8-inch piece on a standing wood mount that focuses on a woman's hair. Two rotating boudoir works, both titled "Cabbage Hair," with a mirror on one side and a small painting on the other, display a kind of subtle wit than can be found elsewhere as well, including pieces like "Tall Tickler" (1974), which draws its title from a kind of French condom.



Christina Ramberg, "Untitled #123," 1986. Estate of Christina Ramberg, courtesy of Corbett vs. Dempsey, Chicago. © The Estate of Christina Ramberg/Photography by Jamie Stukenberg

CHICAGO SUN★TIMES

Although Ramberg never considered herself a feminist, her works have a decidedly feminist bent, with the artist sometimes seeking to supplant or subvert the so-called male gaze. Indeed, a group of works, including “Untitled” (1972),” were included as illustrations in the decidedly male realm of Playboy magazine.

Drawing in part from the graphic look of comics, which she collected in scrapbooks (one of which is on display), the artist’s acrylic paintings on smooth Masonite have a crisp, matte look. Each is executed in exacting fashion right down to the detailed wood patterns on her artist-crafted frames, with the artist giving herself decidedly precise painting instructions in pages of drawings like “Untitled” (1980).

According to Nichols, Ramberg went so far as to carefully sand out any paint strokes that made their way into her paintings. That did not change until a final group of works (painted on canvas and not Masonite), like “Untitled #123” (1986), that are a little shocking with their decidedly painterly look.

These mysterious works, which are based on the shapes of transformer towers, were clearly heralding some new direction in her work, but her illness kept her from pursuing it, and we are only left with this small taste of what might have been.

In most of the early works, the colors are muted and more or less monochromatic grays, blacks, beiges, but brighter colors burst forth in later semi-abstracted works like “Black ’N Blue Jacket” (1981), with their layered, colliding and sectionalized garments, doll-like forms and parts of human anatomy.

After it closes at the Art Institute, this retrospective will be shown at the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles and the Philadelphia Museum of Art — bringing Ramberg well-deserved attention beyond her hometown.

About 10 additional works by her also will be featured in “Four Chicago Artists,” a show that will run May 11-Aug. 26 in the museum’s prints and drawings galleries, which Pascale sees as a parallel offering to this retrospective.



Christina Ramberg, “Belle Rêve,” 1969. Collection of Michael J. Robertson and Christopher A. Slapak, Indianapolis.
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