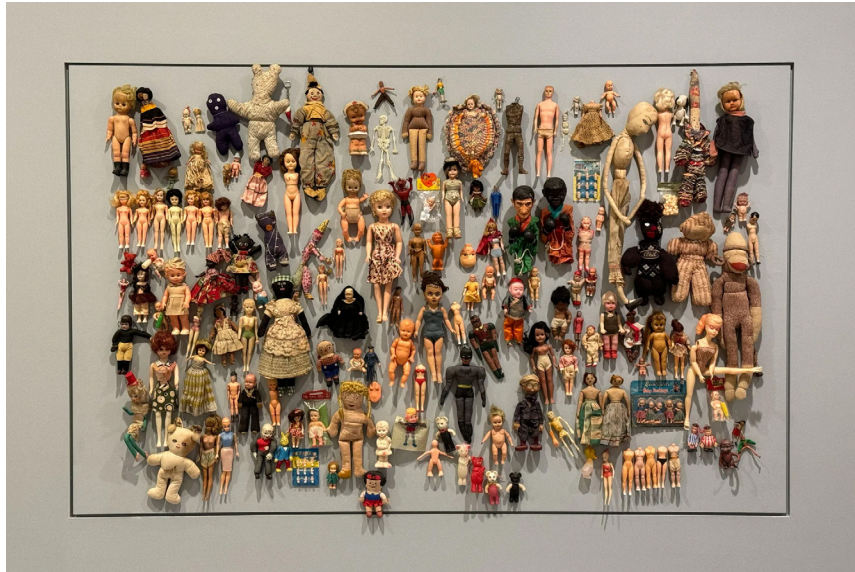


For the late Christina Ramberg, collecting was part of her practice

An Art Institute retrospective unveils some of the artist's keenly observed inspirations.

James Hosking | May 8, 2024



More than 100 dolls are on view in the retrospective, hung on a wall similar to how Ramberg displayed them in her home.

The late Christina Ramberg's paintings, drawings, and quilts are showcased in a gorgeous and long overdue retrospective at the Art Institute, on view until August 11. Rather than explore Ramberg's trenchant themes of gender and the body, I'd like to focus on her personal archive, pieces of which are displayed here. As an artist who also uses archives, albeit in a different fashion, I was fascinated by how the curators integrated Ramberg's physical ephemera, notebooks, and 35 mm reference slides, all of which provide further insight into her mysterious work.

At the School of the Art Institute, the artist Ray Yoshida—Ramberg's legendary teacher—encouraged her to fully indulge in collecting as a practice in dialogue with and inspiring her painting. Following Yoshida's example, Ramberg scoured Chicago's Maxwell Street Market in the late 1960s and early 1970s. The sprawling bazaar was a favorite haunt of fellow SAIC classmate and artist Roger Brown, who competed with Ramberg for the most elusive finds. She amassed a collection of dolls, 155 of which are on view in the retrospective, hung on a wall similar to how Ramberg displayed them in her home. The doll's battered forms, some without clothes or heads, echo the faceless compositions and fragmentary bodies in her paintings. In a 1989 Chicago Tribune interview, Ramberg said, "What I like about them is their sense of history. I'm interested in what is implied."



The artist's personal photos are on display in a wall-mounted light box.

Ramberg's archive of personal photos is excerpted in a video slideshow as well as in a large, wall-mounted light box with slides inside. Both offer intriguing glimpses of her visual interests: Victorian corsetry, constricting beauty devices for the face, and folds of fabric rendered in stone and in medieval religious paintings, as well as several austere water tower photos taken by the German photographers Bernd and Hilla Becher. Like them, Ramberg worked with unexpected variations and found transcendence in repetition. She once illuminated her process: "My aim is to make from my obsessions and ideas the strongest, most coherent visual statement possible. Before I can make them strongly stated I need to fully understand what those ideas are. Only then can I really struggle." It's a gift to spend time with the matte surfaces of her exquisitely rendered paintings and to see some of the keenly observed sources of their unnerving beauty. I only wish she had lived to make more.

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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

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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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