

## HYPERALLERGIC

### The Fetishistically Fantastic Art of Christina Ramberg

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Lori Waxman | June 26, 2024



Christina Ramberg, “Waiting Lady” (1972), Collection of Anstiss and Ronald Krueck, Chicago (© The estate of Christina Ramberg, photography by Jamie Stukenberg)

CHICAGO — In 1968, Christina Ramberg exhibited 16 small, strange, meticulous paintings of women’s hairdos. Each square panel featured a White woman’s head, seen from behind, her dark hair manipulated by an apparently female hand, the background an acidic gray-green.

She was only 22 years old, and she had it all figured out art-wise. That much is clear from the get-go in the Art Institute’s *Christina Ramberg: A Retrospective*, the first comprehensive survey in nearly three decades of the fetishistically fantastic work of one of the lesser-known — but, to my mind, most exciting — artists often grouped together as the Chicago Imagists. A companion show in the museum’s prints and drawings galleries, *Four Chicago Artists*, includes work by my other favorite, Barbara Rossi, a great friend of Ramberg. Both belonged to a wildly original generation of local artists, many of whom studied and taught at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, exhibited at the Hyde Park Art Center, collected folk and non-Western art, and regularly visited the open-air Maxwell Street flea market.

The Ramberg retrospective, co-curated by Thea Liberty Nichols and Mark Pascale, and slated for travel to Los Angeles and Philadelphia, opens with “Hair” and other work from her art student days. In them, to a one, are a prodigious amount of the elements Ramberg went on to refine, darken, and deepen throughout her career: the shiny blue-black hair of romance comics, the monstrosity of fragmented and faceless body parts, the ability of one thing to simulate another, the allure of perfect line-work and

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Christina Ramberg, "Hair" (1968), Collection of Joel Wachs, New York  
(© The estate of Christina Ramberg, photography by Kris Graves)

Armpit shields, I learned, were used to protect fine garments from excess perspiration in the days before deodorant and dry cleaning. But what is a French tickler? A condom with ribbed protrusions for extra pleasure, it turns out. They were the ostensible inspiration for a series of tall, narrow paintings Ramberg created in 1974, undeniably phallic, sure, but mostly just terrifically weird: picture a giant finger, sheathed in lace and tightly wrapped with glossy strands of hair. Hair could be used for binding, or it could be actual hair on a head, but it could be plenty of other things, too: throughout the '70s, Ramberg depicted hair bonbons in little paper doilies, corsets and urns fashioned from gleaming brown locks, and even carved chair backs and lamp bases made not of wood but of shaped tresses. She hand-painted many of her frames, sometimes rendered in the same style as all that hair, sometimes with faux woodgrain or marbling. There's even a series of life-sized headless torsos, not quite human, definitely scary, whose genitals, midsections, and amputated arms are trussed up in the stuff (for pain, for pleasure, for protection — it's unclear). Their unbound skin is covered in fishnet that, when it frays, looks a whole lot like pubic hair.

Why hair? Well, it's not only hair that got redirected in Ramberg's oeuvre, even if it often was. Individual items of clothing, specific body parts, and a wide array of patterns could be recombined in any number of ways, most vividly in a trio of big, uncharacteristically colorful paintings from 1981. Each presents a figure literally composed of garments, such that a gridded blazer stands in for an upper torso and arm, a pair of red pants and a pink button-down hang between the legs like a penis, and an inverted pair of yellow trousers becomes a chest. These are bodies made up of other bodies, all of it constituted as clothing. That that clothing happens to be full-on New Wave, all bold patterns and padded shoulders, helps shift the tenor from creepy to comedic. A trio of small pictures painted the year before, portraying women's outfits, takes the opposite tack: instead of fabric, these skirt suits

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appear to be stitched together from pieces of flesh — butcher's chart meets sewing pattern. Ramberg, who often sewed clothing for her hard-to-fit six-foot-one frame, knew what she was doing.



Installation view of *Christina Ramberg: A Retrospective*  
at the Art Institute of Chicago (photo Lori Waxman/Hyperallergic)

Artists as much as artworks are ultimately inscrutable, but Ramberg left an archive that provides plenty of clues to the sources and personal motivations of her oeuvre. Some of these are on display, including her “Doll Wall,” an installation of thrift-store finds that occupied an entire wall in her apartment, and color slides she shot of medical illustrations, tattoos, smokestacks, gems, mannequins, crucifixions, and patterns found in flooring and doors. The pages of a scrapbook made with her eventual husband, artist Philip Hanson, are filled with comic book cut-outs of hair and hands. Sketchbook pages tidily demonstrate endless variations on the stylized brassieres, head wraps, and other elements found in her finished paintings. The exhibition catalogue reproduces plenty of extra archival material, plus a revelatory essay by Judith Russi Kirshner on Ramberg’s diaries, where black ink was for domestic entries and red ink for studio notes. Like many an artist-mother, she was maddeningly pressed for time, and kept track of the hours she was able to devote to art making. She also wrote about her sexual proclivities, including bondage. All of which is to say, if, upon contemplation of her 1975 painting “Broken,” you’re reminded of S&M, clothes hangers, superhero comics, and doll parts, know that the artist might have been too.

Ramberg stopped painting in 1983, declaring herself “stuck,” and devoted herself more fully to quilting, which she’d been practicing for years on the side. Five examples are on display, their sense of pattern, graphics, and seriality not out of keeping with her celebrated paintings, but lacking any concern for image. Despite what the curators claim, this absence makes them, to my mind at least, irrevocably different from, and far less riveting than, her formal art making up to that point. When she returned to painting in 1986, she produced scumbled black-and-white diagrams of towers. Within a few years, she had been diagnosed with Pick’s disease, a rare neurodegenerative condition that forced her to stop working and eventually took her life, in 1995, at the age of 49.



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Christina Ramberg, "Black 'N Blue Jacket" (1981), Collection of Chuck and Kathy Harper, Chicago (© The estate of Christina Ramberg, photography by Jamie Stukenberg)



Christina Ramberg, "Showcase" (1984), Estate of Ray Yoshida (courtesy Corbett vs. Dempsey, Chicago, © The Estate of Christina Ramberg, photography by Jamie Stukenberg)

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Christina Ramberg, "Untitled (Hand)" (1971), Private collection, New York (© The estate of Christina Ramberg, Stewart Clements Photography)