Manipulation, Monstrocities, and the Male Gaze

Christina Ramberg and the Female Form

[Bennett McKinney]

Christina Ramberg was an influential Chicago painter and a notable figure among the Chicago Imagists, a group of legendary Chicago artists who often exhibited work together and were known for their colorful, comic book-style imagery and the way they toyed with the human form in their work.[1] Like many of her Imagist peers, Ramberg studied at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, later becoming the first woman to be the chair of the painting department.[2] Most popular are her paintings of "stylized fragments of the female form."[3] Like other Imagist artists, Ramberg's works find "new connotations from the shredded iconography of commercial media and pulp publication" through depicting the human form.[4] In her work and in her life, Ramberg indeed demonstrates a fascination for the human form, especially focused on the female body. She had collections and archives of comic books, magazine clippings, advertisements, medical illustrations, photographs, dolls, and more media often featuring the female body.[5] From her collection, she would fill scrapbooks with images cut and pasted onto the pages, and her sketchbook was rife with repeated sketches exploring the same forms meticulously.[6] This obsession with form dominates her paintings and informs the greater meaning behind them; Ramberg's work asserts that women have been reduced to mere objects that society regards with

1 Rosie Cooper and Sarah McCrory, *Chicago Imagists. 1960s-1970s* (London: Hayward Gallery Publishing, 2019), 17.

2 The Art Institute of Chicago "Christina Ramberg," 2024, https://www.artic.edu/artists/36316/christina-ramberg.

3 The Art Institute of Chicago, "Christina Ramberg."

4 John Corbett et al., *Private Eye: The Imagist Impulse in Chicago Art* (Indianapolis: Indianapolis Museum of Art at Newfields, 2021), 25.

5 Cooper and McCrory, *Chicago Imagists*, 97.

6 Cooper and McCrory, *Chicago Imagists*, 97.

monstrous disgust, restrictive cinches, poking hands, and leering eyes.

Before Ramberg and the Chicago Imagists, came the renowned "Monster Roster." In his essay on this group, John Corbett remarks that "one can find lingering echoes of the Monsters in the work of [the] subsequent" Imagists.[7] Corbett could definitely be referring to Ramberg who possessed a similar fixation for creating monstrosities in her work as well as the same "dedication to the figure" that the Monster Roster came to be known for.[8] Even before the Roster, Chicago art has had a long affinity for the monstrosity that remains connected with Ramberg. Jennifer Jane Marshall discusses the pre-Monster Roster artists in her essay "Routes to Modernism" such as legendary artist Ivan Albright whose work as a war medic informed his noxious rendering of flesh in *Into the World There Came a Soul Called Ida*.[9] This depiction of eerily discolored skin seems to be emulated decades later by Ramberg in works like *Rose's Woe* and *Shadow Panel* in which the flesh is gray or blemished. In her essay "Body Partings," Riva Lehrer notes that Ramberg's figures are not simply human; they seem to be monstrous in configuration. Afterall, her paintings contain disembodied limbs and hands, and the women themselves are often faceless, limbless, and headless.[10] These small abnormalities and deviations in the human form are all it takes for Ramberg's figures to become monstrous. Ramberg herself was unconventionally tall for a woman, standing over six feet in stature, often dealing with stares and offhand remarks about her height from strangers.[11] Lehrer notes that those whose appearances are outside the norm are forced to live with this sort of judgment; their bodies are "split into parts: the lived subjective self, and the self that is mirrored back ... by others."[12] With her strange forms, Ramberg tackles this duality. The women in her paintings are made from groups of body parts connected in a Frankenstein fashion. Ramberg was known to collect images from medical journals, enamored by the disfigured body parts, the sutures, the bandages, the diseased skin, and the way they were drawn "so smoothly [and] caressedly [sic]."[13] These elements can all be observed in Ramberg's work from the detached feet in *Air Flow Pump* to the bandaged body in *Troubled Sleeve*. Along with other pieces from her collection, these works seem to imply that even small imperfections and abnormalities in the female body cause it to be seen as horrific or even monstrous.

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7 John Corbett, "Bleak House: Chicago's Monster Artists," in *Monster Roster: Existentialist Art in Postwar Chicago*, ed. John Corbett et al. (The Smart Museum of Art, The University of Chicago, 2016), 47.

8 Corbett, "Bleak House," 38.

9 Jennifer Jane Marshall, "Routes to Modernism: 1914-1943," in *Art in Chicago: A History from the Fire to Now*, ed. Maggie Taft and Robert Cozzolino (University of Chicago Press, 2018), 82.

10 Riva Lehrer, "Body Partings," in *Christina Ramberg: A Retrospective*, ed. Thea Liberty Nichols and Mark Pascale (The Art Institute of Chicago, 2024), 74. 11. Lehrer, "Body Partings," 75.

11 Lehrer, "Body Partings", 75.

12 Lehrer, "Body Partings," 75-76.

13 "False Image," *Hairy Who & The Chicago Imagists*, directed by Leslie Buchbinder (2014; Pentimenti Productions 2014), https://vimeo.com/groups/238110/videos/78074777.

Ramberg's works are deeply influenced by a childhood experience she had, watching her mother getting ready for special occasions. She was horrified and fascinated by the undergarments her mother wore, especially by how they would contort and compress her mother's body.[14] She remembers thinking "this is what men want women to look like."[15] This sentiment is echoed by Wendy Burns-Ardolino's research in her book *Jiggle: (re)Shaping American Women*. In interviews and surveys, Burns-Ardolino found that women feel obligated to wear such restricting, uncomfortable shapewear to formal events as if there is an unspoken, social dress code.[16] Burns-Ardolino argues that this implicit requirement reduces women to a cinched, curved, thin-waisted, full-chested, "ideal" feminine figure.[17] In other words a woman is nothing more than her body, and this idea is central to Ramberg's work. In fact, the majority, if not the entirety, of her paintings are exploring the manipulation of the female form.[18] She once described the way she represents women's bodies as "constraining, restraining, reforming, hurting, compressing, binding, transforming a lumpy shape into a clean smooth line."[19] Her paintings of waists tightly hugged by corsetry question "how women shape their bodies to achieve a certain look."[20] In her 1968 multipanel *Hair*, manicured hands touch, caress, and control women's hair from behind. Notably, these are not men's hands but women's, suggesting that women themselves have lost touch with their bodies seeking to conform to patriarchal ideals by treating themselves as an object to be handled and restrained. Ramberg further manipulates form through omission; her works are often focused on a singular part of the body that exists within the frame. In some of Ramberg's paintings from the early 1970's like *Black Widow* or *Delicate Decline*, the aggressively cropped female body becomes an unrecognizable abstraction, a geometrically curved shape before a gray void. These paintings clearly demonstrate the overarching thesis of Ramberg's oeuvre; a woman's body is an object to be shaped and observed.

Clearly, the women in Ramberg's works are less than women in actuality; they are objects. Throughout her career, Ramberg aimed to depict the objectification of women. The absence of faces in her work achieves this end very clearly as it effectively removes any autonomy or individuality from these figures.[21] This forces the viewer to grapple with several, unsettling questions espe-

14 "False Image," *Hairy Who & The Chicago Imagists*, directed by Leslie Buchbinder.

15 "False Image," *Hairy Who & The Chicago Imagists*, directed by Leslie Buchbinder.

16 Wendy Burns-Ardolino, *Jiggle: (re)Shaping American Women* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books. 2007), 25, EBSCOhost.

17 Burns-Ardolino, *Jiggle*, 26.

18 Cooper and McCrory, *Chicago Imagists*, 27.

19 Kathrin Bentele et al., *The Making of Husbands: Christina Ramberg in Dialogue* (Berlin: KW Institute for Contemporary Art, 2019), 3.

20 Thomas B. Cole, "Parallel Manipulation: Christina Ramberg," *JAMA: The Journal of the American Medical Association* 310, no. 9 (2013): 884, https://doi.org/10.1001/jama.2013.5288.

21 Lehrer, "Body Partings," 76.

cially in paintings like *Probed Cinch* and *Shady Lacy* where protruding hands are prodding, stroking, and holding the faceless, female bodies. The viewer is led to wonder who these women are, if the anonymous hands are the figures' own or if they belong to someone else, and whether or not this touching is welcomed and consensual. With these vague, foreboding depictions, Ramberg instills an uneasiness in the viewer. Another creation of Ramberg's that could produce a similar discomfort was her notorious doll wall: a wall in her living room that was adorned with her collection of vintage dolls.[22] Her fascination with dolls speaks to her greater interest in female objectification. Dolls are literal objects that represent women much like the figures in Ramberg's paintings which have been reduced to simple forms that also represent women. This is especially obvious in her 1971 painting *Black Widow* where the body has been "compartmentalized ... into columns, cones, and spheres."[23] This seems to mirror the way in which "women's clothing ... divides the body into sections," highlighting the "good" parts and hiding the "bad."[24] There's a complexity to Ramberg's portrayal of feminine clothing. The depiction of lingerie in some of her 1969 triptychs like *Lola La Lure* or *Belle Rêve* shows real, feminine sexuality while also serving as a reminder of female objectification.[25] With this, Ramberg seems to suggest that female sexuality is derived from (male) objectification, and that women themselves have been reduced to the very objects that constitute their daily lives: hair, shoes, lace, and so on.

The term "male gaze" was coined in 1975 by Laura Mulvey in her landmark essay "VisualPleasure and Narrative Cinema." Here, she asserts that Hollywood films are built around looking at women through a male perspective. Though this essay was originally published nearly a decade into Ramberg's career, it seems that Ramberg is remarking on this phenomenon with her art. She too was deeply focused on media such as advertisements and comics and her work appears to mimic the way that "the conventions of mainstream film focus attention on the human form."[26] Indeed, Ramberg was greatly focused on the human form. She spent a significant amount of time collecting and cataloging images and media depicting the human body, especially the female body.[27] And this obsession with women's bodies in media is easily noticeable in her work. A friend of Ramberg's, Lori Gunn Wirsum notes in her essay "Remembering Chris" that Ramberg's works always reminded her strongly of the sales catalogs she

22 Lori Gunn Wirsum, "Remembering Chris," in *Christina Ramberg: A Retrospective*, ed. Thea Liberty Nichols and Mark Pascale (The Art Institute of Chicago, 2024), 97.

23 Cole, "Parallel Manipulation," 885.

24 Lehrer, "Body Partings," 78.

25 Lehrer, "Body Partings," 79.

26 Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," in *Feminist Film Theory* ed. Sue Thornham (Edinburgh, Scotland: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), 61, ProQuest Ebook Central.

27 Thea Liberty Nichols, "Parallel Manipulations: Christina Ramberg's Art and Archive," in *Christina Ramberg: A Retrospective*, ed. Thea Liberty Nichols and Mark Pascale (The Art Institute of Chicago, 2024), 25.

encountered growing up in the 1950's which "featured rows of truncated [female] forms wearing intimate clothing."[28] These advertisements were prominent in Ramberg's scrapbooks and collections along with other feminine media such as romance comic books.[29] Ramberg had an affinity for these texts which were certainly constructed around the male gaze and was especially intrigued by their depictions of women's hair. Her paintings are often noted for their comic book style especially in the way that they present women's hair.[30] This is particularly apparent in her earlier small-scale paintings like *Scarved* and *Bagged* or in her sixteen-panel piece *Hair*. The improbable hairstyles in these paintings twist and flow in ways that seem to defy gravity and are otherwise physically impossible. The glossy highlights and bold lines give the hairstyles a plastic, artificial quality similar to a doll's hair. Ramberg uses these visual cues to comment on the male gaze. With these portraits, she seems to suggest that the perfect male fantasy of a woman does not exist; it's a romanticized, fantastical image that defies the laws of nature and physics. Ramberg's women all do this to some extent. Her figures are objects of desire that have been cut and constructed intentionally to subvert the male gaze, to imply that what men want from women is destructive, dehumanizing, and impossible.

Christina Ramberg's career demonstrates a lifelong commitment to the depiction of the human form. Her art was centered on how society views women's bodies and how women view their own bodies. These compositions are oftentimes humanly impossible and deeply unsettling in result. The monstrosities that she has created illustrate the disconnection women feel towards their own bodies as well as the disgust society observes towards bodies believed to be imperfect. A key influence to Ramberg's work is her memory of her mother using corsets to manipulate and perfect her body. Ramberg's paintings explore how the female body is controlled and touched by corsets, ropes, hands, and so on. Additionally, the women in Ramberg's works are represented so that they become more object and less human by removing their faces and constructing their bodies from simple shapes. In doing so, Ramberg discusses the objectification of women and the trappings of the male gaze. She equates the cultural ideals of female sexuality to objectification and suggests that what men want from women (particularly from their bodies) is an impossibility, nothing but a deeply unrealistic fantasy that conforms and binds women to repressive, societal expectations. The central argument that Ramberg concerns herself with is the purpose of a woman's body. Ramberg observes that the female form is an object that is to be touched, tied up, reshaped, and looked at, and her work remarks on this cold reality.

28 Wirsum, "Remembering Chris," 96.
29 "False Image," *Hairy Who & The Chicago Imagists*, directed by Leslie Buchbinder.
30 Wirsum, "Remembering Chris," 96.