

'Christina Ramberg', 42 Carlton Place, Glasgow, 4–21 April 2014

Nadia Hebson, Newcastle University

An exhaustive list of clothing, hard and soft lingerie, accessories, hairdos and cosmetics seems the most appropriate point from which to approach the work of Christina Ramberg (b. 1947–d. 1995). With a singular, inquisitive eye and an armour-plated iconography, Ramberg explored the 'double-bind' of femininity in relation to the language of painting, an exploration staged significantly against the backdrop of second wave feminism. Only now are her enigmatic paintings receiving the consideration their immaculate thinking and acute execution demand. Carol Rhodes and Merlin James' timely exhibition assembles drawing, print, ephemera and painting that spans Ramberg's abridged career. Whilst Ramberg's paintings present a tightly bound and resolute prospect, her drawings, which predominate in this exhibition, reveal another pace of enquiry, methodical and curious: the keenly observed intricacies of a collar's pleat, a confection's texture, or a heel's elevation are turned over in the mind and on the page. Through the lens of Ramberg's drawings the exhibition reveals the fugitive looking and thinking intrinsic in the creation of such impossibly distilled and still paintings, represented in the exhibition by a single work, *Untitled (torso and pants)* from 1982. Ramberg's minutely adjusted, sequential drawings suggest a form of visual list-making or idiosyncratic taxonomy. There is an evident determination to record all possible permutations. Her categorizing and listing curiously devoid of judgment – most conspicuously *overt* political judgment – offer rather a presentation of myriad observations displayed for our own particular and coloured consideration.

Ramberg, frequently described as a Chicago Imagist, was loosely associated with 'The Hairy Who' group of artists: Karl Wirsum, Jim Nutt, Gladys Nilsson, Suellen Rocca and Art Green. A pupil and later friend of artist Ray Yoshida, whom she had first encountered at the School of The Art Institute of Chicago, she shared with her contemporaries a distinctly 'Chicagoan' visual lexicon manifest in both form and content, a result in part of Yoshida's influential teaching.¹ Insightfully described in opposition to contemporaneous New York Pop Art, art dealer Karen Lennox has observed, 'The Hairy Who sourced Surrealism, Art Brut and the comics. Pop Art sourced the world of commercial advertising and popular illustration. One was very personal, the other anti-personal' (Newman 2011: 164).

Whilst it is problematic to suggest a singular definition, the Hairy Who's output can be described as both figurative and idiosyncratic. Ramberg's paintings, however travelled beyond these confines, rejecting whimsy and the idiosyncratic, an anxious, unsettling tenor emerging in their place. Notably this disquiet, absent from the work, of her contemporaries, sets Ramberg's endeavour apart, despite the shared visual language, source material and the evident stylistic call and response that transpires when friends and peers work in close proximity, Ramberg's paintings approach more oblique terrain.

1. Hairy Who was the title of an exhibition that took place at the Hyde Park Centre, Chicago in 1967, the six participating artists never intended the title to imply a self-organizing group with a specific agenda. Perhaps a more insightful connection between the artists and their work is the influence of Ray Yoshida and art historian Whitney Halford; both taught at the School of The Art Institute of Chicago and their tangential purviews had a profound and far reaching effect on the Hairy Who, the Monster Roster and later generations of students.

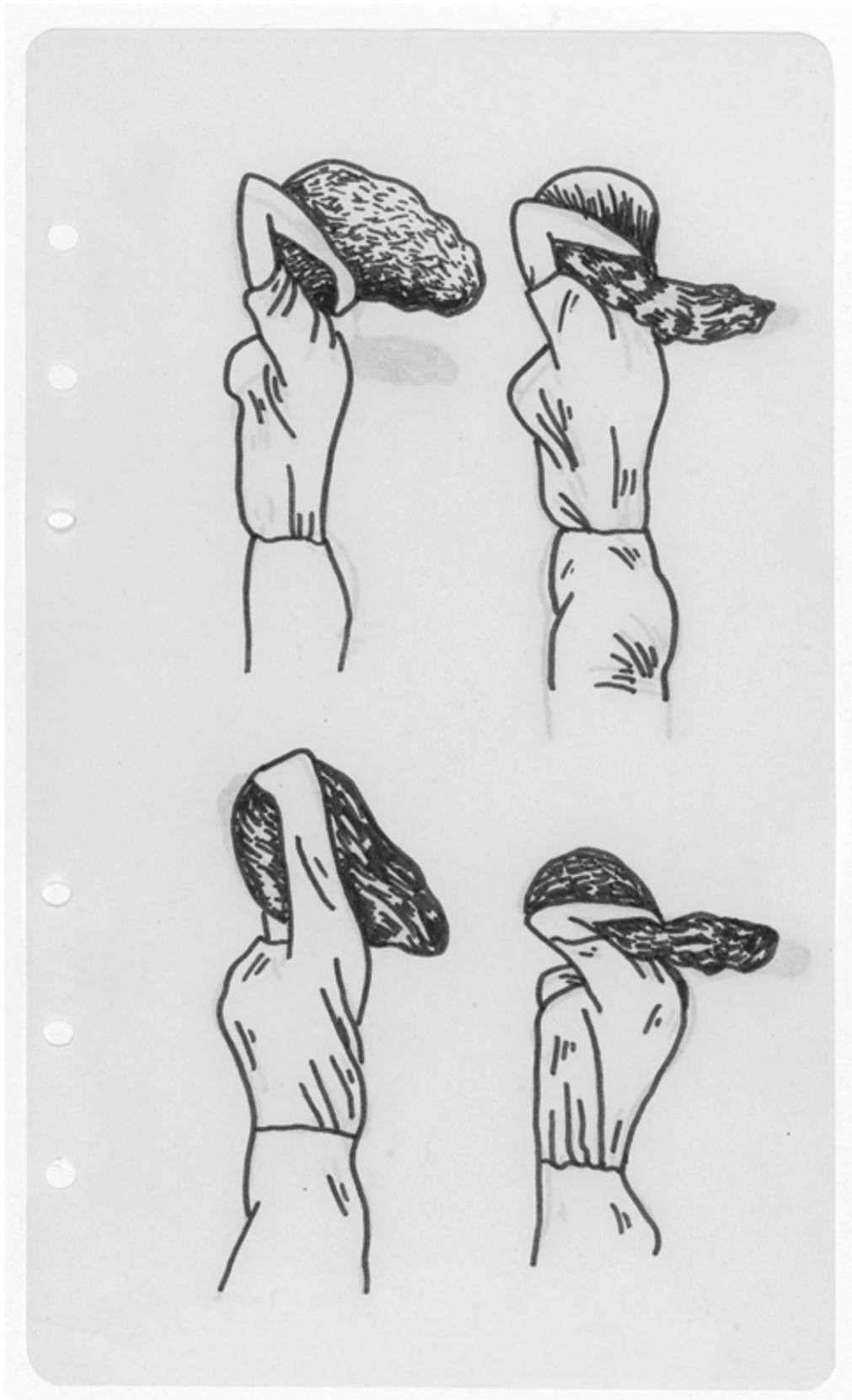


Figure 1: Christina Ramberg (1968), *Untitled (4 figures)*, felt-tip pen on paper (double sided), 7 1/4 x 4 1/4 inches. Courtesy of the Estate of Christina Ramberg and Corbett vs. Dempsey, Chicago.

As the ephemera and sketch book pages in the exhibition suggest, Ramberg traversed both personal recollection and found image, making use of advertising, decals, comic books and objects frequently found at the Maxwell Street flea market. The attentive studies of the backs of heads, the particular nuances of braids, partings and relaxed curls could only have come from the close proximity and tedium of a bus or subway ride. Attentive to the shifts in contemporary street style and the proscribed fashions of past eras, uneasy and at times nonsensical confluences of body and apparel, period and style, clothing and household object, underpin Ramberg's entire *oeuvre*. Present in both the drawings and paintings is a sense that although rapt in observation, Ramberg is marginally perturbed by these acts of adornment and transformation.

Whilst throughout the body of work there remains a clear distance from a self-revelatory or autobiographical concern, it is implicit that individual experience and insightful recollection belay the works' particularity. Ramberg herself remarked in interview:

I remember sitting in my mother's room watching her get dressed for public appearances and I remember being stunned how her [undergarment] transformed her body, how it pushed up her breasts and slendered down her waist Watching my mother get 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.

(Porter 2014: 47)

This quote has come to offer a convenient shorthand for Ramberg's concerns: a woman artist's comprehension of the objectification of the female body for masculine mores, yet Ramberg's work in its entirety is more complex and penetrating than this condensed strapline suggests. Significantly, what Ramberg moves towards throughout the evolution of her career is an unravelling of a static notion of the nature of objectification. From both the interior and exterior, frequently concurrently, we are offered contingent perspectives of a feminine reality that contain the experience of being both self-reflexive subject and sentient object. (Significantly a sexualized state of being, is just one possibility offered among many for the possessors of a female form.) That Ramberg chooses to examine this through painting, a medium so tightly bound to the history of objectification of the female body, could be read as both a request and an invitation for us to be more scrupulous in the ways we term and by extension understand the nature of objectification. Ramberg does not rely on simplistic interpretations, or reductive binaries, rather she offers insight into women's complex relationships to their minds and bodies, pleasures and binds and the states in between, exposed.

Amongst the ephemera accompanying the exhibition are some insightful elements that throw light on the culture of Ramberg's time. Unexpected illustrations for Playboy accompany a Joyce Carol Oates short story, whilst an excerpt from the 2014 film *Hairy Who and The Chicago Imagists* (Buchbinder, 2014) does more to elucidate the complexity of the era than any other single contribution. Artist Ellen Lanyon remarks in interview that Ramberg was not interested in the binaries of contemporaneous feminism or at least the campus feminism of the period. This initially vexing observation is useful in opening out the convolutions of being a painter and a woman who explores feminine experience in relation to paint in the mid to late twentieth century. Reflecting on the work I believe that Ramberg must have found the call for singular, possibly militant, political clarity to be present in her paintings in order that they approach a feminist territory both overly simplistic and deeply confining. The work, nuanced and insistent, is in no way analogous to painterly agitprop. Whilst by all accounts Ramberg herself expressly avoided a feminist moniker, along with any other group affiliations or categorizations, she is undoubtedly a painter who explores feminist concerns. Significantly Ellen Lanyon's observations perhaps belay the genesis of the idea, later prevalent in art school painting departments of the 1990s and 2000s that feminist art

practice was an aesthetic category that painting moved beyond.² It is precisely because of the long shadow of this way of thinking that we need to return to the *oeuvre* of Christina Ramberg and to pick up the thread of feminist discussion, especially in relation to the possibilities of contemporary painting. In comprehending the span of Ramberg's practice we rediscover a prescient and deeply sensitized endeavour, that within its historical moment was only fully comprehended by a few.³

2. This observation comes from personal experience as both a student in the 1990s and later a lecturer working in Fine Art departments in the United Kingdom and abroad. In his recent article Godfrey, M (2014), *Statements of Intent*, Art Forum, touches on the complexities of the educational environment in the late 1980s and the 1990s for women painters.

3. In 1980 artists Carol Rhodes and Merlin James's both saw 'Who Chicago? An Exhibition of Contemporary Imagists' at Third Eye Centre, Glasgow. Ramberg's work made a significant and lasting impression on both and their exhibition at 42 Carlton Place, during Glasgow International 2014 reflects their belief that Ramberg's prescient and complex work has new significance and resonance for audiences today.

References

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Newman, C. (2011), *Chicago Magazine*, 60: 2.

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Boston: ICA Boston.

Contributor details

Nadia Hebson is an artist who lives and works in Newcastle. She studied Painting at Central St Martins and The Royal Academy Schools. Currently Senior Lecturer in Fine Art at Newcastle University, during a sabbatical in 2014 she travelled to the United States to research the work and teaching approach of Christina Ramberg with the assistance of The School of the Art Institute of Chicago, Corbett vs. Dempsey and Carol Becker, Dean, Columbia University. Her recent solo exhibitions include: *Can You Forgive Her?* Mauve, Vienna and *MODA WK*, Lokaal 01, Antwerp. Her publication *MODA WK* exploring the work of Winifred Knights was published by AND Public in Autumn 2014.

Contact

School of Arts and Cultures, Newcastle University, The Quadrangle, Newcastle upon Tyne NE1 7RU, UK.
E-mail: nadia.hebson@ncl.ac.uk