

Gallery 400 (MC 083)  
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## CHICAGO

### Christina Ramberg at Gallery 400

Several recent exhibitions here dedicated to drawing suggest a need by viewers and artists for an experience untouched by the mediating processes that define much contemporary work. Particularly important was a retrospective of 64 previously unseen drawings by the late Christina Ramberg, a significant figure in the history of Chicago painting. Although she first exhibited in the late 1960s with the Imagists, Ramberg never identified herself with this group, but shared their affinity for flat, unmodulated surfaces and stylized figuration. This well-researched survey, augmented by paintings as well as notes and archival materials from the artist's estate, was the most comprehensive overview of her work since 1988.

Known for her iconic paintings of the anonymous female body, Ramberg explored Lacanian notions of voyeuristic pleasure and objectification. Woman, symbolized by the torso, is always represented fragmented, crinched or bound. In early works, she is caught in various states of undress, displaying black corsets and lace undergarments; in later compositions, her body becomes either more androgynous or objectlike, rendered as solitary vessel or strange hybrid with limbs supplanted by wooden armatures. After abandoning painting for quilt-making in the



Christina Ramberg: Untitled, n.d., pen and marker on graph paper, 8 1/2 by 6 1/2 inches, at Gallery 400.

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early 1980s, Ramberg eventually returned to her original medium, in which the figure assumes an abstract, diagrammatic form.

The drawings on view, all untitled, undated and arranged thematically, provided rare insight into the rich iconography that informs her paintings. Images of feminine clothing and high-heeled shoes abound, as do renderings of women dressing or lying prone, their faces masked by flowing veils. Schemata depicting hair parted or knotted into phallic shapes connect Ramberg to the fetishistic explorations of the Surrealists, while studies of ordinary objects (jandy, lamps, chairs), often imbued with a bodily presence, speak to the psychological dramas of the domestic sphere. Her drawings, in their repetition of tightly cropped images organized in rows or grids, have a cinematic aspect. Executed on paper in combinations of ink, marker, gouache and colored pencil, with a bold geometry and an assured, unwavering line, they take their inspiration from advertising, medical illustration, textiles and popular culture.

This show delivered Ramberg's work from the confines of Imagism to a broader field of interpretation, namely, feminism. Her commentary on society's authority over women's bodies, identity and sexuality remains as fresh and immediate as her drawings, her lines controlled but never restrained. —Susan Soodgrass