

Art in America

INTERNATIONAL ● REVIEW

APRIL 2012

EXHIBITION REVIEWS



Christina Ramberg: *Untitled (Torso Undressing)*, 1967, acrylic and felt-tip pen on masonite, 6 inches square; at David Nolan.

CHRISTINA RAMBERG DAVID NOLAN

Like many artists associated with the Chicago Imagists, Christina Ramberg favored a deceptively modest scale, whether in paintings or in works on paper. The drawings shown here, most from early in her career (she was born in Kentucky in 1946 and died in 1995 in Chicago), are small, and the draftsmanship does not call attention to itself. But their intelligence and humor are formidable.

Dating from 1967 to 1974, the drawings are generally executed in felt-tip or ball-point pen, sometimes lightly augmented with colored pencil. Most feature half a dozen or more diminutive figures. They evoke person-shaped semaphores, glyphs in a language of corporal discipline and its variously comic failures. Several drawings look a little like pages from instruction manuals—some for lifesaving, although the victim seems generally to be rescuing herself, others for American Sign Language, as demonstrated by languidly curving fingers with pointy painted nails.

Subjects include women's torsos, hands and heads seen from the back. Underwear and hairdos are important; faces are never shown. Often one head sports two hairstyles at war with each other. Likewise

bellicose, girdles and bras recall a time when undergarments were all sleek curves and weaponized cones, although Ramberg also depicts lingerie that doubles as bandages, and there are several variations on blindfolds. The combat mode extends to a few examples of killer heels. But bodies in Ramberg's drawings reliably give all these constraints the slip: bits of flesh and hair escape, bulging out, springing up. Women twist around, squirming out of their bondage. It's not easy; they get stuck, and, in the next rendering, try again.

In contrast to the casual-seeming works on paper (which included a few intaglio prints), the paintings are finished to a degree that could be called fetishized. *Corset/Urns* (1970), an acrylic on eight small Masonite panels, comprises a sequence of forms that cover the spectrum from explicitly corsetlike to decidedly urn-ish, with much in between. Inky black with spiky pink highlights, they are prim and sexily sinister—a very funny combination. An untitled series of 6-inch-square acrylic paintings shows an androgynous figure struggling out of a nondescript garment that resembles by turns a pajama top, a sweater and a straightjacket.

In the latter series, the cartoonish outlines—drawn in felt-tip pen—and the figures' odd, not-quite-erotic predicaments

suggest a connection to John Wesley. The artist and illustrator Richard Lindner (a corset-maker's son, whose commercial Pop images circulated widely in the 1960s) also seems pertinent to Ramberg's work. Nearer at hand is the Chicago cohort that included Jim Nutt, Gladys Nilsson and Roger Brown. Yet Ramberg's draftsmanship—deft, dark and reticent—seems sui generis. The last solo show of her work was more than 10 years ago; there have been hardly more than half a dozen in all. It would be wonderful to see more.

—Nancy Princenthal