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Mel Ramos, Painter of Female Nudes and Comic Heroes, Dies at 83

By [Neil Genzlinger](#)

Oct. 31, 2018

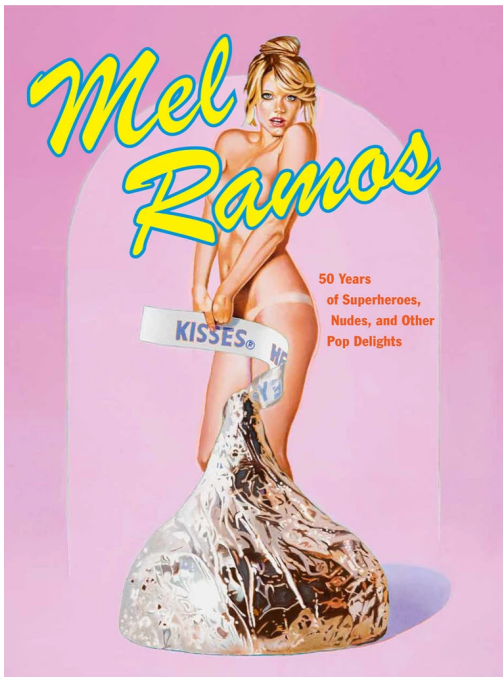
Mel Ramos, whose many paintings featuring realistically depicted nude or underdressed women often left critics divided over whether they were clever Pop Art or something more akin to smut, died on Oct. 14 in Oakland, Calif. He was 83.

The cause was heart failure, his daughter, Rochelle Leininger, said.

Mr. Ramos had other areas of artistic interest — he did a number of paintings of superheroes, for instance — but it was his works with female nudes that drew the most attention, and ire. There was “Miss Grapefruit Festival” (1964), with a nude woman sitting in a sea of grapefruits, the word “Sunkist” behind her. There was “Monterey Jackie” (1965), with a nude woman atop a block of cheese. He painted naked women on candy boxes and inside glassware; one embraced a cigar, another a ketchup bottle.

That seemed to put him in the territory of other Pop Artists of the period. But his nudes were realistic and sexual, and as second-wave feminism asserted itself late in the 1960s, he found himself under attack, accused of exploiting women and playing to a prurient male perspective.

Some critics were scathing. One was John Canaday of The New York Times, who reviewed a 1971 exhibition, at the art dealer French & Company, of paintings depicting women astride various animals. Mr. Ramos, he wrote, “has cranked out the tackiest, the cheapest, the tawdriest, and at once the most pretentious set of paintings that I can remember having seen in a respectable gallery.”



The catalog for Mr. Ramos's retrospective at the Crocker Art Museum in Sacramento, Calif., in 2012.
via Modernism Inc., San Francisco

Time, though, can change how a particular type of art resonates. Decades later, in 2005, another critic for The Times, Ken Johnson, took in a Ramos exhibition at the Zwirner & Wirth gallery.

“If someone had predicted 25 years ago that paintings by Mel Ramos would be found in seriously hip New York art galleries one day, they would have been laughed out of town,” Mr. Johnson wrote. “Yet here he is serving along with Francis Picabia as one of the godfathers of an enduring trend that finds inspiration in popular erotica and pornography.”

Mr. Ramos understood that shock value was relative.

“Some people thought of my work as provocative, semipornographic,” he said in a video made for the Crocker Art Museum in Sacramento in conjunction with a 2012 retrospective. “But then along comes people like Robert Mapplethorpe and makes my work look very timid.”

Melvin John Ramos was born on July 24, 1935, in Sacramento. His father, Clifton, was a commercial fisherman, and his mother, Agnes (Enos) Ramos, was a homemaker.



Mel Ramos, "Maidenform Molly," 2014. via Modernism Inc., San Francisco

He grew up in Sacramento and began paying attention to art as a child, his interest piqued by a friend of his father's who used to make whimsical drawings for him.

"I was just amazed at how easily these things came off the end of his pencil," he recalled in the video.

By high school he was drawing cartoons.

“My high school art teacher asked me if I would do posters for the football games, baseball games, basketball games,” he said. The lure was that he would be allowed to skip some class projects. “And so right away,” he recalled, “I realized that there were perks in being an artist.”

In 1954 he enrolled at Sacramento Junior College, where he studied under Wayne Thiebaud. He received a bachelor’s degree at Sacramento State College in 1957 and a master’s degree there the next year.

Mel Ramos, "Superman," 2006. via Modernism Inc., San Francisco

He started out experimenting with Abstract Expressionism but eventually realized, as he later put it, that he was merely copying Willem de Kooning, and not particularly well.

"I decided to just go, 'The hell with it. I'm going to be an artist. I'll paint whatever the hell I want,' " he told Sactown magazine in 2012. That was in the early 1960s, and at first his new direction meant painting Batman, Superman and other superheroes.

"After the comic-book heroes came the heroines, who were really sexy in those days," Mr. Ramos said. And after the heroines came the nudes.

Mr. Ramos was working the same territory as people like Andy Warhol — he even painted a nude atop a Campbell's Soup can — reflecting and satirizing images from consumer marketing and Playboy enterprises and other sources that were bombarding the culture in the 1960s.

In 1955 he married Leta Alice Helmers, and early in his career she was often his model. He had an unconventional way of working, however, often taking the head from one source and the body from another, depending on the look he was trying to achieve.

By the turn of the century he would assemble these composites on a computer, Photoshopping a head onto a body onto a box of Red Hots and then painting from that image. Whichever the century and whatever the method, though, he had one constant.

"I always do the face first," he explained in a 2011 interview with the website The Talks. "If that doesn't work, then nothing works."

Sometimes he would borrow famous faces; when a naked woman he painted in a hot dog bun looked a lot like the model Claudia Schiffer, it brought a threat of legal action, and also a change in his willingness to admit to appropriating images.

"I've stopped doing that," he told The Daily Beast in 2015. "If anybody asks me now if that is So-and-So, I say, 'It looks like her but I don't think it is!'"

Mr. Ramos's work would sometimes evoke classics. His nudes emerging from candy-bar wrappers suggested Botticelli's "The Birth of Venus." He made a series of prints inspired by the nudes of Modigliani and others.

From 1966 until his retirement in 1997, Mr. Ramos taught at California State University, Hayward. He had also been an artist in residence at Syracuse University and the University of Wisconsin. The dozens of museums with his paintings in their collections include the Whitney Museum of American Art and the Museum of Modern Art in New York.

In addition to his daughter, Mr. Ramos, who lived in Oakland, is survived by his wife; a son, Skot; four grandchildren; and a great-granddaughter. Another son, Bradley, died in 2010.

In the Sactown interview, Mr. Ramos explained the method behind his sometimes jarring imagery.

"I've always considered myself an unreconstructed surrealist," he said. "And my whole career has been based on a strategy that uses a lot of tenets of surrealism — incongruous relationships, for example."

But in another interview about the same time, he said he had largely stopped talking about what he was trying to achieve with his art.

"I don't explain my work," he said. "Either you get it or you don't."

A version of this article appears in print on Oct. 31, 2018, on Page B14 of the New York edition with the headline: Mel Ramos, 83, Painter Whose Female Nudes Attracted Many an Eye and Ire