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Charles Ritchie  
Reflections  
By John A. Parks

For nearly 30 years Charles Ritchie has created art that concentrates exclusively on his suburban home and its surrounds. Working at his front window he faces a view of the most mundane variety: trees, streetlights, and a few nondescript houses. Turning to the interior, he is confronted by the usual accouterments of middle-class life: sofas, chairs, tables, ornaments, and lamps. On his walls he sees a few treasured reproductions and an old star map he purchased years ago from a school supplier.

From this commonplace material Ritchie has rendered up a world of extraordinary richness. Working within an extended series of handmade sketchbooks and modestly scaled drawings, he investigates the mysteries of twilight and reflection, the strange correspondences that occur between ordinary household objects, and his own relationship to both his physical and mental world. He has delved deeply into the romance of light and shadow, involved himself in the power of suggestion, and played games with the way the night can both conceal objects and reveal them in new and sometimes unnerving ways.

Ritchie's finished drawings, although meticulous, are far from photorealistic renderings. He carefully selects details and forms that will contribute to the overall feel of the particular work. Other information is suppressed, and the viewer is often aware that erasures have taken place, that things have been rethought, moved, or redrawn. The images also incorporate writings in a tiny, barely legible hand, which in fact are descriptions of the artist's dreams. A work by Ritchie is a meditation that can take years to complete as he sits at his window with all the patience and restraint of a scientist conducting a long and intricate experiment. Unmoved by the lure of the noisome world beyond, he watches and records as the slow accretion of data builds into a vision of great subtlety, quietude, and depth.

"Although we moved into my home in 1985, I've been working with my surroundings as a subject for as long as I can remember," Ritchie says. "Drawing allows the understanding of a subject or field of vision that can be acquired no other way. Whenever I draw something, I uncover essentials unnoticed when the drawing began. In addition, when I draw the same subject repeatedly, my memories of the subject engage me, as do my imaginings about the subject's future states. Through drawing, I seek to record essences as they shift over time."

Sometimes this shift can be very real, as is the case with an oak tree across the street that was a sapling when the artist moved in and is now very large. "When I see that tree, I envision it through growth stages and seasons," Ritchie says. "I see all my subjects this way. This experience has an emotional resonance, as well as physical effect on my drawing. These states and alterations permeate my work. It seems to me that the best way to search for hidden truths about the world is to map my way through my territory. I invest years in front of my subjects in attempt to dig deep, reinterpreting my terrain to the best of my abilities."

Ritchie's early work was mostly black and white, but he now deploys a highly selective color palette in a way that contributes greatly to the atmosphere and feeling of each piece. "My drawings are based

around underwashes of yellow, red, and blue,” he says. “I layer darks over these primaries to subtly affect the color of the composition. If you look closely at J.M.W. Turner’s paintings, they are usually broken into sections of the three primary colors; that’s why his color seems so brilliant. My method evolved as a variation on Turner’s, but of course, I’m primarily creating night images, so my color is essentially nuanced shadow. During my early years, I commenced with lamp black watercolor, but as I matured the black began to feel like a limitation, and I’ve expanded into color. Now, I avoid black, working instead with mixtures of warm and cool in the form of two base watercolors: raw umber violet, which is a warm reddish-dark, and indigo, which is a cool near-black. My overwashes flex between these warm and cool poles, infused with touches of other colors.

The artist’s sketchbooks are fundamental to his practice. In them he roughs in compositions, plays with ideas, and records dreams. Occasionally we find in the sketchbooks an elaborate study of a painting by a master Ritchie admires, perhaps Caspar David Friedrich, Millet, or Hopper. The work in these pages is clearly private, but the artist chooses to exhibit it. “My sketchbook is open to anyone who wants to look at it,” he says. “I am engaged in the creative process, enjoy reflecting on my activities, and happy to share the results with others—although my books didn’t start as a something for exhibition. They began as a mechanism for questioning and remain so: What is the significance of this landscape, this room I inhabit? How can I understand the transformations that are all around me? How can I become more aware of them? Can I confront these subjects in a significant way by drawing them? What do my dreams mean? What can they be saying about my life? The title of Gauguin’s painting *Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?* is never far from my thoughts.”

Ritchie’s sketchbooks have naturally evolved over the years. “They began rather roughly,” says the artist. “I would write down my activities and sketch anything for practice. It was a regimen that I engaged in daily as a means of improving my skills. I quickly tired of writing events down and eventually discovered dreams, a subject that seemed to have more potential for inquiry. At the same time my sketchbook images developed into serial adventures around a limited group of subjects. The best reward is that 137 and counting journals represent an unbroken line of thought from 1977 to the present. I find their inclusiveness and orderliness a very powerful tool.”

For Ritchie the genesis of an individual work begins with a single moment of inspiration. “I’m always sifting my visual environment,” he says, “and occasionally, a flash of insight into one of my subjects hits. A certain light presents itself or some variation in a motif that I feel compelled to further investigate. I often make a sketch in my journal, noting the most important elements, usually outlining in graphite and then articulating in watercolor. I might meditate on this study for a while or make more studies in my book. I’m working on lots of ideas at any one time, so you won’t necessarily find related studies juxtaposed but rather spread out over multiple pages or even across several books.”

Once an idea has matured enough to be taken on, Ritchie begins work on a single sheet of paper by drawing the composition in pencil. “Very often, after the composition is laid out, I realize that it is incrementally larger or smaller than it should be,” he says. “In this case I often photocopy the preliminary graphite drawing, shifting it some percentage up or down, and then trace it onto another sheet of paper over a light box, essentially beginning again.” Once Ritchie is satisfied that he has found the appropriate scale and proportion for his image he tears the paper to size and begins work.

The artist’s painting process simply involves layering watercolor washes and sometimes lifting them out, until the work is done. “In my studio I have stacks of mounted unfinished drawings

in this state,” he says, “and I rotate through groups of them, rarely working on the same drawing more than a day or two in a row. My strategy is to keep myself fresh, minimizing time for perceived roadblocks to materialize.” Ritchie keeps a select group of works in progress pinned to a bulletin board. “I’m looking at them out of the corner of my eye as I move around my home studio,” he says, “and I leave it up to my intuition as to when I pick them up and work on them. It can take months or years to complete a work.”

Ritchie is a meticulous craftsman who has given considerable thought to the materials he employs. “I’ve used Fabriano 140-lb hot-pressed watercolor paper for many years,” he says. “I like how the watercolor dries quickly on this paper and the way I can draw and erase on its smooth surface. I’ve learned to predict its states and how wet or dry it needs to be before I can move to the next wash. Also, Fabriano is very sturdy and I have learned to scrub away color by saturating areas with pools of water and then releasing the pigment with acrylic bristle brushes. It takes finesse not to destroy the paper, but I’ve made it work with the Fabriano.”

For his journals, Ritchie uses Arches 90-lb hot pressed paper, a weight that allows him to fold the paper easily into pages. “The sizing of the Arches is wonderful—it holds the color up to the surface and does not allow the pigments to sink in and become lighter and dull,” he says. “My watercolors are usually Daniel Smith, and I use a limited palette of about 12 colors that mix to cover the spectrum. Virtually all are transparent colors, as opposed to semi-transparent; I find integrating the white of the paper gives the greatest possible luminosity. Further, I always reserve areas of the white paper for highlights, refraining from using additive whites to paint bright areas.” For brushes the artist uses kolinsky sables made by Daniel Smith or Utrecht. The handwriting is done with a Rapidograph drafting pen with a mix of black and brown ink diluted with distilled water.

Like all artists Ritchie has a pantheon of forebears whose work continues to inspire him. “To me, Michelangelo’s drawings are the pinnacle,” he says. “He carves away at the page like the sculptor he is, uncovering the most luminous, open, and breathing form. Eugène Delacroix’s North African journals remind me to cultivate spontaneity and to seek out subjects that electrify me. Giorgio Morandi’s persistence of vision and commitment to his subject are inspirational. Edward Hopper infuses the most mundane subjects with his distinctive character.” Ritchie also cites Charles Burchfield, Fairfield Porter, Brice Marden, and Richard Diebenkorn as influences.

As for the future, Ritchie has more plans afoot than the quietness of his practice might suggest. “In the immediate future, I’ll return to printmaking,” he says. “I’m taking mezzotint plates to Ireland this spring as part of a Ballinglen Arts Foundation fellowship. When I return I will collaborate with my printer and publisher, James Stroud, of Center Street Studio, on a series of prints. I expect this Ireland journey will be a real outward-bound experience as I will be leaving my window and my subjects to work in completely unknown terrain. I’m sure the voyage will return me with fresh eyes to my home landscape. As far as other expectations go, I will continue to try various media. I’m crazy about gouache but haven’t discovered how to use it yet. Other than that I have no plans. I want to let the work take me.”

#### About the Artist

Charles Ritchie received a B.F.A. from the University of Georgia, in Athens, and an M.F.A. from Carnegie Mellon University, in Pittsburgh. His artwork can be found in the collections of the Baltimore Museum of Art, Harvard Art Museums, and the Philadelphia Museum of Art, among many others. He has exhibited his work across the country, with recent venues including BravinLee programs in New York City and Gallery Joe, in Philadelphia. For more information, visit <http://www.charlesritchie.com/>.