

Karen Holzberg Charles Ritchie

Numark Gallery
Washington, DC

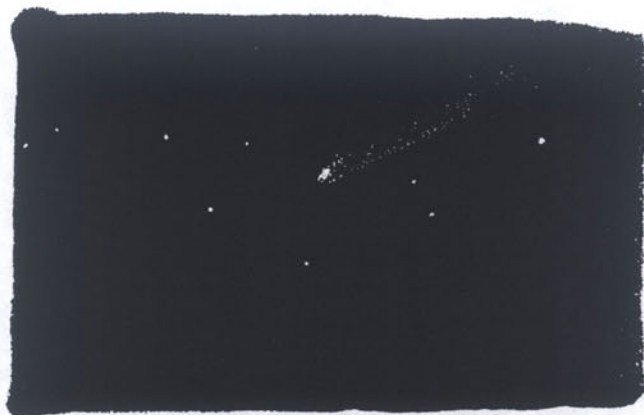
Review by Kurt Godwin

The Numark Gallery's recent exhibition was an unusually fine pairing of photographs by Karen Holzberg and the prints of Charles Ritchie. Through different media both artists convey empathetic worlds of subtle intrigue and private reverie.

According to Holzberg, the title of her portrait series, *Ideal Heads*, is in reference to the standards of beauty used during the Renaissance. Most of the work has a 26" x 26" format that presents the portrait heads on a life size scale. This can produce a fleeting yet unsettling sensation of an actual presence. Combining oil and varnish on bleach toned silver gelatin prints creates shifting surface effects. One unusual effect to find in photography appears as heavily worked charcoal and ink drawings. Various tones of blacks, browns, and gun-metal gray flow with sepia and off-whites into a dripping, gauzy atmosphere. This undulating haze permeates the figures like some other worldly X-ray. Caught in timeless solitude each facial expression is ambiguous. A head flung back, eyes shut with mouth agape could be in a state of ecstasy or angst. Another Renaissance connection can be made in relating this dark luminosity she achieves with the chiaroscuro methods of Caravaggio. The vaporous, dream-like quality combines with the elusive, emotional state to form a universal identity as opposed

to a specific personality. There is a suspicion that lurking beneath this essentially benign surface is a darker epic of Wagnerian proportions. Karen Holzberg's photographs work on several levels both formally and psychologically. One level is the viewer's total immersion into a strangely familiar world. The custom made, graphite treated frames function elegantly as a gateway for entry.

Charles Ritchie's dark monoprints and mezzotints offer another sort of quiet intrigue. Their small scale (2" x 3" approximately) belies the considerable insight and power they contain. The simple elements of this work converge into visual haikus. Looking at these minuscule landscapes and interiors is like peering into a stranger's memory where some details are clear and others remain a mystery. One of several prints set in the night shows a comet blazing bravely in space. The print's dimension effectively emphasizes the comet's scale as observed from earth with the naked eye. In other night-scapes, doorways, front stoops and buildings become discernible only when the eye adjusts to the darkness. The effect of these images is a microcosm with the qualities of night. In a triptych, three views of a room with a flower vase near a window grow progressively darker as the growing shadows indicate the passage of time. Ritchie's tiny scenarios are subtle, zen-like equations that reward the viewer with gentle wisdom for contemplation.



Comet (from the portfolio *Five Days/Five Nights*), 1996, spitbite aquatint, drypoint, image 3 3/8 x 5 3/8 in.