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Visual Arts > Art

Night Moves

Charles Ritchie Finds Glimmers of Meaning in the Darkness of Suburbia

Suburban Journals: The Sketchbooks, Drawings, and Prints of Charles Ritchie

At the UMBC Albin O. Kuhn Library Gallery through March 26

By Bret McCabe



Charles Ritchie isn't afraid of the dark. In the works on paper gathered for *Suburban Journals* the Silver Spring-based artist explores the shadowy hours as if the brightness of day concealed more than it revealed, believing that everyday objects disclose their true nature under the cover of night's blanket. And he does it with the diligent patience of a laboratory scientist, returning to the same scenes, objects, and vantage points since starting his suburban sketches in 1983, documenting less the passage of time than movements of light. And seen as a body of work, the imagery miraculously doesn't feel like a monotonous report but a steadfast investigation of expressive photorealistic verisimilitude.

An obsessive and meticulous work ethic is the show's first impression. The 46 works on paper are culled from over 22 years, including 48 of Ritchie's sketchbooks housed in glass cases. Most of the works themselves are snapshot-sized and highly detailed, and the sketchbooks are filled with even smaller studies and notes. The works themselves speak to such meticulousness: Three different versions of "Draped Chair"—a covered chair with a water pitcher on a side table, backlit by a window—date from 1987, 1997, and 2004. A wall-mounted astronomical chart appears in another series of interior still lifes over the years, while another portfolio series is taxonomically called "Five Days/Five Nights."

It's an attention to detail that is also carried through in Ritchie's choice of materials and media. Everything here is in some way a mixed-media print, from his graphite and paper sketchbooks to mezzotints and monotype prints to larger works such as "Night With Terraces," a work in conté crayon, water crayon, watercolor, graphite, and collage on Fabriano paper. These are process-heavy works, and documenting everything involved matters when Ritchie's eye records it.

That painstaking focus is what invites you past the Peter Greenaway-style cataloging and into Ritchie's world in shades of black. Ritchie is a master technician, oftentimes achieving his Vermeer-esque scenes with barely perceptible manipulations of media. In the 1987 version of "Draped Chair," he finds the scene in a splash of watercolor filled in with ink and graphite. Get close enough, and the chair and window blur into a map of illustrative marks and the watercolor wash surfaces as an inchoate sea of mottled gray. In a 1996 spitbite aquatint from the "Five Days/Five Nights" portfolio, "Sky," a dark black, square fingerprint-like smudge becomes a room at night as Ritchie turns darker areas into doorways. Both pieces are windows into his view of the natural in the abstract and, more importantly, they locate the familiar in the dark of true blacks with batlike radar.

It's this nocturnal undertow that makes the imagery in *Suburban Journals* interesting in ways not purely for the singular enterprise that produced it. If Ritchie's subject matter were any more banal, this work would feel annoyingly quaint: Rows of houses at night, still lifes from a perfectly ordinary suburban home, architectural views of rooms but a glossy finish away from a Pottery Barn catalog. And yet they hold the mind after the eye has adjusted to their dimly lit scenes.

More curious is what Ritchie's works don't do. Nocturnal suburbia is a subject tailor made for the narcotized alienation found in the photographs of Gregory Crewdson or Nic Nicosia or even the early-1980s paintings of Eric Fischl. And, though in idea Ritchie's unpopulated suburban dispatches tread close to a Cheever-esque psychological dyspepsia, he's not out to find the unsettling truth lurking beneath the picture-perfect facade of the all-American middle class. Ritchie's sincerity is a return to classic observation, exploring the reassuring numbness of the safe suburban night.

And that soothing calm is Ritchie's guiding rudder: He finds the tenderly human in scenes that are completely absent of human presence. His empty rooms, empty chairs, and neighborhood nestles of houses with only one porch light lit could feel eerily Dawn of the Dead when seen en masse, such as in this exhibition. The lone person that sometimes appears is Ritchie himself, seen in window reflection in a series of self-portraits. Even then he is more spectral outline than inhabiting presence, the chairs and table and light fixtures more attached to the physical world than the artist's shadow. Yet the works never impart such a sense of unease; like going home on your own terms, Ritchie's artworks are highly skilled placations of the familiar, a testament to the conservative, simple pleasures of paying close attention.