

SUNDAY, JUNE 20, 1993**Daily Press****MARK ST. JOHN ERICKSON**

At a Glance

Ordinary view assumes epic proportions

Charles Ritchie begins his working day by walking around the rooms of his suburban Maryland house.

He stops and looks intently at such things as the chairs, the potted plants, the tomatoes perched on the kitchen window ledge. Next, he peers through the windows at his yard and the houses across the street.

Then, and only then, after hours of painstaking study, does he start to draw and paint.

You don't often go to art exhibits expecting to find subjects like this — things you may have seen hundreds, perhaps even thousands of times before in your own home. Yet, in Ritchie's hands, this universe of modest household objects and spaces takes on a presence few of us have bothered to notice.

Most of the more than 50 images on display at the Charles H. Taylor Arts Center feel wonderfully familiar at first, as if we had encountered them in the past and forgotten just how delightful they were.

■ "The Interior Landscape," featuring watercolor drawings by Charles Ritchie, runs through June 27 at the Charles H. Taylor Arts Center, 4205 Victoria Blvd., Hampton. Also on view are "Twenty-Seven Landscapes," by Barry Spann; silkscreen prints by Josef Albers; and Dimension III Juried Exhibition. Hours are 10 a.m.-6 p.m. Tuesday-Saturday and 1-5 p.m. Sunday. Free. Call 722-ARTS.

Then they begin to seem bigger, more important and more interesting than that, as if Ritchie had taken us on an expedition to look at things we'd never imagined, much less seen, before.

Created with watercolor, pencil, pen and ink, Ritchie's pictures employ a half-dozen different tactics to captivate their viewers.

Most are determinedly small in scale, with a few measuring less than 10 square inches in size. So just getting a good look at what's going on means getting in close — a move that mimics Ritchie's own obsession for minute observation.

His mostly black-and-white paintings also are made to order for describing the effects of light, shadows and reflections. Some images seem spell-bindingly photographic, in fact, until the artist subverts his meticulously rendered scenes — and prompts a double-take — with a loosely handled watercolor wash.

Eccentric edges — with the paper torn roughly and not always straight — add to the mystery of the paintings. So does the occasional triptych, which Ritchie uses to

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"Case," watercolor, graphite, pen and ink, by Charles Ritchie.

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break his realist pictures down into not-quite matching trios of fragments.

This struggle between the familiar and the unknown, the real and the imagined, lies at the heart of the artist's work. Even his larger pieces pull your nose to the glass as you look, look and then look again to make sure you know what you're looking at.

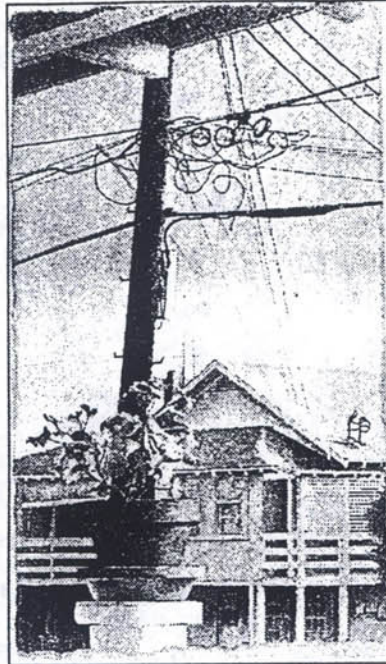
In "Tilted Chair," for example, the subject is familiar and simple — until you give it a second glance. Bathed in a warm light from a nearby window, the chair almost seems to hover in space. The neighboring house feels too close, moreover, as if it had crossed the street to press up against the window panes.

Such competing impulses show up again in the nighttime glare of "Self-Portrait in Studio Window." Here, the potted plants on the ledge and the frame of the double-hung window are tightly rendered. But the likenesses of Ritchie and the surrounding room shimmer and break apart in the reflections from 12 different squares of glass.

What lies beyond those inky gateways, meanwhile, remains even more obscure.

In other paintings, such tightly framed views provide the foundation for an impressive series of landscape scenes. Two small cottages, in particular, demonstrate a remarkable chameleonlike quality as the artist records their likenesses at Christmastime, on a foggy winter night and in the bright light of high noon.

The same two houses pop up again in "Interior/Exterior," a revealing tour de force that combines elements from several dif-



In "Geranium," Charles Ritchie depicts a potted plant with power lines.

ferent works. The piece incorporates the view from Ritchie's front picture window with a detailed reflection of his home's interior.

What results is a kind of spiritual self-portrait that fuses the artist with the place where he lives. Look for his shadowy image in the middle of the picture, sandwiched between his household visions and the glare of a chandelier.