

Sleepwalking in the Suburbs

An artist awakens after years of practice looking.

by Paulette Roberts-Pullen

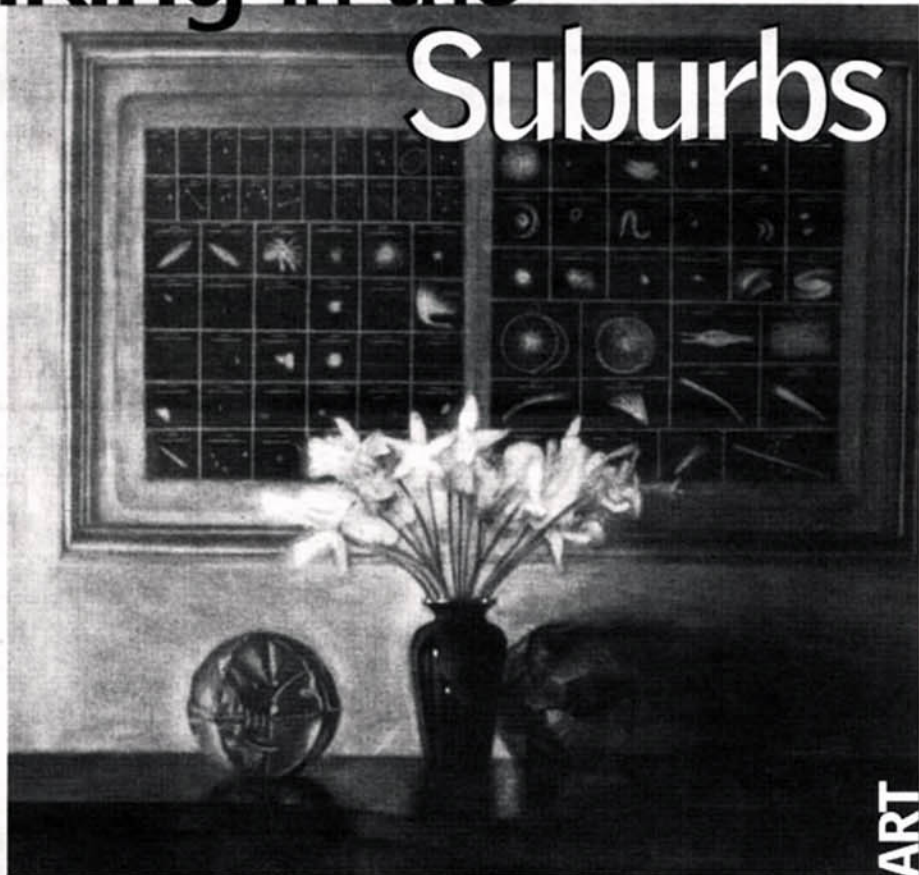
Every day for more than 25 years, artist Charles Ritchie has carried pocket-size sketchbooks. He scribbles in them quickly, often in the dark. Dozens of these sketchbooks have accumulated, each page filled with the artist's illegible but graceful handwriting and small images deftly recorded in pencil or ink. Just as a teenager's diary contains secret desires, Ritchie's journals are repositories for a soul bubbling over.

"Suburban Journals: The Sketchbooks, Drawings, and Prints of Charles Ritchie," currently at University of Richmond's Marsh Gallery, proves that the relationship between this artist, his sketchbooks and the pieces born from them are entirely co-dependent. It showcases many of the drawings that initiated prolonged involvement with certain subjects.

Ritchie's small (often no larger than a postcard) paintings and prints developed from his journals are detailed to a mysterious degree, with little trace of the artist's hand. But the artist clearly does not intend to work as a photo realist. As he states, the pictures only begin with a scene. They quickly move into something deeper, more complex.

Ritchie's subjects, usually observations of his domestic environment in suburban Maryland, provide a surprisingly dense source of lyrical imagery. Working in his studio before sunrise (he's a full-time curatorial staff member at the National Gallery of Art), he observes the visual phenomena during morning's darkness and the new day's unveiling. Having discovered a sort of witching hour when familiar objects seem to possess a life of their own, the artist feeds on the strangeness of light and how it deceives our understanding of the visual world.

Years of observation have given Ritchie the ability to capture the illusion of time via light. His convincing por-



Charles Ritchie's works on display at the Marsh Art Gallery feature dreamy, shaded images like "Daffodils with Astronomical Chart" (above) and "Rocking Chair" (left).

trayal of the darkness and shadow that falls on his objects, quivering across his pages as if the light source is moving, serves him formally and conceptually. By describing so much of what is before our eyes and in our memories, Ritchie reminds us that pause is more than a button on our remote.

The inclusion of Ritchie's journals in this show not only provides an intimate look at the artist's daily intake of his environment and an understanding of where his images begin. The journals also demonstrate how maturity and

experience cause vision to shift and images to adapt. The exhibition begins with Ritchie's disciplined, highly detailed rendering "Rocking Chair," made in 1983, but in later images looser and simpler pictures emerge.

The allure of "Suburban Journals" isn't so much Ritchie's mastery of his media, though it certainly acts as a big hook. His scrupulous attention to detail has more to do with attention than detail, as in "Attention! Wake Up!" The big draw of "Suburban Journals" is that it is a very appealing alarm clock. **S**

