



CHARLES RITCHIE

RECENT WORK

JANUARY 7 - FEBRUARY 7 1998

RECEPTION WITH THE ARTIST
FRIDAY JANUARY 9 6-8 PM

NUMARK GALLERY

406 7TH STREET NW WASHINGTON DC 20004 202.628.3810

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

Arts

Galleries

By Ferdinand Protzman
Special to The Washington Post

Holzberg and Ritchie at Numark

Numark Gallery currently has a strong exhibition featuring work by two Washington-based artists: Karen Holzberg and Charles Ritchie. It is the first solo show in a commercial gallery for both artists.

Inspired by her fascination with Renaissance art, Holzberg has created a group of bleached and toned photographs titled "Ideal Heads." The photographs, mounted on painted Masonite, show the balding head of a pale young man in a variety of poses that could have been taken from a Caravaggio painting. Holzberg uses Renaissance-style chiaroscuro, the interplay of light and shadow, to heighten the emotional effect of her photos. She bleaches to reinforce areas where light falls and uses tint and gesso to create deep, shadowy backgrounds. A few of her images seem trite, but most have an ethereal presence and grainy texture, like the painted image of some long-suffering saint fading into the damp wall of a Venetian church.

Ritchie is assistant curator in the National Gallery of Art's department of prints and drawings and a very talented printmaker whose meticulously crafted works on paper have been seen in numerous group shows in the United States and Europe. He was given a retrospective exhibition in 1996 at the Butler Institute of American Art in Youngstown, Ohio.

His subject matter is usually to be found in and around his home in Kensington. While Ritchie's prints are small gems, his two mixed-media paintings are subtly radiant jewels. "Northern Sky," which shows the heavens glittering above a quiet suburban neighborhood, is a paean to the night sky and the depth of the universe.

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 otherworldly 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.

Articulate #27 (March-April 1998) pp.9-10