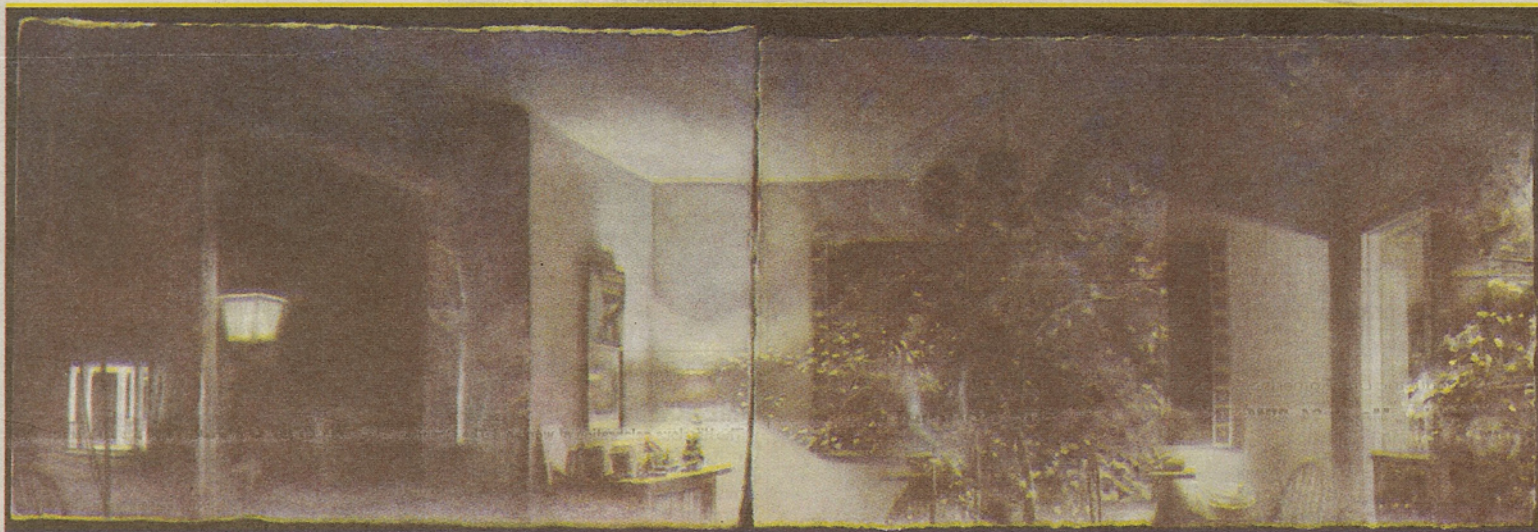


Art

Friday, March 10, 2006

Nicole Phungrasamee Fein and Charles Ritchie at Gallery Joe.

Two fine painters, one show



Charles Ritchie's "Self-Portrait With Night" is one of his works on display at Gallery Joe on Arch Street through March 25.

By Edith Newhall
FOR THE INQUIRER

A two-person show in which both artists shine shouldn't be a rare occurrence. But it too often is, which makes the current Gallery Joe exhibition pairing the works of Nicole Phungrasamee Fein and Charles Ritchie an unexpected treat.

Seeing Fein's and Ritchie's small but otherwise entirely unrelated watercolor pieces was a little like going to an ice-cream shop on a hot July day and trying to choose between such distinctive and likely competing flavors as peppermint stick and mango. In this particular case — art being ice cream — choice was not an option. I'd have ordered a scoop of each on one cone.

Fein's watercolor paintings do, in fact, have something in common with ice cream. Her colors, like De Kooning's or those of the Washington Color School painter Gene Davis, are coffee, lemon, peach, strawberry, pistachio, and boysenberry, among others. And her arrangements of those hues into stripe paintings — she also paints grid patterns — suggest miniature horizontal versions of Davis' vertical stripe paintings. That other horizontal stripe painter, Agnes Martin, comes to mind, too.

Both are superficial resemblances, though. Fein's practice of using the same pool of water to mix her paints — making each of her colors unrepeatable and unique — makes this work unpre-

dictable and very much her own.

Ritchie's watercolors of nocturnal scenes in and around his Maryland home are spellbinding, not least because they were all painted at the same table in the same room of his house, and are all composed of tones of black and white, yet manage to be strikingly different from one another.

For example, there are paintings from two separate suites of self-portraits here, each individual work depicting Ritchie's self-portrait as reflected in a window, but some of these portraits are as easy to recognize as others are difficult. I found myself lingering in front of several of his self-portrait paintings waiting for the image of his face to coalesce, which it eventually did, but never in the

way I'd anticipated it would.

Ritchie's paintings of straight and reflected images of the interior and exterior of his house often seem like composites of views, which I suppose, in effect, they are. The newest body of work in his show, a series called "Pages," juxtaposes Ritchie's tiny, almost indecipherable writing describing his experiences and dreams with images of his table at the window. These minute intimate pieces, though less photographic-looking than his other work, are reminiscent of trompe l'oeil painting.

Gallery Joe, 302 Arch St., noon to 5:30 p.m. Wednesdays through Saturdays. Through March 25. 215-592-7752 or www.galleryjoe.com.