



FROM THE INSIDE LOOKING OUT CHARLES RITCHIE

Dreams have been a key component of my journey.

Charles Ritchie



(Detail) *Self-Portrait with Night: Side Panels I*, 2006-2008, watercolor and graphite on Fabriano paper
(Cover) *Folded Self-Portrait with Night I*, 2006-2008, watercolor and graphite on Fabriano paper, 5¾ x 17¼"

FROM THE INSIDE LOOKING OUT:
THE JOURNALS, DRAWINGS AND PRINTS OF CHARLES RITCHIE

The Gregg Museum of Art & Design, North Carolina State University, Raleigh, NC

August 21 - October 8, 2008

Gallery Joe, Philadelphia, PA November 1 - December 20, 2008

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

For every exhibition that opens there are a number of people who come together to make this happen. The genesis for this show came in 2005 when Margaret Parsons, Head, Department of Film, National Gallery of Art was guest curating an exhibition at the Gregg. She suggested I look into the work of Charles Ritchie and I thank her for bringing this gifted artist to my attention. Throughout the next several years Ritchie and I kept in touch as I planned this exhibition. The entire Ritchie family became part of the process and my gratitude goes out to Charles, Jenny and Sam. Another partner in this process was Becky Kerlin, Director, Gallery Joe, Philadelphia. This exhibition will travel in part to Gallery Joe after it closes in Raleigh. Jessie Brinkley designed the catalogue that will serve as a wonderful document long after this exhibition is over. The team at the Gregg, as always, pulled together to make this project successful. A final thanks goes to the students of NC State. They are the ones that make all this possible.

Lynn Jones Ennis, Curator

JUST NOW

*Just now, if I look back down
the cool street of the past, I can
see streetlamps, one for each year,
lighting small circles of time
into which someone will step
if I squint, if I try hard enough—
circles smaller and smaller,
leading back to the one faint
point at the start, like a star.
So many of them are empty now,
those circles of roadside and grass.
In one, the moth of some
feeling still flutters, unspoken,
the cold darkness around it enormous.*

— Ted Kooser¹

CHARLES RITCHIE: STARING BACK

Charles Ritchie: Staring Back

A muted color photograph shows a young man perched on the back of a shiny Ford Mustang. With journal in hand and pencil at the ready, he stares back at the viewer with an intensity that is the unmistakable hallmark of any young, ambitious artist.

The artist is Charles Ritchie. The year is 1977.

On that summer day, Ritchie peered into the lens with a quiet, unflinching determination to establish himself as a professional artist. He was fresh out of undergraduate school and found himself working sixty hours a week in a dead-end graphic design job. The journal that was propped on his knee was not merely a sketchbook, but a lifeline that would keep him connected to his personal art. It was compact, portable, and most importantly, a compliant repository for the documentation of fleeting ideas, dreams, and observations.

Ritchie himself asserts that the beginning of his career as a serious artist may be traced back to his decision to maintain a daily journal. (He has filled approximately 130 volumes to date.) Hundreds upon hundreds of pages are covered with practically illegible handwritten notes (themselves an integral aesthetic element) and gestural studies executed in a variety of media. Subjects for these studies range from the general clutter on the worktables in his studio to the celestial points of light that loom over the darkened homes in his suburban neighborhood.

Each journal entry is a spark made with his own hand. They illuminate the thousands of disparate points along his personal and aesthetic journey. For him, the times, the places, and myriad sensations remain as lucid as the moment they were recorded. It is clear that he wants to remember not to forget.

The Constant Observer

Inspiration is for amateurs; the rest of us just show up and get to work.

– Chuck Close²

Charles Ritchie rises each day at four a.m. and works in his studio for several hours before commuting to the National Gallery in Washington, D.C., where he is a curator. The predawn hours in the Silver Spring, Maryland neighborhood that Ritchie calls home are quiet and still. He positions himself in front of a window in his studio and looks out. From this vantage point, porch lights and streetlamps form earthbound constellations, while the moon and stars draw faint outlines around tangles of tree limbs and slanting rooflines.

As he emerges from the fog of sleep, the nocturnal worlds of his conscious and subconscious mind are free to mingle on the pages of his journal. Here, there are no rules, just work.

Ritchie's dedicated and spontaneous approach to his journal is by no means an end in itself. It also provides the basis for all of his refined, small-scale works on paper (to use his term, "drawings"). For the most part, the drawings are rendered, as are many of his journal studies, in myriad tints of gray watercolor. The transparent quality of this free-flowing medium is conducive to capturing the hazy atmosphere of night. Graphite, pen and ink, and conté crayon may also be incorporated to sharpen details and provide concentrated areas of opacity. Conversely, areas of media may be scraped away with a razor or bits of white paper left untouched to convey the brightest points of light.

The drawings take shape over multiple sessions in his studio. They require an extraordinary amount of time and attention. Compositions are created through close consultations with his notes and sketches. Though his journals contain an abundance of information with regards to specific subjects, it remains imperative that he continues to "work from life" (i.e., maintain direct visual contact with the actual interior/ exterior scenes). To this end, it is not uncommon for some drawings to remain untouched for months or even years due to seasonal change and its effect on the natural surroundings and light quality. Ritchie often revisits unfinished drawings at the appropriate time of year when perhaps the blossoms reappear on the magnolias or the leaves have once again vanished from the oaks. This constant back and forth between the recollected and actual experience fills his world with an inherent tension and vibrancy.



Light Under Porch, 1981, pen and ink, graphite, and wash on Fabriano paper, 3¾ x 2¾"

(En)Counterpoints

The need to have things rational and organized and controlled is matched by an opposing need to have things open-ended . . . I release myself into the page and explore.

– Charles Ritchie³

The meticulous nature of Ritchie's investigations of light and dark in individual drawings is pushed even further into printmaking. For this, Ritchie is forced out of the solitude of his home studio and into collaboration with long-time friend and associate master printmaker, James Stroud of Center Street Studio in Milton, Massachusetts.

Since 1994, Stroud has aided Ritchie in the production of a number of limited edition prints. They employ a wide variety of printmaking processes, such as drypoint, etching, and/or aquatint. However, it is the mezzotint process that seems best suited for capturing the soft, luminous light quality that Ritchie strives to convey.

It was Stroud who introduced Ritchie to mezzotint – a reductive process whereby an image is produced by working from dark to light. Ritchie periodically initiates a new print project by selecting an image from a number of his finished drawings. Once an image is chosen, Ritchie may spend several months burnishing areas of a microscopically pitted copper plate to produce a delicate, grainy atmosphere filled with velvety blacks and radiant lights.

At various stages in the print's development, he ships the plate to Stroud for proofing. The proof print and plate are subsequently returned to Ritchie with notations for further development. This back and forth between the two studios continues until a satisfactory result for the edition is reached. This is yet another way in which Ritchie influences the creative process so it accommodates his schedule and work habits, thus infusing his practice with a variety of new and engaging challenges. Other

print processes are often explored when Ritchie visits Center Street Studio. Etching and aquatint, methods that require caustic acid to cut recessions in the plate to hold printing ink are done in the workshop, away from Ritchie's home.

Though the order of his daily life may be disciplined, Ritchie is determined to keep his artistic practice in a constant state of flux. Complacency invites predictability, resulting in dull and belabored images. He is conscious to keep many projects (journals, drawings, and prints) in progress at all times. The labor-intensity of his drawings and prints is a deliberate strategy that compels him to probe the depths of his material in relation to the depicted image. Furthermore, the spontaneity of his journal activity is a vehicle for exploring the more mysterious and elusive aspects of human existence. What does it mean to occupy a place? What is permanent/transient?

To say that Charles Ritchie has created a deeply personal style over the last thirty years is only part of the picture. By means of his resolute methodologies, he has developed a way of presenting to us a world that is so familiar, it seems unusual. His constant exploration of physical and psychological realms allows their junctures to remain ambiguous. And when the light is right, he may catch his reflection looking out into the darkness. But then again, he may also be looking in.

Brad Thomas, 2008

NOTES

1. The poem by Ted Kooser is from a collection entitled *Flying at Night: Poems 1965-1985* (pp. 93). Published by the University of Pittsburgh Press, Pittsburgh, PA © Ted Kooser, 1985. ISBN 0-8229-4258-5
2. There are number of variations on this quote. The author recorded this particular phrasing during an interview with artists Chuck Close and Robert Lazzarini in Close's studio on November 30, 2005.
3. Email from Charles Ritchie to the author on June 11, 2008.

Brad Thomas is an artist and the director and curator of the Van Every/Smith Galleries at Davidson College.

This essay was greatly informed by email exchanges with Charles Ritchie and through the online journal entries on his website www.charlesritchie.com



Daffodils and Star Map, 1988, watercolor and graphite on Fabriano paper, 4¾ x 3"

ON THE OUTSIDE LOOKING IN

For some time I have been observing the work of Charles Ritchie through the filter of the Internet. Ritchie's ever changing website invites you to be a part of his world where he posts new images and thoughts daily. He includes excerpts from his journals and scans of new drawings and prints. The online log includes musings on creative process, notes on observing, and his reflections on exhibitions such as Edward Hopper at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, DC.

In January 2008 I visited Ritchie in his home/studio which he shares with his wife Jenny and daughter Sam. It is a comfortable home that is warm and inviting. The dining room is the hub of the house and serves as the family gathering place. As I looked around I recognized objects that appear in his work. I caught a glimpse of several works in progress. Looking at one makes you want to see more. On one wall is a map of all the constellations. One of Ritchie's many influences is the dance in the night sky. His work is much like looking up and seeing all the stars and constellations. Nothing, however, prepared me for the many drawings and journals that were carefully catalogued and preserved. As someone who has steadily exhibited his work since the early 1990s there are some works widely known and others that play a lesser role. So some of Ritchie's work in this show is part of a visible canon while other works have waited for their turn to shine. This exhibition spans approximately three decades and includes work throughout those years.

The cosmos is where you are sitting

While Ritchie was growing up his family moved every two years. His father's work with a large corporation took young Ritchie to many different towns and states. As he grew older he yearned for a place to put roots down and stay put.

After receiving his undergraduate degree in graphic design he worked in the field long enough to know he had made a mistake. For someone with such creative energy the advertising work he was doing seemed scripted and he disliked the trendiness and ephemeral nature of the projects. He began exploring graduate school as a means of returning to painting settling on Carnegie Mellon in Pittsburgh, which serendipitously was his family's next move. At Carnegie Mellon, Ritchie found that he was working against a dominant movement toward conceptual, minimalist, and installation art. He was interested in figurative drawing and he chuckles as he states: "Lord knows how they saw me fitting in there". It's one of the few times in his career that he kept two journals going at the same time. His first journal (Book 1) begun about that time, was geared more towards writing and line drawing. The second journal (Book 2) was more exploratory drawing, as a means of jettisoning what he felt was a rigid format and his self-consciousness. In the latter he investigated a more fluid personal drawing style and allowed his writing to veer into the totally illegible (even to himself). By the time Book 3 was begun and the program



Three Candles, 1998, watercolor, graphite, and pen and ink on Fabriano paper, 4¼ x 3"

ended Ritchie had melded approaches to the two journals and has been using the chronological series of ever-evolving books as a springboard for his work.

As a summer job between the two years of graduate school he worked as a guard at the National Gallery of Art. Ritchie wasted no time with so much great art around him. He kept a folded sheet of paper in the palm of his hand, took notes and sketched. He also trained himself to follow his thoughts by developing a stream of consciousness style of writing. On many levels he was preparing for his future as an artist, journal keeper, and museum professional. After finishing graduate school in 1980 he returned to DC and began working in the publications department for the National Gallery in the sales shop devouring all the art history books that surrounded him. From there he moved into a job on their education staff. His responsibilities included answering questions at the information desk and to giving tours. These two duties were a perfect match for someone who loves to look at art and talk about it. Subsequently he became a research assistant who catalogued the works of art for the museum and today he serves as Associate Curator of Modern Prints and Drawings.

The wall around the window does not create two worlds

One of Ritchie's reasons for moving to Washington, DC was that long time friend Jenny Lyle was there. She was working for the National Gallery and today continues to serve as a museum specialist. As their relationship matured they married and bought a house. Today they enjoy a home with daughter Sam. He uses the dining room window as the main station for his artwork. The

proximity of the "studio" allows Ritchie to be around his family. He can cook dinner and be with the family while he's working on drawing. He and Sam, with whom he also plays guitar, can listen to a lot of music - from popular rock and folk to classical music and beyond. His energy seems boundless.

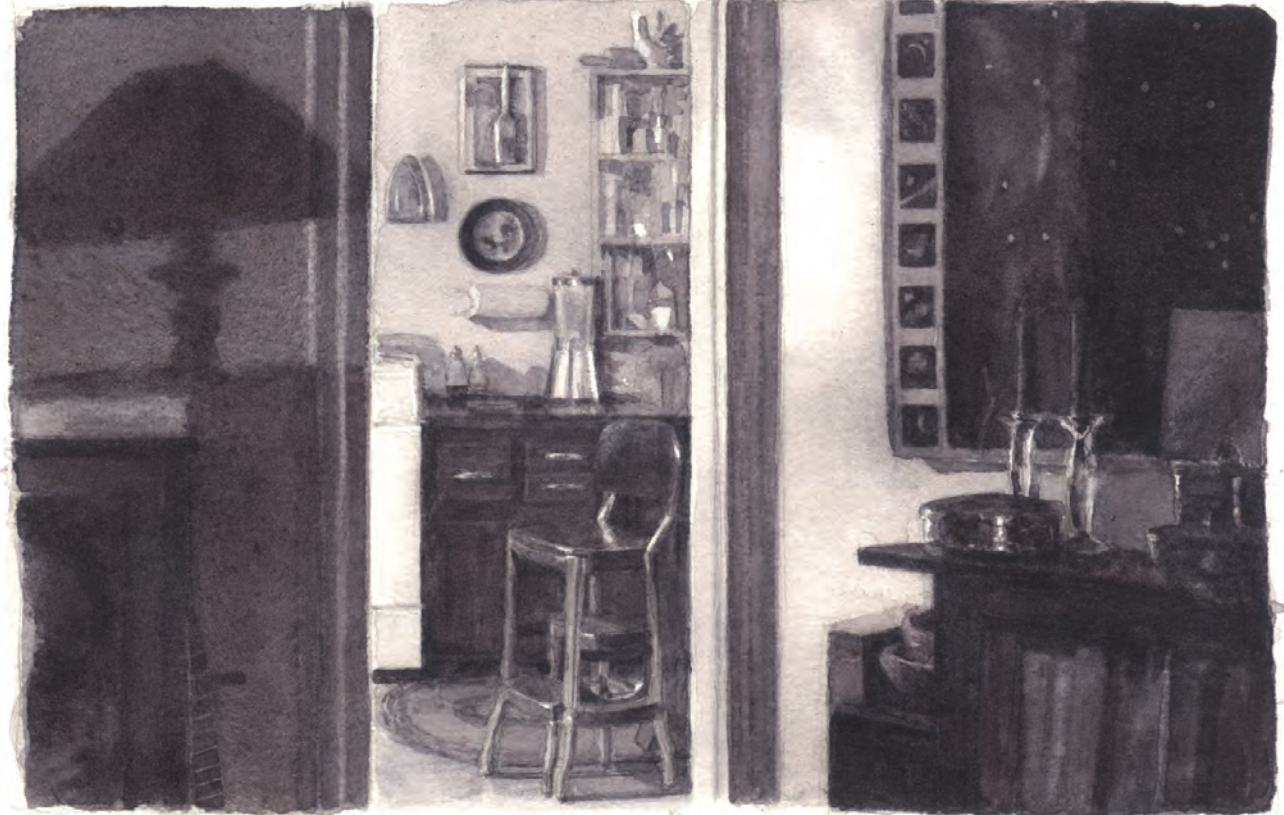
Jenny is an important part of the creative process. Her arrangements throughout the house serve as vignettes for drawing. Her imaginative and artful placement of the everyday catches Charles' eye and is incorporated in his work. It might be that Jenny pulls together bulbs in bloom or a dish of shells that become a centerpiece. It's quite clear that the two are a creative team. Jenny's own background includes her earlier work in oil painting. Her patience provides a steady, reasoning force, a counterpoint to Charles' energy. She also has been making his journals since the spring of 1992. Jenny took a workshop at the Smithsonian Institution on bookbinding and as Charles says "we were off".

Ritchie looks to the poet Wallace Stevens as a kindred spirit. Stevens, a key poet of the twentieth century, worked thirty years for the Hartford Accident and Indemnity Co. rising to the position of vice president. He walked the two miles to work everyday and used this time to write poetry and meditate on his craft. Ritchie also balances his work as an artist and his job as a curator in much the same way. Ritchie writes on his website that his position has fed his intellectual curiosity, provided high artistic models to follow, and offered financial security. It allows him to focus on the process as he continues to ponder the world outside his window.

Lynn Jones Ennis, Curator

My thanks to Charles Ritchie for allowing me to tape our conversation that took place during my visit in January 2008. He was open and candid as we exchanges e-mails over the past 4 years. This was most helpful in writing this essay.

14 June 2007 Am: My job is a cent. a picture start... a style of living that do you't body.
 and a picture of a kitchen - the a picture through a window and a picture of a kitchen through a window.
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Kitchen Doorway: 14 June, 2007, watercolor, graphite, and pen and ink on Fabriano paper, 5 3/4 x 7 1/4"



Self-Portrait with Blossoming Star Magnolia, 2002-2008, watercolor, graphite, and gouache on Fabriano paper, 4 x 3"



The Bend, 1984, watercolor, graphite and pen and ink on Fabriano paper, 3 $\frac{3}{8}$ x 14 $\frac{7}{8}$ "

Streetlight and Porchlight, 2008, watercolor and graphite on Fabriano paper, 10½ x 7¼"



Erased Self-Portrait, 1983, watercolor, graphite, and pen and ink on Fabriano paper, 4 x 7"





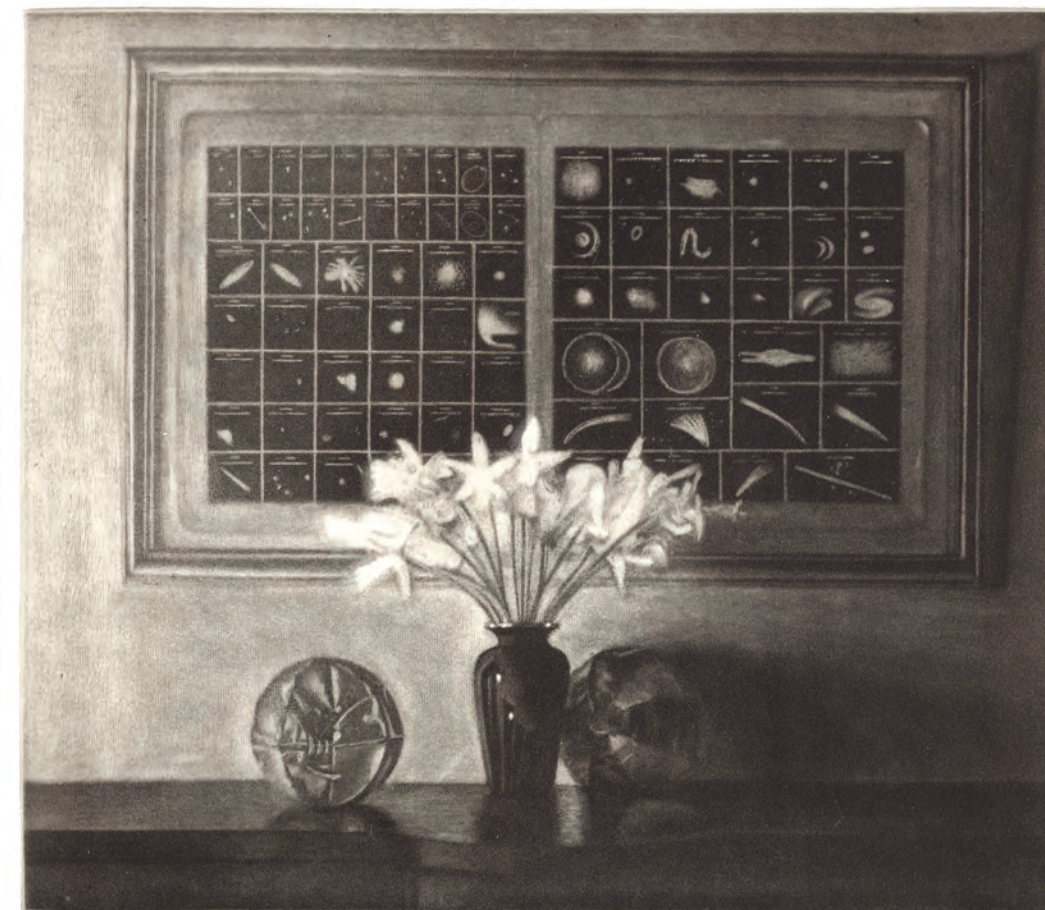
Book 126, Spring/Late Fall, 2006 with Studies for Interior with Shadows (left) and Self-Portrait with Night: Side Panels (right), 4½ x 13"



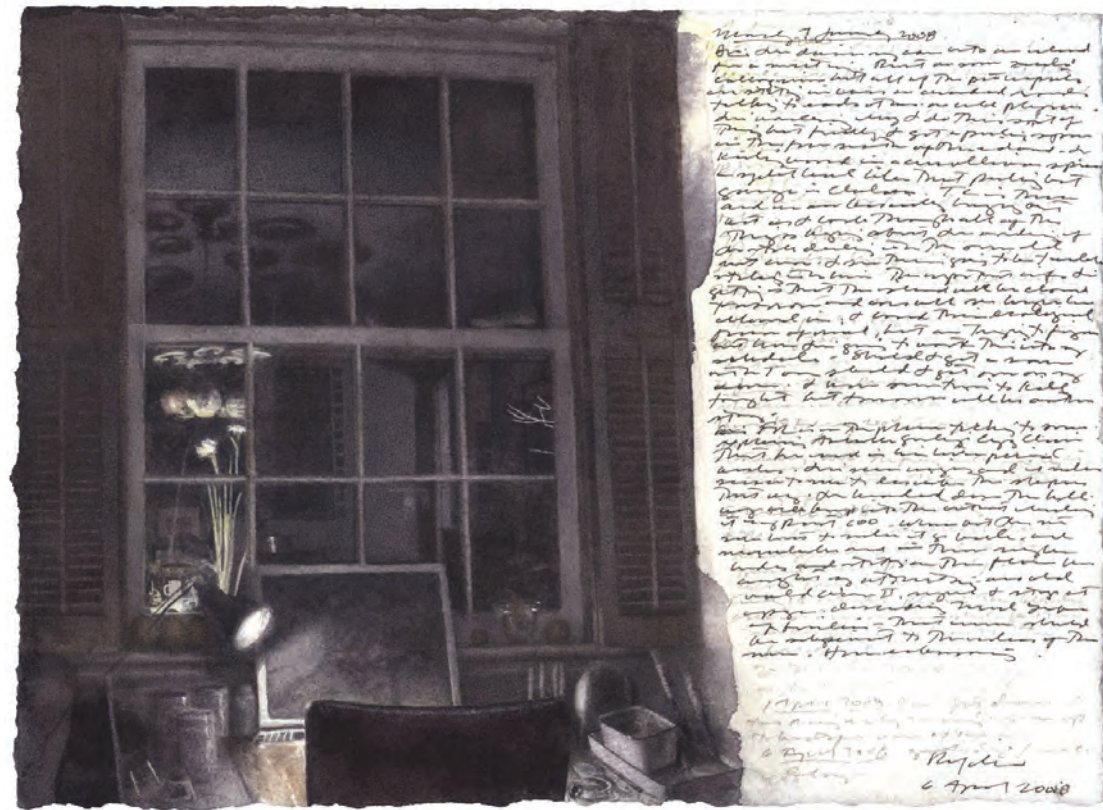
Self-Portrait with Night: Side Panels I, 2006-2008, watercolor and graphite on Fabriano paper, 5¼ x 17¼"



Midday Rain, 1994-2007, watercolor, graphite, conté crayon, litho crayon, and pen and ink on Fabriano paper, 4 $\frac{7}{8}$ x 9 $\frac{3}{4}$ "



Daffodils with Astronomical Chart, 1996, mezzotint on Rives BFK paper, 4 $\frac{3}{8}$ x 5 $\frac{1}{2}$ "



Self-Portrait with Paper Whites and Drawing, 2008, watercolor, graphite, and pen and ink on Fabriano paper, 4 1/4 x 5 7/8"



Book 117, Winter/Spring, 2002, with sketch of a blossoming pear (left) and two self-portrait studies (right), 4 1/2 x 13"

Two Windows: 18-21 November, 1986, watercolor and graphite on Fabriano paper, 6 x 10³/₄"



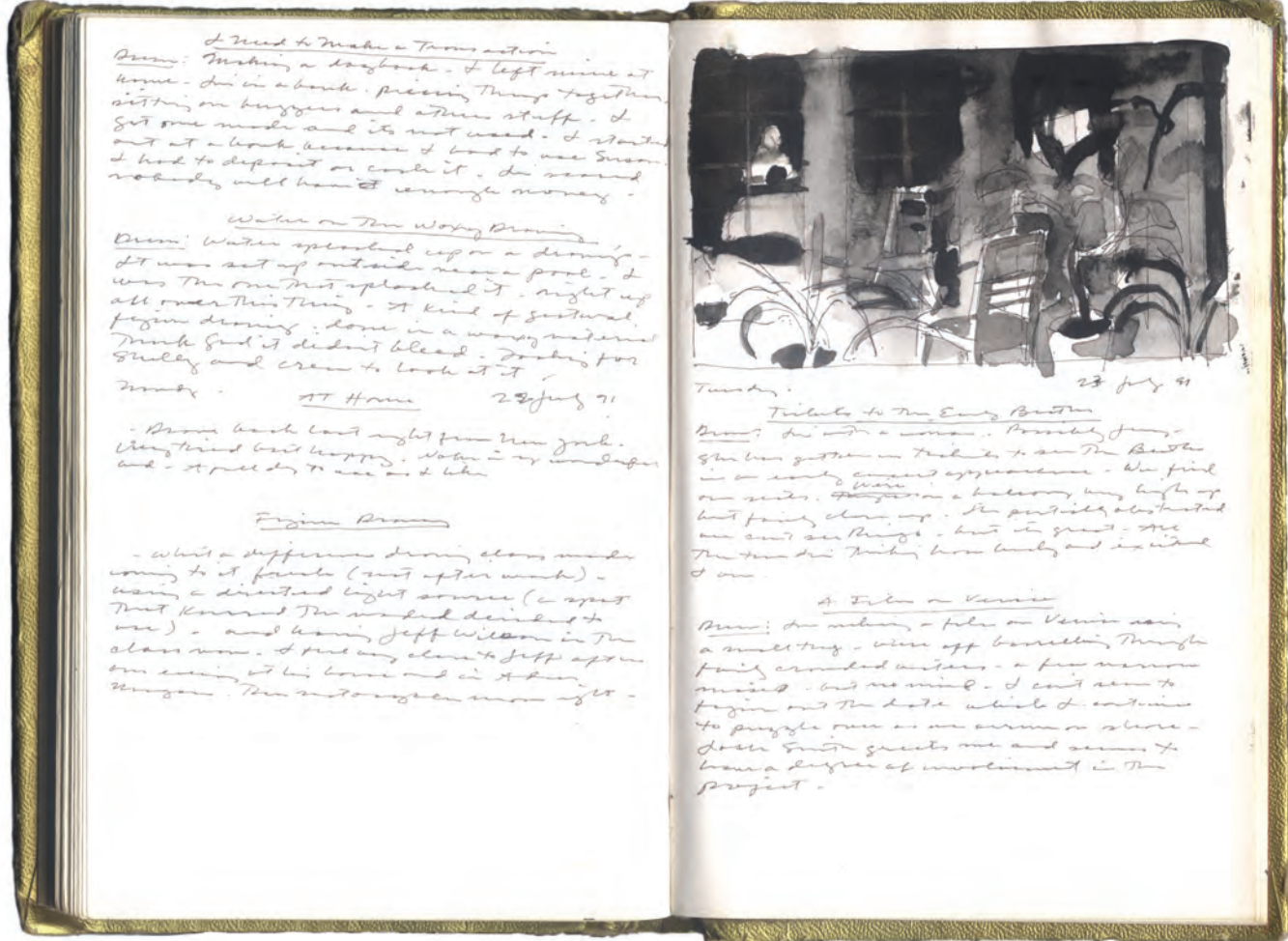
Summer Night with Interior, 2007, watercolor, graphite, and white pen and ink on Fabriano paper, 6³/₈ x 4¹/₈"



Self-Portrait with Full Moon and Tree: Second Study, 1988,
watercolor, graphite, and pen and ink on Fabriano paper, 4 $\frac{3}{8}$ x 2 $\frac{3}{4}$ "



Late Sun, 1990-1996, watercolor, graphite, conté crayon, litho crayon, and pen and ink on Fabriano paper, 5 $\frac{1}{4}$ x 9 $\frac{7}{8}$ "



Book 74, Summer, 1991, with a study for Night Studio with Plants, 6 x 8"



Night Studio with Diffenbachia, 1985, watercolor and graphite on Fabriano paper, 4 7/8 x 4 7/8"



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