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Charles Ritchie's shadow world at Gallery Joe

By [Roberta](#) December 7, 2008

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

It's a depopulated world with the stillness of the *midnight hour* filtered through the house's windows. In fact **Charles Ritchie's** second solo show at Gallery Joe is a museum-quality exhibit, a 30-year retrospective with a catalog, a glass vitrine in the vault showing the artist's working sketchbooks and 43 works of exquisite beauty, each a washy night-time scene of the artist's studio or his neighborhood.

It's a depopulated world with the stillness of the *midnight hour* filtered through the house's windows. In fact the windows are major players here lending their glassy mystery to catch both the interior scenes as well as the outside world. Many of the pieces are titled self-portraits but mostly it's hard to see the artist for all the other things reflected in the glass. Of course looking at the drawings through the glass they're under in the show adds another level of peek-a-boo which I can only guess the artist loves because he surely does love reflections in glass.



Kitchen Doorway: 14 June, 2007. watercolor, graphite and pen and ink on Fabriano paper, 5 3/4 x 7 1/4"

Where you "see" the artist is in the hand-written notes that make their way into many of the compositions (like Kitchen Doorway above). The tiny unreadable (to me) script makes the works feel like working drawings (they're not—they're finished). These penned words are also a mystery since who knows what they say. Is the artist waxing philosophical, jotting down anecdotes, thinking about politics or poetry...or maybe writing the day's grocery list (*JK*)?



(detail) *The Bend*, 1984, watercolor, graphite and pen and ink on Fabriano paper. 3 5/8×14 7/8"

In his exterior scenes Ritchie focuses on the play of light on the depopulated street and the vaporous atmosphere of the early morning fog. My favorite is *The Bend* a sprawling, almost 15" long scroll of fluffy trees, a sidewalk, a road and lamp posts at either end. There's a tropical feel to the work, enhanced by the shine of the road from the early morning moisture. It's a work that reminds me of walking in many urban parks and how wonderful the whole idea of an urban park is.



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

I want to compare the overall sense of the self-contained universe — a Ritchie world in a snow globe — to **Andrew Wyeth**, although Wyeth is more about Americana and Ritchie is about life's weird wonders at 4 am. Wyeth also imbues his work with a fascination with death but I see that nowhere in Ritchie. These are very life-filled works for all their dark ghostliness. Perhaps **Vermeer** is a better comparison. Vermeer who loved optics and the play of light and was enamored of the room, the inside space, as much as he was the people. (With the exception of Girl with a Pearl Earring, Vermeer's people seem to me to be props or furniture as much as people).

An expanded version of this show, curated by **Lynn Jonas Ennis**, first appeared last August at the [Gregg Museum of Art and Design](#) at North Carolina State University in Raleigh.



Notebooks. Ritchie has filled 131 notebooks with his drawings and words. It appears to me that he has made the books although I didn't ask that question. They are of various sizes and seem to have idiosyncratic covers and extraordinarily sturdy paper.

The artist — who gets up at 4 am and works a couple hours before going to work — is a curator of prints and drawings at the [National Gallery of Art](#).

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