

ART

Visions of inner and outer worlds

MANY OF US grew up in the suburbs — quiet neighborhoods of equispaced houses with wraparound yards held taut by chain-link fences.

It's not generally considered an environment of dark mystery. But maybe the 'burbs are so close we can't see the shadows.

If you take Charles Ritchie's brooding mixed media drawings to heart, the suburbs are too close for comfort.

Ritchie's "Night Sky for Martin Lewis" (1993) won first place in the "32nd Irene Leache Memorial Biennial Exhibition," which continues through next Sunday at The Chrysler Museum.

TURENA ANNAS



er Museum.

The Silver Spring, Md., artist has created a body of work set in his neighborhood, often rising before dawn to record the transition to day.

"Night Sky" and Ritchie's two other works in the show are set in

1. Typically, he positions viewers inside his house, looking out a window onto mundane backyard and street settings. He appears to take special pleasure in recording how street and house lights illuminate house facades and garage doors, as if they had a life of their own.

2. There seem to be encoded messages in the play of those lights, perhaps an SOS.

3. In dream language, a house often represents the self. Ritchie mines that metaphor. The neighborhood stands for The Outer World.

4. The implied person in the house seems ensconced, shy. The viewer might imagine that the person doesn't want to leave, that he peers at the Outer World with awe and fear.

5. When asked about her choices, the juror — Kinshasha Holman Conwill, director of the Studio Museum in Harlem — said she was trying for diversity in media and content.

6. She noted that drawing has "fallen a bit on hard times" in American art. In Ritchie, she found an artist in command of that difficult discipline.

7. Her second place award went to Norfolk sculptor Laurel Quarberg for "Seeking Level," made from cumbersome materials but reflecting a delicate sensibility.

8. The 1993 work is a continuation of the artist's exploration of personal/environmental issues. At one end of a low seesaw-like structure is a gilt bowl containing water; at the



"Night Sky for Martin Lewis" by Charles Ritchie won first place in the "32nd Irene Leache Memorial Biennial Exhibition" at The Chrysler Museum.

opposite end, a large stone. With such universal yin-yang symbols, "Seeking Level" could be interpreted numerous ways.

Certainly, it's about finding a balance. On the personal level, it could be seen as balancing a nurturing, flexible side (water) with a resolute nature (stone). For such cumbersome materials, the piece communicates delicacy.

By awarding third place to Chesapeake artist Geneva Beavers, Conwill has anointed yet another form — folk art. Beavers is an unschooled painter whose vivid, patterned works, often depicting animals, are a favorite among area patrons.

The works Conwill chose have aspects in common.

The show of 59 works by 41 artists presents art that is elegant, thoughtful and personal.

The show is notably lacking in the self-indulgent, openly activist and/or purposely "bad" art so prevalent in today's art scene.

As in Ritchie's and Quarberg's art, you sense in Conwill's selections a balance between inner and outer world concerns.

There are not a lot of large, showy canvas paintings. Instead, the show consists mostly of small to medium scale works, many of them with recognizable content.

Quite a few realists made the final cut.

Barbara Rachko of Alexandria, who recently took top honors at the

d'Art Center's juried show, shows two pastel drawings. Rendered with pristine naturalism, the domestic nighttime scenes feature stuffed critters gone awry.

Nearby, the looming torso of a muscular black man fills the canvas in Norfolk artist Gregory Willis' photorealistic airbrushed rendering. Apparently in the midst of doing sit-ups, the man stares intently at the viewer. A shadow crosses his eyes like a mask.

As to palette, Conwill seemed drawn to black-and-white or gray, as in Willis' work. Or, as with Rachko, she'd go the opposite extreme — to vivid, pattern-heavy pictures.

Conwill also seemed compelled to choose art organized into a grid pattern. Many of the works on view break down into repetitive blocks of imagery.

Virginia Beach artist John Stock's 92-inch-wide "Urban Tangencies" is entirely gridded off. "The Sayings Drawing" by Michael Rowe of Camp Hill, Pa., consists of 140 tiny drawings in a tight grid, each squared picture suggesting an enigmatic tale.

In a category of its own is William Bennett's "Heart." It is the sweetest, most vulnerable-looking piece in the galleries. From unbleached muslin and twigs, the Keswick artist crafted a nestlike form in the shape of a human heart.

But the heart is split open. Twigs emerge from its center, and form a woven set of wings. The twigs could

be ribs. But I like seeing it as a winged heart — flight of the spirit.

The "Irene Leache Memorial Biennial Exhibition" continues through next Sunday at The Chrysler Museum, Olney Road and Mowbray Arch, Norfolk. Hours are Tuesday through Saturday, 10 a.m. to 4 p.m.; Sunday 1 to 5 p.m. Call 622-ARTS.