

# OPEN LAB



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KRIS VAN ASSCHE // JESTER WHITE // NORA STURGES // SHAD K. // KENT ROGOWSKI // CHARLES RITCHIE // JULIA ZIMMER // TYLER MAHER // FLO DRON // DORIAN COBB // LAUREN ENGLISH // ALEX HEEREMA // SEBASTIAN AHMAN // BETH DONAGHY // LUKE LYSDAHL // FRITZ HELDER // JAKE LOVE // KEVIN FRANCIS GRAY // ROBBIE MCKINNON // ANDREY SMIDL // LUCA FIXI // MAAIKE KLAASEN // MARKO BROZIC



**// CHARLES RITCHIE //**

by Juan Rodas, Katherine Nonemaker,  
& John E. Rice

I think it was one of my mentors, Tonia Matthews, who introduced me to the work of Charles Ritchie when I was a graduate student. At the time, my large-scale drawings attempted to present dreamlike scenes constructed from my surroundings. Charles Ritchie's work achieved just this, which is what drew me to him as an influence/inspiration. I was fortunate to be able to experience one of Ritchie's pieces in person when taking part in a printmaking event at the Baltimore Museum of Art, an experience that is impossible to replicate through a computer.

What was so impressive to me was what Ritchie was able to accomplish given the minute scale of the images. His work brings out an ephemeral and haunting beauty from what is often dismissed as the otherwise mundane suburb. He achieves this with great draftsmanship in drawings and prints that are often no bigger than a postcard, an exploitation of dimension employed by the artist to draw in the viewer to experience his work at an intimate distance. In these small images, Ritchie experiments with the possibilities that arise from a carefully placed light source and a deceptive reflection. Often there is interplay between the effects of the light from a desk lamp, a streetlight, or the scattered faint lights of a street



and the reflective/translucent nature of glass from a window at night, creating the appearance of a fluid interaction between two places designed to be kept apart. Nighttime is a recurring moment in Ritchie's work. From a practical sense it is at night when it is easier to manipulate a light source to affect a reflection. However, it is the uses of night scenes that evoke the ephemeral, which invites the viewer to stay with the visual enigma the art presents.

-Juan Rodas



Joseph Harvey Waggoner, age 13, was living in eastern Pennsylvania when he and his family witnessed the great meteoric shower of the early morning of November 13, 1833. They stood outside in the bitter wind and watched the stars whizzing down through the atmosphere while neighbors hid inside, behind curtains or under bedclothes. It lasted for hours. The "millions of stars seeming to fall from their spheres," were described in Baltimore, Maryland as setting the heavens on fire; in Boston, Massachusetts the earth was said to be illuminated as with a morning light. In North Carolina, it was thought that the world was ending. In Missouri, it was said that "the most perfect master of language" would fail with any attempt at verbal description of the astronomical spectacle. A witness to the event in Fredericksburg, Maryland later spoke of it as "the most brilliant phenomenon of nature I ever [saw]."<sup>1</sup>

This ineffable experience of his childhood stayed with Joseph Harvey Waggoner as he grew older, and he eventually commissioned Swiss painter and draftsman Karl Jauslin to create a painting of the meteor storm based on his personal account. An engraving was later made by Adolf Vollmy, and is now one of the most famous depictions of the event - an event which marked the birth of modern meteor astronomy.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Littmann, Mark. *The Heavens on Fire: The Great Leonid Meteor Storms*. 1998. Cambridge University Press. Google Books. Web. 16 Mar. 2014

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*



If Charles Ritchie had been alive on November 13, 1833, he would have already been awake and watching the first few meteors dropping from the zenith of the sky to the earth, drawing. "I am an early riser, usually up by 3:30 am," he says. His viewing location would have also been prime, since Ritchie lives and works in the suburbs of Silver Spring, Maryland and has been for the last 25 years. In his home studio he captures the moments that are so often overlooked by those of us who have forgotten how to see and recognize them. He begins each morning by making quick watercolor paintings, recording the previous night's dreams in his journals, and going through stacks of drawings, making decisions on what to work on next.

"Waking early is a function of my body clock. Before sunrise is my most productive time of the day, so night is the physical context for much of work," says Ritchie. "Darkness offers graphic impact. Darkness heightens some objects and hides others; it increases contrast and reduces color. When I'm looking into a sea of details, night can spotlight essentials." This is made apparent when viewing the artist's rich and inky mezzotints. In *Rocking Chair*, we see the highlighted edges of a tall wooden rocking chair by a window, whose sill is defined sharply by either star or moonlight, its panels of glass indivisible with the dark space around and behind them. A streak of diffused light can be seen outside through the

window - the Milky Way? These are the only elements of illumination in an otherwise completely dense and black space - object, interior and exterior reduced to highlights and indications. In this work, the furniture loses its function as a symbol of domesticity and instead becomes a signifier of a more evasive subject matter - the space around it, and the weighted feeling of being alone inside the dark. This image offers the viewer a glimpse into that strange and silent moment before the pale light of morning begins to reveal spaces that were formerly clogged tight with darkness. Other intaglios feature recurring night themes - dark houses, night panoramas, images of structures half hidden in twilight.

Ritchie's palette is minimal for his drawings as well, but the drawings reveal the same qualities as his prints; they are heavy, layered, and complex. The subjects of Ritchie's work are not rooms, doorways or windows in themselves, but rather the light on the walls, the reflections in the glass, and the threshold from one space into another. The work's complexity lies in its subtlety, such that a quick glance might deceive the viewer to the intricate thematic concert at play. A deeper look at the work reveals a consistent concern with light, time, space and presence. The drawings, though small, seem to hold space within them both dense and expansive. The layers of graphite and watercolor over heavily textured papers mimics visual snow - that grainy, sparkly

"noise" you see when there's nothing else for your eye to focus on besides its own optic operation. The many layers of the drawings are testament to the close and prolonged observation of the artist. They speak of long hours in solitary work, the kind of work that needs to be spent un-interrupted. They carry the weight of meditation, of silence.

Speaking on the nature of darkness, Charles states that "on another level, night offers our deepest view into the cosmos. On a clear winter night I can look out my window and feel I'm looking at the edge of the universe. I'll mention a recurring dream I have. I'm floating and I can reach across a great distance and touch the surface of the moon. As I look up, space has curved back on itself. I can reach beyond the planets out to the edge. It's an exhilarating vision, referencing neither day nor night. This is a feeling I like to hold close as I make my work."

Seemingly at odds with his introspective nature and solitary morning habits, Charles Ritchie does in fact play well with others. He regularly employs the vision and workmanship of fellow artists, resulting in rich collaborative elements and influencing a variety of past and future partnerships and publications.

Charles and his wife Jenny have been a team since they first met in 1976. Jenny makes all of Charles' journals by hand. Charles has been keeping a drawing journal continuously since 1977 and fills the pages with his

dreams and his watercolor sketches of the suburban landscape. Jenny also frames his drawings and prints and prepares them for exhibition. "She acts as my producer; I trust her judgement on everything I do," he says.

Another artistic partner is James Stroud of Center Street Studio in Milton, Massachusetts. Stroud has been printing and publishing Ritchie's intaglio prints since 1994. "It was Jim who originally proposed I make mezzotints," says Ritchie. "I took to the process naturally and was impressed that he could look at my work and instantly guide me to an important new path." Another of Ritchie's key collaborators is author Peter Turchi. The two became friends while completing residencies at The MacDowell Colony in 1999. They immediately liked each other and were drawn to each others' work. "Pete helped catalogue about my art. *Suburban Journals: The Sketchbooks, Drawings, and Prints of Charles Ritchie* was published in 2005. Pete then wrote a short story *Night, Truck, Two Lights Burning*, inspired by one of my drawings that became an illustrated limited edition letterpress book." Now the author and artist are working on a collection entitled *About Home*, which pairs Ritchie's mezzotints with Turchi's texts. They are planning on producing it with Stroud at Center Street Studio. Stroud's wife, Janine Wong, will contribute as designer. "She's done incredible work on projects with us before," states Ritchie.

As a child, Charles loved all sorts of books, but gravitated to those about astronomy and space flight. "A favorite was *The Little Golden Book, Stars*, illustrated by James Gordon Irving," he says. "I have a huge interest in the space illustrations of the 1950s and 1960s. Images by artists such as Irving, Chesley Bonestell, and John Polgreen gave us ways of imagining space at a time when the revolution in color printing made such visions accessible."

Many of Charles Ritchie's represented objects reference themes of astronomy. A number of his studies and paintings in ink and watercolor feature a huge and complex star map. The map is an offset lithograph created in 1972 by David W. Teske, which exhibits 5,129 hand-plotted stars strewn across a chart of deep indigo, each at their relative brightness. "My copy has been hanging on my walls since I ordered it from the back pages of *Sky and Telescope* magazine not long after it was published," says Charles. Along the sides of the chart are postcards that Jenny arranged in vertical rows, taken from *Space Hop*, an astronomy game published in 1973. Charles says that "the other framed chart that I often draw is Burritt's *Atlas of the Heavens*,

a collection of wood engravings that helped popularize astronomy with 19<sup>th</sup> century audiences. Acquired from a local antique shop around 1985, we framed two pages for display, *Double Stars and Clusters* as well as *Clusters, Nebulae, and Comets*."

The sensation that one is a direct observer of the setting is consistent in Ritchie's work. In several panoramic pieces there is a blurring of interior and exterior spaces. The term "interior landscape" has been used to describe his work and appropriately so. Living room furniture and light fixtures blend with reflections of trees, houses, and the night sky, to the point that it is difficult to tell whether one is inside or out. Layers of reflections between sets of windows are often used as a tool to describe the viewer's place in a continuing space. Natural light is necessary. The distinct pale light of dawn creates vivid shadows that cut intricate angles across walls or pass between the ribs of an old chair. His night scenes incorporate the streetlights and warmly lit windows of the neighborhood, but natural light from the stars or deep blue sky is always present. He states that "by setting up dualities one builds a framework for exploration. For example, by establishing black and white, we create a context for understanding grays. When I select the interior of my studio as a focus and propose the outside world as counterpoint, I can begin to study their interrelationships."

His repetitive use of specific spaces, rooms, windows, the trees outside, household objects, makes them familiar to the viewer and imparts a strong nostalgia, as if the viewer had personally walked those same halls for years. This feeling of passed time is indeed fitting, because much of his work is completed over long periods of time. The drawings are seasonally set aside and periodically returned to.

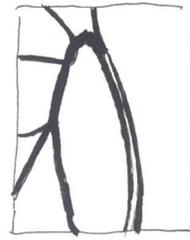
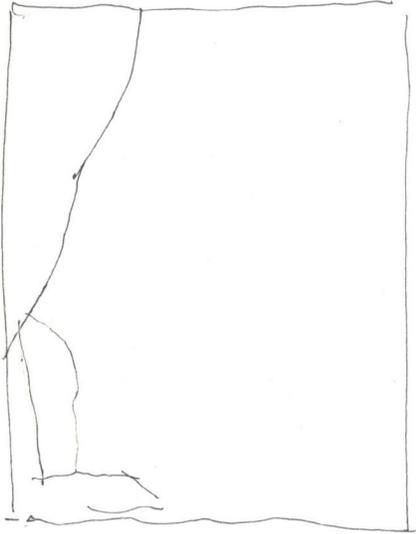
Many pieces show the subtle shifts of focus and changing scenery in the landscape that occur over these lapses in time. One hand-rocked mezzotint portraying the variants of night illumination was burnished and scraped over a period of eight years of observation. "As I work on drawings over extended periods, often years, my subjects change and I change," says Ritchie. "When I come back to [a drawing] years later, much of my original thinking about the drawing may have dropped away. Whatever inherent problems I may have perceived earlier have often vanished. In a way I become my own collaborator. In the intervening

period I may have gained knowledge of materials and techniques or have experienced my subject in a new light that reinvents my engagement."

There is an awareness of the seasonal and annual cycles in Ritchie's body of work. "I try to remain aware of astronomical phenomena as part of a broad interest in the natural world. Knowing the current phase of the moon, the direction it moves across the sky, the approximate times it will rise and set, is directly related to following the tides, weather, and seasons. I integrate these understandings into my drawings and they become a layer of the composition." He records the phases of the moon and its changing location in the sky as he works in his sketchbooks. It may seem as though nothing could be farther from the familiar and commonplace as the celestial bodies, but they are ever present around us. In the early spring Ritchie observes the movement of the red star Antares across the sky through his window each morning until eventually its movement is obscured by new spring leaves. "At that point I put away my winter drawings until next year," he says. "I retrieve my winter drawings after the leaves drop in the fall when I'm suddenly looking at the bright star Sirius."

Images and symbols of these distant figures of the cosmos remind us of our comparatively brief time here and signify its passing. From the planetarium suspended from the chandelier, to the star map on the wall; the quick sketch of a comet observed during a morning's walk, the moon in various phases - these references indicate our smallness the universe and place them into daily life. Whether Ritchie's work bridges the gap between interior and exterior, or breaks them down altogether, his art invites the viewer to re-examine the spaces we occupy. By re-contextualizing the ordinary, Ritchie gives his viewers a chance to witness and study his interior landscape, a continuum uninterrupted by illusory limits of space. Through Ritchie's work we experience feelings of relative smallness, yet begin to perceive the greatness in relatively small things.

- John E. Rice & Katherine Nonemaker



*Tree in back of...*

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| <p>1 <b>Vessels</b>, 1992-1994<br/>watercolor, graphite, and pen and ink on Fabriano paper<br/>4 1/8 x 4 1/16" collection of the artist</p>   | <p>3 <b>The Star Map</b>, 2012<br/>watercolor, graphite, and pen and ink on Fabriano paper<br/>4 x 6"</p> | <p>4 1/4 x 6 1/4" private collection</p>   |
| <p>2 <b>Book 8r</b>: Late Summer / Fall 1992 / pg. 45 of 55<br/><i>Sketchbook Excerpts: Sheet size of the original book is approximately 6 x 4 inches. Primary media include watercolor, pen and ink, and graphite.</i></p> | <p>4 <b>Pegasus</b>, 1996 - 1999<br/>spitbite aquatint on Rives BFK<br/>2 3/4 x 3"</p>                    | <p>6 <b>Book 39</b>: Winter 1986 / 1987 / pg. 25 of 88<br/><i>Sketchbook Excerpts: Sheet size of the original book is approximately 6 x 4 inches. Primary media include watercolor, pen and ink, and graphite.</i></p> |
| <p>5 <b>Astronomical Chart</b>, Bowl, and Candles, 2007-2009<br/>watercolor, gouache, graphite, and pen and ink on Fabriano paper</p>   |   |  |