

ART

Home-Made Art

Charles Ritchie elevates the objects of middle-class domesticity.

by Paulette Roberts-Pullen

According to contemporary philosopher Gaston Bachelard, the house is a human being's first world, a physical integration of all that we think, dream and remember. Offering visual reinforcement of this integration is the exhibition **Charles Ritchie: The Interior Landscape**, opening Jan. 14 at the University of Richmond's Marsh Gallery.

The title refers to the interior world of the artist's house as well as views of the world from within it. It also embraces the connection between the physical landscape and Ritchie's own inner realm. The home is his anchor, allowing engagement with the outer environs and, metaphorically, the world beyond.

Ritchie observes his immediate environment with Zen-like meditation. The banal objects of middle-class domesticity—furniture, house plants or kitchen equipment against a backdrop of suburban architecture and landscape—are unapologetically examined and re-examined with intimate devotion. Concern for light, time and cyclical change—which we traditionally associate with photographs—is subtly evident in his work.

But Ritchie's meticulous honing of detail serves more than realist enthusiasm. These paintings are not just graphic documentation of a place, but a collection of ethereal symbols of the "house" and all that it shelters—physical and spiritual. The

seduction of technical mastery is well played by the artist, enticing the viewer to study as well as to marvel. The lushness is then subverted, calling into question the comfort value of what we recognize.

In the painting "Interior/Exterior," the separate objects are identifiable but the context is not so clear. By observing an interior room at night, the usually transparent window panes both mirror the interior and fragment some exterior scenery. Ritchie's own image is reflected, furthering the tension created between in and out, contained and free.

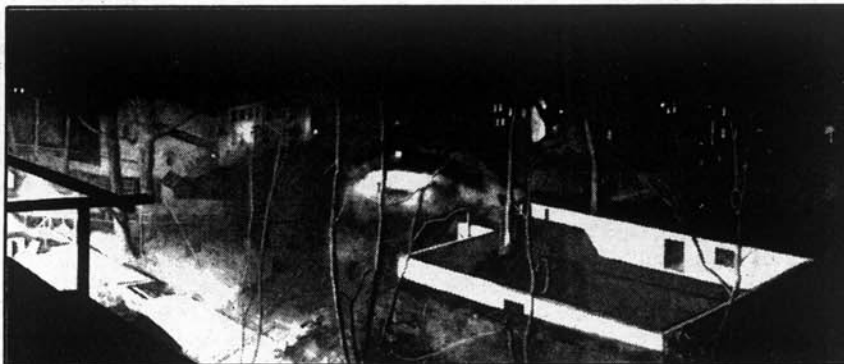
The inclusion of the artist's journals is unusual. They help document the daily observations, and the process in which jotted ideas and sketches become finished work. Like Ritchie's paintings, the journals are small and intimate. But the informal and spontaneous manner in which his

The seduction of technical mastery is well played by the artist.

small, illegible script and images spill onto the pages provides access to the maker's hand and mind that the other work does not.

The scale of these gem-like paintings and journals enchants, but the larger works relieve the exhibition of a claustrophobic mood. Though still no larger than 29 inches, these paintings capture the artist's neighborhood as seen from his house. They evoke a freedom of space and air that acts as a foil to the security of womb-like interior spaces. The work "Foundation" typifies a curiosity to discover "outside" while revealing an underlying uneasiness on the part of the artist. The beginnings of a neighboring house symbolize an invasion, or a "gaping wound in my landscape" in the words of the artist. Yet along with the discomfort of change comes new possibility and in "Foundation," the beginning of a new landscape to observe is potentially heartening.

Like the work itself, Ritchie's place in the context of the larger art scene is enigmatic. Any association with the traditional pictorial methods are not only unpopular these days, but held suspect. Though he has yet to exhibit extensively, his work has managed to elude the predictable critical accusations that eye appeal and/or illustrative craftiness is this work's only claim. His is art representing layers of meaning, only one of which is the connection of our psyches to the physical world we call home. *The Charles Ritchie exhibition runs Jan. 15-March 7 at UR's Modlin Fine Arts Center. Preceding the opening reception Jan. 14, Ritchie will present a lecture in Camp Theater at 7 p.m.* ■



Night Vision—Ritchie's "Foundation" presents his immediate neighborhood as a mystical nightscape.