

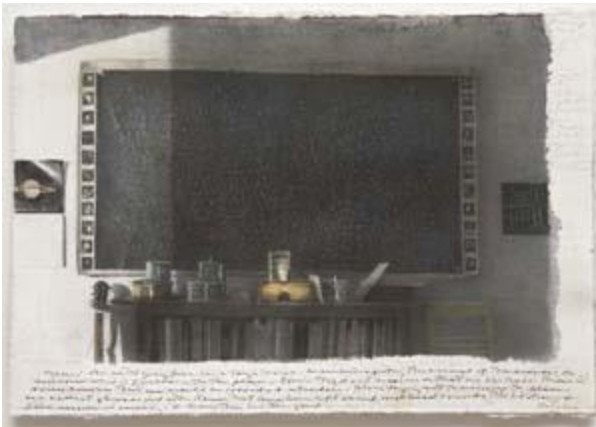
## Charles Ritchie

John Haber  
in New York City

### Inviting you in

Works on paper often invite one in, especially drawing as meticulous as Ritchie's. You want to see what is on the artist's mind, and you want to see how it is done. Ritchie's work depends on its scale and care. Some of it functions as an **artist's book**, a particular interest of the gallery's, as well as a sketchbook or even a diary. Writing overlays an entire sheet, like a secret code. Probably only the artist can read his tiny script, but it is hard not to try.

The script is also part of a sheet's texture, along with the softness of graphite, charcoal, conte crayon, or the paper itself. It is Fabriano paper, the thick Italian kind, and the drawing brings out its surface. The paper often peeks through as well, and he says that he prefers to rely on it for whites—to invite one that much closer, through the illusion to the object. I cannot vouch for that, and watercolor clearly adds some of the brightest highlights along with spots of color. As so often when paper stands for white, it is hard to know. As so often, too, whites then have a greater intensity, well beyond one's association with a blank sheet.



Texture also adds detail, as of leaves. Ritchie says that "light is my essential subject," but light contributes less to tonality than to things—and shadows less to depth than to gradations. He names one drawing simply *Graphite Night*. In time, one does find oneself indoors, where the very objects speak of intimacy, like plants in the window, candles on a dresser, or photos on the mantel. Books on a shelf evoke the drawings themselves. The insistent artificial lighting places that much more emphasis on home, but do not settle in too soon.

Facing clapboard and private property, with no one at all visible inside, one has to feel at least a little excluded. Maybe the artist does, too. He depicts his home in Maryland, but he could be anywhere and nowhere. One cannot make out the photos he so cherishes or the titles on the shelves. His dense script is all but illegible. I wonder if he can read it the next day.

Inclusiveness in America does not come easily, even close to home. Think of **Robert Adams** a quarter century ago, walking his own neighborhood by night. Think of the perpetual encroachment of **communities on nature**—or the perpetual **efforts of architects** to reshape them both. Ritchie, born in 1954, may find that old-fashioned art comes with its own anxieties for the future. What if books are dying after all? The very density of his surfaces are a visual obstacle to entering, although also a welcoming.

Look again, and it gets harder to know obstacle from welcome, outside from in. Many images depend on reflections and refractions from the windows. You may have been inside with the artist all along, looking out. The sky is mostly dark, and the only stars are in a large star chart on the wall. The side of the house never quite parallels the picture plane, softening the depth and sense of a barrier, without removing either of them entirely. There is always a limit on how close one's gaze can come, which leaves nothing to do but approach in person and come in.

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