



Matthew Ritchie *In the Anderson* *Collection*

Matthew Ritchie
Three of a Kind, 1996
Enamel on Sintra
108" x 111" x 23"

Matthew Ritchie was born in London, England in 1964, and currently lives and works in New York. An invited participant to the Whitney Biennial (1997), Sydney Biennale (2002), and São Paulo Bienale (2004), Ritchie is internationally known as an artist who is creating provocative art objects. Working in several media (ink on Mylar drawing, traditional painting, and painting on Sintra, a linoleum-like plastic) Ritchie produces artworks that are both cerebral and whimsical, both extremely complicated and refreshingly simple. Influenced by everything from the mythic escapades of comic-book superheroes and pagan gods to the meta-narratives of philosophy, religion, and science, Ritchie has developed a mythical narrative or cosmology of his own, and his art is communicated via a variety of art spaces and installations, including galleries throughout the world and the World Wide Web.

In these varied viewing contexts, Ritchie manipulates a mixture of media, or what he calls "notational systems." Drawings (paired with explanatory texts) describe individual characters, while paintings portray the characters' activities. The Sintra sculpture-painting hybrids represent the location of the characters and their stories.

Ritchie's four grand-scale, multi-part, art projects to date, *Working Model*, *The Hard Way*, *The Gamblers* and most recently, *Proposition Player* are each made up of many individual artworks. Together, the pieces envision and describe the origins of a world which parallels our own--a world where cosmic battles and sagas are enacted on seven continents by made-up characters who exist as "types" of notorious personalities found throughout our own history, as well as metaphorical figures who correspond to more scientific structures such as the seven lobes of the brain and seven quantum forces. According to Ritchie, the project as a whole is about "the nature of information. . . . Each element embodies a characteristic of information processing--methods of thinking like trial and error and observation. The complete narrative serves as a model of thought, an algorithm of consciousness."¹

Seven Earths (1996, enamel on Sintra), a work in the Anderson Collection, depicts the starting point of Ritchie's large project, the grand drama of *The Hard Way*. It represents a moment when the central characters and their earths fell to our earth. They have been thrown out of heaven for helping to teach mankind knowledge. Says Ritchie, "The seven watchers have been thrown out of heaven. A gang of damaged celestial agents, wandering among the seven, lost earths, finally falling like giant comets in 50,000 B.C. across the seven continents." Chaos rules, overtaking the stasis

¹ Matthew Ritchie, <http://www.adaweb.walkerart.org/home.shtml>.

or order in the universe. The piece resembles a splayed-out world map, flattened onto the wall. Each watcher falls onto a corresponding color-coded continent. Realizing that each character also corresponds to a region of the brain (for example, the cerebral cortex, which is the center of emotional activity) this effort at mapping is soon understood to be an investigation of creativity and imagination, as much as it is an effort to locate a place.

In *Three of a Kind* (1996, enamel on Sintra), another work from *The Hard Way*, the geography of one of Ritchie's map-like constructions appears to drip down the surface of the wall, the Sintra pieces actually spilling into a continuous form on the floor. Such floor pieces, which "primevally creep up or ooze down the wall," suggesting the absence of boundaries between Ritchie's world and our own, and wall-pieces such as *Seven Earths*, are transformed in Ritchie's fully realized paintings to backgrounds "for a range of elegantly drawn implications of figural elements--the human form, organic structures, swooping vectors and obscure notations that detail the physical and emotional transubstantiations undergone by his world and the characters that occupy it."²

The *Gamblers* project is represented by *Jackpot* (1998, oil and marker on canvas), and a set of 49 drawings entitled *Autogenesis* (1996-98, inks, pencil on Mylar). Like the seven "watchers" of the *Seven Earths* project, "the gamblers" are another of Ritchie's seven "families" of seven characters. Each of the "gamblers" personify "the different elements that comprise the scientific narrative of the birth of time,"³ and in Ritchie's narrative find themselves trapped in an oppressive "hotel room" looking for the way out. Trapped "simultaneously at the beginning and the end of time," the act of these seven quantum forces breaking out of their prison enacts the theoretical Big Bang.⁴

The forty-nine original *Autogenesis* drawings describe the genesis of the characters and families of Ritchie's saga, which includes seven families of seven. In an interview with the artist conducted by The Anderson Collection, Ritchie indicated that his reason for producing the drawings was that he "ultimately. . . wanted a piece that told you a complete saga." More biomorphic and representational than both the paintings and the Sintra works, Ritchie's remarkably beautiful drawings depict cellular and cosmic forms which transform into various humanoid creatures and earth-like landscapes.

In Ritchie's large-scale paintings, he allows all of the various forms of his art to come together as a cohesive statement. The enormous painting *Jackpot*, which measures roughly 9 x 13 feet, depicts the *Gambler* characters scattered throughout a jagged landscape where disembodied hands act out games of chance, and complex formulas and diagrams (inscribed onto the surface of the painting with black marker) define the characters' situations and movements. Here, the Sintra forms which make-up the map-like areas in works like *Three of a Kind* and *Seven Earths* are now carved into the paint with a palette knife, and function as a kind of background upon which Ritchie's characters (who are defined in his series of drawings) perform.

Curiosity is one of the forces that drives interest in Ritchie's narrative. Where do the characters and stories of *The Hard Way* and *The Gamblers* come from? While Ritchie portrays the richness of his imagination, these projects remind us that the characters come from the world we live in every day.

To experience his interactive web sites, visit: <http://www.adaweb.com/influx/hardway/>
<http://web.mit.edu/matthew-ritchie>

Molly Hutton, 1999
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² Jeffrey Kastner, "The Weather of Chance: Matthew Ritchie and the Butterfly Effect," *Art/Text* (May-July 1998), p. 57.

³ Helen Molesworth, "From the Big Bang to the Bomb and Back Again, *Matthew Ritchie*, (New York: Basilico Fine Arts, 1998), p. 7.

⁴ *Ibid*, p. 9.