

NOT TWO, NOT THREE, NOT EVEN FOUR DIMENSIONS

CAY SOPHIE RABINOWITZ

In the gallery entrance hangs a wall-size, multi-paneled light box that illuminates drawings of diagrams, symbols, characters, and visual fragments. With deictic arrows made in black marker and liquefied color that appears to flow from one panel to the next, semblances of a sequential ordering intimate that some linear logic is embedded in this convoluted imagery. Expressive cartoon characters seem animated. In the main gallery large hard-edged forms painted on canvas in dated varieties of muted pastel colors surround a fractured plastic mural that cascades onto the floor. One cannot cross the space or circulate around the sculpture as usual; instead one moves around part of the work, which is a painting on the floor and also a sculpture. This reorientation becomes the first of many prismatic encounters.

Ritchie's cross-media activity can be seen to deny the by-now-traditional conventions of installation art where the specific detail or purpose is sacrificed for an overall "spectacle." In his installations, which are

made up of various elements, specific details become cumulative wholes—fractals and ecologies. Like the ecologist who probes the relations and interactions between organisms and their environment, including other organisms, Ritchie's stratified and interlacing forms and figures reevaluate the potential for visual art to reflect both its own character and that of tangential subjects.

What begins as a play of perspective, disclosing the potential for variegated points of view (concurrently textual and pictorial) ultimately offers insight into the nature and culture of information. Ritchie hypothesizes an extended model for understanding a work of art in space that is neither two- nor three- (not even four-)dimensional. As stories, the works need no beginning, middle or end, because each insight or understanding convenes around a confluence of information sources.

Herein painting, building, and writing switch identities and collapse into the same vehicle, but not

as a mere literary experience of painting or vice versa. In Ritchie's work these otherwise segregated disciplines occupy the same dimension. A text can be composed of multiple simultaneously occurring events in a painting and a painting can be composed of events that took place over a period of time even though they exist now as a single image. His project employs seven representational modes to overlap, disclose, and reveal each other: drawing, photography, sculpture, wall painting, painting on canvas, published text, and digital media. Each process presents itself as a radical interpretation ready for reinterpretation to acknowledge that the relationship between a work (or any part of a work) and its interpretation is not parasitic but rather symbiotic.

While literary critics continue to worry about what interpretive analysis of a story might do to our understanding of it, they repeatedly mistake the nature of interpretation. An interpretation cannot purely expose, indict, debunk or enhance, deepen or magnify our appreciation of a story because interpretations end up being more stories—stories about stories—meta-stories. This is also true of the multiple salvaged and cross-referenced forms and genres Ritchie employs: abstract painting, autobiography, pulp fiction, installation art/scatter art, representational draftsmanship, hard science, etc. Just as James Clifford writes about the ethnographic version of this phenomenon, “a practice in which narrative fiction continually refers to another pattern of ideas or events,”¹⁾ one level of meaning in any text will always generate other levels. As such, any story has a propensity to generate another story to repeat and displace some prior story.

In Ritchie's most recent publication, *The Slow Tide* (2000), an elderly swimmer named Emmett takes his name from the Hebrew word *Emet* meaning truth, which the artist claims, “is the word you need to activate a golem or the word that produces life and reverses the thermodynamic tendency toward entropy, in other words, one of the names of god.”²⁾ His counterpart is “Morris,” a golem locked in a thermodynamic end game pursuing a third character, the Actress, who represents Energy. She in turn is pursuing another character, the Astronaut, and so on. With characters whose origins stem from competing tradi-

tions, what Ritchie calls “folded narratives laid on myth,” the stories collapse all ideologies and schools of thought. So Emmett does not only refer to Hebrew tradition, this swimmer also represents the character ABRAXAS, a so-called, “gnostic demon of infinity,” origin of the word *abracadabra* used in magical disappearing acts and another ancient name for god. Emmett returns to a primary narrative state as he drowns and regresses down the evolutionary scale becoming part of the marine ecosystem, which is the closest thing to infinity on earth. As water, he becomes an active ingredient in the story, able to turn inorganic matter into living material. However, this quality is missing from the landlocked Morris, who, by the way, is trapped in the basement of the Eden Roc Hotel, named for the Philosopher's Stone so avidly sought by Ponce de Leon on his visit to Florida—where this whole story takes place. Finally, we may not be surprised to discover that the Eden Roc Hotel was built by—the once ignored, now lauded—Morris Lapidus, whose last name means stone.

A critical reading of Matthew Ritchie's work must differentiate between seeing it as a set of interpretive adventures that merely confirm the continued existence of a ready-made subject and an understanding of interpretation as a site for the subject's perpetual construction and dissolution. Extending all insight, be it in science or art, from personal experience, the artist throws himself into this process of radical interpretation. By “assuming the role of an observing subject who is himself both the historical product and the site of certain practices, techniques, institutions, and procedures of subjectification,”³⁾ Ritchie challenges both art making and narrative conventions.

1) James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature and Art* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998).

2) Matthew Ritchie's statements quoted in this text are from conversations with the author.

3) Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of an Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990), p.5.