



MATTHEW RITCHIE

A GARDEN
IN THE FLOOD

Working in a variety of mediums and across disciplines, Matthew Ritchie seeks to visualize the deep, though ultimately futile, desire to create “theories of everything” explaining the workings of the universe. For Ritchie, information from history, literature, music, mythology, philosophy, science, or technology is a means to an expressive end—another medium like paint, clay, or film. Just as we don’t need to know the story behind a song to enjoy it, so it is with his art: “All my works can be fully experienced without reading a single text,” he writes. “But like the tales of Scheherazade in *One Thousand and One Nights* or a multiverse like the Marvel Universe, there are stories within stories here—should you choose to explore them.”¹

In this thematic survey of works produced since 2000, we see particle clouds and black holes in space, organic mutations and human phantasms, sacred music and devastated cityscapes. Tying everything together are the symbols of garden and flood, evoking such opposites as harmony and chaos, the contained and the infinite, or the known and the mysterious. While the garden is a simulation of paradise, the flood may stand for the submergence of civilization by natural or divine forces. Today, the flood’s threat is literal, with climate change leading to intensified storms, coastal loss, and the melting ice pack. If the garden marks origins, the flood can be a harbinger of the end.

But garden and flood are also interchangeable. The flood can wash away the garden’s insularity and stagnation. In turn, the garden may spill over its boundaries, flooding the world with new life. In this exhibition, the metaphor extends to a view of history and culture, the overwhelming impact of technology, and the challenges and promises of an unknowable future.

The exhibition opens with *M Theory* (fig. 1), a visualization of string theory, which some physicists hope can explain the behavior of matter and energy after the universe emerged in the big bang. This extraordinary concept is far removed from everyday understanding, yet one does not have to be a



Fig. 1: *M Theory*, 2000. Oil and ink on canvas. Collection San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, gift of the artist. © Matthew Ritchie. Photo courtesy of the artist and James Cohan Gallery

scientist to feel the energy within *M Theory*’s roiling origin story. As political activist and author Angela Davis once said, “It’s art that can begin to make us feel what we don’t necessarily yet understand.”²

Ritchie portrays the universe both outside and within our bodies. *The Eighth Sea* (fig. 2) shows a flayed human sinking into the ocean. Clusters of spheres suggesting eyeballs cling to the skeletal figure. Black disks function as atoms and black holes, the microscopic paralleling the celestial. The title’s “eighth sea” connects the human body, full of water, salt, and most known elements of the universe, to the seven planetary seas—in death, the body returns to its source.

Ritchie’s imagery from the 2010s is increasingly atmospheric, with colors blurred together to create sensations of fluidity and transition. Resembling both a nebula and blood vessels in a gigantic eye, *The Red and the Red* (fig. 3) echoes the significance of red to astrophysicists: as objects in deep space

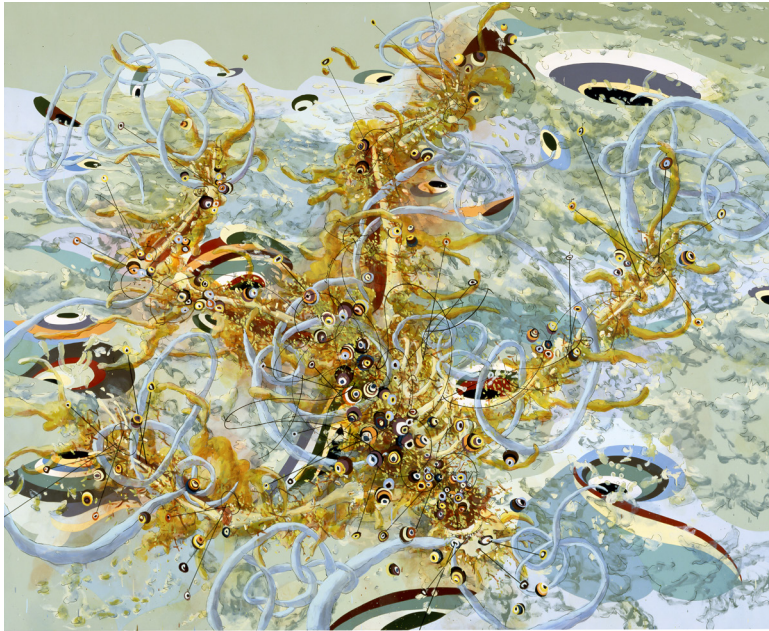


Fig. 2: *The Eighth Sea*, 2002. Oil and ink on canvas. Courtesy of the artist and James Cohan Gallery. © Matthew Ritchie. Photo: Oren Slor

move away from an observer, the wavelength of light they emit shifts to the red end of the spectrum. The painting also evokes a phenomenon known as *closed-eye hallucination*, in which colored spots and patterns called *phosphenes* are formed of light originating inside the eye. These light particles may hint at the cosmos as they trigger what has been described by author Romain Rolland as “oceanic feeling,” a sensation of being immersed in eternity.³

Recent paintings from the *Branches* series like *Harbinger* (cover) bring us back to earth. They appear to show the weird offspring of fungi, roots, and twisted tree limbs while suggesting ancient and uncannily conscious organisms. The paintings derive from *generative adversarial networks* (GANs), artificial intelligence programs that can be used to mutate images into surprising new forms. For the GAN-generated works in this exhibition, including the *Branches* series, the

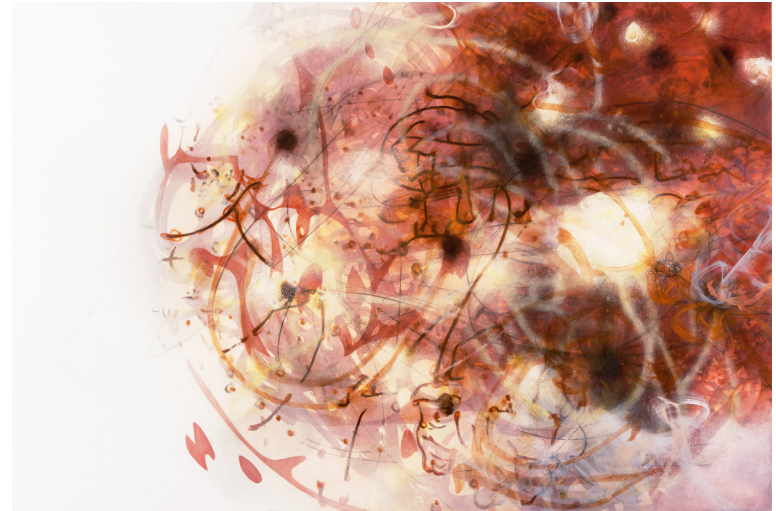


Fig. 3: *The Red and the Red*, 2014. Oil and ink on canvas. Courtesy of the artist and James Cohan Gallery. © Matthew Ritchie. Photo: Adam Reich

video *Caudex*, and the printed series *Latent Garden*, Ritchie fed botanical and landscape drawings from various sources into the program, teaching it to generate an ever-changing garden of an imagined future.

An installation of Ritchie’s films titled *The Arguments* nods to seventeenth-century English author John Milton’s epic poem *Paradise Lost*, in which each book begins with a prose “argument” summarizing the verse to come. The films take us on a journey across space and time, soaring and dipping through scenes of fires and floods, riots and ruins, worlds microscopic and macrocosmic.

Ritchie typically collaborates with musicians to make his films. *Telmun*, a new work created specifically for this exhibition, features “A Garden in the Flood,” a composition performed by Nashville’s Grammy Award-winning Fisk Jubilee Singers with their late musical director Dr. Paul T. Kwami. Their repertoire of Black spirituals is well suited for conveying the sense of deep time, loss, and renewal that pervades the exhibition. Ritchie wrote lyrics for “A Garden in



Fig 4: Rendering of *The Arguments*, 2022. Ten-channel multimedia installation with sound data-base, acrylic, and ink. Courtesy of the artist and James Cohan Gallery. © Matthew Ritchie

the Flood” inspired by *Paradise Lost* as well as “The Princess Steel,” a story by Fisk University alumnus W. E. B. Du Bois that links capitalism, technology, and racial oppression. Composer Hanna Benn then incorporated Ritchie’s lyrics in the extended piece of music, which was recorded by the Singers at Ocean Way Nashville Recording Studios. As it resonates through the gallery, the song sets a tone of spiritual intensity and renewal. The film itself features data visualizations created by Fisk University students in a class co-taught by Ritchie and professors Alicia Henry, Dr. Sajid Hussain, and Jamaal Sheats. These were inspired by Du Bois’s data portraits, diagrams reflecting statistical and sociological information about the lives of African Americans in 1900.

In the final gallery, we can glimpse Ritchie’s research on diagrams that have helped shape understandings of the world throughout history. On view are elements from his 2018 exhibition *The Demon in the Diagram* at Rice University (fig. 5), including structures from the installation *The Screen Game*. These works contain overlapping diagrams representing intersections of knowledge, theory, and imagination. They remind us that, while the desire to



Fig. 5: Performance of *The Exception to the Diagram* (2018) with view of *The Screen Game* (2018) in *The Demon in the Diagram*, Moody Center for the Arts, Rice University, 2018. Photo: Nash Baker

discover and describe unified principles of existence is as old as humankind, we must keep striving for shared meanings to imagine a coherent future, planting new gardens within today’s rising tide of information and technology.

Mark W. Scala
Chief Curator

Notes

1. Matthew Ritchie, email message to the author, August 29, 2022.
2. Angela Davis, interview by Ava DuVernay, “Ava DuVernay Interviews Angela Davis on This Moment—And What Came Before,” *Vanity Fair*, September 2020, <https://www.vanityfair.com/culture/2020/08/angela-davis-and-ava-duvernay-in-conversation>.
3. Rolland to Sigmund Freud, December 5, 1927, in William Parsons, *The Enigma of the Oceanic Feeling: Revisioning the Psychoanalytic Theory Mysticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 173.

This exhibition is dedicated to the memory of Dr. Paul T. Kwami, the Fisk Jubilee Singers’ music director and our inspirational collaborator on this project.

Matthew Ritchie: A Garden in the Flood

November 11, 2022–March 5, 2023

Organized by the Frist Art Museum

This project was supported in part by
the National Endowment for the Arts.



Supported in part by the Sandra Schatten Foundation

With additional support from our Picasso Circle

The Frist Art Museum is supported in part by

THE FRIST FOUNDATION



Cover: *Harbinger*, 2022. Oil and ink on canvas.
Courtesy of the artist and James Cohan Gallery.
© Matthew Ritchie. Photo: Phoebe d'Heurle

Frist Art Museum

919 Broadway
Nashville, TN 37203
FristArtMuseum.org



Connect with us
[@FristArtMuseum](https://twitter.com/FristArtMuseum)
[#TheFrist](https://www.instagram.com/TheFrist)
[#FristMatthewRitchie](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCFristMatthewRitchie)