



Matthew Ritchie with Aranda\Lasch Arup AGU: *The Morning Line*, 2008-2009. Commissioned by Thyssen-Bornemisza Art Contemporary. Installation view: Schwarzenbergplatz, Vienna June 7, 2011 - June 1, 2012. Photo by Jakob Polacek

## Matthew Ritchie's Universal Quest "Monstrance" at L & M Arts, Los Angeles, Venice Beach and "The Morning Line" in Vienna, Austria, organized by Thyssen-Bornemisza Art Contemporary

by Emese Krunák-Hajagos

How would God, if he were an artist and a scientist, see our universe from beginning to end in fast-forward? We can see the artistic/scientific answer to that question in Matthew Ritchie's multimedia works. The objects he creates are monumental and extremely exciting.

Ritchie started to think about the universe and its possible artistic representation in the 1990s by merging physics, art, mythology, philosophy, religion and history. His starting point was that science is the new art as well as the new religion, creating multiple parallel mythologies: cosmogonies. Ritchie creates a spectacular visual world, guiding us through the stories of the beginning and the end. He says

about the beginning and about the particles from which the universe came into being, "Since it is almost impossible to understand them as they were then; as infinite points, bound in an indecomposable continuum, let's look at them as they would become. They were so many and they had waited for so long. Their bodies interleaved as closely as pages in a book, they slipped and slid in and out of each other, all through the endless day of the beginning, inside the heart of naked singularity. It was before years, before history, before time: it was the whole universe; the birth, the hope, the blame; the dream, the betrayal, the revenge: waiting inside one tiny, hot, little dot."

Ritchie thinks that the world is

at its worst at the beginning and at the end. In his apocalyptic video projections, like *Augur* (L & M Arts, 2011), we see the sun from the deepness of the murky water, then closer to the surface a single cell outline. Later creatures emerge out of the water and start to move. Then a tremendous wind whips over the landscape. Fires burn living things into metal sculptural skeletons while a huge wire ball – an atomic model of some chemical – rolls over everything. In this vision the world remains, but without humans, a very sad conclusion. However, it doesn't feel sad watching it while listening to the music of Bryce Dessner with Shara Worden's vocals, sometimes ethereal, sometimes beautifully baroque, sometimes just a complicated composition of noise that could be the sound of parallel universes. Ritchie makes the viewer think about all the possible complexities of life: physical, biological and socio-ecological.

Ritchie started his career in London as a painter with drawing as his base, but after moving to New York he expanded his work to include sculptures, digital images, light boxes, musical compositions, creative writing and structures that function as architecture. In 1995, in an interview with Owen Drolet, Ritchie described his working model. It consists of seven vertical and horizontal rows that include physics equations, colours, characters, emotions and other typically human characteristics, and physical properties of the universe. The equations line the top and the colours are listed vertically. Each shape can correspond to each colour, which in turn can represent seven different groupings of three: character, emotion/human characteristics, and physical property. This matrix gives the artist 49 possible different combinations that he calls a

map. The paintings of *The Hard Way* (1996) were among the first in which Ritchie used this map to create a mythology of gods fighting over the creation of Earth.

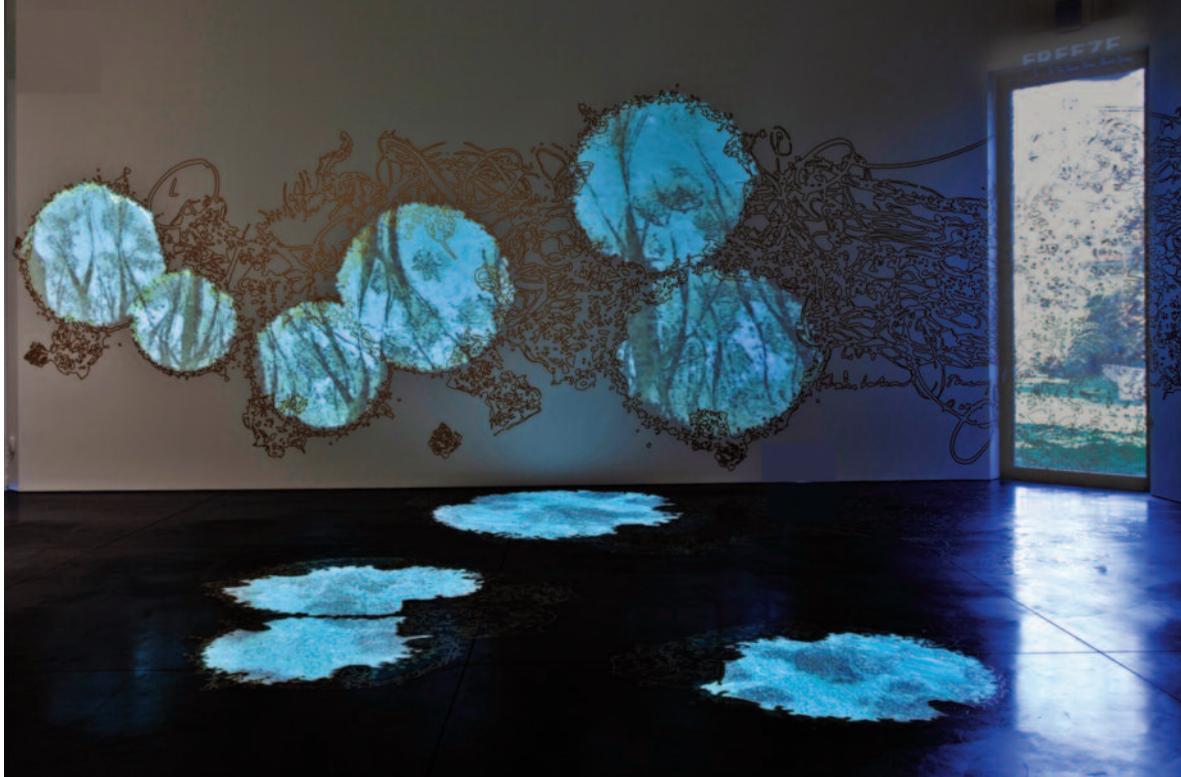
Ritchie stated that he wanted to break away from linear storytelling and create a more structured and formulaic narrative, a scientifically correct mythology as a base for his complex visual stories. He knows physics very well. In 2009, he was the only artist invited to speak to an audience of Nobel laureates discussing Einstein's theories and how they can be applied in the twenty-first century. According to the laws of physics, we only recognize one reality, and its outcomes can be predicted. Edward Lorenz's "Butterfly effect," the idea that the "flapping of a butterfly's wings in Brazil can set off a tornado in Texas," made chaos theory popular, bringing the idea of random-

ness into science. *The Morning Line*, among others, is an excellent example of how Ritchie transforms his scientific ideas into art.

*The Morning Line*, a sonic, Gothic-like temple, is an imposing 10 meters high and 20 meters long, built of 20 tons of black-coated aluminium, intended to draw in the expanding universe that surrounds us. Ritchie started it all with black and white drawings that evolved into something really large (*The Shapes of Space*, Guggenheim Museum, New York, 2004). *The Universal Cell and Remote Viewing* (2006) was his next step into a truly three-dimensional structure. Ritchie collected all possible data about the human cell, the sacred unit of our measurement, and about prison cells. He recognized that everything is designed around a geometrical pattern. He saw a similarity between our



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Matthew Ritchie, *Monstrance*, 2011, projected multi-channel, film vinyl and animation. L&M Arts, Los Angeles, November 2, 2011-January 14, 2012 ©Matthew Ritchie. Courtesy of L&M Arts, Los Angeles.

imprisonment in our genetic makeup and real prisons. He made several different drawings of all these things and then layered the semi-transparent papers on top of each other until they created a kind of information tunnel. In the end, he scanned them into the computer and created the final image, which he sent to a metal-shop to be cut out and assembled. The final product is an amazing structure which captures not only the dimensions of space but its moving energies as well. Ritchie's artistic goal was no less ambitious than to represent the entire universe, as well as our beliefs and knowledge about it. His approach is philosophical, involving religion, occult practices and scientific principles. As he said in an interview, he wants to "describe the whole spectrum of experience, simultaneously."

The idea in *The Morning Line* is "drawing in space," and Ritchie aims to make his drawings stand in space and become a part of the universe. Ritchie

involved design innovators *Aranda/Lasch*, the *Music Research Centre of York University* and *Arup AGU* to create a fully programmable, three-dimensional, moveable sculpture. From his drawings, they designed a structure in which each part can be replicated at a smaller and smaller scale until it reaches a nanospectrum. From there on you can build anything. Ritchie calls it a quantum building, because one piece (a tetrahedron) can support 22 other smaller ones and so on to infinity. With this method you can "build a cathedral which involves the universe."

The structure of *The Morning Line* is amazing. Standing in it is a once-in-a-lifetime artistic experience. You can see the sky, but what you are really looking at is the metal curves drawn on the sky. There is a glass wall as part of the structure, and on it images of the universe and apocalyptic videos are projected. You hear stories told by

various voices about different situations. Above all this is the music: classical pieces mixed with sounds created by the structure itself or composed by contemporary musicians inspired by the sculpture and improvised on site. *The Morning Line* is also sensitive to time, street noise, you and other visitors, so you can never have the same light and sound effect twice. It is a complex, amazing and really universal experience. It has been installed in three very specific sites: the Andalusian Center for Contemporary Art, Seville, in 2008; Eminönü Square, Istanbul, in 2010; and the Schwarzenbergplatz, Vienna, in 2011.

Ritchie participated in two performances as stage designer. In the summer of 2009, *Hypermusic Prologue, A Projective Opera in Seven Planes*, debuted in Paris then was performed again in 2010 at the Guggenheim in New York. Ritchie also worked on *The Long Count* (Brooklyn Academy of

Music, Next Wave Festival, 2009; Holland Festival, 2010; Barbican Arts Centre, London, 2012), a 70-minute multimedia piece. Ritchie sets the scene by projecting an apocalyptic video on three giant screens that envelope the musicians on stage. These hallucinatory videos show whole trees uprooted and other "mad tales of creation and resurrection."

While *The Morning Line* tries to reconstruct the universe in a physical way, *Monstrance*, Ritchie's recently closed show at L & M Arts in Venice Beach, Los Angeles, returns to mythological interpretation. *Monstrance*, meaning "show" in Latin, is a ritual vessel from the medieval period for the public display of relics. In the performance at the opening, a masked singer represented the many forms of sun, including the setting sun. The show was also about one of

Hollywood's myths: *The Fallen Star*. At the gallery entrance, there were eight paintings of golden angels. These hybrids of feathered humans and gaseous nebula represented "high energy states," such as solar storms, pole dancers and female athletes. The figures were accompanied by dots showing the position of constellations over Los Angeles on the opening day, November 2, 2011, the Feast of All Souls. The lone sculpture in the gallery could be the figure of a fallen angel, or, more likely, what is left of him after falling from the sky. The east gallery was a very different world, a dark one, more like a subterranean cave at the beginning of time. There were water pools projected on the floor, their reflections on the walls. Prehistoric drawings covered the ground, interrupted by meteorite-like sculptures, while images floated in

place and music played. There were also four paintings of monsters in this gallery, and their dots showed the position of constellations on October 31, Halloween. They represented "negative energy states," such as terror attacks, ecological disasters, surgery and video games. In this show, Ritchie combined all his previous artistic elements – drawing, painting, sculpture, video projection, sound effect and performance – to create a meaningful and complex view of the specific site of the gallery and its place in the universe.

Ritchie said that in the work of painters like David Salle and Julian Schnabel he saw the last of the generation of artists who had to follow "the master narrative of the West." For him that means a new artistic era has begun, and he is set free to go off and start his own quest into the universe.



Matthew Ritchie, *Monstrance*, 2011, opening performance on November 2, 2011. L&M Arts, Los Angeles, November 2, 2011– January 14, 2012. ©Matthew Ritchie. Courtesy of L&M Arts, Los Angeles