

A Collection of Works in Christopher Richmond's Multiverse or: How I Learned to Ride the Astronomical Current Past the Milky Way

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Hyperway (2018) is a three-channel, baffling, and captivating visual presentation of a (apparent) road-trip video. It is the most recent addition to Christopher Richmond's growing collection of works that combines human and cosmic characters in a cylindrical storytelling interchange.

Across all cultures, and starting with early civilizations, storytelling has been a means of validating one's existence. Christopher Richmond's practice pursues this concept, but rather than describing a narrative in which a resolution is presented, he emphasizes the way the story unfolds. Focusing on tropes of storytelling, such as the campfire or the epic heroic tale as a framework, and pulling heavily from interstellar theorems, terrestrial landscapes, and well-known creation tales, Richmond creates a complex logic system where characters meander through landscapes and inner narratives to explore the human condition and its search for meaning. These works could be considered non-narratives, but instead should be reexamined as non-linear narratives. In no particular chronological order, Richmond presents his narratives as segments where the viewer must take an active role to mentally rearrange the order in an attempt to solidify the story.

Though information is not readily offered, Richmond's characters and plots are deeply layered and complex. Individual works can stand alone and are produced to do so; however, they should be considered collectively as part of a larger body of work. Connecting characters and scenarios in each piece to past and future work by using

opposite, Penrose II
2018
Ink and tape on paper and vellum
22 x 30 inches





Studio detail
2019

video, photography, and drawings, Richmond creates an infinite loop embellished with crude methods of presentation. Combining hand-made dioramas and B-movie props with highly technical cinematography and lighting places the viewer in a space where they must constantly doubt and question the scenarios being acted out on screen in order to fully realize the complex and multi-layered narration that is found in all of Richmond's work. The combination of the rudimentary and the highly refined fabricate the parameters of his storytelling.

MULTI-VERSE-MULTI-CHANNEL-MULTI

Richmond's video works have become increasingly more intricate in recent years. Employing both layered storylines and multiple viewing channels, *Hyperway* is Richmond's first synchronized three-channel project.¹ By using multiple channels Richmond depicts the same action filmed over different takes and from different angles, granting the viewer an omnipotent perspective. However, the feeling of supremacy of seeing more of an action is false because Richmond guides and controls the focus by simultaneously showing too much and not enough: the action is destabilized. He creates a parallax, where the viewer looks more intently at the screens as the motion is duplicated from various angles as if further details are exposed in a different frame. On occasion, the frame will be identical, but the filter on the video will vary. These moments of fabricated mimicry reinforces the concept of the multiverse which Richmond uses as a framework for his works.

The multiverse puts forth the theory that infinite amount of universes exist, not solely ours. Every possible parallel universe is included, and this collection comprises everything that is and could be, including our laws of physics, time, matter and energy. Scientists can only see to a distance of about 42 billion light-years – approximately the date of the big bang. Even if we did exist in a multiverse, our technology would never allow us to view further than 42-billion light years and there is no accepted scientific way to prove the existence of multiple universes.² It manifests a quandary where theory and science collide, unable to prove or disprove the existence of such a plurality.

¹ *The Milky Way* (2015) was the first multi-year production where Richmond began to incorporate cosmic bodies into his work and was shown on a single channel. Collaborative work *Slow Dance*, was the first three-channel video, and *Panthalassa* was the first time Richmond utilized multiple synchronized channels.

² The multiverse is a complex and complicated theory and multiple articles supporting or denying its existence can be easily found by a simple Internet search.

Richmond's work is suspended somewhere between fact and fiction, graspable theorem and science fiction. Similar laws of physics govern each piece and yet there is a slight variation to the reality of each work. In *Hyperway*, it is not clear which monstrous characters are actual celestial beings or constructed by the characters' subconscious: this logic differs from piece to piece. The characters and scenarios are similar enough that foggy recollections and connections could be drawn, but without factual information. Interacting with Richmond's work is akin to waking up from a vivid dream, a reoccurring dream that has spanned over the course of several years at the moment of hypnopompic visualization, when the mind begins to lose its lucid memories of an event that never occurred. Information is absorbed in an ethereal manner and imprints itself emotionally rather than as concrete knowledge.

To watch Richmond's videos requires a great deal of patience, not because the works are tedious or slow but because he creates work that is slightly too long to be comfortably viewed within a gallery setting. There is a phenomenological awareness of the body during active viewing. In *Panthalassa* (2015), the music and dance scenes continue for such an extended period of time that there is the desire to stand and move with the character to overcome the prolonged anxiety. The delivery of the moving image and sound is nothing shy of sensory overload as Richmond relies on a highly technical cinematographic aesthetic as his mode of delivery. Because of this, the viewer wants to place his work into the same category as a full-length theatrical release. There is an impulse to recline and allow the storyline to unfold with little effort, but Richmond does not conform to that structure, and instead demands active participation from the viewer. Characters and scenarios repeat and are disjointed as if large sections of dialogue and scenes have been edited out. Crude and apparent props are wielded to jolt the viewer back into reality. For a moment, the suspension of disbelief is removed, and once again the mind needs to reset and reorganize in order to understand the image. In the hallucinatory viewing process, the viewer continually doubts their own recollection. Esthetic, auditory and visual stimulation are so vigorous that the desire for a solution to the conflict intensifies, but Richmond does not provide enough information to decipher the conflict, let alone provide a resolution.

/ARTIST/DIRECTOR/ACTOR/PROP/

To call Christopher Richmond a caricature of himself would be an understatement. Missing Christopher in a crowd is difficult. He is tall and slender, with a head full of curly,



top, *Panthalassa*

2015

2-channel HD video, 16mm black and white film, sound transferred to HD.

49 minutes, 20 seconds (loop)

Installation, Moskowitz Bayse, 2016

bottom, Video still



top, *Chasing the Horizon*
2009
16mm color film transferred to HD
8 minutes, 48 seconds
Film still

bottom, *Panthalassa*
2015
Production still

voluminous hair. He walks solely on brown leather flip-flops with an upbeat gait, and possesses smooth skin and young features while his uniform consists of airy button-down shirts and dark pants.³ The appearance of an artist is usually not of importance, except that Richmond inserts himself into both his video and photographic works.⁴

Beginning with *Chasing the Horizon* (2009), Richmond has played both a central character and an active observer. It has been difficult to separate the two, the artist and the actor, as the image on screen appears almost like an exaggerated version of the artist. Following a long history of directors who appear in their work, Richmond combines that tradition with that of self-portraiture. In *Panthalassa*, he is one of two main characters, where the other hooded character could be understood as an alter-ego, a Jekyll to his Hyde. But the viewer never learns more about the character of Richmond, nor about the artist himself in any of the pieces. Richmond never utters a word — his presence is solely visual. He is never assertive in any of the scenes; instead, he becomes a bystander, negotiating with his surroundings just like his characters. In the opening sequence of *The Milky Way* (2015), Richmond walks through a wooded forest. He begins to run, and finds himself in a domestic setting where the viewer first encounters Gideon, the silent and clay humanoid character.⁵ But this never becomes a conflict, except that at the end of the film Richmond is back in the woods, slowly falling from a tree limb. This movement is jarring because it does not occur during a plausible section of the piece. Instead, the viewer doubts their memory that Richmond was safe because he was last spotted in the interior of a house with Gideon. Richmond observed an act which led to his demise, or at least we are led to believe that something happened and are left doubting the tone of the piece. In *Hyperway*, he plays two characters: himself as astronaut and as a silvery otherworldly being. As the astronaut, Richmond again takes the passive role, watching and interacting with the other characters without uttering a sound, but takes a more menacing approach as the silvery persona.

While Richmond repeats himself in multiple works, he also repeats actors. *Hyperway* will

³ Richmond very deliberately solidifies this uniform in a series of photographs titled, *Radical Acceptance* (2013-2014). These photos are playful and dark explorations of gesture and self-portraiture.

⁴ These video works include *Hyperway* (2018), *Panthalassa* (2015), *Rendezvous* (2016), *The Milky Way* (2015), *Available Light* (2013) and *Chasing the Horizon* (2009).

⁵ Richmond never makes Gideon's name apparent in *The Milky Way*. It's only through scripts where one could stumble upon a character's given name. Richmond creates another layer of information for these characters that he shares with his film crew. Though, he does place Gideon's name in one of his drawings.

be actor Augusto Aguilera's fourth appearance in Richmond's films, and writer Jan Tumlir and musician Marvin Astorga have both been in two films to date.⁶ Richmond does this intentionally for two reasons. The first is to draw threads and connections to past and future works. These same actors play different roles in each video work— as if they are playing an alternative person in a parallel universe. Continuity of actors in Richmond's milieu confuses the viewer as traces of characters infiltrate subsequent works. The second is because he enjoys working with these actors as materials. Not in an objectified manner, but Richmond creates a relationship and familiarity where he can allow the story to evolve based on the actors' intuitive reactions. He understands a general read of their personalities and lets the scenes change based on chance operations. His process resembles more of a painter or sculpture than that of a filmmaker. Video works take an immense amount of preparation, which is evident in the pristine technical presentation of all of Richmond's pieces. However, Richmond does not begin a project with a finalized product in mind. He starts with an overall tone, several characters and a location, and from that he adds and subtracts images as he edits. Often, during post-production, Richmond will return to the filming process and add in new characters or locations. He utilizes a type of virtual mark making by allowing additional moments to infiltrate and morph into the final piece. This approach allows Richmond to create his own multiverse where each piece can exist on its own and be concurrently organized within a type of metagalactic system.

As Richmond constructs his characters to have an on-stage presence and phantom connections to previous work, he also advances his props into the role of active actors. Following Hollywood's trajectory in cinematography of using props and special effects to create the illusion of an alien world, Richmond proudly displays the hand-made qualities of his props. These props, such as asteroids carved out of foam, fog machines in plain view or taxidermy animals reinforce the deliberate constructed nature of Richmond's work. By revealing the labors of production and the unspoken falsehoods of movie-making, it is a reminder that the moving images on screen are not to be read as a polished fiction, but instead a fabrication of Richmond's imagination. The character's cosmic costumes fall within the same crude esthetic. Gideon's non-animated bodysuit in *Milky Way* strongly contrasts with the serious dialogue spoken by the human actors. The celestial being in *Hyperway* is overtly decorated with space-themed toys: a necklace made of glow-in-the-

⁶ Augusto Aguilera: *The Milky Way* (2015), *Panthalassa* (2015), *Rendezvous* (2016), *Hyperway* (2018); Jan Tumlir: *Summary* (2014) and *Hyperway*; Marvin Astorga: *Rendezvous* and *Hyperway*.



top, **Panthalassa**
2015
Production still

bottom, **Hyperway**
2018
3-channel HD video, 16mm film, sound transferred to HD
1 hour, 46 minutes (loop)
Production still



top, *Hyperway*
2018
Video still

bottom, *Available Light*
2013
16mm color film, sound transferred to HD
20 minutes, 32 seconds (Ilop)
Production still

opposite, *Penrose I*
2017
Ink and tape on paper and vellum
10 x 13 inches

dark stars orbits around her neck and photoluminescent makeup adorns her skin. We are led to believe she is superior to the viewer in both cosmic capacity and in divinity, and yet, her costume is distractingly primitive. In spite of their comically absurd appearance, these characters have complex and serious personas.⁷ Richmond's multiverse conjures wonderment and memories of childhood: an innocence where the possibilities of space travel, imaginary friends and disjointed monologues are possible.

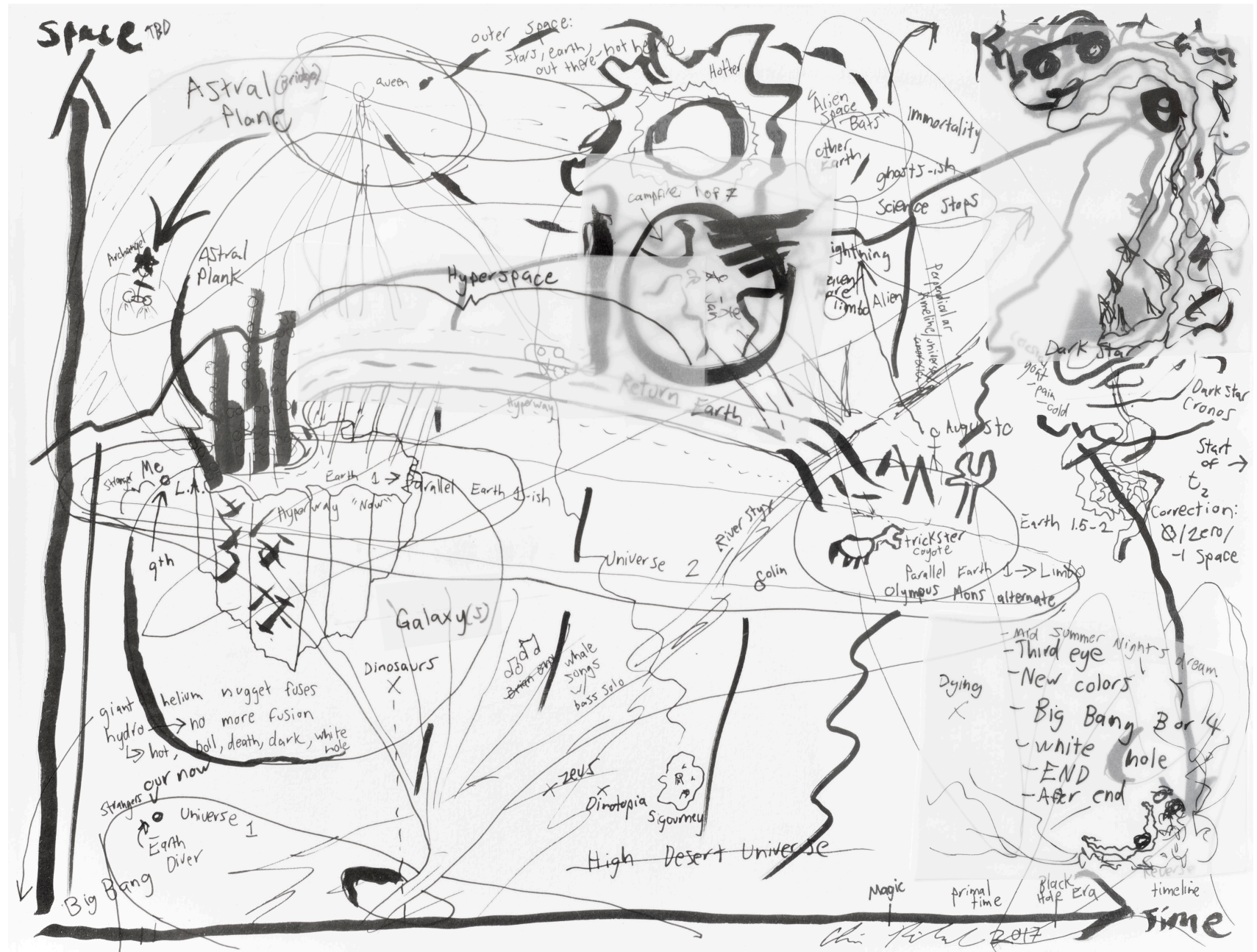
(READING) THE (WRONG) ROAD MAP (UPSIDEDOWN)

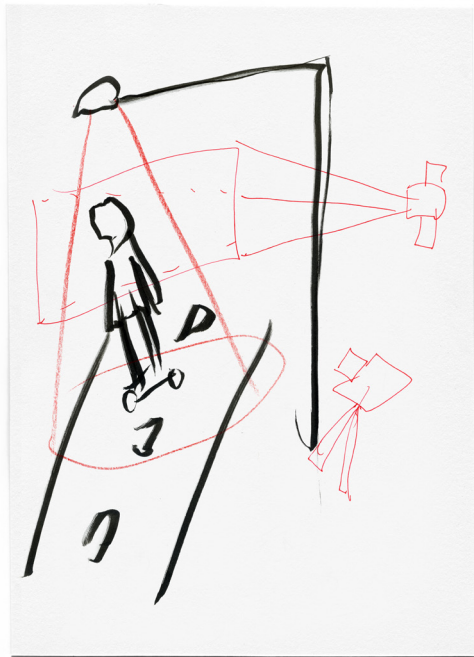
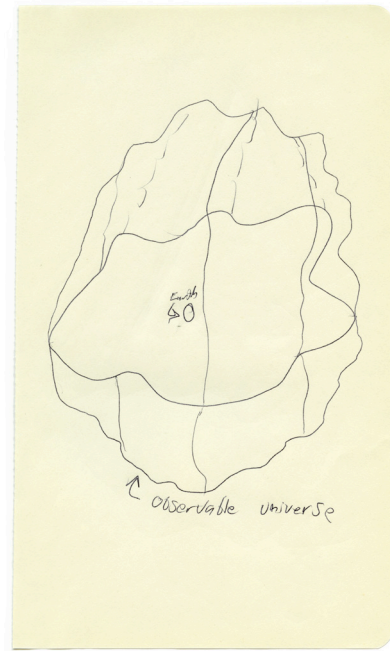
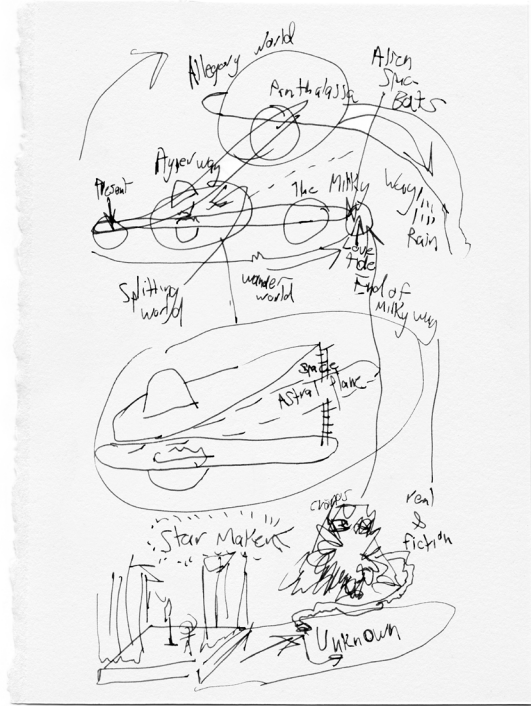
Though Richmond has always had a drawing practice, he has kept his sketches private. Doodles and scribbles have been quickly laid in sketchbooks for years, accompanying his thoughts and research. In a new body of work, Richmond has revisited these previously private marks to create complex drawings which are evident of contemplative and convoluted mind mapping. Here, Richmond uses a Penrose diagram as a way to map both time and space in his drawings.⁸ These drawings combine real truths and those of collective fictional storytelling in an attempt to situate his works into a broader dialogue. For example, in *Penrose 1* (2018) Zeus is located near the high desert universe and not too far from dinosaurs. Different line qualities lay upon each other making it difficult to focus on the entire map all at once, evoking the same cacophony as in his videos. The difference is that these drawings are not neatly rendered like the videos. Instead, they are manic, pulling and pushing the focus from one point to another, both visually and mentally. Vignettes on vellum are placed on top of other sections, obliterating a clear parallel perspective. These drawings bring to the forefront Richmond's own fabricated reality — a reality in which we all have an individualized version. They plot out Richmond's organization of space and time in regards to his oeuvre. In addition to myths and facts listed on the drawings, he includes his own characters and scenarios. Again, it is as if Richmond is giving us too much information to be able to absorb in one sitting, but then again, these drawings are used to situate his video works into a type of chronology.

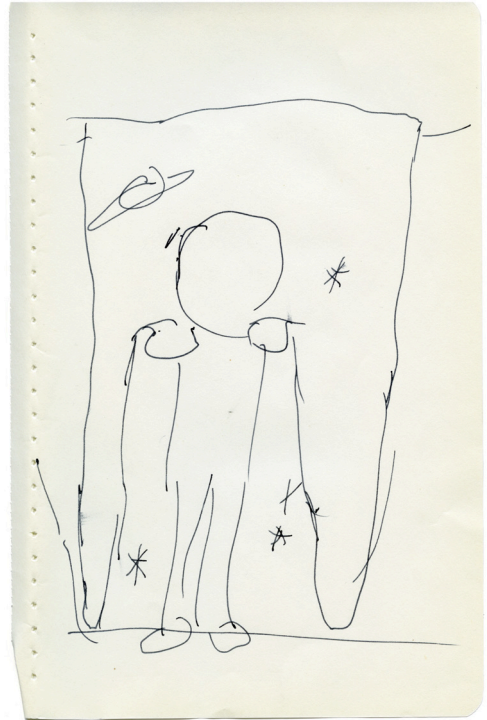
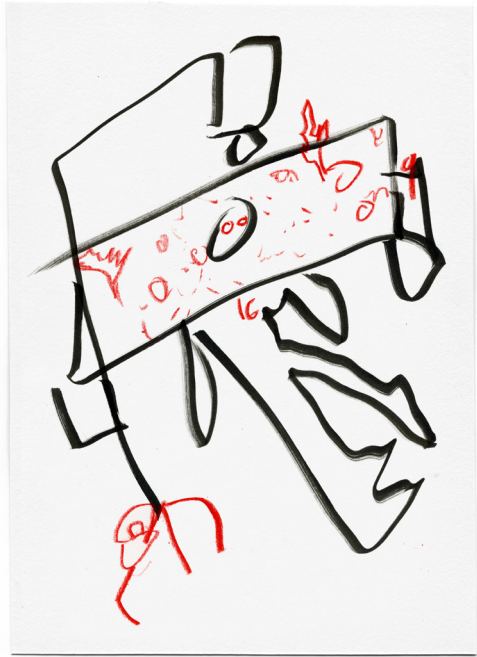
Within his video works, Richmond activates the ubiquitous 1990s sedan as a vehicle

⁷ The physical appearance of the characters in *Hyperway* are the most absurd in all of Richmond's work. In previous works, alien beings have found themselves on Earth, but *Hyperway* is the first film to portray an alien landscape (Mars) with its native creatures. The overlap of both Earth and Mars and their native characters produces a cacophonous and confusing viewing environment.

⁸ A Penrose diagram is a kind of spacetime diagram arranged to make clear the complete causal structure of any given geometry. They are an indispensable map for navigating inside a black hole. Roger Penrose, who invented this kind of diagram in the early 1950s, himself calls them conformal diagrams. Please see <https://jila.colorado.edu/~ajsh/insidebh/penrose.html> for an example.









previous, *Hyperway*
2018

Pages from notebook

top, Video still

bottom, Production still

to transverse through time and space. The sedan creates a point of contention in the continuity of his videos because, depending on the work, it either functions as a metaphorical transport system or as a sophisticated spacecraft. The majority of the dialogue in *The Milky Way* was delivered inside of multiple models of sedans as the characters drove Gideon on the Los Angeles and desert highways. The interior of the car amplifies the character's inner dialogues into a visual experience to allow complicated and uncomfortable character traits that are presented without the typical filter. The interior becomes exterior while encapsulated in a private cavity. *Hyperway* also uses the interior as a space for monologues, but the car travels to and back from a determined location—from Los Angeles to the desert north of Palmdale: from Earth to the planet Mars.

Los Angeles and its surrounding deserts are prominent locations in many of Richmond's work, as both of these locations have been depicted in multitudes of movies. Los Angeles becomes a character in and of itself—a stark concrete landscape connected by a series of long freeways. It, like Richmond, is two characters in one: the city known to its inhabitants and the silent stand-in for multiple locations and time periods. In *Rendezvous* (2016), there is a scene where the camera travels through the interior of the 2nd street tunnel, located in downtown Los Angeles. This tunnel has been used in numerous films and commercials, but it is most well known for its appearance in *Blade Runner* (1982). The reality of the tunnel is forever connected to its fabricated persona and it is unable to detach the dystopic connotations. Los Angeles becomes a constructed icon through visual storytelling and Christopher uses this additional character trait to magnify Los Angeles as a character and backdrop. The duality of the Southern Californian desert landscape could be placed within this same context. Touting both high and low desert landscapes, the terrain superficially remains devoid of life. As rocky formations emerge from the earth, the desert outside of Los Angeles has been used as a backdrop for multiple movies that take place on an alien planet. Richmond has cast the desert as both an extraterrestrial planet and as a destination landscape outside of Los Angeles. By using both the actual physical location rooted in reality and the constructed reality built through films, Richmond is able to insert another complicated layer to his already intricate multiverse.

As the car travels through landscapes, both familiar and foreign, its passengers grapple with what it means to be human. Accompanied by disjointed non-linear segments, Richmond's characters propel through space in a truly epic road trip. Rather than relying

on time to pace his work, Richmond utilizes travel as a means to further his characters' development. From what could be considered as shared, universal knowledge, such as the existence of space and certain global mythologies, Richmond has formed a parallel reality. By displaying the craftsmanship of cinematography in both highly rendered lush imagery and through the exposed special effects, *Hyperway* encompasses all of Richmond's past tropes and intensifies them through a combination of multiple screens, a florescent color palette and distraught characters. Because the work is so unbelievably rich in characters and visual stimulation, *Hyperway* can easily be seen as the apex of Richmond's current work. But, to better understand the journey of its characters, both physically and psychologically, it is best to situate *Hyperway* within the labyrinth of Richmond's practice.



Image Credits

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p. 147, 149 (bottom), 150 (top), 152 (top), 153, 156 (top), 157 (bottom): courtesy of Christopher Richmond and Moskowitz Bayse

p. 151 (top): photo by Boa Simon

top, *Hyperway*
2018
Production still

bottom, Video still