

# Time Out

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**Miranda Lichtenstein,**  
***Sanctuary for a Wild Child***  
Whitney Museum at Philip Morris,  
through Sept 21  
(see Museums).

For her latest installation, Miranda Lichtenstein focuses on the phenomenon known as “wild children”—human beings in both history and legend who were raised in the wild, often by animals. Beginning with Romulus and Remus, and spanning from Tarzan to Donnie in Nickelodeon’s *The Wild Thornberrys*, the idea of these children has always fascinated and troubled people who wonder how human psychology develops without the guidance or strictures of civilization. Lichtenstein explores how these kids might construct their unique realities, and how we in turn might construct our ideas of them.

Lichtenstein darkens the gallery and projects a series of elegant photographic images (here on DVD) that present the children’s inner lives against one wall. *Lost Beyond Telling* and *The Color of Distance* evoke home-sweet-homes out in nature, secure enclaves that are bound by twigs and sticks. Similarly, *Elsewhere* depicts a tree supporting four bird’s nests, which could be, in effect, a dreamy memory of a wild child’s hometown. In *Legend*, an eerie shadow of a gazelle—one wild child’s conception of mother—resembles a cave-dweller’s hallucination. Like James Casebere and Gregory Crewdson before her, Lichtenstein actually constructs these scenes as small dioramas in her studio, so that the photographs are

deftly poised on a double-edged sword of constructed consciousness. While wonderfully able to conjure the mysterious imprints of experience on a wild child’s mind, their very artificiality pulls the rug out from under any idea of a wild child’s supposed “natural state.”

Lichtenstein also hangs drawings in a smaller, round, well-lit space that she has built within the gallery. Recalling a number of actual wild children, these read like exercises in Critical Theory 101, as they refer to typology and classification. A drawing representing the Karpfen bear-girl, for example, shows the name of the child paired with an illustration of a diapered infant. The interplay between exotic subject and everyday image suggests that the line between nature and civilized life is a fine one. But the strategy feels academic when compared to the evocative images that appear in the darkness outside.—Robert Mahoney



Miranda Lichtenstein, *There are no words to describe it*, 2001.