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When I was eight I would sometimes slip on the Batman suit my mother had made me, steal out into the suburban night, and spy on friends through the windows of their houses. The feeling this gave me was complex: potent detachment from that dull, well-lit life, as well as a longing to be back inside, eating ice cream in the glow of the TV. Looking at Miranda Lichtenstein's "Danbury Road," a series

of large-scale night photographs of mostly upscale suburban Connecticut dwellings, reminded me of those Bat forays. Lichtenstein's isolate dream houses elicit an adult version of that same conflicted impression, twisting together the urge to be invited into a home and the desire to violate its sanctity, if only through the cold, potentially predatory gaze of the stranger. It's this outsider's ambivalence, coupled with a formal severity, that prevents Lichtenstein's series from falling into the Suburbs-Are-Actually-Kind-of-Menacing cliché first plumbed by David Lynch in his 1986 *Blue Velvet* and more recently given body in Gregory Crewdson's staged photography.

The finest of Lichtenstein's works (all 1997-98) are suffused with a chilly, almost marmoreal classicism. Part of this restraint is formal and/or conceptual: The artist, treating light as a found object, has used only available illumination. *Untitled (#12)* shows a small, discreetly modern home set against a tree line and lighted by the starry night sky and the porch lights, which primly frame the architecture's austere Bauhaus-ish rectilinearity. Like most of the house lights in the series, these seem to have just come startlingly to life, as if tripped by a motion detector hidden somewhere in the lawn. Lights like this tell us not so much where the house is as where we are—on private property, of course.

If Lichtenstein's attention to the formidable, albeit sepulchral, privacy of these abodes is at times flattering or cowed or nostalgic, in several works she reverses these currents with a simple device: the brake lights of her car occasionally



Miranda Lichtenstein, *Untitled (#8)*, 1997-98,
Cibachrome print, 30 x 40".

splashing a toasty reddish-orange across the foreground. Suddenly the tight-lipped house in the distance has an air of vulnerability, of being cased. Perhaps it's the ominous blood-warmth of the light, or the implied presence of a car (and hence power) in the viewer's vicinity. In any case, with their rich cinematic-narrative atmosphere—all the more powerful for seeming to define the threshold of a drama—these photographs shift the point of view from supplicant stranger to that of predatory other: burglar, serial killer, extraterrestrial. It's *The Ice Storm* meets *Wolfen* meets *In Cold Blood*. The hint offered by the images lit by taillights of a series-within-a-series infuses the Becheresque Conceptual deadpan of the project with popular cultural life.

Balanced on the edge between familiarity and formalism in this way, Lichtenstein's portrayal of upper-crusty suburbia is kept from tipping over into trite sociological observation, on the one hand, and poker-faced Conceptualism on the other. It's a tightwire act, and Lichtenstein walks it beautifully.

—Thad Ziolkowski