

# artext

THE World FROM L.A.

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by MALIK GAINES

MIRANDA LICHTENSTEIN:  
*Scenes from Lovers' Lane*

Suddenly, there's a slew of young photographers, all rather photogenic themselves, who use the old magic of the captured image to position themselves along one or another side of realism. These artists are united by material, a tendency to have gone to the same school, and a moment of media attention. The descendants of Sherman, Goldin, and Opie, they constitute a *movement du jour*.

It is unfortunate for Miranda Lichtenstein that her onerous landscapes may be mistakenly taken as an offshoot of this new, youth-oriented realism. Lichtenstein (not related to Roy) uses found environments as her subjects, partly lit night scenes of natural overgrowth encroaching upon and overwhelming delicate traces of architecture. These scenes are inhabited by a supernatural potentiality, suggesting the spaces' dark histories and dangerous futures while preserving their elusive presents. Lichtenstein's photographs present realism inasmuch as they represent certain aspects of a found reality. Yet Lichtenstein draws her work into that place realism cannot reach by means of its own steady momentum: the alluring world of fantasy.

Lichtenstein's greatest strength is her ability to manipulate photography's precarious placement between painting and cinema. The conflation of these two forms brings each medium's particular circumstances into mutual play, pointing at once to Casper David Friedrich and Wes Craven, Kant's romanticism and Eisenstein's modernity. All of this is located in the never-ending instant of the photograph, and separating these elements is like untangling ivy. For the sake of investigation, let us, nevertheless, try. Take, for example, *Untitled #6 (Bennett's Farm)* from Lichtenstein's recent

show of new photographs at L.A.'s Goldman Tevis Gallery. This seething piece captures a lake surrounded by woods. The water reflects the direct light in such a way that it appears to be painted, like Monet's famous lily ponds. Above the surface, the trees and other growth stand flatly in the light, presenting themselves clearly while alluding to the acres of dark wilderness of which they are only the beginning. In the distance, partially obscured by teeming plant life, stands an old wooden house with a light on. While the photograph maintains its composure as deliberately and beautifully as a well-painted image, hints of dramatic tension are also in place, opening the possibility of the life surrounding this moment.

Questions arise: Where are the house's inhabitants? Are they inside? Perhaps they're sleeping. Perhaps they're haunted by their natural environment. Perhaps they've been murdered in their beds with no one to hear their screams. Or are the murderers lurking in the woods, or just behind us, waiting to strike? There is no one present to hear our cries; there is only the indifference of shrubs, the lake, the dark night. Or, as the series' title, "Lovers' Lane," suggests, perhaps it is not the awesome sense of death which fills the air, but desire, death's distant cousin. Perhaps the rustling we hear in the bushes is not an approaching killer, but instead, two love-struck kids having forbidden sex in their own dark wilderness. All of this is, of course, typical conjecture. It is what Gertrude Stein described as a strange syncopation, the inherent element of dramatic linearity by which an audience is constantly slightly behind or slightly ahead of the unfolding story.

(LEFT TO RIGHT)  
 MIRANDA LICHTENSTEIN, *Untitled #4 (Richardson Park)*, 1999, C-print, 30 x 40 in.;  
*Untitled #24 (Martin Park)*, 2000, C-print, 30 x 40 in.;  
*Untitled #6 (Bossett's Farm)*, 1999, C-print, 30 x 40 in.  
 Courtesy Goldman Tevis, Los Angeles.



The sense of narrative cinema is especially present in the horror tropes the work dutifully reconfigures. Lichtenstein uses only the light that is present plus her harsh car headlights to set these scenes, much like the careful concealing and revealing that creates the terror in *Nosferatu* or *A Nightmare on Elm Street*, or dare I say, *The Blair Witch Project*. Lichtenstein's choice of remote make-out spots as subjects in the "Lovers' Lane" series heightens her work's relationship to the horror genre and that genre's priorities of the last two decades: the supernatural terror that surrounds teenagers and their monstrous sexualities. Were I more compelled by psychoanalysis, I'd probably find it to be a comfortable resting place in the work. The myriad clingy vines that tie sex to death find fertile ground in the fields of the unconscious. There is, as always, a political element involved: the sex/death continuum tends to move from the dark recesses of the mind into the harsh light of "modern" American culture, weaving together everything from the atomic bikini to the AIDS epidemic. It is no coincidence that Hollywood has pumped new blood into the sexy horror flicks of the AIDS era, a conservative move that ultimately, through metaphor, reaffirms cultural fear. What Lichtenstein does with this sex/death relationship is to cleverly re-articulate a trope that is troubling to begin with. Fortunately, however, that framework does not dominate the work.

Using familiar tropes is a necessity in work that relies in some part on pastiche. As vividly as these pieces recall the specifics of horror cinema, so do they refer to one of that genre's inspirations, Romantic painting. The work of Friedrich comes to mind consis-

tently, as gnarled branches and shafts of shadow frame each carefully placed view. As if cueing her observers to consider the work in nineteenth-century terms, each bit of endangered architecture within Lichtenstein's photographs is old-fashioned. *Untitled #24 (Martin Park)* contains a dilapidated wooden fence that may well have been built in the nineteenth century. *Untitled #16 (Cannon)* focuses the gaze on a cannon that is perfectly colonial. Even the more contemporary built objects (a chain-link fence, metal bleachers) are simple and industrial. Yet more than simply representing anachronisms, Lichtenstein's process calls her to actually perform a Romantic role. Friedrich would place an observer in the foreground, his back turned to us as he stands before whatever awesome scene presents itself; here, the photographer occupies precisely this latter role. Lichtenstein selects her sites through daytime interviews and explorations, but treks at night, alone, into the dark woods to take pictures. She becomes the Romantic hero, the individual challenging nature for the sake of transcendence, for the opportunity to reckon with the grand, unknowable sublime.

Yet if Lichtenstein were merely trying to reproduce nineteenth-century universality, the work would constitute a hopeless waste of film. She is successful because she applies her own shades of awe over what, in a different light, might constitute a view of realism. She invents her own subjective sublime by filtering her material through disjunctive art traditions, arriving finally at a familiar, if still elusive, fantasy. As for the other young photographers of the day, Lichtenstein hasn't necessarily gone out on a limb. Justine Kurland's photographs of Caucasian girls in the forest also refer to Romanticism through the quotation of old paintings (though they don't do much else). Malerie Marder's dramatic photos are tense, entertaining fragments of filmic language. Deborah Mesa-Pelly expertly inserts the magical into the mundane with her photos of mossy caverns beneath the floorboards of her bedroom. Jin Soo Kim builds dreamy formal settings out of the conventions of daily life. Each of these women is using the camera to reconstruct what is real and what is art, ultimately dissolving at least some of the differences. Lichtenstein's expression of this transformation is particularly succinct. Her simple landscapes slip smoothly beyond the frame of the captured image, shrouding themselves in dark webs of culture, creating something that, in my humble judgment at least, is quite beautiful.

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