



#### IN HER ELEMENT

Artist Miranda Lichtenstein's photos and drawings (example below r.) probe nature's feral power.

THOMAS MONASTER DAILY NEWS

# Home for the untamed

Unsettling visions of wildlife and wild children at the Whitney BY CELIA MCGEE

Artist Miranda Lichtenstein is off to Malaysia next month, but first she had to travel inside her mind.

In "Sanctuary for a Wild Child," her installation at the Whitney Museum of American Art at Philip Morris, she reflects on her deepest feelings.

Her exhibit explores the history and myths of children raised by wolves, bears, panthers and other animals, beings on the fault lines between civilization and wilderness, nature and culture, shelter and abandonment, speechlessness and language. The work comprises drawings mounted inside a circular enclosure that opens up to a video projection of 21 carefully arranged photographs.

Lichtenstein, 32, first made a name for herself as a

photographer with the series "Lover's Lane," about high-school trysting places, and "Danbury Road," which detailed suburban houses in Connecticut.

Her "Sanctuary for a Wild Child," she says, "is the topography of my imagination. Making it was very hermetic." Even the photographs in the show, which look as though they were shot outdoors, were created from miniature naturescapes constructed in her studio.

"The Whitney came on a studio visit to see my 'Lover's Lane,' pictures, in which I had just finished tracking these places where teenagers go at night and how fantasy-oriented a lot of those spaces are," she says, looking around the small, neat workspace she rents in a converted industrial building hard by the Holland Tunnel. "Leaning up against my wall was a panel of photographs I had taken of artificial environments I'd been

building here. That's what caught their eye."

In addition to the photographs, she had been experimenting with drawings inspired by a fascination with feral children that had gripped her since she first came upon Russ Rymer's book "Genie: A Scientific Tragedy." It's an account of a California girl imprisoned in a back room by her father for the first 13 years of her life.

Lichtenstein was intrigued by the realization that few images of history's so-called wild children survive, but that they have all been given strangely evocative names. She started imitating illustrations from 1950s child-rearing manuals and labeling them as "The Indian Panther Child," "The Maurentian Gazelle-Child," "Edith of Ohio," "Tomko of Zips," "The Wolf-Children of Mindapore," "The Champagne Feral-Girl" and others.

"The names are all we have left," she says. "They're how stories get passed on when there's so little known."

#### BASED IN TRAGEDY

On the other hand, her projected slides of a house, nests, spirals, animal shadows and vegetation, "are not so literal." They represent the children's memories and "are about our own projections."

"There's been this romanticizing going on since the 12th century," says Lichtenstein. "[It's as if] these children — Kaspar Hauser, the Wild Boy of Avignon, The Wolf Children of Mindapore — came from an Edenic paradise. But almost always the assumption is that they were abandoned by mothers who had had them out of wedlock.

"And they're all based in a tragedy — the moment the children were 'saved' from a savage state, their worlds collapsed. They usually died young, or ended up in mental institutions."

Whether an artist is a wild child or the epitome of civilization is an opinion Lichtenstein doesn't want to chance. But, she says, "my oldest, oldest friend has said to me, 'You're the wild child.'"

Brought up in Brookline, Mass., by her mother, a law professor, Lichtenstein spent every possible summer in New York.

"I was hanging out in the city when I was 15," she says, "and from an early age I was very independent."

After college at Sarah Lawrence, she attended the cutting-edge California Institute of the Arts in suburban Los Angeles, near where her father was editor of The Jewish Journal of Los Angeles.

She's a little sad that neither of her parents saved the countless childhood drawings in which she invented "these little rabbit worlds. I would draw a half-section of a

mountain, divide it into little rooms and chambers, and populate it with bunnies. Definitely, there's a connection to 'Sanctuary for a Wild Child.'"

Now Malaysia awaits, where she'll undertake her new project: photographing and videotaping an eerie enterprise called Cyberjawa. It is a city and government seat, she explains, that Indonesia's recently deposed prime minister ordered to be erected in the jungle, laying "acres and acres" of palm-oil plantations to waste in the process.

"I had this idea of it as a failed utopia. It looked a little bit like a ghost town," Lichtenstein says of an earlier visit. "You couldn't tell whether it was a city being built or demolished."

These days her walls are lined with photographs from that initial trip — hyper-real, sun-blasted images of ambiguity and architecture.

In one, a sign reads, "STOP: No Natures Call Here Please."

No wild children allowed. ♦

"Sanctuary for a Wild Child" continues at Whitney Museum of American Art at Philip Morris, 120 Park Ave. at 42nd St., through Sept. 21.



Tomko of Zips

MIRANDA LICHTENSTEIN