



american gothic

AMERICAN BEAUTY INVESTIGATED SUBURBIA'S ANGSTY INHABITANTS, BUT PHOTOGRAPHER MIRANDA LICHTENSTEIN IS MORE INTERESTED IN THE SCARY SPACE ITSELF. BY KARA JESELLA

Portrait of the artist by L.W. Schermerhorn. Right, print from "Dusk" by Lichtenstein, courtesy of Goldman Tevis.

Who would guess that a petite, unpretentious woman with an easy laugh and quick wit is also a peeping tom? Miranda Lichtenstein certainly doesn't fit a criminal profile, but she could probably be convicted of a few minor infractions, including trespassing. The altogether unthreatening photographer is known in the art world for making uninvited nightly forays to strangers' homes and deserted spaces, accompanied only by a novelist friend. She has documented her escapades in two series of prints, some of which will appear in an upcoming exhibit at Manhattan's I-20 gallery. "I grew up in the city, and anything naturey feels terrifying," says the artist, whose images of the suburbs are anything but pastoral. "In a way, my work is an investigation of my own fear."

That fear is palpable in "Danbury Road," her 1998 solo show, which depicts hoity-toity Danbury, Connecticut after hours. Solitary cottages and sprawling mansions are lit only through their windows and by headlights and brakelights from the photographer's car. "On the one hand, I identified with the people inside the houses, who would have been terrified if they had known I was there," she says. "On the other, I was essentially a trespasser and afraid of confrontation." She delved deeper into these feelings for her next one-woman show, "Lover's Lane." The ostensible subject is suburbia's football fields, parks, golf courses, and other iconic spaces that most of us associate with good, harmless fun. Not Lichtenstein. "I was fascinated by this idea that suburban teenagers would go out and party in the woods at night," she says. After reading the Ridgefield, Connecticut police log every week to find out where adolescents had been caught drinking and drugging, she would stake out the spaces when no one was around. Seen through Lichtenstein's lens, a lone set of bleachers unpopulated by rowdy high schoolers could be a still from "Nightmare on Elm Street." It's a landscape where danger is always lurking, the artist suggests, not just in spite of our

sense that this place is innocuous, but because of it.

According to this logic, Lichtenstein's childhood could be the fodder for a teen scream flick. She grew up in a typically artsy, intellectual New York City family, where dad was an editor at *The New York Times*, mom was a law professor, and big brother was a budding (and now very successful) photojournalist. Though she's been seriously snapping pictures since she was ten, Lichtenstein first examined issues of public and private space when she directed and shot a short mockumentary while getting an MFA from California Institute of the Arts. It's appropriately titled "Flasher" since, in Lichtenstein's words, "I am always getting flashed. I have been flashed all over the world." After graduation, she did a five-month stint as Associate Photo Editor at *Interview*. It was walking home from her office at night through the almost barren Financial District that she began taking the photographs that would become her first show. She was mesmerized by the solitude and darkness punctuated only by neon lights and, needless to say, the day job didn't last.

Lichtenstein now keeps busy from 9 to 5 with studio appointments and a ten-day-a-month job as Photo Researcher at *Vogue*, but she's still intent on investigating the world after dark. Her photographs – including one new image – have been selected to appear in "Dusk," a multimedia exhibit curated by art critic David Hunt that's slated for September. The show will include the work of other artists grappling with the title subject, including Jeremy Blake, Kiki Seror, and Lucky DeBellevue. Afterwards, Lichtenstein will shoot the images she hopes will become her next show when she travels to the ill-fated Cyberjaya – a planned future city in Malaysia that was left unfinished when the Asian government crashed. Unlike rural Connecticut, it's a place most people don't know much about, but Lichtenstein will try to shed some light on the subject.