

A Home in the Universe: Kate McQuillen on Night House

By Miguel de Baca



Kate McQuillen, *Night House* (2015), printed styrene affixed to the facade of a home.

The epistemology of the home is complex. Home is a location that, to quote feminist critic Donna Haraway, makes “claims on people’s lives.”¹ It is a physical place in the world as much as a place in discourse. A home conveys return. As a site, it is the beginning and end of a journey. But as a body of knowledge, home resides within us as individuals, a habit of mind. Kate McQuillen’s dreamy, cosmic project, *Night House* (2015), plays with our instincts about what, and where, is home.

Night House is a print-based work in two parts. The first was a site-specific installation in which large sheets of styrene printed with Hubble Space Telescope photographs were temporarily stapled to the façade of a house in the Chicago suburb of Oak Park, in a way that suggested the structure’s dissolution into

the night sky. The second is an edition of posters, screenprinted with whimsical inks including glow-in-the-dark, metallic and varnish, sold to fund the installation.

Night House was part of the Second Terrain Biennial (23 August–30 September 2015), an extension of the Terrain Exhibitions alternative art space founded in 2011 by artist Sabina Ott and writer John Paulett in the front yard of their house, also in Oak Park. Their mission was to generate a novel conversation about public art, introduce a new relationship between contemporary art and local community (there is an elementary school across the street), and challenge stereotypes about suburban space as conservative, boring and devoid of emergent culture.

Suburbs, of course, vary in character. The Village of Oak Park happens to be

a progressive enclave situated between working-class suburbs to the north and south, Chicago’s notoriously beleaguered West Side (Austin) to the east, and the more homogeneously affluent River Forest to the west. The birthplace of Frank Lloyd Wright’s Prairie style (his Home and Studio are located there), Oak Park combines historically significant architecture, liberal politics and an atmosphere of tolerance similar to what one might find in artsier quarters of Chicago proper.

The Biennial expands the Terrain Exhibitions idea—“site-specific art made for front yards, balconies, and porches,” according to the website—to sites around the world. The recent iteration involved 75 artists and three collectives at 60 locations in the United States, Canada, Cambodia and Denmark. Ott exercised a light touch, directly curating only a few

projects on her block, while artists and homeowners elsewhere were encouraged to develop their own collaborations. *Night House* was installed on the house of curator and writer Claudine Isé—a 1911, American Craftsman, two-story house with an open porch, gabled roof with wide eaves and exposed brackets. Typical of its section of Oak Park, it is set back from the street by a modest yard and situated close to its neighbors. McQuillen's installation stretched 25 feet across the façade, covering the shingled second story and the stucco porch pillars.

By day, the building showed that which is usually revealed only at night. In crepuscular light, the façade withdrew into the blue and purple of the late summer sky. At night, however, the installation came alive when interior lamplight seen through the windows showed it to be inhabited. In McQuillen's screenprint (which employs the aptly named Neenah "eclipse black" paper), the sliver of a waning moon at the top left echoes a lit spherical lantern in Isé's home office. Inside and outside collide.

McQuillen's work, most of which takes the form of prints, has repeatedly dealt with the public and private self, the monumental and the vulnerable, and the pressure between assertion and obliteration. I first met the artist during her 2014 residency at Lake Forest College, where she created a two-part installation of collaged monotypes on the theme of surveillance (the title, *No Such Agency*, supplies

the same acronym as the National Security Administration). *No Such Agency I* is a wall-sized agglomeration of black-and-white monoprinted squares. On the right, a silhouetted female figure drawn to the proportions of McQuillen's body is shown holding a camera aloft, posed as the stereotypical tourist, blithely oblivious to billowing plumes of ominous black matter. *No Such Agency II* applies the same technique to a 10-1/2-foot-tall cylindrical pillar rigged with interior lights. The stateliness of the columnar form is undermined—deliberately, I think—by the irregular seams between the individual slips of paper, rendering it decorative, mosaic-like.

No Such Agency shares the themes of McQuillen's *X-Rays* series (2012), pressure monoprints that depict gauzy lingerie concealing matchbooks and pocketknives. Anyone who has traveled through an airport in the last 15 years will instantly get the point: this is the disgruntled mien of the 21st century, in which we surrender privacy in the interest of security. More than the specter of match-wielding fanatics, McQuillen evokes the public consternation over the implementation of backscatter X-ray body scans at American airport security checkpoints. To decline these scans, in which TSA staff see the contours of the body under one's clothing, means submitting to hands-on inspection. McQuillen's prints depict dangerous contraband sheathed within garments of erotic desire, as if to prompt the question: *What*

is it that you want to see?

Night House marks McQuillen's migration from the ambivalent constructs of the paranoid homeland to those of the home, keeping in play the consequences of visibility and invisibility. One of the inspirations for Terrain Exhibitions was the lawn ornamentation in the yards of Sabina Ott's neighbors, which defied the common invisibility of suburbia within metropolitan space. McQuillen's *Night House* embraces the wonder of strangeness in a familiar place. It positions the viewer in front of a house that is also the sky and by extension the universe—a position of compelling coincidence unifying the intimate and the vast unknown. One wonders if the human fascination with outer space must in some way derive from our sense of being perpetually marginal to it, invisible to it, comprehending our smallness within its expanse. *Night House* accepts being at home as the precondition for venturing beyond.

I met McQuillen to discuss *Night House*, printmaking and the home. The following is an abridgment of our conversation.

Miguel de Baca What motivated your interest in *Night House*? What are the issues present that drive your further thinking in the printmaking field?

Kate McQuillen I think the big motivator in this project was taking something really solid and then turning it into something almost immaterial, making it feel



Left: Kate McQuillen, *Night House Poster* (2015), screenprint, 20 x 16 inches. Open edition. Printed and published by Lights Out Press, Chicago, IL.
Right: Kate McQuillen, *Night House* (2015), printed styrene affixed to the facade of a home.



Kate McQuillen, *No Such Agency I* (2014), collaged monoprints, site-specific installation at the Sonnenschein Gallery and Albright Room, Lake Forest College, 138 x 168 inches.

transient or changeable. I was interested in the idea that you could take something that was steady and make it seem unsteady. And along with that, working on a really, really large scale. It felt like it needed to be that big in order to get that feeling across.

Night House was essentially a large-scale graphic that had a short shelf-life. There are other contemporary printmakers who are working with these ideas: there is a lot of dialogue in *Printeresting's Ghost* (an online publication developed by Amze Emmons, R. L. Tillman and Jason Urban) with artists who are working with ideas of cloaking and ghost-like things that are changeable and fleeting. They were looking at *Night House* as a cloaking device; that I really liked, and I do think there are ties in print to that. We all know that prints are impermanent in some sense.

MdB That quality is also what is so moving about Robert Rauschenberg's *Hoarfrost* solvent transfers on silk and cotton (recently shown in "The Serial Impulse" at the National Gallery of Art; see *Art in Print* Mar–Apr 2016).

KM It really pulled it together for me to see Rauschenberg's work on something that was not canvas. Kind of in between a canvas and paper.

MdB When I look at Rauschenberg, I get a sense of inversion or playfulness, but I never really got the sense of disguise or cloaking, so seeing it on silk was transformative.

KM Those works were amazing, and they did have that haunting feel, like a remnant of something. The fact that those images were directly transferred from newspapers really brought that home. A print is usually something that has come off of a matrix. But Rauschenberg's specific use of newspaper transfer makes it seem as though we're the matrix—our daily life, that is, in the form of the news.

MdB In *Night House*, you're cloaking a home in something that represents the universe.



Left: Kate McQuillen, *No Such Agency II* (2014), collaged monoprints, site-specific installation at the Sonnenschein Gallery and Albright Room, Lake Forest College, 126 x 15 x 15 inches.
Right: Detail from *No Such Agency II* (2014).

KM The universe is our home. It is the unknown, but it's also our home. We *do* live in it. Starlight is something that we see and experience but it started so, so far away. And that, to me, is an amazing thing, that something so far away comes to us here.

MdB Just recently we saw that Albert Einstein's prediction about gravitational waves was proven—when two black holes collide, there is a sound. And I just think it's astounding that there are these antennae in Washington and Louisiana that can pick up a sound coming from a billion light years away.

KM I've always been interested in things that are unseen or unseeable and making them visible. The X-Ray work that I did earlier was about those same ideas. At that point, I was talking about surveillance, that it's a way to make the unseen seen. So this question about light as a metaphor for knowledge, for understanding, has been in my work for years. Starlight in *Night House* is the evidence of something so, so far away and our understanding of something so, so far away merging with our understanding of our known space.

MdB That is a bridge to thinking about printmaking, too. The matrix is, in a way, the invisible thing.

KM The matrix is the thing that holds





Left: Kate McQuillen, *Matches* (2012), pressure monograph, 30 x 22 inches. **Right:** Kate McQuillen, *Drop Point Blade* (2012), pressure monograph, 30 x 22 inches. Both photos: Stephen DeSantis.

all the power. The print goes out into the world and it does its thing, but the matrix is always there to be replicated and to continue that process over and over and over. So in *Night House*, there was just the one printing, but I still do have the digital file I made from public domain Hubble Telescope photos. I could apply that to other homes in the future. I would love to find more and more homes where I could do this and then look at them collectively.

MdB This is not directly related to what you just said, but I was also thinking about a *New Yorker* article of awhile ago discussing this idea that the word “galaxy” is derived from the Greek word for “milk,” and how milk has such a strong connotation with femininity—I guess more specifically to womanhood, but also domesticity and nurturing as one type of femininity.²

KM The Milky Way is our home within the bigger universe. When you look at the Milky Way, it’s like a spilled liquid. It’s something that flows across our sky. The Greeks chose milk to be the liquid

that they referred to—it’s telling. It’s comforting. And it was really important to me that this piece appeared to have the Milky Way in it. The Hubble photos were way out in space. There was no reference point. It didn’t really feel like what I see when I look at the stars. So I altered that starting image to make it look like the Milky Way. I wanted it to feel like when you were standing and looking at the house, you were out in the middle of nowhere looking at the night sky. So the perspective is that of humans on earth looking at space.

MdB Your digital file is a composite, so it shows a sky that cannot actually be seen anywhere.

Let’s talk about this article you forwarded me by Arièle Dionne-Krosnick, “What Do Houses Want?,” on the subject of houses having individual identities.³ Thinking about *Night House* as an individual, a character, I was wondering what you think are its dialogues and desires?

KM When I first pitched this project, I was just thinking about cloaking the

house. And then over the course of the few months that I was working with Claudine Isé, I got to know her and her family a little bit. She has a daughter who might be seven or eight, and she and her friends would play on the lawn when I was installing. When I went to take the final documentary photograph, they were out of town. When I got there, their daughter’s scooter was leaning against the front door. At first my instinct was to take everything away—to have this pristine photo that was just the house. But then I realized that I wanted to have the scooter in the photo as evidence that the family lives there.

That led to other decisions, like leaving the window shades staggered. And that was really unexpected. Dionne-Krosnick’s essay mentions that the house takes on the identities of the people who live there and then gives back to them in that way. That was something that I really wanted to keep in the photograph.

MdB That reminds me also of installation work or process art. I’m thinking of specifically Anne Wagner’s writing on Gordon

Matta-Clark and his architectural interventions on houses, because I think that work involves a social context that exceeds the gesture of cutting the architecture and becomes about the history and the context of that specific site.⁴

KM I love his work because it is not only destructive, but also constructive at the same time. In *Night House*, thinking about the house disappearing temporarily does have a somewhat destructive bent to it. If the house were not there anymore—there is something unsettling in that.

MdB By making it invisible, you've destroyed it.

KM Right. If I could do this project again in another location, I would do it on a home out in the countryside, where I could put it up against a really, really starry sky. I would make it look *more* like it was disappearing.

MdB As an aside, have you been to the Chinati Foundation in Marfa, Texas? The biggest thrill is to see Donald Judd's *100 Untitled Works in Mill Aluminum* (1982–86) inside two artillery sheds adapted with floor-to-ceiling windows. When the setting sun illuminates the boxes, they virtually disappear into reflected light. You realize the potential of that work to transform the beholder's perception of his or her own space because you personally feel as though you've also been dissolved into the radiant sunlight. It is a really interesting experience, and one that, like you've been saying, can only be available to us when there's no visual interference.

KM In this project, I had an interest in taking on the role of a foreman, of someone running a construction project. That is exciting to me as an artist and as a way of working; I've found that I love putting together projects that involve not only the physical making, but also the execution.

MdB In my book on the sculptor Anne Truitt, I consider that when she was living in Japan (1964–67), her studio operated like a small corporation of which she was the chief executive. She had to find industrial fabricators, locate places to buy paint, and locate someone to solder the edges of the sculptures. Compare that to Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro's iconic *Womanhouse* (1972), which, of course, physically occupied a house,

but was equally about cultivating a community of artists. Chicago was a foreman in a different way. The project was about embracing women's work and encouraging collaboration amongst women, grounded in an ideological standpoint.

KM It was pretty much all women who made *Night House* happen. Some guys did show up at the end to pack up the work on the house.

MdB You could have done it if you'd wanted to, right?

KM I didn't have the insurance required to do it. But [in terms of domesticity as a gendered construct] I do think you're right to notice that this happened on a house rather than some other space. It's relevant to the project. I've thought about executing it on other types of surfaces, like warehouse spaces, but the domestic element became a huge part of the work conceptually.

The poster was another way in which community became part of the project. It was essentially supported by friends and people who follow my artwork. So there was the public aspect of the artwork itself, and then there was the public aspect of funding it through the print. I think everybody who bought a poster felt like they had a little piece of this house.

MdB In *No Such Agency* and the *X-Ray Series*, personal identity becomes public, insofar as the works are about your own body. In *Night House*, a family's home becomes public. The ideas merge the personal, intimate, and even emotional. That is, not emotional in a specifically sentimental sense, but the work on surveillance seems to be about violation and measuring one's personal reaction to how much of yourself you're willing to give up. You can read that in terms of gender, because I think women are always asked to give up more of themselves personally than men.

KM In the documentary photograph for *Night House*, the stars are the first thing you see. But there's also radiant light coming out of the windows that to me, talking about light reaching out, refers to the people inside. That's their light combined with the starlight. Although it's the façade of the house we're looking at, we're really talking about what's happening inside the house.

MdB That's a beautiful point.

KM And again that's visualized through the light, and that's something I always come back to. Internal luminosity is a reflection of a person, an identity or a presence. ■

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Notes:

1. Donna Haraway, "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective," *Feminist Studies* 14, no. 3 (Autumn 1988): 589.
2. David Owen, "The Dark Side: Making War on Light Pollution," *New Yorker*, 29 August 2007, 28–33.
3. Arièle Dionne-Krosnick, "What Do Houses Want?" *Shift: Graduate Journal of Visual and Material Culture* 6 (2013): 1–18.
4. Anne Wagner, "Splitting and Doubling: Gordon Matta-Clark and the Body of Sculpture," *Gray Room* 14 (2004): 26–45.