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I N T E R N A T I O N A L



Miranda Lichtenstein, *Untitled*, 2005, color photograph, 10% x 13%.

MIRANDA LICHTENSTEIN ELIZABETH DEE GALLERY

From Siddhartha to John the Baptist, every culture has its spiritual seekers. In her new color photograph *The Wave*, 2005, Miranda Lichtenstein shows us ours: A well-groomed, thirtysomething white man, seated in a tastefully minimal office, the room's sole adornment a Hokusai-esque print of a crashing wave by Robert Longo. Gently diffused by white aluminum blinds, light floods through the windows, evenly illuminating the clean lines of a blond

wood desk, the sleek contours of an iMac, and the man himself, his eyes closed in meditation. On the desk lies a wristwatch, a reminder both of the deadline-driven world of work that he has momentarily abandoned and of the rationalizing transformation of a religious practice into means of enhanced productivity encouraged by "enlightened" employers.

In its succinct imbrication of spiritual yearning, late-capitalist work ethic, and new-age lifestyle, *The Wave* serves as something of a key to Lichtenstein's latest series, "The Searchers" (2004-). Each of the nine photographs in this show (there are ten in the series so far) features a solitary individual engrossed in the pursuit of an altered, presumably higher state of consciousness. In *Ganzfeld*, 2005, a man adept at the sensory deprivation technique known as the Ganzfeld procedure reclines on a leather divan, hands crossed over his chest, eyes covered with halved Ping-Pong balls, while an overhead lamp bathes him in glowing red light. *Floater*, 2004, shows a woman in an isolation tank, her countenance eerily reflected in its bright aqua depths. Although impassive, her face appears strained; she is clearly working hard to achieve relaxation. In addition to isolation, weightlessness emerges as a dominant feature of Lichtenstein's vision of twenty-first-century spirituality—*cum*—self-improvement, as, for example, in the apparently gravity-defying pose of a woman clad in a velour top and fishnet stockings, whose upended legs are hooked into the stirrups of a pilates machine located just out of the frame in *If you bring forth . . .*, 2004.

Perhaps the most powerful work in this regard, *Untitled*, 2005, features the artist herself, posed in the manner of the suicided

members of the Christian UFO cult Heaven's Gate, whose thirty-nine bodies were found in a rented California mansion, neatly covered with purple blankets and wearing identical, brand-new Nike sneakers. Dressed entirely in black and set against a black backdrop, Lichtenstein appears to levitate, a pale hand dangling limply at her side. In contrast, the blanket—its every fold and crease captured with crystalline intensity via strobe lighting and a large-format camera—seems to throb with life. A vivid rendering of the release from the "physical container" sought by Heaven's Gate members in their attempt to attain "an evolutionary level above human," Lichtenstein's photograph is both highly evocative and unsettlingly ambiguous. Nothing in it indicates an obvious stance toward the group's morbid desire, or the association of commodity culture and religious cult implicit in their choice of footwear. Indeed, the image's coupling of disembodiment and sensuous immediacy is disconcertingly seductive. Here, one confronts the underlying problem in Lichtenstein's own quest evident in the series's studied neutrality towards its subjects, but perhaps even more so in its combination of visual elegance and slick production values: the fine line it walks between critical mimicry and unreflexive affirmation.

—Margaret Sundell