

Everybody Into The Pool

To get his photos of disabled swimmers, Christophe Jivraj first needed to put away his camera

Published September 11, 2008 by [Kathleen Bell](#) in [Arts News](#)
<http://www.seemagazine.com/article/arts/arts-news/swimmers-1177/>



Christophe Jivraj

This Is The Dawning Of The Age Of Aquariums | Christophe Jivraj took his camera underwater to create *The Swimmers*

THE SWIMMERS

By Christophe Jivraj. Harcourt House (10215-112 St).
Sept 12-Oct 11.

Reaching a goal sometimes takes more than a little luck, a great deal of perseverance, and a heap of help. In the case of Christophe Jivraj's latest project, it took abject failure.

"I thought I could just walk in there and in four months [take photos] that would encompass what it's like to be disabled," Jivraj admits. "I was so nervous I couldn't even photograph or do portraits. And I showed it to the class and it was a complete miserable failure. It was good, though. It was a good failure. One of those things you learn from."

It's been almost five years since Jivraj walked through the doors of Montreal's C.A.R.E. (Centre for Recreational and Educational Activities) with the aim of documenting what it's like to live

with physical disabilities. Camera in hand, he planned to spend a quick four months of his undergrad snapping pictures of the people he met there — people who are cognitively clear but have extreme physical restrictions. However, the response to his first series of photographs, as Jivraj is happy to acknowledge, didn't go too well and included accusations of exploitation and objectification.

“I was very naïve in thinking that because my intentions were true, people would recognize that,” Jivraj says. “Not fully understanding that intent sometimes isn't enough, because intent isn't inscribed in the photograph.”

He decided to try again, but leave the camera behind.

“I realized the camera for me was a crutch; a shield almost, so I wouldn't have to really engage with what was going on around me.”

This time, Jivraj focused on building relationships with C.A.R.E.'s clients, understanding their reality, and discovering the true character of the subjects he wished to represent. That led to a job as a caregiver with the organization and now, six projects later, including the video installation *The Swimmers*, he is still trying to capture what he missed the first time around.

“All the projects leading up to this were always photographs and I was always trying to communicate notions of interpersonal relationships, trust, faith, and beauty. But the unfortunate thing about a lot of my photographs to date was that they didn't necessarily speak of that.”

Where photos have failed, film seems to be succeeding, or at least getting the ever-exacting artist closer to his conceptual goals. The project that will be on display at Harcourt House involves video of some of his clients, those entrusted to his care at C.A.R.E., swimming. According to Jivraj, it's an activity they enjoy and a state of being where, instead of feeling confined by their bodies, they feel free.

In order to capture that sense of freedom, Jivraj rented an Olympic pool. He discovered, much to his delight, glass windows on either side of the pool where trainers could watch their athletes underwater, and where he could set up video cameras — saving him the cost of underwater ones. Monetary constraints also meant only renting half the pool, which, in turn, meant there were able-bodied swimmers in the background of the frame doing laps. This juxtaposition exposed a parallel and a paradox.

“What was really interesting was that even people who weren't disabled were still really awkward underwater,” Jivraj says. “There was complete equality. There was nobody who looked better, disabled and able-bodied. Aesthetically, physically, they all looked the same.”

Over the phone, Jivraj still doesn't sound completely satisfied with his images, and claims that all his work hasn't been quite good enough. “I'm still trying to find ways of communicating my connection with these individuals through photographs — that's my challenge, that's my desire.”

Nevertheless, in that annoying way that clichés have of turning out to be true, Jivraj’s journey has been far more important than the destination. “For them to trust me to take photographs, to show them in the proper light is the biggest gift of all,” he says. “I’ve earned that trust, but they’ve also willingly given it to me to a certain extent. They’ve said, ‘Take my photograph, take my image and make me look beautiful and make me look like who I am.’”