



Naked dignity

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Controversial photographic exhibit explores disability and sexuality

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During Nuit Blanche a couple of weeks ago at SKOL, the gallery showing his latest exhibition, Christophe Jivraj saw one visitor storm out of the room, loudly declaring that the photographs were disturbing and disgusting.

One can understand why the man was upset – the exhibit certainly has the capacity to provoke strong emotions. “1,5-1,5” consists of individual photographs of a group of cognitively lucid but severely physically disabled adults, posing daringly on their beds, half-naked. The work of Diane Arbus comes to mind: her photographs of what she called “her freaks” – transvestites, strikingly short or tall people, cognitively disabled adults, blind children – have been criticized for presenting her subjects as spectacles for others to gape over. However, where Arbus used the camera as a shield to make herself invisible, Jivraj is interested in how he is implicated in the photograph, and in the way it shows his relationship to his subjects.

In discussing the controversy surrounding his work, Jivraj points to the fact that photography in general is never neutral. “Just the structure of portraits is exploitative; taking pictures of another person is exploitative, for whatever reason. It’s impossible to get a photograph to be sincere.”

However, Jivraj is still aware that his subject matter can be more problematic than most portraiture. He says that his first work was terrible for this reason. As an undergraduate student

of photography at Concordia, he got in touch with a day centre for disabled adults through a friend who worked there, with the intention of doing some kind of photographic documentary work. At first, Jivraj was hampered by his discomfort with bodies that were different than his own. “The photographs showed things like the back of their wheelchairs, computer screens – I couldn’t even acknowledge their faces. I mean, it’s scary if you’re not used to it, I get that. That’s why the guy left angry; he was not used to seeing these things.”

Jivraj realized that he first needed to get to know the people he photographed – something that took a lot of time – and thus implicate himself in the pictures. He continued to work as a caregiver at the centre, developing a friendship with his models, and since that first failed attempt, his work with the group has morphed into a collaborative effort between photographer and subjects, through his career as a master’s student and then as a professional photographer. Jivraj is careful to explain that he does not see himself as a spokesperson for disabled people. Rather, these people are his friends. “What I’m interested in is my friendships, and the possible pitfalls of the artist’s relationship to his models. There is no denying that these persons are disabled, but how do I get past it? Can I get past it? How do I get as close to that line as possible?”

He also says something that should be obvious to the viewer who, thanks to the exhibition text, knows that the persons in the pictures are fully mentally capable: his subjects know what their bodies look like, they know what it means when a photograph is taken of them, and they want to do this. They wanted to take off their clothes. Giota, one of the women featured, says that she feels like a woman in “the magazines,” and Jivraj compares the shots to a retake on the classic nude, an age-old format of art. The only difference is that in his version, the nudes have disabled bodies.

Assuming a portrait is exploitative simply because its subject does not look like your average person removes the privilege of subjecthood from them. It implies that those photographed do not understand what they look like or what a photograph is – a condescending sentiment, which further reaffirms the idea that function of body is correlative to function of mind, and that disabled people need to be spoken for. In the 21st century, we ought to have come further.