

**Christophe Jivraj, THE SWIMMERS,
September 12 – October 11, Harcourt House**



Image credit: Christophe Jivraj, 2008

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<http://prairieartsters.blogspot.com/2008/09/christophe-jivraj-swimmers-september-12.html>

There is no easy way to think of, or discuss an exhibition like *The Swimmers*. The subject matter, that which address's the complicated and often under-represented individuals whose lives are connected with physical disabilities and limitations, can be hard to view objectively. I can actually almost hear the unspoken immediate negative reactions to a work that uses such subject matter as its central focus: you have no right to discuss or presuppose your own understanding of the lives of these people. How dare you even attempt it! But I am also of the opinion that this work, which tries simply to be a source of investigation into not only the similarities of action between people of physical obstacle and those who are oblivious to that reality, but to relate a message of sameness in that awkwardness. In Jivraj's explanation for this work, he mentions how we are all uncomfortable and ungraceful in the water. That swimming can be seen as a unifying activity where physical ability is of little import, and where we all look slightly ridiculous decked out in spandex. But I am not of the opinion that this really was the effect portrayed through viewing the work.

Formally speaking, it is a very seductive piece. Multiple horizontal bodies moving repetitively through the water, with legs and torso's drifting in and out of frame. How could we not be captivated by such a sight? But when the contrast between those who are physically able, and the swimmers who display the difficulties of controlled movement becomes apparent, the work shifts in its effect. Perhaps it is my own weak susceptibility to the sight of physical pain or struggle, or a general lack of exposure to the circumstances presented, but I did not perceive that sense of sameness or equalizing element that was to be the driving artistic impression. The verticality of the swimmers with physical disabilities were in direct and violent contrast to the methodical horizontal movement of the background individuals. Their movements harsher, less controlled, with feet pained and tense. I was under no impression of 'universality' while viewing this, rather, I felt quite frustrated. There was this sense of infuriation that those

swimming calmly in the background found the motion so easy, that they could execute such actions without great struggle. To myself then, this video served to examine the actual *visual* difference of motion between people with easily controlled physical movement and people with severely constricted ranges of movement. I felt a contradiction between wanting to be of assistance to those who struggled, and the suspicion that no assistance was possible. And that perhaps I really would be of no use either way.

Even though the impression I personally have developed from this work was not in sync with the proposed ideas stated by the artist, I still consider it quite relevant and brave in its lack of tentativeness. In a time when we can almost predict our own reactions to exhibitions we have heard only summaries about, it is not unappreciated to be struck so strongly by a work with such humble execution. *The Swimmers* is a video of people swimming, projected on a suspended panel, hanging in the centre of a darkened room. I saw this show on September 13th, and have not known what to write about it for over a week because I did not really know what I thought of it; or what I was supposed to think of it. I still don't really. It is an uncomfortable and unapologetic work, and I am glad to of seen it.