

PROOF 17

**Christophe Jivraj
Aislinn Leggett
Meryl McMaster
Roger Proulx
Karen Zalamea**

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G44 CENTRE FOR CONTEMPORARY PHOTOGRAPHY

Sharing and Digital Photography:

Proof 17 at Gallery 44

by MATTHEW WILLIAMSON

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My family got its first digital camera in 2001, a Canon PowerShot S30. It was quite large by today's standards. Since then, I've owned several digital cameras, all varying in size, quality, price, and function. Though I've never been a photographer per se, I did grow up in the same time period as the artists in this exhibition; specifically, while digital photography was coming of age.

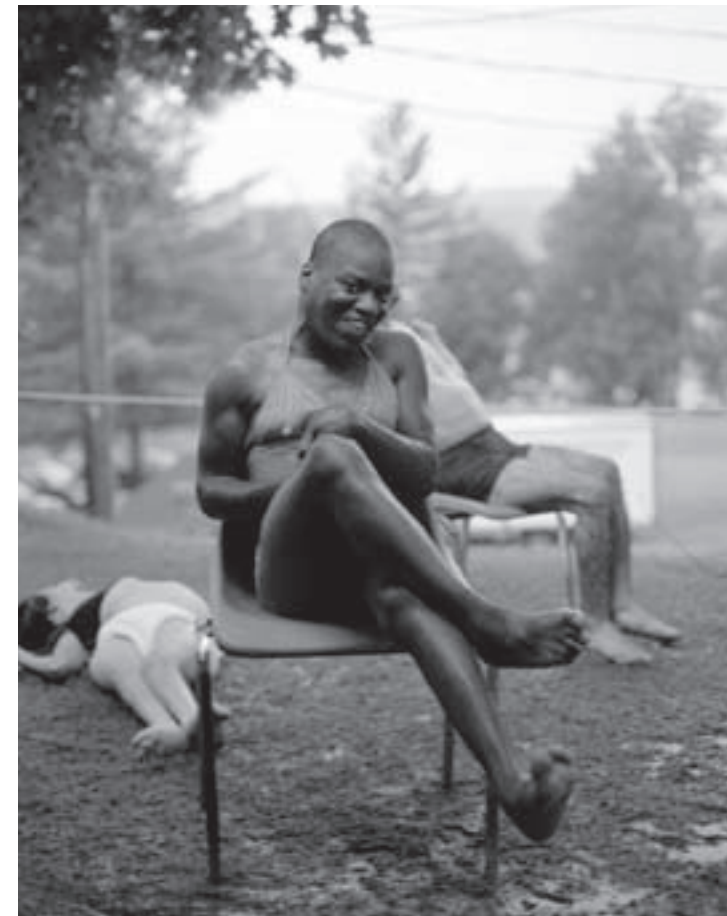
Proof is Gallery 44's annual exhibition of artwork by emerging Canadian photographers, and while there is no formal age range for the artists in *Proof*, in this year's exhibition they are predominately

recent graduates of art school, which would suggest they were born in the 1980s. This generation (sometimes referred to as the Millennial Generation; of which I am one) spent their formative years immersed in digital culture. The new potential for sharing and connecting through images on the Internet was shaped and nurtured by this group. Their attitude toward images, screen-based or otherwise, is one that has been formed during an exponential growth in image saturation.

Aislinn Leggett, Christophe Jivraj, Meryl McMaster, Roger Proulx, and Karen

CHRISTOPHE JIVRAJ, *Group* from the series *Camp*, 76.2 cm x 101.6 cm c-print, 2006

Zalamea have been brought together by their exceptional work. A vast variety of techniques, both physical and conceptual, have been employed by each of them. From the elements of documentary at play in Jivraj's work, to the found-image collage by Aislinn Leggett, no two artists are alike. Some, like Roger Proulx, are perhaps on the periphery of the Millennial Generation, but his post-apocalyptic images would seem right at home next to a copy of *The Road*.¹ Meryl McMaster's layered images make use of the history of photography, and identification. Karen Zalamea's use





AISLINN LEGGETT, *Untitled* (Leggett and Smith Family), 101 x 152 cm Archival inkjet on Hahnemuhle rag paper, 2009

of repetition can perhaps be traced to the digital. The artists deal with the development of digital practices in their own ways, even if they are consciously rejecting the conundrums presented by this technology. The myriad of possible paths available to emerging contemporary artists is a testament to the enduring allure of photography.

There is a long-standing link between digital cameras and computers. One of the first electronic cameras (not fully digital but making use of a CCD sensor to produce an image) saved images to a “video floppy.” These images, meant to be shown on television, were generated as short videos, even utilizing interlacing fields to create an image, and the resolution was comparable to televisions of the day. These products have fallen prey to what Clay Shirky calls “shearing effects”² that have rendered them all but inaccessible. Technology is not the only reason for images to become inaccessible. Aislinn Leggett uses images in her collages that have been decontextualized due to their age. These haunting images create narratives from materials lost in time. She has taken note of our over-consumption of photographs and has chosen to monumentalize these forgotten artifacts.

Regardless of the technology used in each iteration and evolution of the digital camera, it has created a society of fast images. Digital photography creates an immediacy in the viewing and sharing of images. When my family’s first computer with a modem

arrived at our house in 1996, Bulletin Board Systems (BBSs) were the social network of the day. Among other things, BBSs were file sharing long before Napster and LimeWire (or BitTorrent, MediaFire, etc.) were off the ground. Many kinds of files were shared in this way, everything from midi versions of Metallica songs to shareware versions of the video game Doom. There were also plenty of GIFs and JPEGs available to be downloaded by anyone who dialed in. However, since bandwidth was at a premium, there were only low resolution images available at the time. When the World Wide Web (www) (not to be confused with the Internet) took off and bandwidth availability exploded, so did the possibility of sharing more and better quality files, images included. Later would come Flickr, a social network devoted almost entirely to images, with a focus on photography.

In the era of Netscape, the www had become a synonym for the Internet and most users would be hard-pressed to explain the difference. Internet use both at home and in business steadily crept upwards. The focus was on monetizing the Internet, and there was no shortage of business models. “Get

big fast” was the priority for entrepreneurs, but when the bubble burst in 2000 what was left were the people “interested in making the world a better place.”³ Roger Proulx’s images are a reminder of our long-lost survival skills. Whether his work references social disasters of the past or predicts them for the future, it is a grim but hopeful reminder of our fragile state.

LiveJournal was one of the first online communities that I was aware of. LiveJournal is described as “one of the best overall examples of good community engineering”⁴ and it has lasted more than ten years. This may not seem like a long time, but the interval (1999 to now) saw the rise and (debatable) fall of another well-known user-driven site: MySpace. Background images, profile pictures, and other decorative elements are all that users have to construct a profile. An attempt at examining the cult of profile personalization can be seen in Karen Zalamea’s plaster casts. They seem to capture not just motion, but the specifics of Zalamea’s own biomechanics. Profiles would become less personal and increasingly serious when Facebook arrived on the scene, offering some of the

opportunities of personalization with more access to an existing offline social sphere.

The Facebook versus Myspace split is characterized as one of class division. The split has been characterized simply as “good kids go to Facebook, bad kids go to MySpace.”²⁵ The cleaned up template of Facebook meant that this was serious business, and with it came an increasingly tight relationship between actual friends and Facebook friends. Early forums and Usenet (a distributed discussion system predating the Internet) groups formed so that people with common interests could overcome communication difficulties because of long distances. While all those options are still there, presently, the dominant form of interaction is with overlapping peer groups. Facebook offers the option of organizing friends into groups, (e.g., family, college, high school, work, and camp), where the focus is on pre-existing physical relationships rather than common interests.

Christophe Jivraj’s photographs in his series *Camp* capture mundane and intimate moments with a small group of individuals, he has been photographing for five years,

who are cognitively lucid and severely physically disabled. These photographs offer a glimpse into the lives of his subjects, who are removed from their wheelchairs, a symbol of disability, and shown outdoors at play. We have become used to seeing all manner of ordinary and spectacular moments in people’s lives thanks to online photosharing as digital cameras have become more and more common. Cameras are now in almost every pocket, and every friend is in near constant contact. Jivraj captures much of the candidness of online snapshots in this series.

With a growing user base and a culture of sharing, problems have evolved. New celebrity status is offered to moms commenting on their college-bound children’s party photos. The desolution of romantic relationships can now be captured and preserved like a Jurassic Age bug in amber for friends, family, and potentially future generations to see. The popular website Lamebook (and a host of other

KAREN ZALAMEA, *Self-Portrait with Plaster I*,
Self-Portrait with Plaster II, each 114 cm x 76 cm
c-print, 2009





MERYL MCMASTER, *Ancestral 6, 1,8*, each 101 cm x 76 cm digital c-prints, 2008

similarly themed websites) collect the unintentionally hilarious interactions that sometimes take place in this social sphere. The backlash has now occurred when people who suddenly find themselves with a worldwide audience for their least flattering moments can take on their critics in the comment section of Lamebook creating a feedback loop of potentially troll-like behavior. Look at what sharing has done to us now.

Meryl McMaster's work investigates the ways in which profiling can function and dysfunction. She explores her own ancestry

by appropriating late 19th century historical images of Aboriginal women that she projects onto herself and then photographs. Ownership of images is a difficult issue, legal and otherwise. Appropriation of images on online social news websites like Reddit and Digg offer the community a chance to create a shared visual vocabulary. Most of the time users will post links to news stories, images, and other buzz-worthy materials. These stories are voted up or down by other users. Users will regularly download, re-edit and upload other users' submission pictures as a form of competition. McMaster builds her own vocabulary through appropriation, projection, and performance. There is a constant negotiation between public and private, and for the group of people coming up next on this the digital timeline, this negotiation is an even more important consideration. "They just assume that media includes consuming, producing and sharing," says Clay Shirky.⁶ It is no longer a binary between public and private, but a hazy grey zone with few hard facts except the common currency of sharing. Whether they be found images, animated GIFs, party photos or baby photos, we

have become a society that shares online, through images.

This essay focuses on just one avenue that could be used to contextualize the generation whose work is on display in *Proof 17*. This exhibition is a snapshot of an ecology of communication, one that is in constant flux. Aislinn Leggett, Christophe Jivraj, Meryl McMaster, Roger Proulx, and Karen Zalamea should be congratulated on their outstanding photography. They are building bodies of work that not only reflect their knowledge of the history of photography, but of a particular point in time when a hyper-abundance of imagery is the norm.

1 McCarthy, Cormac. *The Road*. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006).

2 Shirky, Clay. "Making Digital Durable: What Time Does to Categories." Fort Mason Center, San Francisco, California. November 14, 2005. Address.

3 Shirky, Clay. "Ontology is Overrated: Categories, Links, and Tags." <http://www.shirky.com/writings/ontology_overrated.html> accessed March 28, 2010.

4 Shirky, Clay. "Broadcast Institutions, Community Values." <<http://www.shirky.com/writings/broadcast.and.community.html>>, accessed March 28, 2010.

5 Lialina, Olia. "A Vernacular Web 2.0." *Digital Folklore*. Ed. Olia Lialina and Dragan Espenschied. (Stuttgart: merz & solitude, 2009), 58-69.

6 Shirky, Clay. "Gin, Television, and the Social Surplus." Web 2.0 Expo. San Francisco, California. April 23, 2008.



CHRISTOPHE JIVRAJ, *Giota* from the series *Camp*, 76.2 cm x 101.6 cm c-print, 2006

CHRISTOPHE JIVRAJ

Christophe Jivraj, born in France and raised in Toronto, has exhibited in Edmonton, Calgary and Montreal. Working with the same models for over five years, his practice explores notions of portraiture, beauty, and trust. Jivraj holds an MFA in photography from Concordia University, and lives and works in Toronto.

AISLINN LEGGETT

Aislinn Leggett was born in Namur, Quebec. Her work contemplates the past, and relationships formed through land, memory, and family. Leggett holds a BFA in photography from Concordia University, and lives and works in Montreal.

MERYL MCMASTER

Meryl McMaster was born and raised in Ottawa. Her work centres on gender, identity, myth, and memory. McMaster is a recent graduate from the Ontario College of Art and Design's BFA program in photography. She lives and works in Toronto.

KAREN ZALAMEA

Karen Zalamea was born and raised in Vancouver. She completed an MFA in photography at Concordia University in 2009. Her work has been exhibited in Canada, United States, England, France, and Holland, and it is an enquiry into the relationship between the body, gesture, labour, repetition, and rhythm. Zalamea lives and works in Montreal.

ROGER PROULX

Roger Proulx was born in Sherbrooke, Quebec. Through his staging of enigmatic and fictive scenes, Proulx suggests a wealth of narrative possibilities in his images. His work has been exhibited in group and solo shows, and is held in the permanent collection of the Cirque du Soleil. He currently lives and works in Montreal.

MATTHEW WILLIAMSON

Described once as "frustratingly engaging," Matthew Williamson examines the gaps between the Internet and so-called "real life." While working in a broad range of formats from print to video, websites to electronics his work is focused on the humorous relationships we forge with our machines. A graduate of Ontario College of Art & Design, Williamson has shown work in Trieste, Italy; Providence, Rhode Island; and Toronto, Ontario.

ROGER PROULX, *Woman with a Nest*, 111.76 cm x 139.7 cm inkjet print, 2009