

# The water babies

Jane Yettram meets the Acton photographer who takes magical images of babies – underwater!



If the best poolside snapshots you have of your children involve armbands, goosebumps and an unhappy grimace, just take a look at Zena Holloway's wonderful photographs. Her water babies – not simply *by* the water but under the surface – paddle, swoop, dip and dive like cherubic dolphins. Eyes are open, hair floats and backs are curved...

Zena, 31, has been photographing babies and children underwater for ten years. 'I learnt to dive at 16,' she tells me. 'At 18, I got into scuba in Egypt and that was the beginning of everything. I was a diver first, then I taught myself photography.' With the demand increasing for her unique images, Zena and partner Patrick Griffith set up their company, Little Urchins, last year, to make the process simpler. 'Before, parents had to choose from a contact sheet of 40 tiny pictures,' says Patrick, who is the business mastermind. 'Now the images can be viewed online at full-screen size.'

In Zena and Patrick's Acton home there are several traditional photographs of their daughter Brooke, who is nearly three, with her



feet planted firmly on dry land. But in many more she is swirling underwater; Brooke was even born in a birthing pool and one picture shows her just minutes old lying lazily on her back with Zena's cradling hand beneath her head.

The youngest baby Zena has ever photographed was just two days old – but that is unusual: 'Babies that young don't make great subjects,' she says. 'They curl up and you can't get decent shots.' Between six months and a year is perfect. 'After a year they sometimes realise being underwater isn't normal! But any child at any age can do the right thing at the right moment and you just catch it.'

Zena usually works with baby swim groups, although she does undertake private commissions as long as the baby is confident in water. In West London she uses Baby Swimming, which runs classes and can arrange a photo session for interested parents. On a shoot, Zena may photograph 50 babies – but not all at once. 'That would be absolute mayhem,' she laughs. 'I do five babies at one time. Five babies, five sets of parents, five buggies, plus siblings and grannies is enough!'



Photograph: E. Critchley

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Zena breath-holds while shooting. 'Although the babies can't see underwater, they know I'm there. I don't use scuba gear – the less equipment the better.' So do any babies throw a spectacular supermodel tantrum and refuse to perform? 'There's always one,' smiles Zena. 'But if a baby's not happy they can come again another day.' A 'baby handler' (Zena uses swimming teachers) helps get the perfect shot. 'Some babies sink, some float, some fly off to one side. The baby handler has to be very skilled.' At least one good picture from the session is guaranteed – although with babies, the shots can't be orchestrated. 'Each baby does what it does,' says Zena – but the results seem magical.

Zena also does commercial underwater photography for prestigious clients such as Oil of Olay and Mastercard, using props, costumes and coloured backgrounds and lighting to transform the water's colour. But

she finds that most parents want the iconic, classic picture of 'their baby underwater against a blue background.' Older children – who come along with their baby sibling – don't want classic; they like dressing up – like the princess floating in her swirling gown and tiara. Attending one of Zena's shoots costs £40, and parents can buy as few or as many pictures as they like after viewing them on the website (a unique authorisation code guarantees security and prints start at £9.99, large canvases at £199 and greetings cards are £16 for 16).

Currently Zena holds about 35 shoots a year and has plans to go international: 'amazingly, no one else is doing it, even in the States'. To this end, she has just invested in new state-of-the-art equipment and is selling her old gear on ebay. So, you could either make a bid and try to improve your goosebumps-and-grimace shots. Or just leave the photography to the expert... 🐼



*Little Urchins (www.littleurchins.com) is holding shoots in Chiswick on 10 July and other dates to be confirmed. Call 020 8896 0082 or email mail@littleurchins.com for details. For information on classes with Baby Swimming call 01865 771397 or visit www.babyswimming.co.uk.*