SARAH IRVIN

The Sleep Series

May 11–June 26, 2015
Fenwick Gallery
Curator's Statement

Fenwick Gallery is proud to exhibit The Sleep Series by Sarah Irvin, part of a larger project called A Bringing Forth. This series of more than 100 watercolors was produced by Irvin in intervals—that is, while her infant daughter napped. Irvin marked the time in tick marks of various sizes and shades of blue. Some longer naps span several pieces of paper, containing hundreds of tick marks. Other naps were clearly very short, with not enough time, even, for Irvin to fill a single page.

Within The Sleep Series are titles such as November 4, Morning Nap; November 19, Midday Nap, and December 18, Afternoon Nap. Each recorded nap is separated by a blank page, a pause in the activities of sleep and counting, measuring, working and waiting. Of course, a pause here is not really a pause, because it means that baby is awake. Activities of waking and caregiving happen in these intervals, which Irvin measures and records in other series within A Bringing Forth.

Irvin likens the recorded naps to “words in one long sentence,” the blank pages like the spaces between words. Installed in a single row, The Sleep Series covers approximately 50 linear feet—the entire length of usable wall space in the gallery. To read the series from left to right truly is like reading one long sentence and the duration of the piece is powerful: on one hand, quiet and steady and on the other, bustling with the activity of a baby’s brain in sleep and the work of an artist-mother.

Anne Smith
Graduate Professional Assistant
Fenwick Gallery, 2014-2015
Sarah Irvin

STATEMENT

My current project-based series is entitled A Bringing Forth, derived from the Latin root of the term post-partum. In this work I respond directly to my experience of parenthood through naturalistic observation as I record, and document the care of my seven-month-old daughter. The work is enabled by and exists within the context of motherhood.

In this exhibition, you see a fifty foot installation of The Sleep Series, one of many series in the project. I created this series during the second and third months of my daughter’s life, exclusively while she slept. Each set of watercolors began at the start of a nap and was considered complete when she awoke. By doing this I allowed my circumstances to dictate aspects of my creative output.

Other iterations of this project are drawings made while breastfeeding; drawings created by our glider rocking chair; transfer drawings created by walking across the nursery rug; my daughter’s nursery as camera obscura; cyanotypes created with her blankets, toys and clothes; metalpoint drawings capturing her activities of play and early stages of her own mark-making captured through fingerprint dust. As a whole, this project-based work is a personal narrative taking form as poetic visual data collected through self-anthropology.

BIO

Sarah Irvin (b. 1985, Florence, AL) creates autobiographical work investigating her perceptions of family members. The medium, format, and technique for each series is dictated by the character of her relationship to the family member and the narrative of how their lives interact. In her current work, she responds directly to the experience of caring for her infant daughter. Works include watercolors only created while the baby is sleeping and drawings created exclusively while breastfeeding. These works serve as a response to and record of her experience as a parent and caregiver.

In 2008, Irvin graduated with a BFA in painting and drawing from the University of Georgia. She is an MFA candidate at George Mason University with an expected graduation date of 2016. Her work is in collections such as the Try-Me Urban Restoration Project and The Federal Reserve Bank.

Irvin also curates The (Pro)Create Anthology: a collection of narratives about the intersection of professional studio practice and parenting.

sarahirvinart.com
procreateanthology.tumblr.com

ABOVE Detail of The Sleep Series, as installed in Fenwick Gallery.

OPPOSITE The following four pages show November 11, Late Afternoon Nap, 2014. Sarah Irvin. Watercolor on paper. Each panel 5” x 7”.

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November 4, Morning Nap

November 6, Afternoon Nap

November 10, Midday Nap

November 10, Late Afternoon Nap

November 11, Late Afternoon Nap

November 13, Midday Nap

November 13, Afternoon Nap

November 13, Late Afternoon Nap

November 14, Morning Nap

November 16, Afternoon Nap

November 16, Evening Nap

November 19, Morning Nap

November 19, Midday Nap

November 19, Late Afternoon Nap

November 19, Evening Nap

November 20, Morning Nap

November 21, Afternoon Nap

November 21, Evening Nap

November 24, Afternoon Nap

December 2, Midday Nap

December 3, Evening Nap

December 6, Afternoon Nap

December 6, Evening Nap

December 9, Afternoon Nap

December 17, Afternoon Nap

December 18, Afternoon Nap
Anne Smith: In my first encounter with The Sleep Series, I noticed how quiet and serene it feels. Then, as I spent more time with it, I began to understand all the frenetic activity implied by the piece; the way the baby’s brain is active and growing in sleep, for instance. There is also all the activity of your making, as an artist and mother, with these brief windows of time (which could end at any moment) in which to work. How would you describe this piece? Do you see it balancing ideas of work and rest?

Sarah Irvin: I find it difficult to put a concise label on this work. In a basic sense, this piece is defined by limitations and in turn re-defines those very limits. Creating these watercolors was a very direct response to having a one-month old baby and being the primary caregiver. I wanted to paint, but found it incredibly difficult to settle into a rhythm of working in very small increments of time that I had no control over. I chose to create work that was “done” when the available time was done, in this way the work was about the constraints and only exists because of those constraints. I worked this way for about two months and slowly transitioned into using the time to create different work without realizing it. Looking back it is multi-faceted. In one sense, I see the work as a visualization of my available time during those two months, in another I see it as a personal reconciliation to a new set of parameters as an artist and so on. I want to avoid the words “work” and “rest” when describing my time. I want to be well-rested and I want to create rigorous work. The way my time is specifically broken up is becoming less relevant. I just move forward. The idea of leaving home to go to a place of work and returning home to a place of leisure is a fiction.

AS: What compelled you to measure your baby’s sleep in this way -- with strokes of blue watercolor in rows, versus, say measuring with a timer and recording the time that way?

SI: If you look for it, you see that parenthood influences the work of many artists. This topic is as relevant as any other. However, first person accounts of parenthood as visual art are not typically acknowledged by major art institutions. It is important for artists to keep making work that engages critically with the experience of parenthood and for institutions to recognize and exhibit this work. If artists and curators take a chance and accept this as a valid topic, we will see what comes of it and no one has to figure out if, why, how and to what extent it is being ignored.

SI: The last three books I read were The Mother Knot by Jane Lazarre, Feeding the Family by Marjorie DeVault and Family Man by Scott Coltrane. Right now I am reading The Mermaid and The Minotaur by Dorothy Dinnerstein. I try to consume as much writing as I can about parenthood from as many angles as possible.

SI: What books have you read lately that have been part of your thinking around this project?

AN INTERVIEW WITH SARAH IRVIN
by Anne Smith

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