

Betsy Kenyon spent the winter delivering a pocket-sized pinhole camera to her friends. Starting in November of 2020 and ending the day before the vernal equinox of March 2021, she would place the small rectangle of teak and brass in a subject's sleeping area, and then depart. We were instructed to open the shutter when we were ready for bed and close it in the morning. The result is a single image that captures a night's sleep in a specific space. A body, and a room, at rest. Light aggregating through the pinhole over the course of a night.

New York, the setting for most of the photographs, was still going through the deadliest disaster by death toll in the city's history. It had endured that terrible initial spike in COVID deaths the previous spring, a summer dominated by the largest scale mass protests in American history, and now a winter defined for many by a life spent inside. Kenyon often walked through the empty city to make these deliveries and pick-ups, passing busy hospitals and fallow office buildings. She took the opportunity of this project to see friends, briefly, physically, even if just for that fleeting moment of placing a camera. The photographs as network of emotion.

The colors dance. The square bounds the frame to the space. Dusk, the night, twilight, dawn, these all melt and wash in waves.

Only sometimes do the images have identifiable slumberers within them. Just as often, they show spaces which could be empty save the haunting movements of the inhabitant. We were our own ghosts, given the ability to disturb and linger without the burden of our every action being captured in a frame. Only in stillness could we be visible, a stillness so absolute it requires hours to be even registered. The more an act involves motion, involves a lack of steady state, the less trackable or traceable it is. Whether animate or inanimate, only the restful shows up. An insomniac is not necessarily discriminate from a burrower. An early riser indistinct from a nocturnal spirit. Our sleeping spaces are all lived in. Ordered and disordered. Temporary and permanent. Geared toward function or form.

Light might be the ultimate main character in the photographs. Most exposures lasted between five and eight hours, allowing light to bounce across the landscape, reflect off sheets and curtains to form outlines, clouds, and blurs. Our light sources gain a prominence in the images. A weight. Electricity really is sorcery and windows really are portals. Our openings, even those muted by shades or curtains, showcase the light that exists even without the sun, a radiance that billows forth even in the long night hours of the season.

There was something quietly radical in the act of turning control over when to open and close the shutter to the subjects. We had these two moments of agency, bookended around an activity in which we were inherently most vulnerable. Sleep deprives us of consciousness, and therefore the self-consciousness from the gaze of a live lens. If we were able to sleep at all that is, another vulnerability the camera could reveal, that our nights can be fragile things as well as sanctuaries.

Kenyon asked participants to write down their impressions and experiences of being photographed, to be returned with the camera. They range from the analytical to the poetic to the personal, reflective on the nature of hours in an era when hours were utterly present, where time had been compressed and limited. They meditate on self and process, center the camera or ignore it. They are signatures, adding layers of humanity to each frame.

I did feel the camera as a presence, a character, but not an unfriendly one. It sat in the corner of my bedroom, watching me work more than I slept, a companion in a time where companions were limited. A connection and a warden.