

The bed is a complex and complicated territory. For some, bed means safety, peace, and relief—where one recovers from a long day of work and regenerates for the next. For others, the bed is a place of worry and no sleep at all. Before the fraught negotiations of sleep, dreams, intimacy, and waking, there is the physical entity made of many parts: frame, mattress, sheets, covers, headrest, and ornament. Some of these components can be subtracted and you can still call it a bed. You could have a thin mat on a hard floor, and only that. You could end up in a cell on a foldup cot under a thin synthetic blanket. You could find yourself alone and cold, curled tightly in the corner of some vast spread suited for royalty. The bed is our portal to conjoined worlds of dreaming and waking; it is the threshold, a setting for daily birth and death. Most of us enter and leave this world by way of it. There is a good chance you drew your first breath suspended above a medical bed—not unlike the one in which your mother may gasp her last.

Betsy Kenyon's new series of photographs, *Slumber*, makes a hard break from the abstract, camera-less, black-and-white darkroom experiments of her 2019 project, *LightHouse*. Her new work is figurative and in color. She employs a pinhole camera with a wood body and an aperture punched into a piece of sheet metal. The camera is placed in her subjects' bedrooms, generally pointed toward their beds, and captures their sleep process. We measure sleep in time, and time plays a critical role in these images. The shutter is opened for the duration of the subjects' intended sleep, and the camera captures just how dynamic our nocturnal lives can be. What the viewer doesn't get is a series of people in pajamas tucked neatly into cozy beds. Rather, Kenyon's new photographs candidly document and explore the practice of sleep during a period in which both our waking and sleeping selves navigate a particularly troubled moment in American history.

In Kenyon's new photographs, sleep does not come easy. Mostly shot over the winter of 2020 and 2021, the images show people sleeping as well as not sleeping. Here is a gauzy, palpable tension between sleep and sleeplessness in quarters ranging from cramped and austere to wide-open and plush, all of which seem equalized by our historical moment: legions invade our most private spaces and thus our sleep. These forces, whether actual or imagined, are all very real. Can we think of another point in our lifetime where so many of us have tossed and turned in that in-between, that half-sleep in which we could neither dream freely nor think coherently? Countless studies show that rates of insomnia and other sleep issues pervaded the last year. This is yet another instance where basic human needs become a luxury. We sleep best in the dark, but in each image there is a light on. Because these are long-exposure photographs, the light was not necessarily on all night, but it was flicked on at some point, for some unknown duration, maybe before the sleeper drifted toward a window, the phone, the refrigerator. Sleep and sleeplessness make common bedfellows, and the rare happy dream seldom lies far from the nightmare. In these photos, as in each sleep process (troubled and otherwise), the light of the mind is always on.

To lie beside another human is perhaps our greatest source of warmth. Most of Kenyon's beds are built for two, but not all of them appear full. One image does show a couple lying close, spooning with eyes closed, while in several pictures one partner appears sleeping and the other less so. Asleep together: we belong. But when the person beside us is soundly asleep and we are wide awake, we feel stranded and most alone. Some of Kenyon's beds appear half empty. Some beds are a mess and seem to sleep no one. Some figures are so translucent as to be partly there but more not there. In one image, a lone sleeper is covered completely, swallowed by a comforter that takes on a pinkish biomorphic form, and this form spills over a short and narrow

mat on the hard floor of an art studio. Dark, abstract prints flank the walls and hang above the figure like ghosts, dream-projections, photographs inside photographs. As sleep territories, Kenyon's new work reminds us of our most basic definitions of what it means to be together and what it means to be alone. It is not the light of day that draws this distinction so much as the night.

By Jason Labbe