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## At U of T Art Museum, a look at the paradox of sleep

A new exhibition at the University of Toronto looks at the ravages of our sleep-deprived world, with no end in sight.



Jon Sasaki, *A Rest*, 2016. Video, 10:20 min. Based on a choreographed solo performed by James Phillips originally commissioned by the Toronto Dance Theatre. Courtesy of the artist and Clint Roenisch Gallery, Toronto. (TONI\_HAFKENSCHIED / COURTESY 1 MUSEUM)

By **MURRAY WHYTE** Visual Arts Critic  
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How are you sleeping these days? With a looming NAFTA meltdown, wild swings in the weather surely portentous of an aggressive global climate shift, a looming threat of nuclear war and a U.S. president who launches Twitter tirades in the dead of night about all this and more, you'd be forgiven a few fitful nights.

That's the paradox of sleep: a vitally necessary universal act, its need seems exceeded only by its lack. In an online world that has little use for outdated-seeming divisions like time zones, our 24/7 lives have spawned a reality where sleep has evolved into less a daily

exercise in peaceful repose than an anxiety-ridden nirvana more elusive than assured. Where constant connectivity reigns supreme, even biological requirement becomes subject to availability and it's getting scarcer all the time.

These are just some of the ideas that *Figures of Sleep*, a new exhibition at the University of Toronto's Art Museum looks to unpack, though its sometimes meandering scope ranges more broadly. This is not a dreamy exploration of the unconscious mind at work, but rather a critical take on divergent experiences of the idea of rest; how, in that intensely connected realm, sleep can be seen in the context of have and have-not: decadent for those able to indulge in its uninterrupted luxury and deprivation for those who cannot.

It's been a relatively short span since Jonathan Crary's 2013 book *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep* put a fine point on the class divisions represented in even this, the most universal of acts, but much lost time has been made up for since.

As a nod to that, *Figures of Sleep* begins not with indulgent dreaminess, but Jasmeen Patheja's towering image of a woman lying prone on the leaf-littered ground of a Bangalore park. Part of the [Blank Noise network of Indian activists](#), the woman, Satya, was camped out to make a point. In the aftermath of [the 2012 gang rape and murder of Jyoti Singh](#), Blank Noise undertook a simple, sustained public action: its "Meet to Sleep" initiative, in which it enlisted women to sleep in public parks nationwide as an act of defiance against pervasive sexual violence. It said, in no uncertain terms, that even this, the most shared and necessary of all human acts, made women vulnerable. It's been staged in 18 cities across the country and counting.

When sleeping becomes an overt political act, you can be sure something in the culture has shifted. Sexual violence is but one of the social aggressions addressed by sleep activism. The various Occupy movements around the world planted their flags on some of the most contested ground of a growing class divide — Wall Street, say — claiming its place in the world by laying its head. The peaceful erection of a teepee on Parliament Hill on the eve of Canada 150 last year by [an Indigenous group called the Bawating Water Protectors](#) is another (the teepee was first removed by police and then, after public outcry, relocated to an innocuous corner).

You get the idea: sleep, perhaps more than anything else, rests at the core of all human experience. That makes it both hotly contested and a source of deep unrest, if you'll pardon the pun, whether social, political or personal.

*Figures of Sleep* spans the experience from the intimate to the universal, effectively recasting an ultimately solitary act in multiple frames. Its inequities are well-represented. Along with "Meet to Sleep," the show includes Rebecca Belmore's *Dream Catcher*, a disquieting tapestry showing an Indigenous woman unconscious on a sidewalk, swaddled in cheap Walmart blankets, and Francis Alys's decidedly unsubtle *Sleepers II*, a slide show of photos of figures drowning on the street in Mexico City. That the series includes both human beings and dogs is telling indeed.

There's a nice little interlude early in the show where a selection of On Kawara's *I Got Up* series of postcards is flanked by Ron Mueck's diminutive hyperrealistic sculpture *Untitled (old woman in bed)* and Jon Sasaki's video piece *A Rest* (the latter of which will be staged live this Saturday night at Hart House as part of [the gallery's "Night of Ideas" sleepover](#), which will also include a night swim and pyjama pageant, naturally).

Mueck's figure, withered and frail, cowers under the covers, while in Sasaki's piece, a dancer gamely mimics and holds poses of utter exhaustion in photos of faddish dance marathons from the 1920s and '30s. In each, resistance is key: Sasaki's dancer battling fatigue and gravity; Mueck's old woman straining either to lose consciousness or to maintain it; and Kawara, by obsessively cataloguing what time he got up each day, at war with time itself. Each makes plain what we already know: that resistance is futile and consciousness elusive and, in the end, it slips beyond our grasp for good.

*Figures of Sleep* inevitably diverts into early conceptualism's faddish embrace of endurance works, and it makes me wonder how well some have aged. For her work *The Sleepers*, Sophie Calle photographed friends (and sometimes their dogs) lolling in her bed on a regular schedule. It's an exploration of the rift between public and private, the prescribed versus the organic, but to me feels less intimate than inert. (Mladen Stilinic's *Artist at Work*, a series of black and white photos of the artist in bed pointedly doing not much at all, seems a critique of exactly that, intentionally or not).

Chris Burden's *Bed Piece*, from 1972, in which the artist lay in bed in a gallery for an entire month, requiring his gallerist to service bodily requirements like food and water (and what comes next) is an icon of the genre but, perhaps inadvertently, speaks less to endurance than the privilege required to be able to indulge in it in the relative comfort of a Soho gallery.

Worse, set next here to the harrowing work of Tehching Hsieh, it withers, louchely out of touch. In the '80s, Hsieh, from Taiwan, enacted a series of "One Year Performances" and he meant what he said. He passed a year in New York not going inside, ever, and spent another year never leaving a cage (sorry, Chris, but not even close). But the most intense among them, on view here, is enough to keep you awake for days. Called, unceremoniously, *Time Clock Piece*, Hsieh committed to punch a time clock on the hour, every hour, for a year, which he proved by photographing himself each time (the images are sped up on a time lapse here, where you can see his hair grow from buzz cut to shoulder length).

A clear comment on labour, commerce and its insistent creep into our off hours, *Time Clock Piece* has perhaps never been more relevant than this very moment. Hsieh, perhaps, could see what was coming: an interconnected world where time itself became the commodity, with all of us on call, all the time. Think about that the next time you reach for your iPhone X, and whether the world in the palm of your hand is liberty or chains.

*Figures of Sleep* continues at the Art Museum of the University of Toronto until March 3. See [artmuseum.utoronto.ca](http://artmuseum.utoronto.ca) for information.

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