

# The Art of Sleeping

Sarah Fuller closes her eyes and opens the shutter

For some, the subject of dreams is trivial but for photographic artist Sarah Fuller and her collaborators at Montreal's Dream and Nightmare Lab it is serious business.

Fuller, who makes her home in Banff, Alberta, first began her work about dreams in 2007 when she started experimenting with pinhole photography. Because of the long exposures required by a pinhole camera, Fuller used it to photograph herself sleeping. Each exposure was several hours long and documented a night's sleep. In conjunction with the photographs Fuller began to write about her dreams; each morning when she awoke she would close the pinhole camera and then proceed to record her dreams. This evolved into the series *Dream Works*. The images in the series are haunting—blurry traces of her unconscious body, compressed into a single black and white frame. Each image is accompanied by a description of her dream: some are very detailed, involving movie gangsters and friends from her childhood; others are fragmented and absurd. One reads “no dream” leaving the viewer to wonder why not.

When I asked Fuller about her sleep habits she replied, “I can sleep pretty much anywhere and I'm a good sleeper”. This stands out in the *Dream Works* series because she doesn't appear to be in the same bed more than twice; and in one image she cuddles under a blanket in the driver's seat of a car. The accompanying dream description reads: “Dreamt I was on a highway (runway) that was notorious for plane crashes. Even as I stood there, there were planes careening into fields, left and right...” When asked she revealed that the variety of sleep locations stemmed from an interest in how different locations might affect her dreams.

Her recent series, *Dream Lab*, was made at the Dream and Nightmare Lab at Sacred Heart Laboratory in Montreal. Fuller had attended a dream conference and, intrigued by the range of research in this area, decided to collaborate with scientists to create photographs and record her dreams using Electroencephalography (EEG), a process that records the electrical activity of the brain. She worked with Dr. Tore Nielsen to create a series of self-portraits and videos. In each image Fuller is seated asleep in a wooden chair, eyes closed, face relaxed, feet crossed and slightly contorted underneath her legs, a tangle of multi-coloured wires stuck to her head and face, an object gently resting in her hand. Despite the uncomfortable position, she was really asleep when the images were taken: “I was in the lab

three nights and during the day I went for a long run to tire myself out so when I got to the lab I was able to fall asleep.”

While she sat on the chair in a darkened room the researchers monitored her brain activity for signs of sleep and, once she drifted off, they triggered the camera shutter that fired a flash unit and exposed her portrait. The sound and flash would indeed wake her up, although only momentarily, during which time she would describe her dream aloud to the lab assistant and then select another object to hold and start the process again. “Because of the role of the camera as a trigger to awaken, I felt a heightened sense of awareness of the relationship to my camera. I had set up the shot but—in a round about way—it was my dreaming self that decided when the camera should be fired.”

The resulting series of still colour photographs are both disturbing and humorous. In one she holds a red shoe, in another she wears a pair of blue swimming goggles and in another she is wrapped in a white blanket appearing quite vulnerable. When asked about these objects Fuller explains that Tore Nielsen was exploring the technique used by the surrealist artist Salvador Dali. Dali would fall asleep seated in a chair holding a key in his hand that would fall to the ground and wake him up; once awake he would make sketches of the images he dreamed about. Fuller was intrigued by Nielsen's methodology and both were enthusiastic about the collaborative possibilities. Fuller simultaneously became both the subject of his research and the subject of her own photographs. The objects were selected because of their personal significance and because she hoped they might prompt dreams about activities associated with them: “When I wore my swim goggles I dreamed about water”.

Fuller also made several videos that recorded her process of preparing for the lab. Of particular note is “Becoming the Subject,” which “...refers to my experience of not only becoming a scientific subject within the dream study but also the practice of becoming the subject of an artistic performance, a transformation I see as beginning the minute I chose to approach the lab to collaborate”. It is this performative aspect of her work that I find most captivating, both in her solo and collaborative work.

— Jennifer Crane

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June 29th, 2007

Trans Canada pullout twenty minutes east of Medicine Hat, Ab.

Dreamt I was on a highway (runway) that was notorious for plane crashes. Even as I stood there, there were planes careening into fields, left and right. It was warm liquid sun melting over the landscape lie buttery golden goodness. I was wandering through a large pond only a few inches deep - there was smooth granular sand on the bottom and bright green reeds in the shallows. The sun glinted off the surface and I was attempting to wade back to my film supply so I could photograph this oddity (the highway that was like the Bermuda Triangle) with my 4"x5" camera. K. was there too, wading in the water. I could here the vroom of the planes veering low above my head but wading through the water was mesmerizing and so calming. I didn't make it to get the film. I was transfixed in the moment.



Top: *June 29th,*

*2007*, from the series

"Dream Work", 2007

Bottom: *Portrait of  
artists asleep holding*

*rock*, from the series

"Dream Lab", 2008, 40.5

x 50.8 cm, Type c-print

Both courtesy of the artist