

Photographs by KEN HIVELY *Los Angeles Times*

**SLEEPING SUBJECT:** These Polaroids of Laura Cooper, taken by artist husband Nick Taggart, are part of a show at Angles Gallery.

# Art of the unconscious

An artist's insomnia sparked an ongoing project in which her husband photographed her as she slumbered.

By HUGH HART  
*Special to The Times*

Every morning Nick Taggart wakes up, takes a picture of his wife, brushes his teeth and makes breakfast. He's done this for the past 3,582 days, except for those mornings when Laura Cooper cracks an eye open and says, "Nope. Not today."

Being photographed after she's awake would violate the rules Cooper concocted in 1993 when she decided it would be interesting to document herself, asleep, for an installation at Sue Spaid Fine Art gallery.

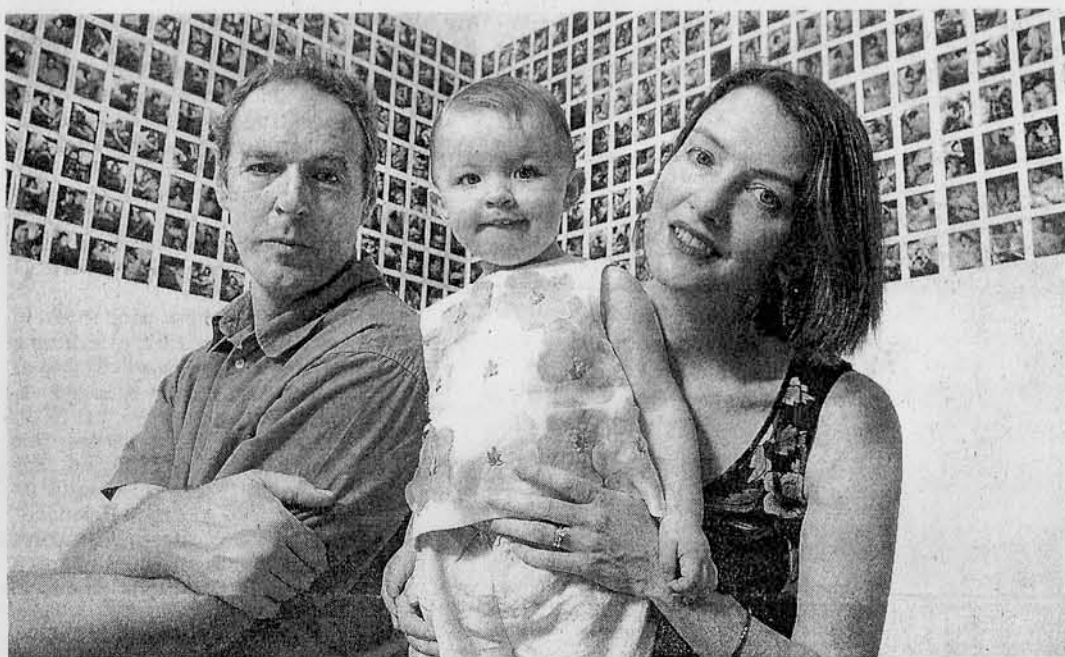
Earlier this month, the artist couple exhibited their progress to date, posting 2,500 Polaroids of Cooper, before waking, at the Angles Gallery in Santa Monica. Arranged as an enormous sequential grid, "Exterior of Consciousness" runs through Saturday, but there's no end in sight to what Cooper informally calls "the sleep piece." They plan to stick with it, she says, "until death or divorce."

Did Taggart and Cooper have any idea what they were getting into when they started out a decade ago?

"No!" Cooper says. Maneuvering around a discarded stove piled with vintage fabrics and odd thrift store finds, Cooper is trying to conduct a tour of the Glassell Park home she shares with Taggart, her husband of 12 years, and their 19-month-old daughter, Lily, who's just tossed a pillow out the window.

"As a parent now I've finally gotten exhausted enough that I sleep a little bit better, but I used to be a terrible insomniac," Cooper recalls, by way of explanation. "I'd be up all night and then I'd fall asleep when it got light. Nick falls asleep when his head hits the pillow, and he wakes up bright and bushy-tailed. I thought, sleep is such a vulnerable thing, maybe I have trouble giving up that control. I figured if I had Nick take a picture of me when I — you know, the conscious 'I' — wasn't there, that it would somehow be reassuring."

"We were not thinking, 'Oh, we'll be showing this 10 years, or 20 years from now.' It took on a life of its own, and that life had so much to do with Nick. When I first said, 'Honey, would you take my picture every morning while I'm asleep?' I thought this was my piece. That was my misunderstanding. It's so much about his eye. And it became apparent that this was going to keep going because I felt safe enough with Nick to entrust him with such a thing as having complete control



**FAMILY:** Taggart, Cooper and their 19-month-old daughter, Lily, in front of some of photos of Cooper. The exhibition includes 2,500 photos of the slumbering Cooper taken over the last 10 years.

of how he presents me when I'm sleeping."

"Laura often has ideas and then she involves me in it, so then I end up doing the work," jokes Taggart, a soft-spoken Cambridge University expatriate, dressed in Bermuda shorts. Indeed, for Taggart and Cooper, work, art and life have a tendency to overlap in unexpected ways.

For example, a death mask cast from Cooper's face, swathed in a translucent vintage scarf, hangs from a doorknob upstairs. Walls are covered with "body prints" titled "Butterflyman," "Squirrel" and "Compost Man." To create these fantastical collages, Cooper covered Taggart in paint. He pressed himself onto a backdrop, which was then framed in a resin bed of preserved leaves, flowers, morning glory vines and lizard remains.

"I wanted these to be sort of like botanical specimens," Cooper says. "You know, the way they print them as sort of evidence of something" that existed in nature.

Cooper, who earned an MFA at CalArts and now teaches at Art Center College of Design, says she's been interested in a warmer, more personal approach to art for some time now. "When I was in school, I felt as though you were supposed to do work that was tough and cool and analytical and distant. I always felt perversely drawn to doing something which was more vulnerable than that, and a little more tied to some kind of intimate experience."

She found ample inspiration after she met Taggart on a blind date 15 years ago and moved into his house on a hill. The home, which Taggart purchased shortly after emigrating from England in 1977, has no air-conditioning; the kitchen, at the moment, has no stove. But there's plenty of ex-

travagance to be found in the profusion of fruit trees, flowers, wild grasses and bushes that surround the home. "For me," says Cooper, plucking a fig from a nearby branch to feed Lily, "this place was really wonderful in that it gave a way to explore that connection of art and life in a more complete way."

By example, Cooper encouraged Taggart, a professor at Otis College of Art and Design, to shift his gaze from the pop culture artifacts that informed his early work. Taggart's "Tower of Televisions," stored in a corner of his studio, feature a painting of Kirk Douglas as Vincent van Gogh from the film "Lust for Life," pondering a self-portrait of Van Gogh. Arrayed on the living room wall are Taggart's drawings of photographs of works by Brancusi, Andy Warhol, Cindy Sherman, Joseph Beuys; Marcel Duchamp, Man Ray and others.

"I used to spend more of my time in the studio and very little time outside," says Taggart, who looks back on some of his early work as being "a little dry and analytical." He found fresh material once he started paying attention to the life forms swarming right outside his window.

"Laura got very involved in the gardening, and I got kind of swept into it too, and that started affecting our art as well," he says. "I liked the idea that I could be in a big city, yet have all these fruit trees outside the window. It's such a strange combination of things. Both of us have been affected by the plant forms and the atmosphere, the drama of the garden."

The spouses, of course, produce individual work as well. Taggart has lately turned his pencil toward deceptively bucolic nature scenes laced with predatory insect behavior. Cooper shares her interest in "component" pieces with Laura Pad-

dock; their 150-painting grouping is currently on display at the Ben Metz Gallery's "L.A. Post-Cool" show, which also includes Taggart drawings.

But the ongoing sleep piece is strictly a family affair, and Cooper admits she recently considered expanding the franchise. "I saw Lily yesterday sleeping, and she looked sort of gorgeous, and I was really tempted to 'be the eye' and take a picture. How dramatic would that be? Ten years of her sleeping, and the changes! But Lily's not the one deciding, and she's not given me permission so I can't do it."

Taggart and Cooper say any narrative or formal cohesion emerging in their project is a matter of "chaos theory" in action, rather than intentional design on their part. Still, Lily's sudden appearance in the morning photos a few months back proved to be one heartwarming plot twist in the ongoing Taggart-Cooper docu-saga. "Lily already has her camera face," Cooper says. "She already understands the presence of the camera. But to say, 'Oh I'm going to present your life as a work of art' would be not right." Maybe when she's older?

"Yeah..." Cooper ponders the possibility. "No," she decides. "All this art stuff — there's enough of that in the family." She laughs. "She should be a doctor."

## 'Exterior of Consciousness'

**Where:** Angles Gallery, 2230 Main St., Santa Monica

**When:** Tuesday-Saturday, 10 a.m.-6 p.m.

**Ends:** Saturday

**Contact:** (310) 396-5019