

AROUND THE GALLERIES

Caught in sleep,
but not in repose

By LEAH OLLMAN
Special to The Times

We never see ourselves as others see us. That's a given. To see ourselves when we're asleep, even more preposterous. Ten years ago, **Laura Cooper** set out to create a visual record that would overcome these natural limitations. She wanted to know "where she was" when her conscious self checked out.

She asked her husband, fellow artist **Nick Taggart**, to photograph her each morning before she awoke. Like all good Conceptualists undertaking a project, they established some rules. Only one photograph a day would be taken, none if Cooper awoke first. They wouldn't edit the results. The process would continue, daily, until death or divorce.

The ongoing project, on view at Angles Gallery, consists now of more than 2,500 images, presented like serial data, in a grid. However formulaic the result sounds, it turns out to be utterly sensuous and fully absorbing. Titled "Exterior of Unconsciousness," it's a private diary that we're granted the privilege of viewing.

We see Cooper in an unguarded state, clothed and unclothed, both nestled in bedding and bare. She is vulnerable, certainly, but because Taggart approaches his task with such tenderness and respect, Cooper's integrity is never violated. The project avoids the taint of voy-

eurism.

Taggart shoots down onto Cooper from a consistent distance, so that she's always seen from around the waist up — close enough to read the serenity on her face, far enough to register the balletic twists of her posture. Though sleeping generally means horizontality, Taggart orients the photographs vertically, which puts us in a more direct, face-to-face relationship with Cooper. The perspective feels both more intimate and more formally dynamic.

From afar, the spread of small black and white images resembles a continuous drawing, with shadowy passages and luminous respites. Studied closely, the work has a cinematic sense of progression. It's not just the patterns on the bedding, shifting from stripes to plaids to florals, but Cooper herself who evolves. The maturation is subtle, but near the final group of prints, it becomes overt. She thickens and swells, until from one frame to the next she is no longer alone in the bed but snuggled next to her newborn. From there, the chronicle feels like a love letter, a daily ritual of appreciation.

Together, Cooper and Taggart have created an extraordinarily beautiful document. Originally intended to expose the machinations of unconsciousness, it testifies instead to the power of its opposite state: acute attention. Cooper sleeps on, her lovely face peaceful and closed. Taggart — and the rest of us —



COOPER AND TAGGART: "Exterior of Unconsciousness" conveys a tender intimacy without veering into voyeurism.

Angles Gallery

are happily wide-eyed, more devoted than ever to the act of looking.

Angles Gallery, 2230 Main St., Santa Monica, (310) 396-5019, through Aug. 2. Closed Sunday and Monday.