

CHAMBER MATES

By Alexandra Kokoli

There is a special intimacy that comes from sharing sleeping quarters: the etymology of ‘comrade’ as ‘one who shares the same room’ (1590s) hence ‘a close companion’¹ supports this assumption, while the more familiar subsequent uses of the term underline a sociality that rests on shared ideals and goals – a fellow communist.² The artworks brought together in this exhibition by artist and curator Mindy Lee do not necessarily share a common ideology but they evoke an intensified vulnerability in their sleeping/dreaming states that creates the opportunity for intimacy, not only among themselves (if the works may be granted some materialist agency) but also, potentially, between us and them. *Sleepy Heads* abides by and even amplifies some of the tacit rules of the white cube, such as silence, while breaking others.³ By casting the gallery as dormitory, the expectation that the visitor should contemplate (visually and intellectually) the works on display is marred by the suggestion of a social transgression: staring at a stranger while they’re sleeping. To avoid the censure of voyeurism, the visitor is encouraged to modify their gaze and re-position themselves in the visual economy of the gallery as something other or more than viewer. *Sleepy Heads* invites us to join the exhibited works if not in sleep, then in states of altered, heightened, or meditative consciousness, as wakeful allies. Doing so does not guarantee intimacy but promises ‘a familiarity that grows proportionally with the estrangement of the self from the self.’⁴

Alicia Reyes McNamara describes her woven cardboard head as ‘a studio spirit’ evoking the sacred figure of Chacmool, a stylised pre-Columbian Mesoamerican sculpture of a reclining figure with a plate on its stomach, used to hold sacrificial offerings at Mayan and Aztec temples. Chacmools are recognisable by the exaggerated 90-degree angle by which the head is turned away from the body, but this body-less head is liberated from performing this gesture and allowed to finally rest. In contrast, **Cathy Lomax**’s apparent sleeper is hard at work: the character of *Toni Marachek*, played by actor Lizabeth Scott in 1946 film noir *The Strange Love of Martha Ivers*, is painted expertly acting sleep, calling to mind the asymmetrical dynamics of the gaze and our inability to see ourselves being looked at, as the artist has explored previously.⁵ While Lomax examines our enduring fascination with the silver screen, beauty, and celebrity, **Gabriela Schutz** attends to *First Hand Experiences* (2017-2018), a series of drawings accompanied by text that trump their autobiographical, diaristic content by the universal language of the cartoon. *Patrick*, a section from the series *First Hand Experiences* which was originally exhibited as a scroll, highlights the intimacy and trust of sleep in the presence of others: Schutz captures a not-quite-shared experience (her convalescing friend drifts off

while they're listening to a murder investigation show) while confirming their togetherness across the border of sleep.

The ambiguity of sleep as a both connector and divider is also at play in **Mindy Lee's** *Head back*, a triple portrait of mother, child, and grandmother, the latter rendered faintly on the top left. Lee paints on a semi-translucent cotton pillowcase unravelled on three sides, with the stitching on the connected side highlighted, like a stubborn scar. The entangled bodies appear odd and uncomfortable, flickering between slumber and unconsciousness, closeness and solitude, undoing the ingrained romanticism of mother-and-child representations. *The Perfect* (2007) by **Freddie Robins**, a series of complete machine-knitted 'skins' using cutting edge technology that claims to require no hand-finishing, animates the near-homophones 'skin' and 'skein', successfully negotiating their very different textures. The results are both comic and unsettling: while perfectly-knitted, as was the promise of the technology, the floppy sk(e)ins do not quite live up to their title, although they convincingly embody the pursuit of perfection as an exercise in futility. Despite not using textile as material, **Aly Helyer's** painting *A Head Full of the Past* teems with tactile textures: skin, hair, upholstery, a domestic interior, hold together fragments of bodies and heads, one longing, one nearly squeezed out of the frame, another glassy-eyed and completely disconnected from the world even though it appears wedged between soft furnishings.

It would be an understatement to claim that **Debra Swan's** *Family Portrait (Shrunkened Heads)* departs from established conventions of family portraiture: the shrunken heads of mother (the artist), father, son, and dog hang together from a jute string, brownish and dried up, with their mouths stitched shut. Obviously created with loving care (Joanne Lee notes 'the careful alignment of eyelashes, the faint sheen to the dog's nose'),⁶ it is their ambiguity that makes these shrunken heads most disturbing: beautiful, serene, and literally attached to one another, this *Family Portrait* reveals maternal ambivalence with painful eloquence and humour. Forbidden and usually censored thoughts also surface in *Prohibition* by **Jane Hayes Greenwood**, a layered drawing in which embracing forms emerge inside a woman's head, while her lips are blocked from kissing: in compensation for such prohibitions, the work renders bodies permeable by dreams, desire, and each other. An hourglass female figure in **Hannah Murgatroyd's** *Herbst* appears to be sleeping upright or else to be in a trance, hypnotised by the autumnal winds swirling around her. Hair and leaves are churned together vigorously, with an energy that threatens to bring her back to wakefulness: 'spirited lines animate her drawings as much as her paintings, their vitality stemming from drawing's relationship with the unconscious'.⁷ Closed or downcast eyes do not always denote sleep but can also evoke self-containment, interiority, and absorption. **Rebecca Fortnum** has long been fascinated by the intensity of portraits of women and children who refuse to reciprocate the

viewer's gaze, while also exploring the tension between the persistence of images and visual motifs on the one hand, and the fragility of specific works of art on the other. *Prosopopoeia* (Caudel, unknown) is based on a portrait by Camille Claudel of an unknown subject of a sculpture the whereabouts of which remain undetermined, while *The Sleeping Children* (Chantrey) is a painting of the frontispiece from a book about Tennyson of Francis Chantrey's *The Sleeping Children* (1816) in Lichfield Cathedral. Chantrey's sculpture was famously commissioned by a grieving widow who wanted her dead daughters commemorated as if they had fallen asleep in each other's arms.

The channels between the dead and the living have long been a source of both comfort and terror, and those who claim to cross them are viewed with suspicion as well as awe. Originally commissioned for the Senate House Library in 2014, **Sarah Sparkes** made *The Electric Girls* in response to research carried out at the Harry Price Library of Magical Literature, during a research fellowship at the University of London between 2008 and 2011.⁸ A collection of light bulbs in glass jars references the 'psychic testing apparatus' that Harry Price, a self-proclaimed psychical researcher, fashioned for ascertaining the authenticity of mediumship, while the illuminated faces of the celebrated mediums appear to be paying homage to their gifts and persistence in the face of such scepticism. In *Thorness Sleeps*, **Victoria Rance** creates a universe of myth and magic in the shape of a small installation, in which a female, earthier manifestation of Thor, Thorness, a tiny black creature covered in briar thorns, is guarded by a motley crew of imaginary entities, organic matter (including a dead spider), and talismans. Rance challenges divisions between human and animal, science and magic, and strives to restore the land to its 'lost creatures and local spirits'.⁹ We will all sleep better if she succeeds.

¹ <https://www.etymonline.com/word/comrade>, accessed 3 June 2019.

² <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/comrade>, accessed 3 June 2019.

³ In his formative *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space* (Santa Monica: Lapis Press, 1986 [orig. 1976]), Brian O'Doherty compares the gallery space to a church, a courtroom, and a laboratory (p. 14), but never to a dormitory or bedroom. In fact the prohibition on visitors to sleep in the gallery is cited as one of its shaping conditions: 'one does not laugh, eat, drink, lie down, or sleep; one does not get ill, go mad, sing, dance, or make love.' (p. 10).

⁴ Dimitra Gkitsa, 'Against the Solitude of the White Cube', in Nella Aarne, Lucy Lopez and Adam Smythe (eds.), *The Standard Model: Curatorial Propositions* (London: Goldsmiths MFA Curating, 2015), p. 103.

⁵ <http://www.cathylomax.co.uk/pages/shows/2017/TheBlindSpot.html>, accessed 3 June 2019.

⁶ Joanne Lee, 'Long Time Dead', in Debra Swann, *Dwelling* (Nottingham: Bonnington Gallery, n.d.), p. 18.

⁷ Lizzie Lloyd, 'Drawing like a Painter' (2019),

https://docs.wixstatic.com/ugd/f889ec_744d7a004a9844d788bc212d0d114632.pdf, accessed 3 June 2019.

⁸ 'The Electric Girl', <http://www.sarahsparkes.com/blog/3-dimensions/the-electric-girl/>, accessed 3 June 2019.

⁹ 'Otherworld White Box Gallery March 1-10 2019', <http://www.victoriarance.com/>, accessed 3 June 2019.