

SARAH IRVIN

# The Sleep Series

May 11–June 26, 2015  
Fenwick Gallery



## CURATOR'S STATEMENT

Fenwick Gallery is proud to exhibit *The Sleep Series* by Sarah Irvin, part of a larger project called *A Bringing Forth*. This series of more than 100 watercolors was produced by Irvin in intervals—that is, while her infant daughter napped. Irvin marked the time in tick marks of various sizes and shades of blue. Some longer naps span several pieces of paper, containing hundreds of tick marks. Other naps were clearly very short, with not enough time, even, for Irvin to fill a single page.

Within *The Sleep Series* are titles such as *November 4, Morning Nap*; *November 19, Midday Nap*, and *December 18, Afternoon Nap*. Each recorded nap is separated by a blank page, a pause in the activities of sleep and counting, measuring, working and waiting. Of course, a pause here is not

really a pause, because it means that baby is awake. Activities of waking and caregiving happen in these intervals, which Irvin measures and records in other series within *A Bringing Forth*.

Irvin likens the recorded naps to “words in one long sentence,” the blank pages like the spaces between words. Installed in a single row, *The Sleep Series* covers approximately 50 linear feet—the entire length of usable wall space in the gallery. To read the series from left to right truly is like reading one long sentence and the duration of the piece is powerful: on one hand, quiet and steady and on the other, bustling with the activity of a baby’s brain in sleep and the work of an artist-mother.

## ANNE SMITH

Graduate Professional Assistant  
Fenwick Gallery, 2014-2015

# Sarah Irvin

## STATEMENT

My current project-based series is entitled *A Bringing Forth*, derived from the Latin root of the term post-partum. In this work I respond directly to my experience of parenthood through naturalistic observation as I record, and document the care of my seven-month-old daughter. The work is enabled by and exists within the context of motherhood.

In this exhibition, you see a fifty foot installation of *The Sleep Series*, one of many series in the project. I created this series during the second and third months of my daughter's life, exclusively while she slept. Each set of watercolors began at the start of a nap and was considered complete when she awoke. By doing this I allowed my circumstances to dictate aspects of my creative output.

Other iterations of this project are drawings made while breastfeeding; drawings created by our glider rocking chair; transfer drawings created by walking across the nursery rug; my daughter's nursery as camera obscura; cyanotypes created with her blankets, toys and clothes; metalpoint drawings capturing her activities of play and early stages of her own mark-making captured through fingerprint dust. As a whole, this project-based work is a personal narrative taking form as poetic visual data collected through self-anthropology.

## BIO

Sarah Irvin (b. 1985, Florence, AL) creates autobiographical work investigating her perceptions of family members. The medium, format, and technique for each series is dictated by the character of her relationship to the family member and the narrative of how their lives interact. In her current work, she responds directly to the experience of caring for her infant daughter. Works include watercolors only created while the baby is sleeping and drawings created exclusively while breastfeeding. These works serve as a response to and record of her experience as a parent and caregiver.

In 2008, Irvin graduated with a BFA in painting and drawing from the University of Georgia. She is an MFA candidate at George Mason University with an expected graduation date of 2016. Her work is in collections such as the Try-Me Urban Restoration Project and The Federal Reserve Bank.

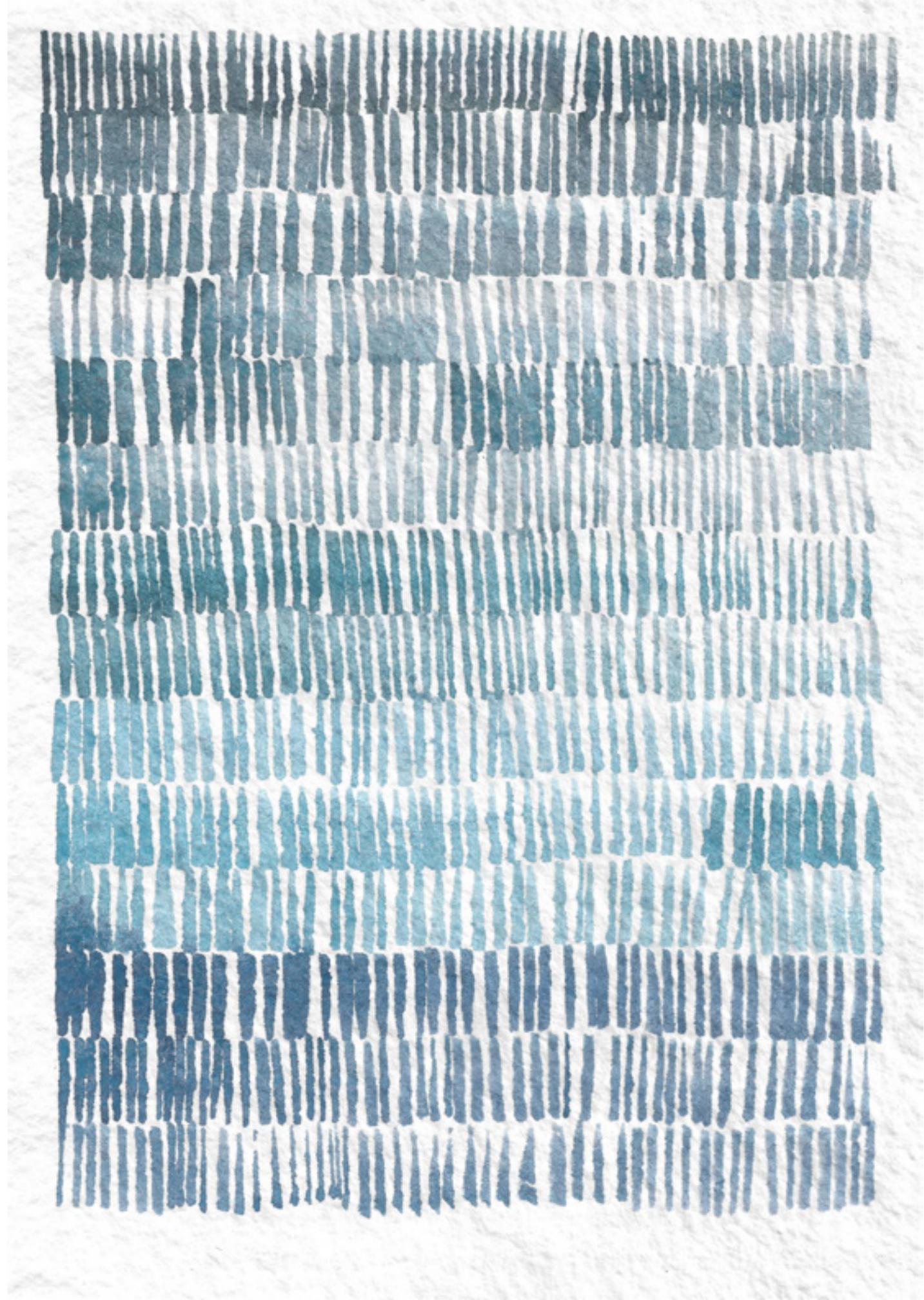
Irvin also curates *The (Pro)Create Anthology*: a collection of narratives about the intersection of professional studio practice and parenting.

[sarahirvinart.com](http://sarahirvinart.com)  
[procreateanthology.tumblr.com](http://procreateanthology.tumblr.com)



**ABOVE** Detail of *The Sleep Series*, as installed in Fenwick Gallery.

**OPPOSITE** The following four pages show *November 11, Late Afternoon Nap*, 2014. Sarah Irvin. Watercolor on paper. Each panel 5" x 7".



Handwritten text in a cursive script, likely a historical document or manuscript. The text is densely packed and spans the entire page, with some lines appearing to be headings or section markers. The ink is dark, and the paper shows signs of age and wear.

Handwritten text in a cursive script, likely a historical document or manuscript. The text is densely packed and spans the entire page, with some lines appearing to be headings or section markers. The ink is dark, and the paper shows signs of age and wear.

# Index



November 4, Morning Nap



November 6, Afternoon Nap



November 10, Midday Nap



November 10, Late Afternoon Nap



November 11, Late Afternoon Nap



November 13, Midday Nap



November 13, Afternoon Nap



November 13, Late Afternoon Nap



November 14, Morning Nap



November 16, Afternoon Nap



November 16, Evening Nap



November 19, Morning Nap



November 19, Midday Nap



November 19, Late Afternoon Nap



November 19, Evening Nap



November 20, Morning Nap



November 21, Morning Nap



November 21, Evening Nap



November 24, Afternoon Nap



December 2, Midday Nap



December 2, Afternoon Nap



December 3, Evening Nap



December 6, Afternoon Nap



December 6, Evening Nap



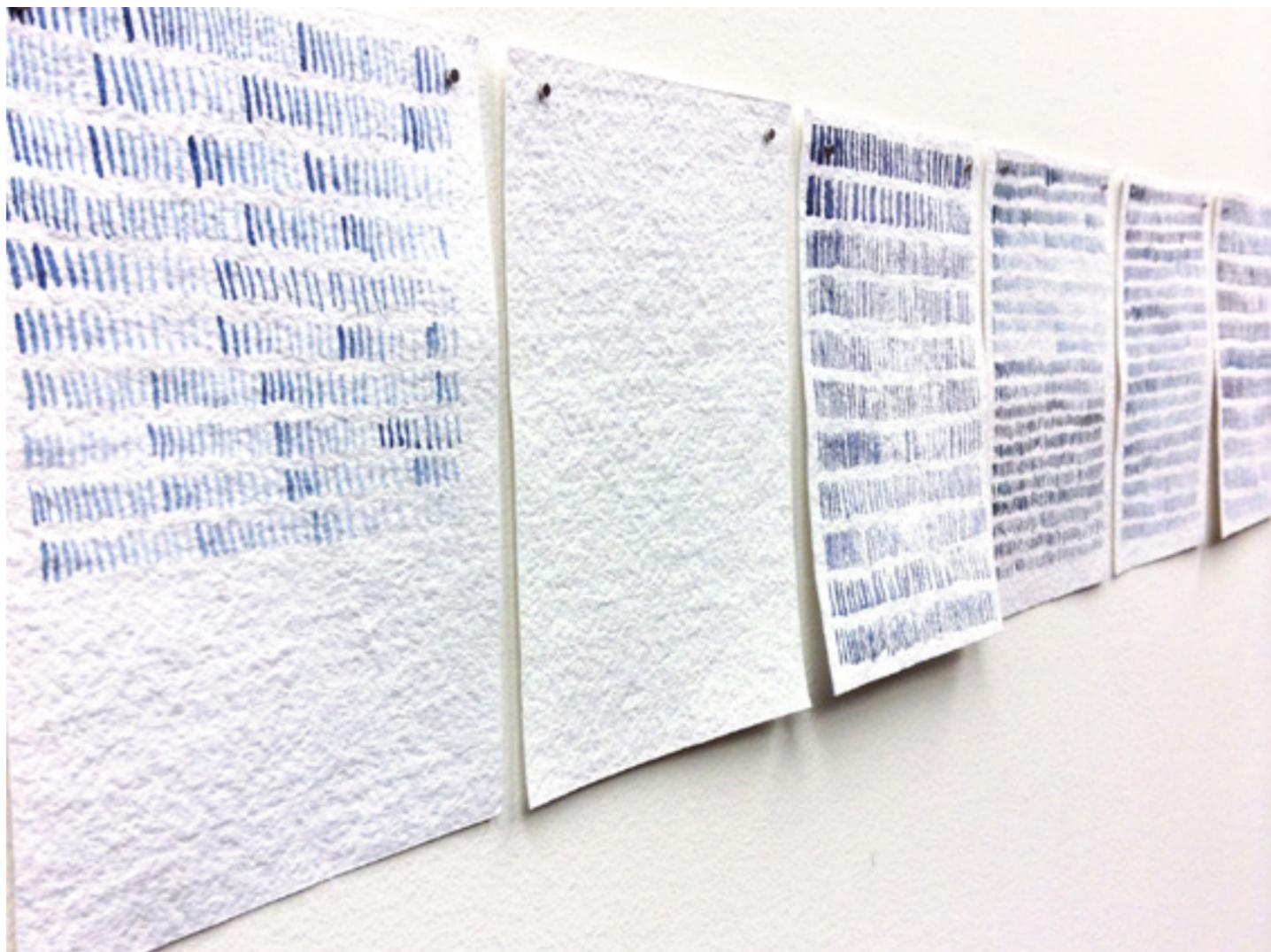
December 9, Afternoon Nap



December 17, Afternoon Nap



December 18, Afternoon Nap



# AN INTERVIEW WITH SARAH IRVIN

by Anne Smith

Anne Smith: In my first encounter with *The Sleep Series*, I noticed how quiet and serene it feels. Then, as I spent more time with it, I began to understand all the frenetic activity implied by the piece: the way the baby's brain is active and growing even in sleep, for instance. There is also all the activity of your making, as an artist and mother, with these brief windows of time (which could end at any moment) in which to work. How would you describe this piece? Do you see it balancing ideas of work and rest?

Sarah Irvin: I find it difficult to put a concise label on this work. In a basic sense, this piece is defined by limitations and in turn re-defines those very limits. Creating these paintings was a very direct response to having a one-month old baby and being the primary caregiver. I wanted to paint, but found it incredibly difficult to settle into a rhythm of working in very small increments of time that I had no control over. I chose to create work that was "done" when the available time was done, in this way the work was about the constraints and only exists because of those constraints. I worked this way for about two months and slowly transitioned into using the time to create different work without realizing it. Looking back it is multi-faceted. In one sense, I see the work as a visualization of my available time during those two months, in another I see it as a personal reconciliation to a new set of parameters as an artist and so on. I want to avoid the words "work" and "rest" when describing my time. I want to be well rested and I want to create rigorous work. The way my time is specifically broken up is becoming less relevant. I just move forward. The idea of leaving home to go to a place of work and returning home to a place of leisure is a fiction.

AS: What compelled you to measure your baby's sleep in this way -- with strokes of blue watercolor in rows, versus, say measuring with a timer and recording the time that way?

SI: I had watercolors at the ready because they are easy to set up and clean up. If your palette dries out, you can still use the paint later. This flexibility was what I needed. I used tick marks that were similar to marks

in drawings I made while I was pregnant and not feeling well. I saw them as an indicator of the passage of time and like letters that form words in a very long, unreadable sentence. Recording every minute of sleep in a chart as hard data would have been obsessive, and I like to think that this is a more poetic record of early parenthood. Also, sleep is definitely a bluish, grayish, purplish, so color of the paint was an obvious choice.

AS: Where does the voice of a parent or mother fit into contemporary art today?

SI: If you look for it, you see that parenthood influences the work of many artists. This topic is as relevant as any other. However, first person accounts of parenthood as visual art are not typically acknowledged by major art institutions. It is important for artists to keep making work that engages critically with the experience of parenthood and for institutions to recognize and exhibit this work. If artists and curators take a chance and accept this as a valid topic, we will see what comes of it and no one has to figure out if, why, how and to what extent it is being ignored.

AS: What books have you read lately that have been part of your thinking around this project?

SI: The last three books I read were *The Mother Knot* by Jane Lazarre, *Feeding the Family* by Marjorie DeVault and *Family Man* by Scott Coltrane. Right now I am reading *The Mermaid* and *The Minotaur* by Dorothy Dinnerstein. I try to consume as much writing as I can about parenthood from as many angles as possible.

Note: The artist answered these questions while her daughter was sleeping.

# About Fenwick Gallery



## A SPACE FOR INQUIRY

George Mason University Libraries provides a hybrid, walk-through exhibition space in Fenwick Library to enhance and enrich teaching, learning and culture at the University. This space highlights Mason Libraries' resources together with original visual and multi-media work.

Exhibit themes emphasize facets of the Libraries' collections, research interests of Mason faculty, students and staff, Mason's curriculum and local cultural initiatives. Fenwick Gallery is dedicated to exhibiting high quality works by students, faculty, staff and other emerging and experienced artists that highlight aspects of the Libraries' collections.

For more information, visit: [fenwickgallery.gmu.edu](http://fenwickgallery.gmu.edu)

## OUR GOALS

- Promote the Libraries' collections and encourage scholarly and cultural inquiry at George Mason University
- Focus on research and scholarship at/of George Mason University
- Collaborate and engage with relevant Mason faculty to incorporate and/or embed gallery exhibitions into course instruction
- Stimulate intellectual and creative reflection through visual and multi-media exhibitions, discussions, etc.
- Promote the Libraries' academic and cultural mission
- Support the Libraries' development program and goals