

F2
ART / CATHY CURTIS

Strange Bedfellows at Cal State Fullerton

■ New exhibit spotlights "the role of the bedroom, in art and in our society." Second show, "Sculptural Architecture: A Look Within . . .," closes on Friday.

I asked people to give me a few hours of their sleep. To come sleep in my bed. To let themselves be looked at and photographed. To answer questions. To each participant I suggested an eight-hour stay, that of a normal sleep," writes conceptual artist Sophie Calle.

Twenty-eight men and women—friends and strangers alike—took their turns on Calle's bed during an eight-day period. Some took their clothes off; others didn't. Some were suspicious; several men said they were expecting an orgy, and at least one refused to sleep. Every hour, Calle took a photograph.

Calle's 1979 project, "The Sleepers," is part of "Bedroom Eyes: Room With a View," a Cal State Fullerton exhibit of work in diverse styles and media by six artists—famous and fledgling—from Los Angeles, New York and France. Graduate student curator Patricia Watts writes in a brief introduction that the show "seeks to define the role of the bedroom, in art and in our society."

The works focus on a number of key themes: sexuality, voyeurism, religious belief, family dynamics, urban isolation and the loss of innocence. Just about the only thing they all have in common is the image of a bed—and the refusal to draw pat conclusions about the activities that take place behind the closed doors of the second-most private room in the house.

"The Sleepers" includes selected images tracking some of the sleepers through hours of oblivion or wakefulness. Brief texts describe each person, and miscellaneous observations and ran-



KARI RENE HALL / Los Angeles Times

Sophie Calle's "The Sleepers" in Cal State Fullerton "Bedroom Eyes" exhibit consists of photos of friends, strangers who agreed to spend eight hours in bed.

dom remarks are inscribed on the bottom of each photo. One woman took a Valium and awakened "with a loud cry"; another woman dreamed of "blood and bombs." One man told Calle he "loves the idea of drooling during the night" and is "scared of being bored"; another said he believes that "people are closer during night."

Sleep is one of the most private activities we all engage in, a time when we have no control over what we look like or which memories and desires are racing through our minds. But Calle deliberately doesn't use her subjects as fodder for research. She writes that all she wants to do is "establish neutral and distanced contact."

Operating in a peculiar realm—she isn't exactly a host, even though she offers food and a bed, nor is she a social scientist or a kinky voyeur—Calle offers viewers little more than a jumble of fragmentary experiences.

None of Calle's sleepers are shown nude or having sex. No bizarre bedtime rituals are shown or discussed. Details of erotic, frightening or embarrassing dreams are not described. The sleepers are simply inert bodies half-buried under covers, who offer up disconnected remarks without compelling interest.

Ultimately, the *idea* of being observed while in a strange bed turns out to be more tantalizing and forbidden-sounding than the actuality. Like the sleepers who were mildly disappointed not to have been invited to an orgy, we begin to realize that the most tantalizing aspects of sleep are locked in our own imaginations.

Eric Fischl's two bedroom paintings in the exhibit are redolent with off-kilter sexuality and a pervasive feeling of unease. In "Father and Son," an older man and a younger man are shown sleeping in the nude, on top of the sheets,

in exactly the same self-contained posture. Two bold-patterned pillows wall off the father's torso from his son's. The overhead bed light is still on; the figures are literally under a spotlight.

Why are they sleeping together? And why in the nude? Are they at home? (Where's Mom?) In a hotel? Are the pillows in place to keep the father from accidentally touching his son? What happened before they fell asleep? Is this a case for the local social service bureau? Is the air conditioner broken? And what the hell are we doing in their room?

The other painting, "Master Bedroom," is one of Fischl's best-known works. An adolescent girl wearing only bikini underpants, with her hair in curlers, hugs a large dog on an unmade bed. Fischl's beds—the ubiquitous king-size model—are vast chunks of territory, like islands, on which vulnerable people are cast adrift. The girl might be posing for some unseen photographer, might be looking at herself in a mirror, might be trying to catch the attention of a sibling, a lover or (who knows?) a parent. In Fischl's universe, the questions are always open-ended.

Robert Yarber's squat, urban couples—who live in a world of garish colors and neon lighting—are more shallow folk whose motives are easier to figure out. In "The Immortals," an embracing couple levitate above a bed as flat as a table top. Through the open window the sun sets above blocky office buildings. Yup, that's the weightless feeling of escaping with your honey to a hotel room, a private universe disconnected from the demands of the everyday world.

The sleeping couple in "Sign-off" have fallen asleep with the TV on. A mirror above their bed reflects the "snow" on the screen as well as the ever-present downtown skyline seen through a window. The only unusual sight is the upside-down dog that falls against the flaming red sky. If a dog falls out of a

Please see ART, F5

ART: Cal State Fullerton Exhibit

Spotlights Role of Bedroom in Society

F5

Continued from F2

window in a city of sleeping people, is that like a tree falling in a forest? Maybe it didn't really happen, if no one was watching.

Karen Carson's theatrical-looking drawings from the early '70s of empty beds are based—as she has written—on Los Angeles bedroom showrooms, with their “acres of horizontal promises for sexual mysteries solved over the lapping of water, among cuddly fake furs and on velvets surrounded by mirrors and Mylar.”

Carson replaces these empty promises with the view of a woman who has been through it all and knows love and sex are no bed of roses. In “Virginity,” two giant hands emerge from the headboard to pull down the covers—a graphic image of a powerful external force ripping away a protective covering. In “Edge of Night,” a circular power saw rises, shark-like, through the center of the mattress—a visceral sign of the mixture of rage and isolation in a damaged relationship.

Flip-flopping the ubiquitous images of king-size beds in the exhibit, the real four-poster in Caryl Davis' installation, “Conspire,” is only four feet long. Two church kneelers serve as “parentheses” on either side of this unusable bed, tipping off the viewer that the piece is really about the impingement of religious values on the privacy and comfort of the bedroom.

Rona Pondick's bleak yet emotionally charged floor piece, “First Bed,” consists of a block of wood topped by a soiled pillow and divided into a neat, impersonal grid by strings that connect mismatched baby shoes. This puzzling work, as small and self-contained as a baby's crib, seems to be about the painful transition from innocence to experience in human life. While the pillow suggests human “experience” (bodily secretions of unknown origin), the baby shoes connote a child's “first steps” in the world.

Although baby shoes are commonly preserved in our culture as wistful tokens of innocence, these shoes possess a curious power. They join together to form an inexorable force—ringing the bed, marching in awkward “lock step” toward the pillow, and resting their dirty soles there, in place of the unseen baby's head. Perhaps Pondick is referring to the doctrine of



In Robert Yaber's "The Immortals," an embracing couple levitate above a bed. Work is part of Cal State Fullerton's "Bedroom Eyes: Room With a View" exhibit through Oct. 18

Original Sin, which offers a stern counterweight to the usual notion of childhood innocence.

Artist Buzz Spector has contributed a thoughtful and readable catalogue essay for the exhibit that links the works in the show to the modernist history of the bedroom as, in his words, a “metaphor of anxious desire, isolation and dream imagery.” In fact, the essay makes at least one viewer wish some museum curator would attempt a broader survey of the role of the bedroom in 20th-Century art.

□