

Sean Kelly

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Wolfgang Laib sifting pollen

The PATIENT Artist

The natural and spiritual worlds intersect in Wolfgang Laib's meticulous, contemplative art

by Brenton Good, from *Image* * photography by Wolfgang Laib

As Catholic monk and author Thomas Merton observed, the contemplative life has fallen out of fashion. We may give lip service to the idea of stillness, but we do little to cultivate it. A person who refuses to make efficient use of time, who is not practical, who does not actively pursue some concrete goal is somehow disturbing to the modern psyche.

One such iconoclast is the installation artist Wolfgang Laib. First of all, he is slow. Deliberately slow. He spends entire summers in fields near his home in the Black Forest of Germany

filling small jars with pollen. He'll devote long winter months to sanding a depression into a thin piece of marble. In the fast-paced, achievement-minded art world, his methods seem more than a little eccentric, and to the modern view of time, they are almost perversely meticulous. But it is integral to his projects that a single person completes every task. A three-inch pile of pollen on a museum floor speaks of intense care, love, and devotion.

Laib's work resists labels. It includes elements of performance art, photography, and concep-

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tual art. It also exhibits the influence of Buddhism, Jainism, and Christianity. At the point of overlap among multiple categories, Laib finds a unique voice. Using exquisitely simple everyday materials like milk, rice, and pollen, he manages to create a viewer experience that is new.

In *Pollen from Hazelnut*, pure pollen forms a glowing sheet of yellow pigment on a stone floor. Visitors hold their breath, partly for fear of disturbing the powdery veil, partly out of wonder. The pollen squares make no direct allusion to landscape; one is not transported to the grove where Laib collected it, but instead one is left with a tangible meditation upon light, color, and smell. The materials in their purest form become cryptic metaphors, intangible and ephemeral. Though his work is typically installed in galleries and museums, Laib has chosen at times to install it beneath the vaulted ceilings of European cathedrals. There it projects a reverent stillness that resonates in the ancient sacred spaces.

For 30 years, Laib has worked and reworked only a few series, exploring subtle variations on a few chosen themes. He continues to make the same "milkstones" with which he began his career in 1975. Over months, he'll painstakingly sand a thin slab of Macedonian marble, creating a slight concavity over the surface. When the slab is finished, he carefully fills the cavity with milk. Held by surface tension, the milk covers the entire slab without spilling over the edges, creating a clean, geometric shape with a reflective surface. The resulting object is something entirely new: a

piece of marble with properties never before seen in marble. The choice of materials is central. The durable stone, with its venerable place in the history of art, is juxtaposed with the cloudy, perishable, nourishing liquid.

Laib began working with pollen in 1977, and it has become one of his signature forms. He hand-collects varieties that occur naturally near his home, including pine, hazelnut, and dandelion, and stores them in

of pollen form a perfect row. In this minimal visual statement, the cones can refer to mountains, temples, or offerings. The way these tiny, precious accumulations can fill a vaulted hall with their immense presence is hard to believe until one experiences it firsthand.

Laib's installations are not photogenic, and he realized early in his career that documenting his work would pose a problem. He chose to photograph everything himself in



Pollen from Hazelnut, 1986, an installation at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Bordeaux, France

jars. A season may yield two jars of one type and a mere half jar of another. In most of his pollen installations, Laib sifts a single type of pollen (he doesn't mix varieties) onto the floor of a gallery or church. Upon entering the room, one is immersed in a large field of intense primary yellow—and in the smell. The work creates an intensity and purity of reflected light that is unique.

Laib also sometimes arranges pollen in minute piles. In *The Five Mountains Not to Climb On*, five cones

order to retain complete control, and the photos have their own beauty. Among the most powerful are those he's taken of himself installing the work (he sets up the shots before moving in front of the camera). These process photos allow us to witness the ceremony of creation. By making the private act public, the photographs offer viewers a new way to understand the work.

For some artists, the choice of medium is more or less a neutral decision. Deciding to paint in oil or



Laib pouring the milk for *Milkstone*, 1987–1989, an installation at his studio

cast in bronze hardly draws extra attention. When an artist selects sifted pollen or poured milk, however, the work is charged with special meaning before he begins. Instead of making his work out in the field, Laib takes natural materials indoors and makes art there. By isolating his materials in new settings, Laib reduces them to their purest essence. Hazelnut pollen becomes a reflection upon light and color; milk becomes a meditation upon sustenance.

Laib keeps his biography off center stage, but his life story sheds light on his work. He was raised in southern Germany, and his family took frequent journeys abroad, including trips to Turkey and India. He studied medicine, wrote a doctoral thesis on

the purity of drinking water in India, then chose not to practice medicine but to pursue a career in art instead. He, his wife, daughter, and parents now all live on the same rural property where he was born. They sit, eat, and sleep on mats instead of conventional furniture. Far from the art capitals of New York, Paris, and Berlin, they live a plain, secluded, almost ascetic life.

Laib has always been attracted to ascetic practice. After his first exhibition in New York, in 1979, he rented a loft there for a few months. The only furnishings were a six-inch portrait of Saint Francis of Assisi, a large pollen work, and a cloth mat. In interviews, he notes his interest in the monastic traditions of both East and West. He reads Buddhist philosophy, the teach-

ings of Saint Francis, and the Sufi mystic Rumi. It's not difficult to see the influence of the monastic traditions in his work; there's a pervasive sense of reverence and contemplation, though Laib avoids titles and overt symbols that could link his work definitively to any one religion.

At first glance, it seems natural to classify Laib as a minimalist, but his work strays far from minimalist ideology. Minimalist sculpture deals with intellectual investigation of space. It's about ideas. Once the artist has determined the concept, the making of the artwork can easily be passed on to assistants. Laib, on the other hand, insists on collecting each grain of pollen, and the end result is a sense of awe that is palpable for viewers. His work never becomes a cold investigation of space or form; it retains something spiritual.

The difference between Laib's work and most minimal art comes out in viewers' reactions. A cavernous room that

houses minuscule works composed of pollen is arresting to more than just the intellect. It demands thoughtful reflection and meditation. As viewers enter and leave the installation, rarely can a whisper be heard, even from those who know nothing of the artist. People respond with a deep stirring of wonder. No one dares break the stillness.

In a world where, as Merton observed, "what counts is getting things done," Laib's work asks the viewer to step outside the stream of time, to slow down and sink into a piece of art.

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LAIB POURING THE MILK FOR MILKSTONE, WHITE MARBLE, MILK, 3/4 X 48 X 51 1/8 INCHES