



American Federation of Arts

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MAJOR RETROSPECTIVE OF WOLFGANG LAIB TO BEGIN SIX-VENUE INTERNATIONAL TOUR

Wolfgang Laib: A Retrospective

(April 2000)-*Wolfgang Laib: A Retrospective*, the first major survey of the artist's work in the United States and one of the most extensive ever presented in Germany, opens to the public on October 26, 2000 at the Hirshhorn Museum & Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C., where it remains on view through January 22, 2001 (see page 3 for tour itinerary). Organized by the American Federation of Arts, the exhibition includes 24 sculptures and installations and 26 drawings tracing the progression of Wolfgang Laib's career over the past 28 years, from his early signature works, the "milkstone" and pollen pieces, to his recent large-scale installations.

Born in southern Germany in 1950, Laib began working as an artist in 1972, having been inspired by the life and art of southern India—a place he had traveled to many times as a child and continues to visit. Laib's oeuvre is informed by his interpretation of Eastern and Western philosophies, defined by a profound relationship with nature. Created with natural elements such as milk, pollen, rice, beeswax, and white marble, Laib's objects and installations possess an inherent vitality and sensuousness, an austere beauty and spirituality.

Guest curator Klaus Ottmann, an independent curator and critic, has selected the works, opening the exhibition with the milkstones, a group of sculptures that are part of an ongoing series. Each is a rectangular slab of polished white marble with a barely perceptible depression sanded into its upper surface that is then filled with milk to create the illusion of a solid object. The act of pouring the milk into the hollow in the stone is a participatory ritual: Laib performs the initial pouring and then museum staff empty the stone at the end of each day, clean it, and refill it the next morning, throughout the exhibition.

Like all of his works, Laib's pollen floor pieces reflect his abiding interest in nature. As Margit Rowell, formerly chief curator of the Department of Drawings at The Museum of Modern Art, New York, writes in her essay in the catalogue accompanying the exhibition, "Laib arrives at his forms through a discipline of complete concentration in which he is no longer separate from the world of nature but a participant in its organic process." He collects pollen from the fields around his home in southern Germany throughout the spring and summer months, and stores the particles in glass jars. He exhibits the pollen in the jars, such as *Jars with Pollen from Buttercup, Hazelnut, Dandelion, Pine (2), and Moss* (1977-97), or shapes the vibrant yellow dust into cones, as in *The Five Mountains Not to Climb On* (1984), or sifts it through muslin directly onto a bare stone or concrete floor, as in *Pollen from Hazelnut* (1992), creating a brilliant field of yellow and orange. Like the replenishing of milk in the milkstones, Laib's pollen pieces are cyclical, with the pollen re-collected and cleaned at the end of an exhibition, to be utilized for future installations.

Asian and Indian influences are revealed in Laib's rice houses that are either sculpted in solid white marble and surrounded by rice, or made of red sealing wax, tin, or silver and filled with rice. Laib has explained that they are inspired by Islamic cemeteries and medieval reliquaries with rice, a literal symbol of nourishment, substituted for bones. Also included are *The Rice Meals* (1983), piles of rice and pollen heaped on brass plates commonly used in India to bring food and flowers to the temples.

Laib's recent works are represented in his large installation and wax pieces, including his wax rooms; life-sized chambers lined with large panels of beeswax, illuminated by bare light bulbs hanging from their ceilings. Beeswax "ships," such as *You will Go Somewhere Else* (1995), are installed in a serial progression on wooden scaffolding, inspired by his visit to Tibetan monasteries, where sacred scriptures are stored on freestanding, elevated shelves.

Ottmann writes in his catalogue essay that the artist is "insinuating the beauty of nature in his art and creating immediate sensations that expand our understanding of life, politics, and religion. His modesty gives his art a sense of grace, serenity, and transcendence".

A large selection of Laib's exquisitely rendered drawings, which have rarely been exhibited, completes the survey.