Making the Ideal Real: Wolfgang Laib

by Sarah Tanguy

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For the last 25 years, Wolfgang Laib has explored the enigmatic zone where what we know or believe to exist commingles with what is actually there and can be perceived with our senses. Using materials such as pollen, milk, rice, and beeswax—mostly natural or animal products that involve nourishment and preservation as well as cycles of life and death, give and take, and the ephemeral and eternal—he creates contemplative works that he himself describes as “challenging.” The milk stones, for instance, require a ritualized commitment of cleaning and replenishing white marble slabs on a daily basis. His fragrant beeswax works, including Somewhere Else—La Chambre des certitudes, are also engrossing, offering a direct apprehension of the divine.

The son of a German physician interested in the East, Laib spent much of his childhood traveling in Afghanistan, India, Iran, and Turkey. He went on to study medicine, writing his dissertation on the hygiene of drinking water, but found the profession focused on the body at the expense of the soul. “Raised with Constantin Brancusi,” bearing a “complais” relationship to Joseph Beuys, and friends with Mario Merz, in Laib’s words, he fuses a love of nature with an awareness of Western and Eastern cultures. He now talks about art as possessing a spiritual healing function and, thus, being the answer to what medicine should be.

Sarah Tanguy: For me, your work is about embracing contradictions, creating a spiritual physicality that combines existentialist practice with Platonic and utopian aspirations. It’s also about substituting an archetypal or primal definition of ritual that’s connected to naturism for one that in contemporary, Western life involves a more detached practice rooted in urbanism. In this regard, I love your phrase “cement desert.” I wonder if you would comment on, for example, the difference between filling a stone cavity with milk and drinking coffee every day and rushing to go somewhere.

Wolfgang Laib: That sounds very beautiful, what you just said. The work I make is very, very simple, but then it’s also very, very complex. For me, the simpler the work’s statement the more levels it can have. If I fill up a stone with milk, and somebody else has coffee with his breakfast and tries to make a thousand things a day, it’s the complete opposite. Those stones were my first works after I had studied medicine for six years, and somehow they contain so much that is the opposite of what daily life is today. For me, art is the most important challenge for everything, and I think such things can be the challenges.

ST: To get you to slow down.

WL: Not only to slow down but first to think about what you want for your own life, and also what you may want to change.
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Beeswax and wooden construction, 19.4 x 109.2 x 21 cm.
ST: For many visitors, your current retrospective at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden will be their first chance to experience your work. How do you anticipate the response?

WL: An exhibition in a museum or a gallery is a public event. Many people will come who have never seen my work and do not know what it is, and then there will be people who have known my work for 20 years. It's a very beautiful experience, especially in the United States, that people who are very far away from my work, and very far away from my world, see the pollen or milk stones and are so surprised. There is a spark, which initiates a whole experience—and that is very strong in this country. I think in Europe, somehow they think they know so much more and they are so much more encosed; they see something new and are afraid. I realize that in every exhibition I've had here. It's always the case. People strive for something they don't have. That's something very beautiful.

ST: That urge.

WL: Yes, it brings them very far—even if they can't realize it in their own lives because their environment is totally different. If they see something completely different, they can be taken, something can happen.

ST: Along those lines, I think that much of the art you see now involves narrative or storytelling. And that's always an easy point of entry. But in your case, a portal might be your use of natural materials and their sensual qualities. Your iconic, distilled forms—rectangles, cones, houses, ships, and chambers—are also recognizable, so that in the end, while you are not necessarily telling a story, you offer ways of entering.

WL: Yes, that's also been very beautiful for me. When I show the pollen or milk in any country in the world, everybody knows what pollen is or what milk is. And it has nothing to do with German art or with European art. It's something so universal, any human being can relate to it without language or explanation.

ST: Do you believe that the idea of ritual continues to hold relevance? Or do you think that people, when they understand that there is a ritual aspect to your work, will interpret that as some kind of nostalgia for something maybe no longer relevant today? Along with that, so much of your work involves ideas of faith and certitude. Yet many people are running around with so much doubt and irony that they can't see the world with fresh eyes.

WL: Yes, the more irony and doubt, the more I feel that something like this is important. It's not an issue for all artists. Other artists, they do what is now. They have more irony. I think that art needs to challenge everything. Important art is always the opposite. Otherwise you don't need it anymore.

ST: I'm also thinking, because I have a background in dance and theater, that if you walk around with irony all the time, it's very heavy.

WL: We have enough irony. I think we needed the irony, but it's already long been achieved. So for this, you don't need an artist anymore, you don't need me anymore.
ST: How do you balance in your life the fact that you are very private and autonomous and that at the same time you are reaching out to other people?
WL: When I started out with my first works, the milk stones and the pollen, I was living in a very small village, totally isolated with my family. But at the same time, I had no experience—I had such a naive idea. I was so struck by these things because, for me, they were the most important things in the world, and I wanted to show them from the beginning to as many people as possible. It would have been sad for me to have them only for myself. It was like a message. I found the pollen and the milk to be so world-moving, to be culturally important. It’s something very beautiful to have this experience collecting pollen for myself, but then on the other side, I wanted many other people to participate.

ST: You just mentioned your art as being participatory. I’m very interested in this. You also talk about your art as residing in the materials. So, I was wondering how you see yourself as an artistic agent because, of course, you are still making.
WL: The main difference is I’m not a painter who’s using pigments to create a painting. I use the milk and I use the pollen or the hassocks, which I did not create. I participate in the most beautiful things in the world, which I could never create. I could never create the beauty of the pollen. The tragedy for me would be if I tried to make a painting out of pollen.

ST: To manipulate in that sense.
WL: I think that in most cultures, artists were not considered as individuals who had to invent or create something. They were participating in the whole, in the universe. So, for me, the sky is much more important than trying to make a painting that is a symbol for the sky. For me, it’s the pollen itself—that is the miracle in which I participate in my daily life when I collect the pollen. It’s not mine.

ST: Two of your main interests are the cycle of life and death and the interplay between the symbolic and the real, as Klaus Ottmann discusses in his essay for the Hirshhorn catalogue. Given this, what constitutes authenticity for you? When or how does the authentic experience or the authentic moment occur? Authenticity as a state when you lose your sense of yourself and linear time and merge with something larger and possibly, through these practices of purification you might, as you say, “go to another level.”
WL: Exactly.

ST: So the authentic is in the collecting, the putting together, the sharing.
WL: Yes, because it is the reality, which I feel I’m not even touching.

ST: But you’re connecting with it.
WL: Yes. The milk and the pollen are there, but they’re in a totally different environment—a much more abstract
and direct environment. To see the milk with the cow is one thing, but then I took it out and put it in a very abstract environment in order to experience it in the most authentic way. It's very rare that I would do something outside. A milk stone is not sitting in a forest, and that's not a compromise. I wanted to have this very intense, concentrated experience with the milk or with the pollen. So, the meadow with flowers where I collect the pollen is something very different from how you see it here, a real concentrated experience without any distractions, nothing else.

ST: But do you want the person here to think about the fields? To think about the whole cycle?

WL: Yes, of course.

ST: You say in a conversation with Harald Szeemann that The Five Mountains Not to Climb On is your principal work. Can you elaborate?

WL: These mountains contain many levels, many, many thoughts. And they're so small. The size of this work is somehow very important in contrast with the big ziggurats, which are really monumental works. These small pollen mountains contain most of what I did in other works. Somehow for Harald Szeemann and me, it was a work in which his vision and mine met. He couldn't believe that an artist could get so close to his own vision. I've made so many exhibitions with so many curators in my life, and such an experience is rare for an artist and for a curator. It's a pity. I would like this to happen more often, to be able to do something so together with a curator.

ST: When I saw that piece just now, I was struck by its vulnerability. It makes a very strong statement, and yet, it's so delicate. And, to me, this paradox expresses a wonderful sense of beauty. The other element that I love is the fact that the little mountains have some pollen around their bases. In thinking about your entire oeuvre, some of your works have clean edges and others go outside their "bounds," creating a gentle, oscillating aura.

WL: Yes, yes.

ST: And you're right. The more you try to ascribe words, the more the meaning proves elusive.
WL: I don't mind if other people do this, but for me as an artist, I think that I'm very shy and getting the details into words is a pity. But for other people, they can discuss this endlessly, and I don't mind.

ST: I was interested in the change in scale. The ziggurats are so much bigger. Does this represent a different experience for you?

WL: Yes, for instance, in one of my recent exhibitions at the Kunsthalle Bregenz, I had four floors. On the ground floor, I had a much bigger ziggurat than this one, and then on the floor above, I had these mountains. And somehow, I did the installation to have this relationship of the two—the big ziggurat and the small mountains together is exactly what I like.

When I started to make these big ziggurats, I somehow became afraid and thought that these monumental sculptures were what I never wanted to make. Harald Szeemann's first exhibition, in which I was involved and where we met, was about monuments. His title was—I don't know exactly—"Weak Like the Monuments, Strong as the Acorn." The pollen mountains were finally the main work of that exhibition. But now, when I make these big ziggurats and have the pollen mountains next to them, I see that this is exactly what they need. It's necessary to have both the fragility and the sense of size where small can be bigger than big.

ST: One of your most recent projects involves an actual mountain—A Wax Room for the Mountain. You have described it as "a small space dug out of the rock on a mountainside, having the dimensions of a human being, entirely covered in beeswax and with a small wooden door. It would be a place that only a few people could visit." I'm especially taken by your choice of setting. The Pyrenees are old mountains with a long history. It's an isolated area, yet it also has several Romanesque churches. I'd like to ask you about the issue of permanence, seeing as so much of your work is temporary and gets re-created.

WL: It just opened in July. It was a very important experience for me. Exhibitions are important, and I love to do them. But then after some time, you also think that you would like some place that stays. And that is something that I've dreamed about for a long time.