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Wolfgang Laib Lays Out His Postmodern Pastoralist Art at MoMA

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Wolfgang Laib at MoMA
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Wolfgang Laib sifting hazelnut pollen, 1992 / Courtesy Sperone Westwater Gallery, New York

Wolfgang Laib is the holy fool of contemporary art. A monk-like figure who weaves his art out of natural substances that evoke spiritual regeneration — a permanent installation of his chamber made of beeswax [opens at the Phillips Collection in March](#) — he has opted to live in the slow lane in a small town in the south of Germany. His works echo the mix of pathos and abstraction of post-minimalism, but he denies this connection, preferring to talk about Eastern philosophy. He came to prominence in the ‘70s and ‘80s, mouthing phrases about the healing virtues of art and universal spiritual aspirations that would make any postmodern cynic cringe: His art, he [has said](#), seeks to use materials that are “so universal, any human being can relate to it without language or explanation.”

Laib’s practice has been amazingly constant, in line with his deliberate approach to life itself. At MoMA, he has just installed a piece in the atrium, 18 jars of bright yellow pollen that he has sifted out into a carpet-like rectangle. This is one of his signature images — the first such work was created in 1977, before I was born — and in its way this dense, glowing yellow patch is as elemental and indelible as Matisse’s “The Dance” or Brancusi’s “Bird in Space.” The museum says that this is Laib’s largest pollen work to date, but like all of his carpet-like works made using this particular substance, it is titled simply “Pollen from Hazelnut,” as if to emphasize the basic repetitive fact of the underlying substance over whatever is special about the individual piece.

Yet pausing for a moment to contemplate the particulars, the MoMA version does have a unique component that is worth taking note of: Instead of being presented directly on the floor as with previous iterations — a presentational device that serves to emphasize the gesture’s lyrical directness — this version of “Pollen from Hazelnut” is raised up on a six-inch platform. The reason is obvious: This work about the spiritual encounter with the natural is being presented in the mega-church of art tourism that is the Museum of Modern Art; direct exposure to the crowds flowing through would almost certainly disrupt it. At yesterday morning’s press conference, I asked Laib about this context, and he seemed unphased. In fact, he said the work gained from the contrast between its own focused intensity and the hustle-bustle around it. He called this “a very beautiful tension.”

And that tension is probably key to understanding what's going on here. Literary scholars point out that as a genre, the pastoral is quintessentially urban; writers started romanticizing nature precisely when the dirt and the crowding of the city became overpowering. I'd say something similar of Laib's art, and how its soulful naturalism presumes the underlying realities of our increasingly mass-produced and frenetic daily lives (the very reality that industrially produced Minimalism made into a badge of honor). Pollen may seem a "universal" substance, but most urban dwellers don't have anything like the concentrated experience of it that Laib does. Half the pleasure of his work comes from its ritualistic trappings — which of course reverberate precisely because we are so rushed and hurried. Laib serves as our proxy for an experience of time and nature we lack.

When you unpack it, a much-repeated note from his biography — that Laib became an artist only after training to become a doctor, and finding that Western medicine didn't attend to our spiritual needs — indicates quite clearly that his interest in the virtues of Eastern philosophy implies the antagonistic background of materialistic, bottom-line-oriented, rationalistic "Western" culture. Fretful visitors are assured that "Pollen from Hazelnut" is safe for anyone with allergies, but it seems clear that it presumes, at least, a mild allergy to the present.

Wolfgang Laib's "Pollen from Hazelnut" is on view at the [Museum of Modern Art](#) through March 11, 2013.

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