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Placing an object in empty space concentrates the mind on that object. We become aware of every feature, of what it is, what it means to us and why it is here, in this space, now. Wolfgang Laib demands the contemplation of the archetypal. What is milk? What is pollen? What is rice? What is marble? What is beeswax? What is a house and what is a boat? These are the materials and forms from which he has created his meditative art for over twenty years. We wonder how many grains of powdery pollen are here and what might happen if every one germinated. How many grains of rice does it take to feed six billion people and how many dwellings do they need?

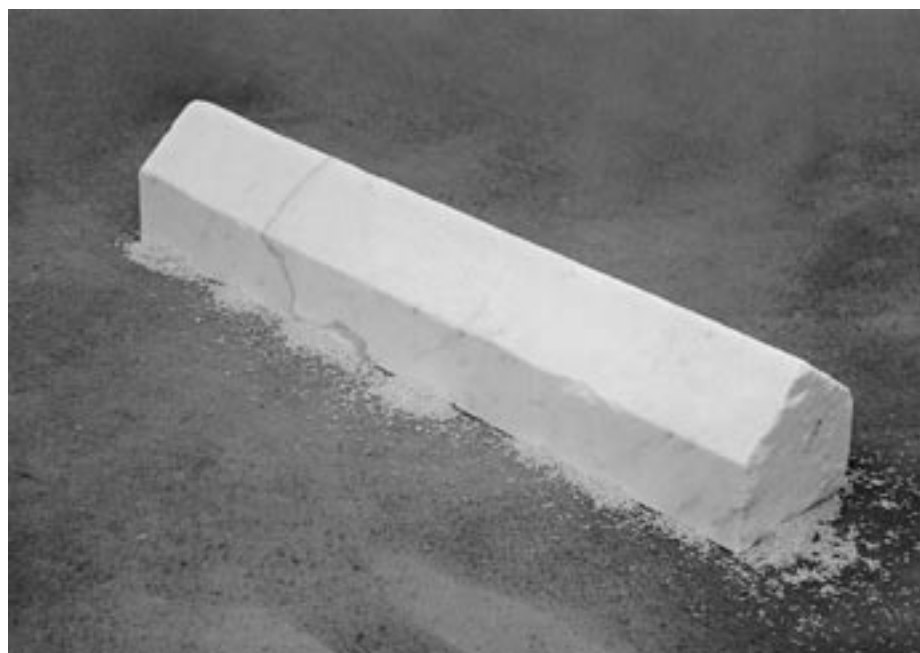
The gallery housing the object is revealed to us. Like Richard Wilson's *20:50* [1987], Laib's work adapts to each location in the way it betrays the emptiness rather than the way it fills or reflects it. At the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, we enter Laib's exhibition by approaching a line of thirty brass plates, all but one of which contains a day's ration of uncooked rice, set out like stepping-stones to convey us to the next room. The twenty-third plate, of pollen, creates a pause, a [dis]juncture, in our arithmetic considerations. In the next room, the shallow pool of fresh milk, ritually poured daily onto its slightly dished marble slab, only dimly reflects the interior architecture and the bending viewer's silhouette. The tiny marble houses that sit on the floor, surrounded by rice, look ancient and somehow vulnerable. The final room, with its pollen and boats, is divided in half, asking us to compare the halves, to experience the resulting asymmetry. In one half, there is the rectangular field of pollen on the floor beneath a half-room of still, empty air. Enclosing the field of pollen is a horizontal steel cable about a third of a metre above the floor. The stored tension in the cable, which is stretched musically taut, wall-to-wall, contrasts with the ephemeral pollen it protects and becomes part of the moment. In the other half of this room there are aged timber platforms, supporting a flotilla of wax ships above head height and filling their air. As we walk around the platforms we feel that any sudden movement might generate a current of air enough to displace a little of the pollen.

Experiencing this work takes time. If we stare fixedly at the pollen it can seem to disappear or to hover in mid-air. Sometimes the pale grey-blue floor seems to become the yellow of the pollen and sometimes the pollen looks pale grey-blue. What is colour, what is perception? Laib's work heightens and distorts awareness.

And in taking time to experience the work we see how much time and experience it took to realise it.

His depictions of boats and houses are reduced to childish simplicity. They are merely the shapes of these things; symbols rather than transcriptions, but weighty like shards of classical masonry. There is tension between natural substances—stone, beeswax and plant—and these symbols of the man-made. The manufactured object, placed alongside the natural, looks as if it is trying to revert to nature. What weight do we bestow on each kind of thing and why? And from where do we look? We observe the pollen from the far side of a fence, the boats from beneath as though we are underwater and the houses are below us, as if we are Gulliver in Lilliput or a bird.

This art resonates with the revolutions in Western art of the 1960s but does not depend on them. It is not the iconoclast's response to suffocating fashion, nor merely the display of reduced forms and materials for their own sake. It is neither the denigration of art nor the creation of the null set, for one can satisfy oneself with its materiality, tactility and aroma without the need for deeper contemplation. It does more than challenge our preoccupation with the purchase price of the art object in the commercial gallery or its valorisation and historicisation in the museum. As Anthony Bond's catalogue essay suggests, this work recalls everything from Duchamp to Beuys, but it is different from them and from everything else. We recall Andy Goldsworthy but his work is part of the landscape, belonging outdoors. The beauty of this work is transmuted by its being located indoors and loaded with symbolic allusion. Perhaps most of all we recall Hossein Valamanesh's shirts woven from lotus leaves and his *Colour Field* [1995], where varieties of seeds are embedded in wax on a board that is hung like a painting, but such references to everyday objects are more direct. In Laib's work there is the whiff of traditions outside Western culture—Rumi's poetry, the manicured Zen garden—but paradoxically this work denies tradition by drawing us into the present moment. There is the hint at the wandering mendicant's renunciation of this world to enter another. Laib asks us to gather our own pollen, rice, wax or other natural substance, to contemplate it as he does and to create with it. His work arises from performance—the painstaking harvesting and spreading of pollen, the collecting and shaping of beeswax—as ritual or prayer or dance. By understanding what is involved in making this work we come to know both our vitality and our frailty. Laib's work asserts a different valuing. It even transcends valuing. His spiritual experience is there for those receptive to it.



Top: Wolfgang Laib, *The rice meals*, 1998
Bottom: Wolfgang Laib, *Ricehouse*, 1990
Photos courtesy the artist and IFA, Stuttgart