

Wolfgang Laib

(Metzingen, Germany, 1950)

Having grown up in a cultured environment since he was a child, in contact with extra-European culture, Wolfgang Laib turned to art after a degree in medicine, obtained with a view to following in his father's footsteps. The objectivity of science, however, was unable to satisfy his intimate need for spirituality, which led him to look for answers to his questions elsewhere, in Oriental philosophies and religions or in the figures of Christian mystics and saints. After frequent journeys to India together with his family, in 1972 he spent various months chiselling a great mass found near his home in order to transform it into a smooth ovoid shape, intense black in colour, which he would name *Brahmanda*: the cosmic egg in Sanskrit. This sculpture, considered his first complete work, is already symptomatic of Laib's approach to creation, characterised by self-discipline, dedication and long working times, far from the frenetic rhythms of the contemporary world.

The parallelism often drawn with the purity of Brancusi and the essentiality of Minimalism is compromised by the use of easily perishable organic materials such as milk, pollen, rice and bees' wax, which are hardly if at all processed by the artist, with a view to re-establishing in man a sentiment of sacred respect with regard to the cycles of nature. The glassy whiteness of milk which collects on the imperceptibly concave surface of his *Milkstones* will not last long; indeed, it changes colour, consistency and smell against the solidity of the marble. Likewise, the floor works with pollens are conditioned by the seasonality of the flowering, by the time needed for its gathering and the smallness of the grains, which might destroy the composition at any time.

In the middle of the 1980s, on returning from one of his many journeys to India, Laib decided to integrate rice into his work, a universal symbol of abundance and well-wishing, as well as being – like milk – a staple source of nutrition for many populations. His *Rice Houses*, represented here in the collection by an exemplar from 1998, are rectangular structures around which a certain quantity of rice grains are stacked up in an unstable manner. Their shape, reminiscent of that of a house with its typical sloping roof, in fact opens up to a wealth of associations, from the simple barn to certain medieval reliquaries containing the bones of saints. These works define the moment in which Laib's practice opens up to a more sculptural dimension and, progressively, to the investigation of space. This is shown by the works produced with bees' wax, the ductility of which allows him to model walls that block transit through the space, thus rewriting the exhibition area and even whole rooms, making them narrow and dimly lit, pervaded by the unmistakable aroma of honey and visitable by only one person at a time, just like the passageways of Egyptian funerary chambers. The path or rising towards a sacred place is made even clearer in other series of works, in particular in the sculptures of boats suspended on wooden scaffolding and on the monumental steps of the *Ziggurat*.

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