

The Phillips Collection: Laib Wax Room

Review by Tanya Roland



I smell it before I see it. A thin band of its waft tickles my nostrils. The scent has travelled into the hall and I happen to walk through it.

I should stand still and let the aroma come to me...to let the work itself spark the ancient familiarity, to show me the way, to welcome me in.. But I'm on a schedule and ask, where? "...up the stairs and on the right."

The perfume increases distinctly as I climb the 8 or 9 stairs. The perfume familiar and warm, and just as I have envisioned it, just as I have smelled it hundreds or thousands of times before, yet never so concentrated and strong.

The room is so simple, small (6 X 7 X 10), and were it not so packed with meaning, the little closet could be called stark. It's visually not as I have pictured, though, many times in my mind - and yet it's also similar.

The lone light bulb hanging from the ceiling throws me, as does the concrete floor. These are not part of my picture. And why is there no door to close so we can be thoroughly ensconced in this womb of sunflowers and firelight - the ambrosia residue of thousands upon thousands of flowers?

I guess the artist has his prerogative. Pounds and pounds of beeswax were melted, affixed to the walls and ceiling, heated again and ironed out smooth. It looks to be less than an inch thick. Its lucency reminds me of lacquer, but in yellows and gold. The room is creamy - opaque in the lights, whipped butterscotch. It's speckled throughout with darker, amber-like transparent chunks. "Where have you gone?" Wolfgang Laib asks in the title. The bees — gone to collapsing hives thanks to toxins flooding our biosphere.

The humans — gone to protecting toxic manufacturers and their profits over the precious hives that feed the miraculous web of life... common sense — gone to huge industrial farms who feed their bee road show corn syrup because they, because they, why the hell do they feed the bees corn syrup that has zero nutrition and tastes like fruit loops on steroids? What's the twisted rationale? Their own honey is the perfect food they need... oh right, we steal that too.



The rich saffron room that still echoes of forests and meadows and fields and gardens... the color of sunlight and buttercups reveals none of the drama playing out in our farms and fields across the globe. The room, so hummingly familiar, so pollen warm pulls me deep inside. I want to climb into the hive, surround myself with this ochre blanket and sit in the stillness with the vibration of a billion bees wings as they dance uncorrupted as they have forever... showing each other the way to the gardens of abundance and bliss.

"Where are you going," Wolfgang Laib asks in the title. Are we going with the humble bees deep into the future, to follow them into the wealth of nature, just as it has been from beginning-less time, or are we going down a dark path forged solely by human hands where we cannot leave anything alone and the bees die, confused, weak, ill from lack, desperately trying to reap nectar from poisoned blossoms? I close my eyes in this temple of fecundity to envision the humans awakening in wisdom. I see them walk away from the hubris of attempting to "improve" perfection, humble in recognizing deep mistakes made. I feel the wax, the pollen, the honey... the dance in my DNA as every apricot, broccoli, coriander, motherwort and barley, chickweed, magnolia, cherry blossom and dandelion ingested (ad infinitum) and carry their song in every cell out of the gallery, out into this crystalline afternoon.

Where have you gone, where are you going? (The Wax Room)