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Dust to Dust

The reality of very little things.

Dust gets on our clothes and beneath our fingernails. It colonizes polished wood, fabrics and glass. And because dust pervades every corner of our existence, it has existential significance.

"Dust Memories," currently at the Swiss Institute, takes a grander look at these microscopic particles. The collection of mixed media works features international interpretations of "the residue of reality," demonstrating that dust isn't just grime, but "a vital layer of our dense and elastic reality."

"It's an attempt to add new layers to reality, to look differently at the quality of an object that is here, but not here at the same time," says Emmanuel Latreille, the show's curator. "Dust invades every small opening. It's invisible but it's everywhere. It has to do with nothingness. Though you can see nothing, it's still something."

In 1998, Latreille, who curates the Fonds Regional d'Art Contemporain in Montpellier, France, organized his first such show, "Poussiere," to explore his fascination with dust, debris and residue. While we try to sweep it away, he tries to gather it up.

"[This] is a replay of the past exhibit with some new artists," remarks Latreille. "Each incarnation has its own body and story, but dust always comes through as the connecting theme."

One of the artists making an encore presentation is Michael Ross. His piece, *The Smallest Type of Architecture for the Body Containing the Dust from My Bedroom, My Studio, My Living Room, My Kitchen and My Bathroom*, is both a mouthful and a small thimble containing dust he gathered from around his apartment. Though it's not much to look at, the "sculpture" illustrates how tiny particles and hairs can embody so many elements of the artist's everyday life.

Dario Robleto makes his Swiss Institute debut with three different pieces, including *The Abstractness of a Blown Off Limb*, a small group of handmade clay and lead marbles—used by American soldiers from various homeland wars—sitting in a pile of human and dinosaur dust from femur bones. You can connect the title with the materials used. But take into account the little stars painted on the marbles, and just like with Ross' work, you can assign a much broader definition to what you see.

"The stars are images of the universe," Latreille says. "[With these pieces], we don't try to talk about art, but of the universe we live in. We try to uncover our reality out of our art."

The photo of *Polvere*, a piece by Claudio Parmiggiani similar to one created for Latreille's previous exhibit, is a ghostly example of dust's role in destruction. The image is an imprint of a bookshelf on a white wall caused after smoking a sealed room. The ashes left behind are the only reminder that a "real" object existed in that space at one time.

For true nihilism, stare at Jonathan Monk's *Empire (After Andy Warhol in Reverse)*. At first, it may appear as nothing more than a color-slide projection of the Empire State Building and surrounding skyline. But this piece addresses dust's association with annihilation—the slide is set to be projected until it yellows and deteriorates from overexposure.

"The price to pay is destruction of art," Latreille says. "Is it possible to destroy art? This is a paradox—seeing 'art' as the destruction of itself in order to go to reality."

"Dust Memories" is an extension of "EXTRA," a spring exhibition that explored reality's elasticity and showed "that when stretched, the real becomes extremely dense and complex." Ultimately, "EXTRA" was an attempt to show that reality lacks limits. In the same way, the current installation asks its audience to "look into the supposed empty corners of our world" and discover just how complex it can be.

"EXTRA" transformed reality," says Marc-Olivier Wahler, the Institute's artistic director. "Art looks a lot like reality but it makes you feel like something else... There are many different layers to reality. ['EXTRA' asked] how many layers you can graft onto reality before it collapses."

"['Dust Memories'] is also about another layer. Reality is made of dust, but dust is also another layer of reality."