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Answering Society's Thorniest Questions, With Performance Art

By MEGAN O'GRADY MARCH 2, 2018



Pope.L, photographed in his Chicago studio this past December. For the last four decades, the artist has created intense, often provocative performances. Credit Paul D'Amato

IN A LIVING room in Flint, Mich., Tiantha Williams's son, Taylor, a bright-eyed 2-year-old in a cheetah-print onesie, is waking from his nap. On the television, commercials for class-action attorneys alternate with an ad for an early childhood intervention program: "Don't wait. Evaluate." Williams, an attractive 40-year-old woman, sits on the sofa with her mother, VanNessa, explaining how she first knew that something was terribly wrong with her tap water. "My mom's dreads started falling out," she says. "Then all of the house plants died." Williams was pregnant at the time, and after she contracted listeriosis, Taylor was born two months premature.

I'm in Williams's home with the artist William Pope.L for his "Flint Water Project," an installation he did last September for the Detroit gallery What Pipeline. As we talk, a hose snaking from Williams's basement sink through her kitchen and out the front door fills a 180-gallon tank sitting on the bed of a pick-up truck. Later, back at the gallery, which has been transformed into a Flint Water branded boutique, the water will be

bottled by assistants wearing gloves and safety goggles and sold as art objects, with a Pope.L-designed label. It is a project that is characteristic of much of the artist's work, a theatrical provocation that combines scathing satire with heartfelt activism. The labels feature a sinister image of the Flint Water Plant and reads "16 fl. oz. non-potable." The reverse notes that the water may contain E. coli, lead, and Legionella.

The "Flint Water Project" began when the gallery's owners, Alivia Zivich and Daniel Sperry, invited Pope.L to do a show in Detroit. It was Pope.L's idea to turn the focus to nearby Flint, whose residents were exposed to contaminated drinking water beginning in 2014, after the city's water source was switched from Lake Huron to the Flint River as a cost-saving measure, triggering a public health crisis — 12 deaths resulted from a Legionella outbreak — that was ignored for nearly two years by Governor Rick Snyder's administration and allegedly covered up by a number of state officials. Aimed at addressing the disintegrating bedrock of our presumed first-world privileges — drinkable tap water, an accountable government — the project has raised over \$30,000 so far for the United Way of Genesee County and Hydrate Detroit. (What Pipeline reimbursed Williams by paying her water bill for two months.) In 2016, after the water was returned to its original source, the EPA once again declared Flint's water safe, but no one here believes that to be true until the city makes good on its promise to finish replacing its corroded pipes. Meanwhile, the catastrophe continues to unfold in human terms: unsellable homes, more deeply entrenched poverty, and the mass lead poisoning of a generation of children, the cognitive consequences of which are still to be determined. Adding insult to injury, homeowners have had to continue paying for the tainted water — among the highest rates in the country — or face foreclosure. On our way to Flint, a grave Pope.L spoke of an increasingly Orwellian America; of the symbolic value of one troubled city (Detroit, in this case, about one hour from Flint) reaching out to another; of the things, small and large, that can break a community. But sitting on Williams's sofa waiting for the tank to fill, everything else momentarily falls away, and we become a trio of parents simply trading stories about our kids.



The artist in New York in 1991, performing one of his famous “crawl” pieces, which involve him laboriously inching through the streets on his stomach. Credit “Tompkins Square Crawl (an extension of How Much Is That Nigger in the Window),” 1991, ©Pope.L, courtesy of the artist and Mitchell-Innes & Nash, NY

AT 62, POPE.L is inarguably the greatest performance artist of our time. This is exactly the kind of label he would find absurd, but over the course of the last four decades, no artist has so consistently broken down the accepted boundaries of the genre in order to bring it closer to the public, with lacerating, perspicacious and gloriously anti-authoritarian projects that play with our received notions of race and class and almost always cut more than one way. Some of these pieces are comically subversive: In 1997, after New York outlawed aggressive panhandling near A.T.M.s, the artist used an eight-foot-long chain of Italian sausages to tie himself to a Chase A.T.M. in midtown Manhattan, wearing a skirt of \$1 bills to cover his lower half. Others are more subtly provocative: In his early 1990s production at Bates College in Maine of “A Raisin in the Sun,” Lorraine Hansberry’s 1959 play about a poor African-American family on the South Side of Chicago trying to make a better life for themselves, Pope.L cast both white and black actors as the family members.

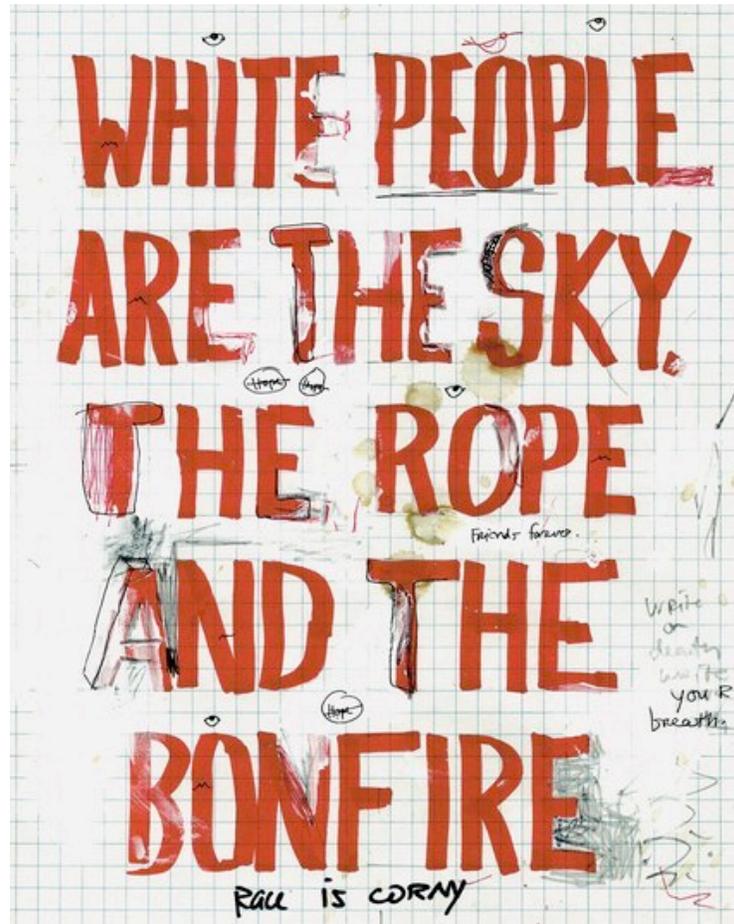
His career has also included pop art, sound art, short stories, collage and videos, but everything the artist touches is imbued with elements of theater; in 2002, when he was still a little-known lecturer in Maine, the art historian and curator Lowery Stokes Sims had already called him “the poet laureate of male performance artists.” Pope.L made paintings with peanut butter that engage unexpected senses; a relief map of the United States constructed of shellacked hot dogs; text-based drawings that read “I Am Still Black” mailed out to friends and collectors. But he is probably best-known for his “interventions.” First begun in New York in the 1970s, they include physically punishing

“crawls,” during which he drags himself, clad in a Superman costume or a business suit, down busy city streets, bringing the high art of performance down to the gutter, and elevating the gutter to the realm of high art. (Forty group and solo crawls, one of which covered the entire length of Broadway in Manhattan, have left him with several fused vertebrae.) His “Skin Set” series, often marker on sheets of paper torn out of notebooks, has become quietly iconic, with phrases that lampoon the kind of dehumanizing categorical thinking that is the backdrop of much of his work: “White People Are the Sky, the Rope and the Bonfire,” reads one; “Green People Are Hope Without Reason,” reads another. They feel utterly of the moment, yet he’s been doing them for decades.

His incitements have earned him many admirers within the art world, but Pope.L, who now lives in Chicago, has remained at the periphery of fame, an anti-consumerist loner in a business that runs largely on money and schmooze. In jeans, a hoodie and a Yankees cap, he’s forever squinting at his phone, arranging, researching, connecting, checking in with his 10-year-old son, who has chipped a tooth in a skateboarding accident. He’s more forthright than irreverent, with a soft-glow magnetism, and if he seems mildly impatient with his interlocutor, it’s because he has work to do. (In most any given room, one has the feeling, he’s at least a few steps ahead.) For an artist who has built his career on public spectacle, he’s strikingly uninterested in his own self-presentation, redirecting the conversation’s subject from himself to, say, the Routledge International Handbook of Ignorance Studies, which looks at the growing interdisciplinary field that explores the social and political impact of “not knowing.” His humility feels genuine: He resists lending his name to group shows, and is displeased by photos that depict him at the head of his group crawls.

But if Pope.L has a sidelong relationship with the spotlight, the spotlight is increasingly seeking out Pope.L, whose work has grown more urgent over the years: there’s the 54-foot-long American flag, dramatically fraying at its edge, that he installed at the Geffen Contemporary at MOCA in Los Angeles in 2015, and the stinging 2016 performance piece at Art Basel, to which the artist arrived in a white stretch limo, dressed in a white gorilla suit and clutching a Birkin-esque handbag. In 2017, at Documenta 14 in Athens and Kassel, he unveiled “Whispering Campaign,” a bravura undertaking in which live performers wandered the cities broadcasting prerecorded monologues in English, German and Greek about nationhood and borders, with hidden speakers in public locations across both cities transmitting still more, the words seeming to haunt the exhibition itself. The Flint project, with its canny repurposing of an emblem of adversity and gross negligence — a bottle of toxic water transformed into an unlikely symbol of agency — is his most ambitious work yet. But his next one is maybe more so: After a solo show in September 2018 at Mitchell-Innes & Nash in New York City, Pope.L is planning to stage William Wells Brown’s “The Escape” at the Art Institute of Chicago. Written in 1858 by a former slave turned writer and abolitionist, the play is one of the earliest known examples of African-American dramatic literature, but has rarely been staged, probably due to Brown’s frank approach to the sexual reality of a female slave and its bracingly dark comedy, which includes scenes of torture as well as characters from the era’s minstrel tradition.

By reclaiming an original text of black theater, Pope.L's career comes more or less full circle. An heir to Beuys and Beckett, he remains focused on art's potential for open-ended exchange that, at its best, operates not only on the eyes and intellect but on more subtle parts of our humanity as well, in ways that often aren't straightforward. "I believe there is something aesthetic about being socially engaged, being involved in your community," he tells me. "There's a beauty to making work that interacts with people, and I think there's a way to describe and talk about it — and to do it well."



A 2000-01 drawing from Pope.L's ongoing "Skin Set" series, which parodies racist language. Credit "White People Are the Sky, the Rope and the Bonfire," 2000-01, ballpoint, coffee, correction fluid, marker and pencil on graph paper, © Pope.L, courtesy of the artist and Mitchell-Innes & Nash, NY

THE CRACKLING CURRENT of private anxiety running through all of Pope.L's work is most evident in the Flint project. "I grew up in the welfare system, and there was a lot of shame involved," he says, as we stop by the Greater Holy Temple church, one of Flint's water crisis help centers, which is managed by Williams's aunt Sandra Jones. "There was a lot of not wanting to look at your condition — and nobody else wants to look at it, so there's a lot of isolation. There's a blindness there too, because back then I only thought black people did welfare. But everybody is hiding stuff." Flint's population is more than half African-American, but many of the families we see lined up for water that day are white. "The shame, and the lack of agency, because you don't think you can

change your situation — that part really sticks out at me. They drive up to the water, and even if they've got a smile on their faces, they're kind of beaten down.”

Pope.L was raised by a single mother in and around Newark; his distinctive last name melds his father's surname with her initial, L, for Lancaster — a feminist gesture before hyphenating became a norm. A nurse who had once aspired to a career in journalism (he recalls finding her press credentials once, for a Galveston newspaper), she lugged a massive bookcase packed with books whenever they moved, which was often. “I really admire her,” he says. “She was an alcoholic and an addict, and I guess there are a lot of things you could say made her not likable, but she was really smart — and with some guys, that could be a problem,” alluding to the sounds of violence coming from behind closed bedroom doors that he'd hear as a child at night.

It was his grandmother who decided he should become an artist, buying him used art supplies and taking him and his older brother to Manhattan's art museums for shows, most memorably, Jacob Lawrence's 1940-41 “Migration” series, which depicts the mass movement of African-Americans from the rural south to northern cities. “I think she really wanted to go and we were her excuse,” he says. “It's scary going in those places by yourself, but with two little kids . . .” As he tells it, his grandmother never thought of herself as an artist, but she showed her Rousseau-inspired appliqués of birds and flora at the Studio Museum in Harlem in 1973. She did installation work too, of a kind, maintaining a garden in the lot across the street from her home on West 136th Street. One summer, she decided to grow cotton, which seems in retrospect the kind of installation Pope.L himself might make, and in fact it became something of a local attraction: Schoolchildren would come to see the plant they'd read about in history books, the one their ancestors had been brought to this country in shackles to pick.

Over lunch at a Detroit diner, I ask Pope.L if he considers himself a provocateur, and he immediately says no, then reconsiders. “Maybe there is a kind of strategic use to provocation. People are so dulled by what they have to put themselves through to get through the day, maybe you do have to mess with them. But after that, what is there?” He's taught performance since the early '90s — he's currently an assistant professor in the department of visual arts at the University of Chicago, a job he took in 2010 to be closer to his son, whose mother is a professor at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago — and tells his students, “If you're going to cut off your big toe, just cut off the other one while you're at it. You have to be able to think beyond the immediate impulse to do the far-out thing. You should be able to answer the question: Why do you want to do that?”



The 2017 installation of the artist's Flint Water-branded "boutique," at What Pipeline gallery in Detroit. Credit: Installation view of "Flint Water" at What Pipeline, Detroit, MI, 2017, © Pope.L, courtesy of the artist, Mitchell-Innes & Nash, NY and Susanne Vielmetter Projects, Los Angeles

THE POPULARITY OF American performance art has always been closely aligned with political unrest. Its golden age was in New York City in the 1960s, where improvisatory and experimental events called Happenings were spiritual cousins of the sit-in. At these events, as the artist Allan Kaprow observed in 1961: "... when something goes 'wrong,' something far more 'right,' more revelatory, has many times emerged." Within the art world, performance has long been sidelined by the industry's endlessly growing commercialism, which is why Pope.L has, until recently, worked mostly in obscurity. But at a time in which our accepted systems of power are splintering, the idea of an artist viscerally engaged with seemingly ungraspable struggles like systemic racism and poverty has lent a new relevance not only to Pope.L's works but to the entire form. Now that most mainstream institutions have dedicated departments for performance, it's easy to forget that just a decade ago, it was more of a fringe curiosity relegated to the realm of experimental theater. Pope.L's persistence in championing the form has helped keep it in the public eye, even as his works remain shocking or gruesome to onlookers who catch sight of him crawling through the dirt of a major thoroughfare, or eating copies of *The Wall Street Journal* while sitting on a toilet atop a 10-foot tower (in a 2000 piece called, appropriately, "Eating the Wall Street Journal"). But in a year when everyone in America has confronted certain painful truths, when things that were once grotesque feel increasingly normalized, many of us are wondering what art is for if not for a reckoning. "People always ask me, what do people think, and I say, I don't know," says Pope.L, who finds it so exhausting to talk during a crawl that he has taken to having an assistant hand out cards printed with a brief explanation and contact information. "But I do know that I'm giving them an opportunity to have this engagement and take what they want." When we next meet, for lunch in the cafe at the University of Chicago's Logan Center, Pope.L is eager to talk about the Detroit opening and a voice of dissent — a young

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woman who took him to task for giving the money to outreach organizations instead of directly to individual residents of Flint. “I guess I made a decision to enter the fray, and when you do that, then you also risk that you’re going to do something that maybe people won’t like,” he says.

Immigration, a subject that “makes people a little skittish,” as he puts it, is his latest preoccupation. A recent exhibit at the Logan Center gallery invited anyone in the community “to submit for exhibition your responses to what’s happening globally + at home with immigration, migration and loss.” For Pope.L, the first generation in his family to grow up in the northeast — his mother and grandmother moved from Alabama at the latter end of the Great Migration — the debates over borders and policies point to an acute case of historical amnesia. “We’re ‘a nation of immigrants,’ but people have fear put in them by Trump and his minions regarding who has a right to be here, and we forget what it was like in our own families, stories we’ve been told about when we first got here,” he says.



A 2015-16 “Skin Set” painting, “Gold People Dick the Mist.” Credit “Gold People Dick the Mist,” 2015-16, acrylic, charcoal, matte medium, marker, oil paint, wood, metal latch, screw, hot glue and paper tape on canvas on board, © Pope.L, courtesy of the artist and Mitchell-Innes & Nash, NY

A similar desire to reckon with a very present past brought him to Brown’s play, which mixes farce and melodrama in the story of the secret marriage between two slaves who plan to flee to Canada. Brown, who was among the first to write of Thomas Jefferson’s

“familial adventures” (as Pope.L calls them) with Sally Hemings in his 1853 novel “Clotel,” captivated audiences by reading aloud from the play at abolitionist meetings. It is likely to be the riskiest move of Pope.L’s career. “The writer is looking at the absurdities in the story,” the artist says. Much of the play deals with the relationship and secret marriage, but it is just as much about the ridiculous failures of their owners’ attempts to foil these plans, all of which culminates in a confrontation at Niagara Falls. “And I know some black folks would tell me there’s nothing absurd about it,” Pope.L continues. “Whereas Brown doesn’t think so. He thinks it’s an enigma, he thinks it’s something that’s not easily understood, and I think that goes against the way that slavery and the pursuit of freedom has been portrayed. You’re not supposed to find a comic dimension in it, and I can see why people feel that way. There’s so much trauma involved, the way to clear the road is to make it simple. But I’m interested in a text that doesn’t do that.” Crucially, Pope.L plans to contemporize it. “I’m going to treat it as a living piece of culture, as we do Shakespeare,” he says.

The boldness with which Pope.L critiques racism in his work has, at times, been taken at face value. And, sometimes, the critique simply doesn’t land — like “Claim,” an installation created for last year’s Whitney Biennial. A large structure with thousands of pieces of shriveling bologna pinned to its walls, each piece affixed with a portrait of a supposedly Jewish person, it was intended as an oblique comment on how easy it is for collective identity to be rendered meaningless when reduced to abstraction. The piece won him the museum’s \$100,000 Bucksbaum Award, despite accusations of anti-Semitism that it drew for its implied irreverence. But Pope.L sees a larger purpose to his work, which is all about going places other artists wouldn’t dare to in order to force people to ask difficult questions. “I know I’m going to have these projects where I’m going to have a lot of doubts,” he says. “I know I’m going to have people telling me I did it wrong. Why do the next one? Well, because the nature of answer-making is that you have to keep seeking the new answer. You have to write the next word, you have to take the next step.”

AS AN ADOLESCENT, Pope.L had a lot of questions — the big, philosophical kinds that led him back to the Baptist church he’d fled in boredom. “At first I’m thinking it’s because I want to hang out with the girls,” he laughs. The ministers not only engaged with him, but invited him to extemporize on Bible verses to the congregation. “And I couldn’t see myself doing it. In my home, men did not take that role of leadership, the women did. And so, being asked to represent as a leader was very strange to me. I knew it was a good thing, but I took it as a threat. I just maybe couldn’t think I was good enough for it.”

A clear line of influence connects Pope.L’s performance pieces back to those church congregations, but also to the civil rights movement and its leaders, who understood the performative value of political marches. In addition to getting his M.F.A. at Rutgers in 1981, Pope.L was mentored by the New York-based Mabou Mines, the avant-garde theater company in which actors assume interdisciplinary roles in productions, as directors and choreographers, even puppeteers. It was an ideal laboratory for his material. This was the era of Julian Schnabel-style Neo-Expressionist bombast, and Pope.L wanted to approach art differently. Working construction to pay his bills, he accepted an

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invitation from a women's shelter in Philadelphia to perform a "proscenium work" with monologues, music and movement, a precursor to his "Eracism" series, which imagines a world in which racial superiority has been eliminated. "They had no curtains, no sound support, no lighting, and it was one of the best gigs," he remembers. "The kids loved it. And so I realized that's a way you could do it."



The artist in his studio, with a recent work from the "Skin Set" series on view behind him. Pope.L's irreverent, unsparring explorations of race and class have made him the most significant performance artist of our time. Credit Paul D'Amato

Letting go of a certain amount of control in order to test his ideas outside the predictable became part of the art itself. "I've always been interested in working in a positive way, where you're setting things up so that you can maximize the work's impact by putting it in situations where maybe there's stress on it. I can't change that little kid's life," he says, referring to Taylor in Flint. But he can, he adds, support community leaders like Sandra Jones. The power of the art of public engagement is in how, after news cycles and public outrage have moved on, it makes us see the things we don't want to. Pulling it off requires not only a kind of just-do-it fearlessness, but also certain foundational knowledge. Understanding what it means to not have heat or light to do your homework, say, or being too embarrassed to have friends over from school, or living with constant uncertainty: This too can be an artist's education, one that seems to have led Pope.L over the years from clarifying anger to electrifying empathy.

Now that he is not only an artist of renown but also a father and a professor, Pope.L's ambivalence about his own authority hasn't abated. If anything, his responsibilities have made him feel more vulnerable. He recounts a memory that still rattles him: the night his

son, then in nursery school, declared, “I’m good like Mommy. I’m white. Not like you.” The artist pauses. “I didn’t know what to say to him — he’s this young little creature, we’re standing there brushing our teeth — but I knew I needed to talk to him about it right then. And I said, ‘Well, where did you hear that?’ and he says it again: ‘I don’t know. I’m good like Mommy, I’m white. Not like you.’ And I said, ‘Well, I love you, don’t I?’ He says, ‘Yeah.’ ‘And you love me, don’t you?’ ‘Yeah.’ ‘So how does this work?’ Now that he’s older, he’s much more savvy, so I don’t know if he tells me everything he hears. I think he wants to be protective of his family.”

Recently, Pope.L has returned to a character he wrote fictional stories about in the 1990s, Mr. Brown Guy, who lives in a transient hotel among other men, and whose world is a reflection of his own lacks and self-delusion — someone, perhaps, not unlike Pope.L’s absent father. He invented the character as an undergraduate — a graduate student’s young child wandered into the painting room, pointed at him and said, “Hi, Mr. Brown Guy!” — and it has evolved over the years from an emblem of racial tokenism to something more ambivalently personal. “My mother used to say, ‘If you had a father, he would teach you how to do x or y,’ and it used to be abstract to me why she was saying this,” he recalls. In the new story Pope.L is writing, Mr. Brown Guy is taking a trip to visit his family. “He knows his salvation or his real truth is in confronting this, so the story is really about the decision he makes to go visit them. But it’s all told through the lens of his inability to simply say: ‘I screwed up with my family — and now I am returning to be forgiven.’”