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ART REVIEW

What Makes Pope.L's Art Endure? (It's Not the Famous Crawls)

The maverick artist, the subject of two exhibitions, is known for his grueling street performances, but his real enchantment lies in something weirder.



The performance artist William Pope.L at his 1991 crawl around the perimeter of Tompkins Square Park, in which he wore a business suit while dragging his body along the ground, using his elbows and knees. Pope.L and Mitchell-Innes & Nash

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Artists often adopt personas in their work — master painter, trickster, savant — and you can see this in the 13 performances of the maverick artist William Pope.L at the Museum of Modern Art. And he uses the characters in his show, “member: Pope.L, 1978-2001,” to critique race and class in the United States.

“Member” is one of three exhibitions of Pope.L’s work mounted last fall, collectively titled “Instigation, Aspiration, Perspiration,” and organized by MoMA, the Whitney Museum of American Art and the Public Art Fund. At the Whitney, his room-size “Choir” features an industrial water tank installed in a darkened space and eerie sound elements created by contact microphones placed near the pipes leading to the tank. Pope.L does this to show how even “neutral” or natural elements like water get embroiled in social and political battles, from Jim Crow laws that prohibited African-Americans from using certain water fountains to the recent water-contamination crisis in Flint, Mich.

In September 2019, the Public Art Fund mounted a big group “crawl,” echoing the ones Pope.L has performed throughout his career. Called “Conquest,” it involved more than 140 volunteers crawling through the city, from a playground in Greenwich Village to Union Square. The main event is at MoMA, though, where you can experience the arc of the artist’s performance career.



Pope.L’s new immersive sound and sculptural installation, “Choir,” at the Whitney Museum of American Art. Pope.L and Mitchell-Innes & Nash; Ron Amstutz



Pope.L's "ATM Piece" (1997), in which he wore Timberland work boots and a skirt made of dollar bills and "chained" himself with an 8-foot-long string of Italian sausages to a Chase Bank. Pope.L and Mitchell-Innes & Nash

Born in Newark, Pope.L began using the professional name William Pope.L, a combination of his father's last name, Pope, with an "L" for Lancaster, his mother's maiden name, when he was a lecturer at Bates College in Maine in the early '90s. Students shortened it to Pope.L and the name stuck. While working in theater, he did things like cast Lorraine Hansberry's play "A Raisin in the Sun," about an African-American family struggling to realize its dreams, with both black and white family members.

Eventually Pope.L moved fully into the art world, but you can still feel the radical theater tradition in his work. "ATM Piece" (1997), for instance, caused Pope.L to be called an "E.D.P." (emotionally disturbed person) by a police officer. For this piece, Pope.L wore nothing but Timberland work boots and a skirt made of dollar bills and "chained" himself with an 8-foot-long string of Italian sausages to a Chase Bank in Midtown Manhattan. The work was a response to a law passed in 1996 that prohibited panhandling within 10 feet of an A.T.M. Instead of merely standing around in his absurd costume, however, Pope.L offered dollar bills to people approaching the bank.

"Eating The Wall Street Journal," first performed in 1991, involves similarly provocative behavior. Seated on a "throne" topped with a toilet seat, Pope.L chewed (and spat out) chunks of The Journal with the help of milk and ketchup. He had read an ad claiming

that subscribing to The Journal would enrich the recipient, so he decided to lampoon the paper's magical power by consuming it.



“Thunderbird Immolation a.k.a Meditation Square Piece,” New York, 1978. Pope.L and Mitchell-Innes & Nash

Other works by Pope.L fall under “endurance art,” a type of performance that rose in the 1960s and '70s, symbolically referring to the Vietnam War or high-profile assassinations during that era. “Thunderbird Immolation a.k.a. Meditation Square Piece” from 1978, in which Pope.L sat in the lotus position on a yellow square, surrounded by matches on the sidewalk in SoHo, appears to pay homage to the monks who self-immolated as a form of “ultimate” protest during the Vietnam War.

Pope.L’s most famous works are his grueling “crawls,” of which he has performed more than 30, either individually or collectively, over the years. For “The Great White Way: 22 Miles, 9 Years, 1 Street” (2001-09), he wore a Superman costume bought at a party store and crawled up Broadway, in increments. The street is known as the “Great White Way” because it was one of the first to be lit by electric lights, but Pope.L’s performance connects to larger histories, like the fact that Broadway originated as a footpath for indigenous people.

Some of the works here are more successful than others, particularly in a museum setting where we are generally relying on photographs and video documentation. The crawling pieces register well — the exertion and absurdity of the actions are made clear. In the end, however, Pope.L tends to borrow more than he innovates: the

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crawling, ingesting and meditating are couched in earlier actions and overlaid with social critique.



Pope. L's "Times Square Crawl a.k.a Meditation Square Piece," from 1978. Pope.L and Mitchell-Innes & Nash



Details from “The Black Factory Archive.” These archival materials were gathered during Pope.L’s “Black Factory” (2004-06), a mobile artwork situated in a van that toured throughout the United States. Pope.L; The Museum of Modern Art; Martin Seck

Pope.L does anger and irony well. When he calls himself the “friendliest black artist in America,” you can almost hear the sneer in that slogan. He does found objects pretty well, too: The groan-worthy collection of items presented in “The Black Factory Archive,” started in 2004, and which are supposed to “represent blackness,” include dolls, large-size condoms, hair products and musical artifacts — as well as a Federal Reserve Board pamphlet, a reminder that economics and ideas about race (everywhere) are often bound together.

What Pope.L does really well is something stranger: he calls it a haunting. A backpack hanging from a hook on the wall inside the MoMA show is accompanied by a label announcing that the artist will “haunt” the exhibition, or show up unannounced, to hold “a dialogue between his past and present selves.”

If you’ve attended a biennial or other large exhibition around the world recently, you might have encountered (or heard about) a Pope.L performance materializing like a flash mob in that city. Performers have appeared in São Paulo, Athens and Kassel, Germany, dancing, chanting and otherwise activating public spaces. These interventions are among Pope.L’s weirdest and best, and it’s a shame they weren’t included in “member.” (They also tend to use performers other than himself, part of his attempt to undercut singular authorship.)

The stealth magic and gonzo tactics in these works invoke people who succeeded in some of the horrific historical narratives: captives who sneaked off slave ships;

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runaways and maroons; people who acted like ghosts to achieve their own freedom. Haunting public spaces and even his own museum retrospective is where the real enchantment of Pope.L's work lies, I think, rather than the grueling and more obviously impressive endurance test.