

Art in America

IN DETROIT, ARTISTS PURSUE AFROFUTURIST VISIONS OF JUSTICE AND AFROPESSIMIST STRATEGIES OF WITHDRAWAL

By [Taraneh Fazeli](#) July 9, 2020 1:59pm



Pope.L: *Choir*, 2019, 1,000-gallon plastic water storage tank, water, drinking fountain, copper pipes, and mixed mediums; at the Whitney Museum of American Art. © POPE.L./COURTESY MITCHELL-INNES & NASH, NEW YORK. PHOTOS RON AMSTUTZ.

JUST BEFORE NEW YORK issued its shelter-in-place order in March, I attended the closing of Pope.L's exhibition "Choir" at the Whitney Museum of American Art. Entertainment justice adopts a rhetoric of Black empowerment similar to that of the Black Arts Movement in the '70s. But, as critic **Aria Dean writes**, Pope.L has reacted to that position over the course of his life as an artist, developing a "hole theory" that posits Blackness's relationship to trauma as a powerful creative force.¹⁰ The influential artist is perhaps best known for his crawl performances across the urban landscape, in which he turns his Black male body into an abject lightning rod. His 2002 traveling survey was titled "Friendliest Black Artist in America©"—a moniker he adopted with the understanding that Black masculinity is often synonymous with violence or threat.

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Pope.L catalyzes these forces of objectification to visualize and potentially reorder them. While entertainment justice takes an Afrofuturist approach uniquely rooted in a majority-Black city, Pope.L's recent exhibition could be understood as an Afropessimist memorial in a museum.



Pope.L: *Well (Whitney version)*, 2019, water glass installed at the Whitney Museum. PHOTO RON AMSTUTZ

“Choir” had three diffuse parts: *Flint Water Meets the Mighty Hudson* (2019), a video on the museum’s website; *Well (Whitney version)*, 2019, consisting of ten glasses of water on small, unreachable shelves in the lobby, galleries, and staff kitchen; and, *Choir* (2019), a sound and sculptural installation in the lobby and ground-floor gallery. Occluded by darkness with a handwritten sign on its door exclaiming: “DO NOT CLEAN SWEEP MOP THIS GALLERY,” the tucked-away gallery looked like a no-go zone. Upon entry, light seeping in from the lobby slowly faded while faint rumbles of gurgling, sloshing, and dripping grew increasingly louder. The soundtrack’s origin soon became apparent: at the center of what resembled at once a dusty basement, utility room, and echo-free chamber was a sound-generating system topped with an inverted drinking fountain—the quintessential symbol of Jim Crow segregation—suspended over an industrial plastic tank amid a network of cooper pipes and contact microphones. Over forty-minute increments, water furiously poured down from the fountain into a hole atop the dented white thousand-gallon tank. As the vessel filled, a theatrical spotlight illuminated the churning waves inside, evoking the tumultuous waves of the Middle Passage. Fleeting fantasies of an ungovernable deluge surfaced as the water neared the top of the tank, but containment reigned. The flow stopped abruptly before water slowly drained out, presumably through the pipes, into the black walls before returning to the fountain to start anew.

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It was difficult to tease apart the dissonant composition produced by these operations. Noise was generated in random patterns by water hitting the vessels containing it. Sloshes mixed with recorded echoey snippets of shouting, laughing, and singing. The artist sourced the clips from blues field recordings and gospel music from African-themed 1930s Hollywood films, then altered the tracks until the lyrics became unrecognizable as language. Haunting, barely legible messages appeared in vinyl letters on the dark walls: first, “NGGR WATER,” then “HL OW WTRR,” then, “NDVSBL WTR.” The last one, a truncated stand-in for “indivisible water,” read as a tongue-in-cheek reference to American singularity amid racist slurs and the symbols of segregation, like the water fountain, ironically underscoring the insistent collectivity of the sound. Conjuring the transformational ecstasy that can result from a choir’s call-and-response with a church congregation, the slow, deep, discomfiting tones reverberated spectral pain. Afropessimist thinkers Fred Moten and Stefano Harney propose that Black social life is fugitive. It persists in spite of deadly racist oppression through shared sensory experiences: “a feel for feeling others feeling you.”¹¹ Their theory of haptics as fugitivity offered one way to understand the experience of *Choir*. As a non-Black person of Middle Eastern heritage, I thought of Taarab music and its tradition of interactive, ecstatic performance as a parallel reference point. But I remained aware that my experience was not analogous. Violent regimes apply their effects unevenly.



“The Fight for Clean Water” panel at the Whitney Museum, Mar. 8, 2020, held during Pope.L’s exhibition “Choir.”PHOTO SAI MOKHTARI

At the Whitney, a panel discussion addressed how “environmental justice communities”—often comprised of low-income people of color—experience “toxic stress” when they cannot access essentials like clean air and water. The panelists, focused on water crises in two majority Black cities: Newark, New Jersey (Pope.L’s birthplace), and Flint, Michigan (where the artist has

worked to provide aid). In 2014, Flint’s emergency management made the cost-saving move to draw water from the Flint River without treating the corrosive water first.¹² This was the most immediate cause for the high amount of lead, coliform bacteria, and other pathogens in Flint’s water. Newark similarly had elevated lead levels and recently discovered that one quarter of the filters intended to remove it were improperly installed by residents who had not been trained in how to do so. Lead—used in US service pipelines until 1986 and in private fixtures as recently as 2014—is deeply interwoven into our infrastructure, but, as is often the case with things we can’t see, its risk is hard to comprehend. Enter art.

In 2017, in *Flint Water Project*, Pope.L purchased 150 gallons of tap water from Flint resident Tiantha Williams. Through a bottling factory/shop at What Pipeline gallery in Detroit, he sold the repurposed water as limited edition readymades with proceeds going to nonprofits combatting water shutoffs in Detroit and supporting relief efforts in Flint. His act foreshadowed the controversial permit Nestlé purchased the following year for just two hundred dollars to bottle water from Detroit’s source, for a yearly corporate profit of approximately two million dollars. Pope.L portrayed his intervention as aid from Detroit to Flint, one distressed city to another. It was achievable only because he is a renowned artist, a status he leveraged through the economic tools of philanthropy and art marketing. A Kickstarter campaign, for example, promised “dinner on Pope.L’s lap” to donors of \$9,999 or more. *Flint Water Meets the Mighty Hudson* (2019), a video on the Whitney’s website, shows Pope.L pouring a stream of Flint water—made through editing to seem absurdly long—from a single editioned bottle into the Hudson River. This act combines “Choir” and *Flint Water Project*, connecting New York to Michigan through an ambiguous web of elements belonging to the infrastructures of water and culture: rivers, pipes, drinking glasses, tanks, vapor in the air, fundraising swag, editioned artworks, mutual aid, donations, fundraising dinners, art sales, etc. Pope.L’s project pursues an Afropessimist strategy of fugitivity. Neither radically alternative nor simply mimetic, the rejiggered system demonstrates how infrastructures that enforce scarcity can be evaded, in this case through mutual aid and creative philanthropy.

COVID-19 has led to temporary suspension of certain practices that negatively impact overall human and environmental wellbeing, primarily for the benefit of the few. There have been eviction moratoriums, deferment of debt payments, the thinning of jail populations, diminished pollution, and the flourishing of mutual aid—glimpses of what could be possible if society drastically changed. But just when many states began to reopen, the possibility of a “new normal” faltered, as police murders of Black people continued. Amid the ensuing uprisings, conversations on police abolition have circulated at unprecedented levels, given the failure of systemic reform. White-led arts spaces broadcast allegiance to racial equity, many without concrete plans for transformation. The question remains whether these institutions can be transformed when they are inextricably linked to colonial and carceral infrastructures. While Pope.L’s ways of coping with infrastructural failings via fugitivity offer one model for life under existing systems, artists in Detroit help us dream what is possible if (and when) such systems are dismantled.